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‘Unshored, Harborless Immensities’¹: Cetology², Gender and Sexuality in *Moby-Dick*.

Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* is a problematic novel to say the least. It’s met with contempt by most students, who are easily frustrated by the book’s sheer immensity and persistently allusive and elusive narrative. It is at once epic poem, romance, travel log, history, drama and encyclopedia, not to mention, fiction. Because of this, critical responses to the novel sometimes stop at what the text does without making serious attempts to understand why.

So far, critical interpretation has been unable to connect three seemingly dissimilar elements at work in *Moby-Dick*: cetology, gender and sexuality. While extensive work has been done to discuss each topic (or occasionally, how two are related) no one seems to have linked these three subjects. Moreover, compared to how much has been made of how gender and sexuality operate in Melville’s most famous novel, critics and students alike routinely ignore the cetological chapters to the detriment of their greater understanding of the novel. Instead of relying on an inserted expert or omniscient encyclopedia to relay information about whales to the readers, Melville allows Ishmael to comment directly on whaling and the whales themselves. Melville’s inclusion of these

¹ *MD*, 145

² Cetology, as it applies to *Moby-Dick*, is the scientific study of whales but also includes dolphins and porpoises.

chapters and his insistence that Ishmael maintain narrative control throughout, as evidenced by the repeated use of the narrative cue “I” throughout those sections, suggest a correlation between how Melville plays with our rigid definitions of gender and sexuality and how Ishmael manipulates and questions scientific categorization as it relates to the whale. The result is a narrative that is neither fact nor fiction, but some fluid in-between. Melville uses everything in his rhetorical repertoire to highlight what he calls “the truth of the thing” in *Moby-Dick*. This truth is an assertion that flexibility prevails where stringency hinders. Ishmael’s inability to fully delineate the whale is directly related to Melville’s refusal to strictly define either gender or sexuality. This explicit mutability in the cetological chapters diffuses throughout the rest of the novel implicitly.

“I Promise Nothing Complete”³

The cetological chapters of *Moby-Dick* are generally regarded with, at best, disinterest by most Melville readers. Critics, too, seem at a loss determining their purpose in the novel’s larger context. Most seem to dismiss these sections as mere deviations from the narrative. When they do attempt analysis, a number refer to the “ballast theory” (Hilbert, 825). This presumes the nonfiction sections of the novel work to slow down the narrative. While the cetological chapters do stall the narrative flow, in that they stray from the novel’s main story, it isn’t enough to say what these digressions do without also suggesting how or why they accomplish this.

In these sections, Ishmael repeatedly refers to how the whales’ various qualities remain mysterious, even to the whalers who study and hunt them. He notes, “though real

³ *MD*, 147.

knowledge there be little, yet of books there are a plenty” (*MD*, 145-6). He goes on to poke fun at the taxonomical categories of animal organization developed by Carolus Linnaeus⁴ in the 16th century. While he does attempt classification, he also understands that his conjectures and groupings are limited at best. When defining the razorback whale he states, “he eludes both hunters and philosophers. Though no coward, he has never shown any part of his but his back, which rises in a long sharp ridge. Let him go. I know little of him, nor does anybody else” (*MD*, 153). Throughout all his descriptions of whales, Ishmael always keeps this in mind. For him, the whale is impenetrable. Even though he engages in this ongoing discussion, he understands its fruitlessness.

Melville contrasts this uncertainty with Ahab’s persistent patternmaking. Ahab believes that if he can track the seemingly chaotic paths of whale migration, he can find and kill Moby-Dick. “For with the charts of all four oceans before him, Ahab was threading a maze of currents and eddies, with a view to the more certain accomplishment of that monomaniac thought of his soul” (*MD*, 215). Ahab’s insistence that he can develop a blueprint for the whale’s movement, coupled with his private sense of injustice, serves to create the egocentric Western binarisms that (*MD*, 178) cannot penetrate the whale any better than Ishmael’s meandering definitions. Both their scientific approaches fail to articulate a clear, accurate picture of the whale. But unlike Ishmael, who is aware of his limited knowledge, Ahab studies the whale as a means of controlling it. This assumption that he has power over nature is his, and by extension, his crew’s ultimate undoing.

⁴ Carlous Linnaeus (1707-1778): Scientist who developed a system for naming, ranking, and classifying organisms.

