

Melville / Shakespeare

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That Melville's *Moby Dick* contains nearly measureless references to the reading of Shakespeare is an old story featuring the whaling epic's persistent Shakespearean verbal echoes, the composition and sequencing of scenes, and the construction of Ahab as a tragic hero-villain, his shipmen as "knights and squires" and heroic commoners all caught in a tragic drama of the excesses and shortcomings of its mercurial prince. The verbal echoes pop up so often that Shakespeareans may look forward to enjoying the variety of uses to which Melville put the bard. Critical observations of these echoes range from Mathiessen's noting of the blank verse rhythms employed by Ahab in "The Quarterdeck" and the similar uses of oath and ceremony (as in the pledge with harpoon cups and Hamlet's swearing Horatio and Marcellus to secrecy), to minor echoes involving specific words or phrases. For example, Melville's choice of the metaphor "tiger's heart" to characterize the inner condition of the apparent "tranquil beauty and brilliancy of the ocean's skin" (*Moby Dick* 405) recontextualizes a line from *3 Henry VI*—"O tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide" (1.4.137), phrasing also made infamous by Robert Greene in his efforts to savage Shakespeare:

there is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde*, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you: and being an absolute Iohannes fac totum, is in his owne conceit the only Shake-scene in a countrey. (1835)¹

The "kaleidoscopic variations of Shakespeare's patterns" of speech often involve not blind imitation, but the recasting of Shakespearean phrasings to "pour this energy into a new mould of his [Melville's] own" (Matthiessen 424, 432). Sometimes the echoes blatantly re-read Shakespeare, as with the paraphrase of the famous "seven ages of man" speech delivered by the malcontent Jaques in *As You Like It* and echoed as part of Ahab's meditation:

There is no steady unretracing progress in this life; we do not advance through fixed gradations, and at the last one pause: —through boyhood's thoughtless faith, adolescence' doubt (the common doom), then skepticism, then disbelief, resting at last in manhood's pondering repose of If. But once gone through, we trace the round again; and are infants, boys, and men, and Ifs eternally. (406)

Though Ahab's speech initially disputes the gradations of age and the maturing intellect, he presents a catalogue similar--if far less precisely concrete—to that of Shakespeare's original, ending on a note that exudes Jaques' existential despair, which sums up life's final phase as "second childishness, and mere oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything" (*AYLI* 2.7.165- 66). Notably, Ahab has *topped* the Shakespearean malcontent: a single life may be a dull round, yet it appears that we return to experience that dull round again and again, endlessly. Melville further modifies this changed perspective, connecting it to Ahab's melancholy wish that "these blessed calms would last" and his reflection that the grave contains the answers to our deepest questions.

Even more interesting are Melville's attempts to pattern plot development through constructing scene sequences following the Elizabethan-Jacobean pattern most famous to modernists in Shakespeare's plays. A common thread in the renaissance plot is the deliberate juxtaposition of spectacle or a scene of public significance with soliloquy or an intimate interview. In *Hamlet*, for example, the second scene of the play opens with Claudius's state of the nation speech: his explanation of the hasty marriage to Gertrude, his pronouncements on foreign policy, Laertes' request to go to Paris, and the new King's attempts to bend the young Hamlet to his will. Hamlet's soliloquy regretting the canon against self-slaughter and seething with rage against his mother and Claudius follows hard upon this, clarifying Hamlet's near-silence in the court--yet this turn is barely completed when Horatio shows up with the news of the ghost, spinning the nearly hysterical prince toward action and resolve in his commitment to watch on the tower.

Melville's application and modification of this pattern is perhaps most apparent in chapters thirty-six to forty of *Moby Dick*. First, in "The Quarter-Deck" Ahab calls the men together to rouse them to his cause, and like Hamlet, Starbuck refuses the game and is isolated by his leader. Following this chapter are Melville's adaptations of the Shakespearean motif: instead of one soliloquy focusing on the hero alone, Melville gives us one each by Ahab, Starbuck, and Stubb, and instead of the further intensification developed through the hero's intimate interview with his ally, Melville turns to a choral scene of apparent relief in the simple honesty of the harpooners and sailors. Even this variation, however, shows an appreciation of Shakespeare's sense of modulating the emotions of succeeding scenes.

The bard's common practice is to break moments of high tension with scenes of comic relief, as in the porter scene of *Macbeth*, the gravedigger scene in *Hamlet*, or in the fool's by-play with Lear. So too the choral scene of *Moby Dick's* chapter 40 breaks the enormous tensions of Ahab's and Starbuck's soliloquies—and even, in its attempts to evade consciousness, Stubb's desperate resolve to "go to it laughing" (149). Later attempts to employ Stubb for comic relief—as in his confrontation with Fleece and in his diddling of the Rose Bud (chapters 64 and 91)—are of interest for the comic exposure of the middle man's tyranny and the *modus operandi* of the confidence man, but they are somewhat less successful as plot relief because Melville unnecessarily clogs and deflates his plot with too many digressions and chapters involving minute detail or extraneous observation at the expense of plot intensity and efficiency.

