

**“Poe’s *Maison de Santé* Revisited. A Spanish Imitation of
‘The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fether’”**

José R. Ibáñez-Ibáñez

Few tales reflect Poe’s humorous vein as does “The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fether;” the reversal of roles—the keepers “mistreated” by inmates and inmates acting the role of sane keepers—produces a grotesque situation only fully appreciated when the story comes to a close. Critics such as John Pendleton Kennedy and Stephen L. Mooney exposed Poe’s humorous strain. Mooney, for example, focuses on how Poe made use of the elements of vaudeville and farce in order to exploit “the comic possibilities of groups of people brought together in mad pursuit of amusement at any price”¹ in stories such as “Four Beasts in One,” “The Man That Was Used Up,” “Hop-Frog,” “The Spectacles,” and “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether.”

The purpose of this essay is to draw a comparison between Poe’s “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether” and Bremón’s “Siete historias en una,” a story that imitates Poe’s in structure, content and farcical elements. This intertextual assessment aims to cast doubt on the position defended by many scholars who play down the importance of fantastic fiction in Spanish literature due, in part, to the late arrival of Romantic ideas in Spain and to the conspicuous role of realism in mid-19th-century literature.

Romanticism brought about profound changes in literature. It also meant the relatively late flowering of the fantastic, a genre almost unknown in Spanish literature. Over the last few decades, it has become commonplace to call into question the Spanish readership’s interest in this genre; this also means to downplay the influence of writers like Hoffmann and Poe on Spanish literature. In a lecture delivered at the Poe Society in the 1940s, Pedro Salinas ascertained that “the work of Poe has had scarcely any influence on the writers of Spain, or if it has had some influence, it is very superficial, and has been exercised on no writers of a high order, nor has it produced any work of importance.”² Although he claimed his assessment to be hypothetical, Salinas contended that “the Spanish turn of mind does not incline to the type of the supernatural” and, if a certain degree of spiritualism is to be found, it “does not aspire to produce terror or surprise” (27). It is, however, surprising that he declared that Poe’s influence may be traceable in lesser-known authors who never produced outstanding works, despite the fact of claiming acquaintance with John E. Englekirk’s seminal study on the influence of Poe in Spain and South America. Nowadays, critical

works such as those by Lanero, Santoyo and Villoria (1993), Lanero and Villoria (1996), Gurpegui (1999) and Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan (1999)³ about the reception and translation of Poe's fiction have proved Salinas wrong. It is noteworthy that although the influence of Poe in Spain never yielded outstanding works, traces of his fiction can be found in Becquer's *leyendas* and in the tales of Alarcón, Clarín, Galdós and Pardo Bazán, as Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan pointed out in his study.

It seems to be generally agreed that 19th-century Spanish readers never held the fantastic tale in high esteem. Its influence, therefore, cannot be compared with its popularity in Britain, Germany or the United States. Although the Romantic movement flourished in Spain, a plethora of critics parodied its excesses in newspapers and magazines. Others considered fantastic fiction a foreign literary manifestation that had nothing to do with the Spanish character, indelibly marked by the overwhelming weight of religion. In this regard, fantasy was considered the expression of the excesses of the mind. Nonetheless, a few authors such as Eugenio de Ochoa (1815-1872) defended its newness and cultivated it in a fashion reminiscent of Hoffmann. Many others, such as Jorroto Paniagua, Mejía de la Cerda, Ildefonso Ovejas or Tomás Salvany, published fantastic tales that partake of the burlesque and grotesque as well as make use of a strong local color.

Another of these practitioners was José Fernández Bremón (1839-1910), a journalist, playwright and short story writer whose tales were praised by Leopoldo Alas "Clarín" but attacked by Manuel de la Revilla, who regarded them as "imitaciones evidentes de Hoffmann, Edgar Poe, Erkmann-Chatrion y otros célebres cuentistas contemporáneos."⁴ In his criticism, De la Revilla echoed the lack of enthusiasm displayed by Spaniards towards this type of literature which he regarded as a "degeneración notoria de la literatura oriental."⁵ Though almost forgotten, Bremón excelled in the "humorous fantastic" mode, primarily as a result of the intelligent mixture of bizarre science fiction and outrageously hilarious situations.⁶ He also showed a great interest in scientific discoveries and new breakthroughs in the field of medicine for the treatment of illnesses and blindness. One of his tales, "Siete historias en una" (1874) ["Seven tales in one"] (hereafter, "Siete historias") tells the story of a visitor to a mental institution in which the monomaniac patients roam freely throughout the premises. In part, this narration shares intertextual connections with Poe's "The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fether" (1845) (hereafter, "Tarr and Fether"). The first Spanish version of Poe's tale was published in Argentina in 1869 under the title "El sistema del doctor Alquitrán y del profesor Pluma," and it is possible that Bremón could have known of this translation.⁷