As evidenced by “The Sphynx,” the whale’s body isn’t even fully understood by the crew; “Consider that the whale has nothing that can properly be called a neck; on the contrary, where his head and body seem to join there, in that very place, is the thickest part of him” (*MD*, 339). Even dissecting the sperm whale is problematic because of uncertainty about the whale’s anatomy, with which the crew is undoubtedly familiar. This ambiguity of definition and boundary extends into the stylistic shifting throughout the novel.

The reader is made immediately aware of Melville’s myriad influences from the “Extracts” he includes before even opening the novel. In his essay, “The Epistemology of the Wonder-closet: Melville, *Moby-Dick* and the Marvelous” Chad Luck notes that Melville’s refusal to limit himself to one genre or another allows for epistemological multiplicity. “The encyclopedic impulse and the play of speculative intelligence [is] at work in *Moby-Dick*’ at the same time that it destabilizes any determinate epistemological paradigm” (par. 7). By eschewing strict natural history for a narrative that places the wonderful with the factual, Melville is able to blur distinctions between the two. Related to this question of genre in the cetological sections, Betsy Hilbert claims that nonfiction elements separate from their role in the larger context of the novel and suggests that even Melville understood that he was creating a problematic text (828). Despite this he presented “onion-like, translucent layers of truths: real stuff about whaling, fictionalized and fancied-up, an extraordinary combination of romance and textbook” (824). “This work,” Hilbert argues, “assaults our concept of genre: it confused our easy categories” (827). Those “easy categories” are further blurred in the narrative when the reader is faced with undercurrents of both femininity and homoeroticism.

Throughout the cetological sections is an understanding that definitions, even seemingly complete ones, fail to encapsulate the whale. Through Ishmael, it allows for the understanding that strict categorization fails to get at any deeper understanding of the whale.

While writing *Moby-Dick*, Melville wrote to Richard H. Dana Jr., Esq. that he was working on a “strange sort of a book” (Hayford, 79). However, it is his last line concerning the novel that bears the most importance to understanding the cetological chapters: “I mean to give the truth of the thing, spite of this” (Hayford, 79). Melville knew, even a year before it was published, that *Moby-Dick* would encompass more than his earlier travel stories. These cetological chapters, it seems, were constructed as a means of angling towards deeper understanding. Here Melville uses Ishmael’s nonfiction cataloging as a means of noting that “small erections may be finished by their first architects; grand one, true ones, ever leave the capstone to posterity” (MD, 157). This insistence that knowledge and definition are always incomplete drives the rest of the novel.

“The Umbilical Cord of Madame Leviathan”⁵

In her feminist critique of “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” Robyn Wiegman notes that Melville “has been perceived as *the* American master of male bonding narratives and sentimental renderings of life among men” (735). Moreover, she notes the “most stable feature of the male bond” is its essential difference from femininity (Wiegman, 735). This gender separatism—masculinity as defined by its distinction from

⁵ MD, 424.

the feminine—is apparent not only in *Moby-Dick* but in 19th century society in general. While men were seen as controlling the “economically productive” public spheres of business, production, politics, etc., women were relegated to the more private spheres of family and domesticity (Broadhead, 9-10).

The setting of *Moby-Dick* would seem to reinforce this disparity in as much as it limits the novel’s breadth of characters. A commercial whaling ship is decidedly part of the masculine realm. A woman, let alone enough women to balance out the male crew, would not have been allowed on the *Pequod*. Inserting female characters onto the ship would undermine the basic integrity of the novel. However, in a hyper-masculine setting Melville is able to infuse his narrative with feminine imagery despite the almost complete lack of literal female characters. Martin argues, “Melville’s work may be seen as a consistent appeal against the ‘feminization’ or domestication of American culture” (15). But while the focus of *Moby-Dick* may be masculine, Martin is mistaken in assuming that the scarcity of female characters is an indictment of femininity. There is an undeniable female current in the novel, especially in its fascination with the domestic and maternal.

Later on, I will discuss Ishmael’s relationship with Queequeg in terms of its homosexual overtones. However, we must first examine this bond as an appeal for, not against, femininity and domesticity in the novel. Ishmael, who can arguably be read and will be recast later as a woman, appears, by his own description, as Queequeg’s wife (*MD*, 28). In “The Counterpane” Ishmael immediately establishes his role as bride. By the end of the chapter he muses on his marriage to Queequeg while the two recline in bed:

Man and wife, they say, there open the very bottom of their souls to each other; and some old couples often lie and chat over old times till nearly morning. Thus then, in our hearts' honeymoon, lay I and Queequeg—a cosy, loving pair (*MD*, 58).