Perhaps Melville's most important Shakespearean adaptation, however, was in his attempt to construct an American tragic hero-villain in the mold of such Elizabethan-Jacobean Machiavels and overreachers as Marlowe's Mortimer, Shakespeare's Macbeth, or Jonson's Sejanus. These characters, as well as doomed heroes like Hamlet or Lear, all reify the Aristotelian tragic hero in his basic outline. Such a character must be directly connected to the power of the state so that his fall will shake the represented society to its core, and though he may be a superior man in many respects, he must also share enough common human traits so that the audience will be able to relate to him. Further, he must possess some kind of flaw which causes his downfall:

His virtues else, be they as pure as grace,
As infinite as man may undergo,

Shall in the general censure take corruption
 From that particular fault.
 (*Hamlet* 1.4.33-36)

The variety of characters fitting this definition is almost as staggering as the number of heroes and hero-villains invented during the English renaissance, but one may generally distinguish two basic patterns: the good man trapped in circumstances either of his own making or beyond his ability to control (as with Lear and Hamlet), and the over-reacher—either a good man tempted by his pride or ambition into the role of the villain or Machiavel (as with Faustus, Macbeth, and in his own peculiar way, Melville's Ahab), or an unscrupulous Machiavel whose rise both horrifies and fascinates us, and whose fall is an occasion bringing the audience relief. One may distinguish Marlowe's Tamburlaine as the preeminent model of this second type, but the Mortimer of Marlowe's *Edward II*, Jonson's Sejanus, and such Shakespearean villains as Richard Gloucester, *Lear*'s Edmund, or *Othello*'s Iago also reify this kind of psychology. Peculiar to all overreachers is the fact that, despite our relief at their falls, we are moved by the loss that one so energetic and potentially good should go so wrong: we are overwhelmed in irony.

Thus, when Melville came to his Ahab, he was deliberately constructing an American version of the Elizabethan-Jacobean tragic hero-villain, itself expanding on a Senecan model based on Aristotelian theory. He was, in a sense, consciously utilizing his canonical models to give American literature a claim to greatness, as he had prophesied in "Hawthorne and His Mosses": "men not very much inferior to Shakespeare are this day being born on the banks of the Ohio. And the day will come, when you shall say who reads a book by an Englishman that is a modern?" (543).²

In particular, Melville aficionados have long recognized connections between *Moby Dick* and *King Lear*. From Olson to Matthiessen to Julian Markels, they have formed a chorus whose refrain connects Ahab to the aged king of the Britons and the world that he fashioned and which destroyed him. Markels claims that both works produce "intimately related moments of ideological self-awareness in Anglo-American history" (1), that *Lear* dramatizes the "historic overthrow of corporate feudalism" of which Lear is the embodiment by the "competitive bourgeois individualism" of its villains, while *Moby Dick* similarly depicts "bourgeois individualism's historic conflict with liberal democracy" as acted out in Ahab's Hobbesian beliefs and the Lockean impulses of Ishmael (1). Like Matthiessen and Olson before him, Markels also traces how the characters of Edmund, Cornwall, Regan and Goneril serve as sources for Ahab's character, though in each case the comparisons revolve around superficial similarities, lacking a grasp of the real differences that radically separate the two texts and their heroes in mood and inner dynamics.

Other points of focus generally cited by Melvilleans include the storm scene of *Lear* as a parallel to the storm in *Moby Dick*, and the relationship of Lear and his fool as similar to that of Ahab and Pip. These kinds of statements may be true if one is speaking generally or in terms of each text's atmospherics, but one must pursue the specific dynamics of these comparisons with more rigor if they are to mean anything. Matthiessen's claims, for example, that "when the terror of the storm scenes is re-enacted on the *Pequod*, Ahab's fierceness owes something of its stature to Lear," and that Ahab's relationship to Pip "is endowed with the pathos of the bond between the King and his Fool"

(434), both ignore the inner dynamic of the Shakespearean scenes altogether for the sake of superficial comparison.