For the purpose of this essay, I will provide a synopsis of Bremón's tale. The story begins *in medias res* when the narrator, a traveller, stops by at an "alienist" doctor's private home and is invited to dine with him and his six monomaniac patients. All but one, who thinks himself to be a melon, are grotesque imitations of their former professions—a gravedigger, a disillusioned doctor, a painter of stars, a warfare lover, and a lunatic pedagogue—and victims of their mania. Though initially hesitant, the narrator finally agrees to join them but not before exacting the promise that nothing untoward would happen. In the midst of their repast, the doctor asks his patients to tell *their own* stories and the reasons for their confinement. The inmates relate the events that led to their mania. When dinner is over, roaring thunder triggers intense confusion among the patients and provokes a revolt resulting in the doctor and narrator being surrounded by the revenging lunatics. The "alienist" doctor is flung out of the window only to land on a pile of mattresses. Despite this obvious failure to maintain equanimity, the doctor refuses to give up his method of treatment.

As previously mentioned, both stories share a great deal of narrative perspectives: they are told by passing visitors who happen to walk into mental institutions; both stories revolve around innovative treatments based upon the naïve assumption that man is naturally good. Monsieur Maillard ("Tarr and Fether") and the unnamed "alienist" doctor ("Siete historias") praise the virtues of their methods although from different viewpoints. Thus, Maillard informs the narrator how the "system of soothing" was forsaken, a method in which "all punishments were avoided—that even confinement was seldom resorted to—that the patients, while secretly watched, were left much apparent liberty, and that most of them were permitted to roam about the house and grounds in the ordinary apparel of persons in right mind."⁸ The definitive abandonment of the method was due to the consequential danger caused by its implementation; Maillard goes on to explain how they had to resort to the old methods while promising to show the narrator the new system which he considered to be "incomparably the most effectual as yet devised" (310).

Unlike Monsieur Maillard, the "alienist" doctor in "Siete historias" praises his "método de las condescendencias" after having proved that "la dureza es inútil con esos desgraciados. Gozo al ver el respeto y las consideraciones que me guardan. Nada les niego, ni me opongo a sus caprichos; circulan libremente por mi casa, y siempre me acompañan algunos en mis excursiones por el campo."⁹ The likeness in the descriptions of both treatments is quite noticeable. Notwithstanding, Maillard's denial of the "system of soothing" opens up an uncertain ending which is, however, foreshadowed by the very title of Poe's

story. Similarities continue as, in both tales, narrators are invited to dinner though under different circumstances. In this way, in “Siete historias” the element of surprise is discounted from the outset as the narrator *does* know he is sharing the table with the doctor’s monomaniac patients; in “Tarr and Fether,” on the other hand, the deluded narrator *discovers*, as the evening progresses, the full extent of the dinner guests’ insanity. In spite of the evidence of being confronted with a group of lunatics and the narrator’s doubts regarding the correct behavior of the other guests, uncertainty is maintained until the end of the tale as a way of preserving the story’s final twist, fulfilling Poe’s assumption of the “unity of effect.”¹⁰

It is noteworthy, however, how Bremón discards surprise revealing the true insanity of the dinner guests to the reader. This fact could be interpreted as an example of the denial of the fantastic by Spanish authors, a fact pointed out by Salán Villasur as he suggests that none of these authors “acaba de creer en lo fantástico, no se toman en serio el misterio y optan directamente por la complicidad con el lector y por la hipérbole enloquecida que atenúa o anula lo sobrenatural para instalarlo en una humorada más que terrenal.”¹¹ If we follow this interpretation, we may conclude that the story becomes a surrogate product in which comedy outweighs fantasy. Nonetheless, I consider that a second interpretation may be given to the end of both stories.

Humor and uncertainty are intertwined in Poe’s tale as the reversal of roles between inmates and keepers is maintained until the story comes to a close. It is then when the tarred and feathered keepers break out of their cells and put an end to the dinner party taking place. Order is finally re-established and yet another reversal of roles occurs when the inmates are re-incarcerated. However, despite its failure, the “system of soothing” that enabled the lunatics to rebel against the keepers is shown as a unmistakable proof of human naiveté. The dénouement of “Siete historias” runs parallel to that of “Tarr and Fether.” If Poe took considerable pains to secure a “final effect” in his tale, so did Bremón; the final story—the seventh one told by the doctor—counteracts the excess of realism and allows this further interpretation. Therefore, when asked by the narrator if this failure means an end to the use of this method, the “alienist” doctor answers: “Ya ha pasado. Amigo mío—dijo el doctor con seguridad—, he prometido curar a estos infelices por un método a que no renuncio. Es mi manía, porque, créame usted, también los cuerdos las tenemos. Más diré: sin estas manías o alucinaciones, o como quiera usted llamarlas, la sociedad humana es insoportable” (126).¹² Thus, if in Poe’s short story, the reestablishment of the