In a literal sense, Ishmael makes himself into an ersatz female character. Because he is the narrator, he has considerable control over his own representation within the narrative. That he makes himself Queequeg's wife is even more telling in this context. The couple has also taken to the former marriage bed of the innkeeper and his wife. More importantly, though, his admission sets up the stark contrast that will occur later on in the novel between Ishmael's egoless femininity and Ahab's egocentric masculinity.

Another means of understanding how domesticity operates in the novel occurs during "The Tail" wherein Ishmael comments on artistic renderings of God and, more importantly, Jesus:

These pictures, so destitute as they are of all brawniness, hint nothing of any power, but the mere negative, feminine one of submission and endurance, which on all hands is conceded, form the peculiar practical virtues of his teachings (*MD*, 411).

Jesus is referenced or invoked sporadically throughout the novel, most consistently in relation to the "Golden Rule": "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law of the prophets" (*Holy Bible*, Matt. 7.12). In this passage, Ishmael associates this New Testament teaching of Jesus with the absence of feminine power. While this is an arguably stereotypical view of feminine power in that it presumes femininity is marked by a distinct lack of authority or

control, this definition of the feminine as negative does manifest itself in multiple male characters: Fleece, Captain Gardiner and Ishmael. In his essay “Ishmael’s (m)Other: Gender, Jesus and God in Melville’s *Moby-Dick*” Mark Lloyd Taylor notes that “in each case, Jesus’ message of love for neighbor is located within feminized, domestic culture” (332).

Early on in the novel, Ishmael muses on whether or not he should join Queequeg in his pagan rituals. He comes to the conclusion that since to worship is to do the will of God and the will of God is that he do unto others as he would have them to do unto him, he must “turn idolator” with Queequeg because he wants Queequeg to join him in his “particular Presbyterian form of worship” (*MD*, 58). Later on, Stubb commands Fleece, the cook, to sermonize to the sharks disturbing his dinner by noisily consuming the whale carcass strung to the side of the ship. Fleece tells the sharks that though they are instinctively “voracious,” they need to control their sharkishness because “an angel is not’ing more dan de shark well goberned” (*MD*, 321). He also preaches to the sharks,

don’t be tearin’ de blubber out of your neighbour’s mout ... I know some o’ you has berry brig mout, brigger dan oders; but den de brig mout sometimes has de small bellies; so dat de brigness of de mout is not to swaller wid, but to bite off de blubber for de small fry ob sharks, dat can’t get into de scrouge to help demselves (*MD*, 321).

In response to this preachment, Stubb notes, “that’s Christianity,” and urges Fleece on (*MD*, 322). Lastly, Captain Gardiner of the *Rachel* begs Ahab’s help in locating his missing son, saying, “I will not go...till you say aye to me. Do to me as you would have me do to you in the like case” (*MD*, 578). Ishmael, who has no power aboard the *Pequod*,

feminizes himself as Queequeg's wife; Fleece carries out the domestic role of cook so that the other crewmembers can be commercially productive, and as captain of the *Rachel*, Captain Gardiner takes over her Biblical function as grieving mother. In each situation we see Jesus' teaching as performed by relatively powerless, domesticated and feminized characters that are finally unable to halt Ahab's quest (333)

Equally important to understanding how femininity asserts itself in the novel is the repeated maternal imagery. As with domesticity, maternity must work within the novel's rampant masculinity. In "Cistern and Buckets" Ishmael recounts how Queequeg saves Tashtego's life after he falls into the head of a whale. "Queequeg with his keen sword had made side lunges near its bottom, so as to scuttle a large hole there ... had thrust his long arm far inwards and upwards, and so hauled out our poor Tash by the head" (*MD*, 376). The incident is described as a sort of emergency birth with Queequeg fulfilling the role of midwife. Much like the metaphorical re-birth I'll discuss in the next section that he grants Ishmael through their intimate relationship, Queequeg offers Tashtego a second chance despite almost certain destruction. Melville later muses that through "great skill in obstetrics of Queequeg, the deliverance, or rather delivery of Tashtego, was accomplished" (*MD*, 376). This delivery, however, is short lived, as even Queequeg can't save the entire crew.