First, though Pip is undoubtedly intended to serve the role of the fool comforting his prince, the analogy between the little slave and Lear's fool ends there: the former is, after his drubbing by Stubb, "from that hour . . . an idiot" (347) rescued by his captain because he sees his own madness in the boy. Lacking wisdom of his own, Pip is merely an object reflecting Ahab's self-fascination, a toy with which to reveal Ahab: the little slave is an echo, has no true voice. Lear's fool, on the other hand, is renowned as the wisest of Shakespeare's stable of "wise fools": as his prince falls farther and farther from his own sanity, he grows increasingly desperate in his humor, but he is no idiot—rather, he is a man who can precisely name a situation and give it an ironic turn so that his wisdom gives no offense. He knows when to retreat from an affirmation and yet is quick to spot the implications of events. His jests about Lear's foolishness in giving away his titles, speaking the truth—that his king is "Lear's shadow"—display a melancholy humor whose irony grows out of his love for Lear, a fact not lost on Lear's most loyal friend, Kent. The relation is not one of paternal dependency on a familiar slave who is a weak reflection of the prince's own condition, but one in which the Fool thoroughly recognizes the desperate circumstances in which Lear and his companions toil, and in those circumstances he labors bravely, if ineffectually, to comfort his king as long as he can.

The storm scenes are even more problematic: even more than in the relationship between prince and fool, Melville's language superficially echoes Shakespeare's, while in fact the underlying dynamics of the two scenes are worlds apart. Ahab's behavior in the

storm further reifies the power of his personality and his obsession with control, and while his language echoes Lear's hysteria in its forcefulness, Ahab *defies* the storm and the power that lies behind it. Despite Starbuck's warning that "God is against thee," Ahab seizes the burning harpoon in a gesture of power and control: "that ye may know to what tune this heart beats; look ye here; thus I blow out the last fear!" (418).

Lear's rages on the heath, by contrast, smack of hysteria and loss of control. A good man who "hath ever but slenderly known himself" (1.1.293-94), Lear had thought to divide his kingdom as a means to "shake all cares and business from our age, conferring them on younger strengths, while we unburthen'd crawl toward death" (1.1.39-41). His good intentions have, however, led to chaos, unleashing the cruelty and ambition of his two older daughters, while his own blind pride has led him to banish the one daughter whose honesty might have stayed his age. When we meet him in the storm, his oaths call down vengeance on Goneril and Regan: unlike Ahab, his oaths are pathetically impotent and hysterical.

The fact is that Lear and Ahab are distinctly different types. Lear reifies the type of the good man trapped in circumstances of his own making, while Ahab is a late example of the Machiavellian overreacher, as noted earlier. Though their initial motivations differ, the *Pequod's* captain has more in common with Macbeth than with Lear. This is in spite of Markels' claim that "instead of deadening his once acute sensibility and lapsing like Macbeth into mindless cruelty, he [Ahab] remains poignantly aware of his own 'special lunacy' in its destructive career" (Markels 65).³ His trajectory *does* briefly present a pathetic, humanizing interlude with Pip, but this does not prevent Ahab from sacrificing

himself and his entire crew for the sake of his overreaching obsession, just as nothing would prevent Macbeth from sacrificing his nation for his ambitions. Further,

he perceives in Pip's attachment the quality that might cure his own malady, but he refuses to be deflected from his pursuit by the stirring of any sympathy for others, and warns the pitiful boy: 'Weep so, and I will murder thee!' (Matthiessen 451)

Secondly, both Macbeth and Ahab are obsessed with controlling their own circumstances and acutely aware of which among the honest men they should target. Macbeth knows, for example, that Banquo and Macduff are those most likely to oppose him once they discover his machinations: one is killed and the other flees, only to lose his wife, family, and estate. Similarly, Ahab terrorizes Stubb and neutralizes Starbuck, the one voice who can oppose him.

More centrally, both confront and resist the unfathomable facts of eternity: spurred by the weird sisters' prophesies, Macbeth knowingly trades his immortal soul for earthly power, becoming the source of evil that corrodes and destroys his state until delivery appears with the sword of Macduff. Ahab is also possessed by what Melville repeatedly calls his "monomania," directed at the whale and the god who created it:

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed--there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can

the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? (144)

This pre-Nietzschean lecture is the result of Starbuck's having challenged Ahab for blasphemy in being enraged with "a dumb brute," yet naming his faults only enrages him: "Talk not to me of blasphemy, man: I'd strike the sun if it insulted me" (144). The satanic influence may be further seen in Fedallah, who is a kind of familiar or Mephistopheles exercising influence on his captain, as the witches do at key moments in Macbeth's trajectory. Perhaps most importantly, in both texts, the hero-villain's obsession with controlling power and his resistance to ethics and divinity define the major arc of the plot, leading to a resolution which ends in relief at his death.

