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# THE 'FEMME FRAGILE': DECLINE AND FALL OF A LITERARY TOPOS

**BARBARA KORTE**

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## THE 'FEMME FRAGILE': DECLINE AND FALL OF A LITERARY TOPOS

... – but then without those doors there *did* stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher. There was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame. For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold – then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon her brother, and, in her violent and now final death agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated.

(Edgar Allan Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher", (1840))<sup>1</sup>

This description is an uncharacteristically dramatic rendering of an event which, in the last century, was more often staged in a peaceful and highly sentimental way – the death of a beautiful and delicate young woman. In all other respects, however, the lady Madeline is a perfect specimen of a literary stereotype that emerged with the rise of romanticism; one which, before the end of the 19th century, had become so widespread that it is possible to speak of a topos of the kind investigated by E. R. Curtius for the literature of the middle ages<sup>2</sup>. Ariane Thomalla calls this stereotype the "femme fragile"<sup>3</sup>, a type of woman that is young and innocent, frail, thin, pale and almost disembodied – in short,

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<sup>1</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher", in *The Penguin Book of American Short Stories*, ed. James Cochrane (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 74.

<sup>2</sup> E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1979), Chapter 5.

<sup>3</sup> Ariane Thomalla, *Die 'femme fragile': Ein literarischer Frauentypus der Jahrhundertwende* (Düsseldorf: Bertelsmann Universitätsverlag, 1972).

## ⌵ About the article

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