Later, in "The Grand Armada," when the crew happens upon a sperm whale herd and the harpooners spear one of the whales, the other whales circle the boats as a means of defending themselves and the crew is ushered into the center of the chaos. There, they see whale domesticity, "keeping at the centre of the lake we were occasionally visited by small tame cows and calves; the women and children of this routed host" (*MD*, 423). In

her essay, “Suckled by the Sea,” Rita Bode notes how maternity works in *Moby-Dick*, suggesting that, “the masculine gives way to suggestions of the maternal” (183). Even in an ultra-masculine, hierarchical environment, “scenes throughout *Moby-Dick* counter this hierarchy through an alternative view of relationship often informed by a maternal presence” (184). During a whale pursuit, the crew finds themselves at the center of the whales’ domestic life. While the interlude is brief, it is an explicit example of how femininity intrudes in the midst of overwhelming masculinity. Throughout *Moby-Dick* there is an exchange wherein the masculine and feminine give way to one another.

Whereas earlier feminist scholarship pointed to the novel’s blatant masculinity as reinforcing patriarchy, more recent retellings of *Moby-Dick* make a point of highlighting femininity in the novel as a means of examining and breaking down androcentrism. In her essay, “Feminizing *Moby-Dick*: Contemporary Women Perform the Whale,” Elizabeth Schultz notes that an increasing number of adaptations focus on feminine power in the novel and seek to extract “women’s experiences and women’s concerns, a vision supporting the more encompassing hopes for a pluralistic and equal society” from *Moby-Dick* (305). Although some of these retellings rely on the false pretense that everyone would have lived happily ever after if women were aboard the *Pequod*, they point to a space left open for women in Melville’s narrative even though he had no way to include them literally.

“In This Simple Savage Those Old Rules Would Not Apply”

Early Melville scholarship is marked by a paucity of debate concerning the undeniable sexuality between Ishmael and Queequeg. There is no mention of the novel’s

homoerotic undertones in F.O. Matthiessen's seminal work *American Renaissance*, which guides analysis of Melville's work for decades. Only inadvertently, in describing Melville's authorial influences, does Matthiessen allow for a means of discussing Melville's adoption of matrimonial language: "A curious mixture resulted from Melville's effort to formulate his thoughts, since they were still so new to him that he had as yet no vocabulary to express them that was not at second-hand" (123). Without language specific to their relationship, Ishmael and Queequeg must recast heterosexual wedlock to articulate their bond.

The aforementioned gap in Melville studies has everything to do with the publication of *Moby-Dick* predating use of the term "homosexual." While Robert K. Martin notes, "the word is invented to correspond to some social reality" (*Hero*, 12), multiple critics worry that because the word didn't exist during the creation or initial publication of *Moby-Dick*, it cannot be attributed to the novel. This incorrectly assumes that ideas are defined only by the creation of new words and not vice versa.

In his groundbreaking work *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault develops what he calls the "repressive hypothesis" (10-12). In the 17th century we see not only an ongoing discussion of sexuality, but having named it, a cultural need to subjugate and control it. "As if in order to gain mastery over it in reality, it first had been necessary to subjugate it at the level of language ... and extinguish the words that rendered it too visibly present" (17). This is apparent even in discussions of homosexuality before the advent of the homosexual as a species, not just an act. While there is no language to eliminate in terms of the homosexual, repression of discussion that could lead to further understanding creates a need for writers like Melville to deconstruct matrimonial

language in order to explain male-male bonds. The development of the homosexual in the 19th century seems to have two effects: it “made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of ‘perversity’; but it also made possible the formation of a ‘reverse’ discourse...homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf” (101). Because *Moby-Dick* precedes the invention of homosexually specific language by at least a decade, Melville can, by insulating the relationship in connubial signifiers and eschewing overt references to homosexual sexual practices, incorporate the idea of male-male attraction and intimacy without inviting accusations of perversity.

After all his protestations and misgivings about sharing a bed with an “infernal harpooner” (*MD*, 19), Ishmael resigns himself to sleep and wakes the next morning to find Queequeg wrapped around him so that “you had almost thought I had been his wife” (*MD*, 28). Melville has 18 chapters from Queequeg’s introduction at the end of “The Spouter-Inn” until the two board the Pequod and the focus of the novel changes to Ahab’s quest. He could have developed the friendship slowly given Ishmael’s initial reticence, or glossed over their relationship entirely since the main action of the novel will take place at sea where the two men are separated by their functions aboard the ship. Instead, he immediately resorts to matrimonial language to describe Ishmael and Queequeg. They are repeatedly portrayed by Ishmael as “married”; Queequeg’s arm draped over Ishmael becomes the “bridegroom’s clasp”; they are even given a child in Queequeg’s tomahawk, a “hatchet-faced baby.” This adoption of matrimonial language is not only a means to include the feminine in an overtly masculine novel, it is also necessary to more fully articulate the relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg. Melville could have just as easily called them friends and avoided the sexual overtones of

matrimonial language. Instead, he invites the comparison by deconstructing a heterosexual relationship (i.e., marriage) to encompass homosexual intimacy. Because his novel predates “homosexual” Melville is able to give further weight to Ishmael and Queequeg’s relationship by couching it in heterosexual terms. In much the same way he allows a masculine text to give way to the feminine, here Melville asserts homosexuality within a heterosexual context.