Conclusion

Moby Dick presents a first class case study for how a later author utilizes a canonical predecessor's language, motifs, and even the sequencing of scenes to augment and expand his own powerfully original plot. Using elements from a variety of Shakespearean characters, Melville creates in Ahab a thoroughly traditional Machiavellian hero-villain after the likes of Macbeth, adapting the obsessive ambition of the over-reacher to his American whaling captain's tyranny over his crew and obsessive pursuit of the white whale and the god that lies beyond it. Melville's achievement is also in that adapting elements from Shakespeare, we are given a precise measure of how traditional elements may be turned to relatively original effect. He was not the great liberator of American literature—that task would be left to Whitman and Twain—but he was their necessary forerunner.

Finally, I have found it immensely interesting that in choosing America's first truly great tragic hero, Melville should opt for a character who is primarily an incarnation of Macbeth with a subtext borne of Lear in his most tender and melancholy moments. This first American tragic character is a self-serving and self-deluded overreacher whose ambition knows no bounds, the embodiment of an individualism whose identity is forged in squashing the individuality of others while at the same time showing the confidence man's ability to deceive himself in his most *human* moments. The critique of American imperialism and our capacity for self-deception is continuous and relatively complete, yet even here Melville is following the example of Shakespeare or Jonson, whose tragedies of state also developed subtle and careful commentaries on the vagaries of power and its connection to a nation's identity. Thus, *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet* echo deep-seated concerns about succession and the ambition of courtiers during Elizabeth's last years, which saw the mercurial rise and fall of the Earl of Essex, and the new court assembled by James after his progress southward was so upset by the political explorations of *Sejanus* that Ben Jonson was hailed before the Star Chamber to explain himself. If, as claimed by Edward Jayne, the canonical text's most important quality is the skepticism that challenges our most hallowed assumptions, Melville joins the English predecessors from whom he borrowed so much else in requiring his readers to engage in serious meditation on national identity and the uses of power, as well as on the complexities of character and action in a troubled world.

End Notes

¹Melville was familiar with this quotation slandering Shakespeare's art, though in "Hawthorne and His Mosses" he attributed it to Henry Chettle (543-44).

²"Hawthorne and His Mosses" is replete with Melvillean contradictions and paradoxes. The imperialism of "rapidly preparing for that political supremacy among the nations, which prophetically awaits us at the close of the present century" is a far cry from the clear and incisive analysis of capitalist exploitation that informs works from every period of his own labors: "The Tartarus of Maids," *Moby Dick*, and "Billy Budd" all recognize that class conflict and exploitation are the central fact of human injustice (546). From a literary standpoint, Melville's call to write like Americans, not "like an Englishman, or a Frenchman," and his condemnation of "all imitation" as not worthy of the writers of a burgeoning American culture is directly contradictory to his own practice of larding his works with references to Shakespeare (546). One must suppose that his enthusiasm for Hawthorne had gotten the better of his rational sense, or that his nativist patriotic impulse blinded him to the implications of his own enthusiasm. In any case, though Melville anticipates that originality and spontaneity that is the hallmark of the best American writing, his prophesy only prepared the ground for Whitman and Twain, who brought American literature truly into its own. The heroism and tragedy of ordinary men is the Americanist contribution of *Moby Dick*, but in its plot, characterizations, and pointing back to the earlier paradigm, the novel does not entirely free itself from the Shakespearean heritage that in many ways circumscribes it as a derivative work. This is not, of course, to deny its attraction, power and complexity.

³Markels' claims that Macbeth has deadened his "acute sensibility" displays a shallow reading of the Scottish King's character. It is true that Macbeth sank into cruelty once he had killed Duncan, but though his actions are needlessly cruel, they are not mindless: indeed, both the murders of Banquo and Fleance and the attempt to murder Macduff and his family were motivated by an awareness of who his potential enemies were in a state characterized by Machiavellian power politics. His agon is that of the sensitive man who has sullied his own heart and soul, and whose mind preys upon him: having succumbed to the temptations to take power through violence, he too readily interprets the language of the weird sisters at face value, and when he damns his soul, he remains aware of his excesses, though he cannot curb himself. Consider, for example, the fact that in his final scenes of meditation, he ponders the effects of his choices:

that which should accompany old age,
as honor, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; but in their stead,
Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honor, breath,
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.
(5.3.24-28)

This is not the musing of a man who has deadened his sensibility, but one whose sensitive awareness tortures his mind in that he knows all too fully what he has done. His despair reaches its ultimate depth when he learns that his lady had died:

Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (5.5.23-28)

This agony, borne of the loss of his lady, is a clear recognition of the futility of his own life and the choices he made--and if one is to understand the achievement of this play, one must realize that this darkest of Shakespeare's tragedies depends not only upon the horror of its cruelty, but upon the fact that all of these horrors are perpetrated by one whose awareness and sensitivity remain intact, increasing the agon of the play and forcing us to confront an ability for self-deception that is all too human, trapping even the "worthiest cousin" in whom kings could build "an absolute trust" (*Macbeth* 1.4.14).

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