situation means a reassurance of human goodness, Bremón recuperates the element of uncertainty in the tale through the doctor's acknowledgement of his own mania. It is unavoidable to wonder whether this character is as insane as his monomaniac patients. In Poe's story, the incarceration of Maillard and all the lunatic guests means the restoration of normality: sanity stands for order. Despite the elements of vaudeville and farce pointed out by Mooney, Poe's attempt to secure a closed ending may be also reflected in his desire for a realistic ending: keepers winning back the control of the institution while inmates are put back in their cells. This final aspect may be called into question in "Siete historias." Therefore, even though the final effect is more moral than humorous, as the "alienist" doctor points out the maladies of human society, one may question to what extent this ending deconstructs the entire story. Does this ending undermine the *realist* elements of the story?

As the title "Siete historias en una" suggests, equating the doctor's story with those told by his monomaniac patients may be interpreted as an invitation to question our initial assessment of the story at the same time it gives us an opportunity to reexamine the interest of Bremón in the fantastic. Hence, the stimulating open-endedness plotted by Bremón—once the "alienist" doctor reiterates his adherence to this failed method—goes beyond the story itself and allows us to dig into the immediate consequences, steering us to the assumption that the fantastic prevails over reason.

Notes

1. Stephen L. Mooney. "The Comic in Poe's Fiction." In *On Poe. The Best from American Literature*. Ed. Louis J. Budd and Edwin H. Cady. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 134.
2. Pedro Salinas. "Poe in Spain and Spanish America." In *Poe in Foreign Lands and Tongues*. Ed. John C. French. (Baltimore: The Edgar Allan Poe Society, 1941), 26.
3. See, respectively, Juan J. Lanero, Julio C. Santoyo and Secundino Villoria. "50 años de traductores, críticos e imitadores de Edgar Allan Poe (1857-1913)." *Livius* 3 (1993): 159-84; Juan J. Lanero and Secundino Villoria. "Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849)" In *Literatura en traducción. Versiones españolas de autores americanos del s. XIX*. (León: Universidad de León, 1996): 93-130; José A. Gurpegui. "Poe in Spain." In *Poe Abroad. Influence, Reputation, Affinities*. Ed. Lois Vines. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999): 108-14; and Santiago Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan. *Presencia de Edgar Allan Poe en la literatura española del siglo XIX*. (Valladolid: Universidad de Valladolid, 1999).
4. Translated: "clear imitations of Hoffmann, Edgar Poe, Erkmann-Chatrion and other celebrated contemporary storytellers." Qtd. in Rebeca Martín. "Prólogo: 'Ni romántico, ni clásico, ni modernista, ni boreal: José Fernández Bremón y su narrativa breve.'" In *Un crimen científico y otros cuentos*. Ed. José Fernández Bremón. (Madrid: Rescatados Lengua de Trapo, 2008), xix. [Translations are my own.]
5. Translated: "notorious degenerations of Oriental literature."
6. Mariano Baquero Goyanes. *El cuento español: Del romanticismo al realismo*. (Madrid: CSIC, 1992), 125.
7. This was not the first version in Spanish of Poe's tale; in 1871, Raymond Strap (pen name of Ramón Rodríguez Correa) published "¿Estaba loco?" in *Revista de España* (Martín, xxxiii).
8. Edgar Allan Poe. *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*. (New York: Penguin, 1982), 308. Subsequent references to this edition will be cited parenthetically in the text.
9. Translated: "Hardness is useless with these wretches. I enjoy seeing their respect and considerations displayed to me. Nothing is denied to them, and I do not object to their whims; they roam freely about my house and some of them always accompany me on my field excursions." José Fernández Bremón. *Un crimen científico y otros cuentos*. Ed. Rebeca Martín. (Madrid: Rescatados Lengua de Trapo, 2008), 113. Subsequent references to this edition will be cited parenthetically in the text.

10. Edgar Allan Poe. "Review of *Twice-Told Tales*." In *The New Short Story Theories*. Ed. Charles E. May. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994), 60.

11. Translated: "... really believe in the fantastic. They do not take mystery seriously and directly opt for a complicity with their readers and to exploit a crazed hyperbole which dims or annuls the supernatural so as to adopt a down-to-earth witticism."

12. Translated: "It's over. My friend—said the doctor with certainty—, I have promised to cure these wretched thanks to a method I do not relinquish. It's my mania because, believe me, even we, the sane, have them. I'll say even more: without these manias or hallucinations, or whatever you may want to call them, human society is unbearable."