Unlike earlier criticism that characterizes Ishmael’s pleasure-seeking in “Squeeze of the Hand” and other chapters as childish fantasy, Martin notes that this particular scene is key to understanding Ishmael’s delivery from an Ahab-like character at the beginning of the novel to Melville’s sole survivor. “Although the ecstasy that Queequeg can produce in Ishmael (he feels a “melting in me”) is a loss of self, it locates that selflessness as a step toward reunion with a larger social self” (*Hero*, 77). At the beginning of the novel, Ishmael is a singular entity set apart from the “wolfish world” much the same way Ahab later pits himself against whatever insults his sensibilities: “talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I’d strike the sun if it insulted me” (MD, 178). Queequeg’s lasting effect on Ishmael is their union. This relationship gives way to his communion with other men in an egalitarian setting later on in the novel:

Squeeze! squeeze! squeeze! all the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers' hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up

into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say ... Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness.

Without his earlier initiation into male-male intimacy through his relationship with Queequeg, Ishmael would not have been able to participate in “The Squeeze of the Hand.” Here he gives a model for the ideal nonaggressive male relationship. Through Ishmael’s ecstatic narration, this scene becomes a great, democratic circle jerk. Here Ishmael is Melville’s fully realized narrator; he is boundless and all-encompassing. Without Queequeg, he would still be too guarded and isolated from the possibilities of this kind of intense male-male bonding. Reynolds argues that the two characters are able to “[burrow] beneath the cheapened radical democracy of popular culture to a genuine radical democracy signaled by a deep affection between two good-hearted human beings of different races” (544). While Reynolds work is limited to race, this claim extends easily to sexuality. Their relationship creates both a racial and sexual boundary-blurring that results in Ishmael’s disappearance as an individualized narrator and “points up the all-absorbing magnetism of the cultural paradoxes Melville is portraying” (291). That Queequeg’s makeshift coffin later becomes Ishmael’s buoy and life raft after the final showdown with Moby-Dick is no small coincidence; Queequeg has already saved Ishmael’s life much earlier in the novel.

Ishmael’s narrative “melting” comes to a metaphorical head in “Squeeze of the Hand,” but as Cowan notes, his quest for indeterminacy and fluid meaning begins much earlier, “as old systems of reference disappear on the horizon, the temptation for the newly liberated seeker of meaning is to believe he can attain unmediated experience of

transcendence” (91). Almost suicidal on land, Ishmael is looking for a kind of ultimate personal understanding at sea. In seeking this, Ishmael melts into the narrative and Cowan argues into the nature he attempts later to understand. “Undifferentiation spreads like a contagion, rupturing the boundaries of the self” (92). Perhaps influenced by passages from the end of “The Mast-Head” this suggest that dreamy philosophical yearning is dangerous: “this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch, slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror” (*MD*, 173), Cowan’s disease metaphor creates a negative connotation for Ishmael’s transformation. As the individualized and clearly defined “self” he slowly disappears after his departure on the *Pequod*. Ishmael’s melting, however, is as much physical as it is contemplative.

Melville’s fluid use of sexuality and gender, moreover, his refusal to define either the whale or his narrative form as one genre or another, serves to create a reevaluation of those ideas without boundary or definition. Melville has written a narrative that is at once straight *and* gay, male *and* female, knowable *and* unknowable. In *Moby-Dick*, Melville wants to create a world without the rigid distinctions put in place by characters like Captain Ahab. Through Ishmael, he continually reasserts his refusal to play into those distinctions, instead creating a novel where divisions of gender and sexuality are blurred in a setting that lends itself to unyielding stratification. Even our scientific systems of taxonomical nomenclature can never fully explain the natural world. That Ishmael lives to tell this story lends credence to his flexibility, and to Melville’s as author. With *Moby-Dick*, Melville seeks to throw out our binary oppositions in favor of fluidity over rigidity. These seeming contradictions of meaning, wherein characters and images are at once two

opposing binaries are actually Melville's carefully erected means of deconstructing our cultural and scientific classifications as a means of un-defining them.

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