G. R. Thompson reminds us that “One of the favorite pastimes of critics is trying to identify the symbolic meaning of the colors of the seven rooms” of Prince Prospero’s imperial suite but they have had difficulty agreeing on the significance of the colors or if they have any significance at all. Nicholas Ruddick insists that the chromatic imagery has no symbolic meaning whatsoever and Poe employs it simply to demonstrate Prospero’s insanity. Eric H. du Plessis also believes that no particular meaning is discernible in the arrangement of the colors yet this is a deliberate strategy:

Poe’s use of jarringly disparate nuances in “The Masque of the Red Death” suggests a concerted effort to breach the standards of aesthetics prevalent among the painters of his day. . . . The tonal anomalies and resulting visual shock orchestrated by Poe make a fitting counterpoint to the other discordant elements introduced in the text: they complement Prince Prospero’s unusual demeanor and his aberrant taste in clothing, entertainment, and décor . . . the disharmonious color scheme participates effectively with other jarring elements in challenging the reader’s artistic assumptions.

It is difficult to believe that a symbolist such as Poe would refuse to assign significance to the hues in a tale otherwise loaded with symbolic and allegorical suggestiveness.

Indeed, other commentators maintain that the color scheme is not meant to indicate discord but something more clear and sensible. Sister Madeleine Kisner, in a dissertation devoted to color imagery in the works of American authors, has surprisingly little to say about the chromatic strategies of “Masque”: after providing no original insights about the black room, she states, “The choice of colors for the other apartments seem[s] randomly indicative of the multi-colored dreams that life encompasses.” Edward William Pitcher says that Poe sometimes wrote about life in terms of a tripartite division: life’s three stages are the first twenty years (the blue and purple rooms signifying a closeness to divine truths—purple is the color of paradise in [Poe’s tale] “The Domain of Arnheim”), the subsequent thirty years of Manhood (with green, orange, and white for the three rooms or decades signifying the spring, autumn, winter periods of fertile adulthood), and the final twenty years (with violet and black signifying at once the return to “facility in belief” through the association of purple and violet, and the approach of death).

H. H. Bell reads these rooms similarly but more specifically, saying that the seven rooms are “the allegorical representation of Prince Prospero’s life span.” Quite right, though several of Bell’s recommendations regarding color seem rather far-fetched, even arbitrary. Blue “may be related to the same beginnings and origins that ‘East’ stands for by thinking of it in the sense that it is the residence of the unknown or the unexpected—i.e., such as when we speak of something coming as a bolt out of the blue” (103). Purple is “a color worn by those who have achieved something in the world or society. Again, by extension of meaning, one may think of this color as being representative of that period in Prospero’s life when he has accomplished a little something in life—perhaps moving into maturity.” Bell makes more sense with the next three colors. Green is associated “with that which is verdant, with that which is full of life and vigor—indeed with a man who is in the prime of his years.” Orange suggests “the autumn of life. Prospero could well be considered here to be beyond his prime, but by no means old yet.” White, of course, “would suggest the silver or hoary haired period of old age.” Less convincingly, Bell goes on to say that violet is “emblematic of gravity and chastity . . . this room then represents the gravity and the soberness of extreme old age as well as the more or less enforced chastity that goes along with it” (104). The final room is black and its associations, along with its westerly location, leave no room for imagination or Procrustean interpretations. Patrick Cheney relates the colors to the vestments worn in Catholic liturgy. He backs off a little, though, in admitting that the correlations he makes “need not be pressed too hard”; furthermore, he reads “The Masque of the Red Death” as a reversal of the Christian drama of resurrection: “Hence, in the Red Death’s destruction of the abbey, Poe seems to suggest the inefficacy of man’s use of religious ritual to commune with God, as a means of transcending time and of triumphing over the law of death” (37). The colors associated with Catholic liturgy would therefore seem to have absolutely no relevance to Poe’s allegory. Nevertheless, Cheney is correct in proceeding on the assumption that Poe means something by the hues in this enigmatic tale.

Although we may disagree with Ruddick and du Plessis, who argue that Poe means nothing by his use of chromatic imagery in “The Masque of the Red Death,” we may not be entirely satisfied with the explanations offered by other scholars. Perhaps an obvious strategy would be to consult modern dictionaries of symbols. J. E. Cirlot’s Dictionary of Symbols is less helpful than we might expect. Much more useful is Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant’s Penguin Dictionary of Symbols, yet that provides a surfeit of
suggestions; one has to wade through, with some colors, pages of material picking and choosing significations that work in the context of “Masque” while rejecting many others.

Consequently, an important question arises: Would Poe have known about the various meanings assigned to the colors by these twentieth-century scholars? Which texts, if any, were available to him that might have influenced his chromatic choices? Chevalier and Cirlot are helpful in this regard: both provide extensive bibliographies. One naturally looks for publication dates that preceded or are approximately coeval with the first publication of “Masque,” which appeared initially in Graham’s Magazine in May 1842 and later, in revised form, in The Broadway Journal of July 1845. The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols provided the first clue with a book printed in Paris in 1837: Des Couleurs Symboliques Dans L’Antiquité, le Moyen-Age et Les Temps Moderns, by Frédéric Portal. The English translation I have seen, published in 1845, is by W. S. Inman. Poe certainly would not have required a translation; his facility with French is well known to Poe specialists and Portal’s French seems relatively accessible. A footnote in Inman provided a further lead: George Field’s Chromatography; or, A Treatise on Colours and Pigments, and of Their Powers in Painting (1841).

While it is difficult to prove beyond doubt that Poe had his hands on those two treatises, or others, he does appear to have tapped into the contemporary interest in chromatic aesthetics. Portal, after all, mentions “polychromy, the theory and practice of which, in the schools of France and Germany, have recently attracted much attention.” Although he is an artist figure, I do not mean to imply that Prospero’s sense of décor takes anything from nineteenth-century “polychromy”; rather, it is plausible that Poe borrowed the color symbolism from his French contemporaries for his existential allegory. For specialists, it is now a given that, rather than being estranged from the spirit of his time and place—socially, politically, culturally—Poe was very much in tune with his Zeitgeist. Whether or not he was interested in “the standards of aesthetics prevalent among the painters of his day,” as a literary artist Poe was concerned with the symbolic associations provided by texts on chromatics—at least for “The Masque of the Red Death.” To solve the riddle of the colors in this macabre tale, I draw upon whatever suggestions are useful in Chevalier and, whenever possible, buttress or go beyond them with evidence from Poe’s contemporaries, Portal and Field.