

BRINGING HER HOME:
THE WOMAN IN HERMAN MELVILLE

By

CLAUDIA A. DIXON

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Abstract

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By

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This dissertation examines Herman Melville's life and work through the lens of gender identification. It is my thesis that the essential mystery of Herman Melville's life, the one around which all others revolve, is his hidden feminine identification, which troubled his domestic life and found ambiguous representation in his art. I challenge the conventional biographical interpretations of his life and work to reveal the unrecognized feminine second self inside the man. His struggle to coexist with her and give her free expression in the face of cultural codes that forbade it accounts for his unhappy domestic life, his odd behavior and his frustrating art that doomed his promising career during his lifetime. The recurrence of spectral, elusive and abandoned women in his texts, as well as the persistent themes of damaged manhood, captivity and thwarted life represent his struggles with a culturally unacceptable cross-gender identity.

I use gender theory, cross-gender behavior theory, psychoanalytic and object relations theory as critical frames through which Melville's feminine identification can be understood. In positing a mechanism through which this identification could have formed, I focus on the connection between maternal depression and the formation of a feminine gender identity in boys as discussed in theories ranging from

Sigmund Freud to Salvador Ferenczsi, Michael Balint, D.W. Winnicott, Robert Stoller, Susan Coats, Richard F. Docter, J. Michael Bailey and others.

I argue against an exclusively queer reading of Melville because I believe the issue of gender is prior to sexual orientation and desire. Queer theory rightly concerns itself with the dramas of the closet, same sex desire and its coded representations in texts, but it avoids talking about what I believe to be the central issue in Melville, the vortex around which all issues of the physical and culturally embedded body revolve—gender identification.

Reading Melville's life and work in this way turns everything around and changes everything we think we know of him. Seeing the woman in Herman Melville reverses the vectors of desire and, like the inverted, lightning struck compass needle in *Moby-Dick*, allows a new perspective on this complex and elusive author to emerge.

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I am most deeply grateful for the help and support of Neal L. Tolchin, my professor at Hunter College who, when he read my first paper tentatively exploring the feminine second-self in Melville, enthusiastically validated my insights and encouraged me to pursue Ph.D. studies in English. Over the long years of study, he kept encouraging me, bolstering my confidence that I had something important to say about Melville that others might want to hear. It is entirely due to his persistent encouragement that this dissertation exists.

I am also grateful to my husband, Mike Thornburgh, whose steady hand, eagle eye and tenacious dedication as a critical reader and editor made every page sing out ever more clearly to express ideas that had a tendency to run away into the ethereal and abstract. Whatever good qualities this dissertation displays as a concrete text are entirely due to his questioning and his patient reading as well as his invaluable technical support in guiding it safely through the electronic wilderness of software and the computer.

I also wish to thank my committee. Professor William P. Kelly whose scholarship and humor, and willingness to entertain unorthodox readings of Melville helped give me courage, and David S. Reynolds, whose illuminating books on the American Renaissance gave me a wider view of Melville's times and the literary influences swirling around him.

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PREFACE

When the trout rising to the fly gets hooked and finds himself unable to swim about freely, he begins to fight which results in struggles and splashes and sometimes an escape.... In the same way, the human being struggles...with the hooks that catch him. Sometimes he masters his difficulties; sometimes they are too much for him. The struggles are all the world sees, and it naturally misunderstands them. It is hard for a free fish to understand what is happening to a hooked one.

Karl Menninger
The Human Mind

A “man forbid”

Near the end of his life, a retired Custom-House official and long forgotten writer of South Sea stories sits at his desk writing. No one reads him anymore, but he continues anyway. Sometimes, for some unknown reason he jumps up and paces the floor of his study upstairs, perhaps struggling to find the right words, or to wrestle with some emotion and find a way to transfer it onto the page, or perhaps it is something else that drives him. No one ever knows. His granddaughters listening downstairs are trying to read his mood. Times like these there seems to be a storm going on upstairs and whatever their grandfather is wrestling with, the family knows the outcome is never safe, simple or certain. Perhaps they will have to leave, as they have in the past during episodes of “domestic upheavals” (Laurie Robertson-Lorant *Melville* 580).

The brownstone on East 26th Street in Manhattan is narrow and the bedroom of the old man faces north and is dark. A small black iron bed lies along one wall and a massive mahogany desk with shelves on top laden with gilt and leather books dominates the small room like an altar. Atop “the high dim bookcase...strange plaster heads...searching blindly with sightless balls,” in the gloom. And pasted to a

wall by a table piled high with papers is a small slip of paper that reads: “Keep true to the dreams of thy youth” (Eleanor Metcalf *Cycle and Epicycle* 284).

To his granddaughter, Eleanor, this room was always “a place of mystery” and the man within it was an unfathomable mystery too, and remained so to the end. In her memoir of him she thinks aloud that the “dreams” of his youth must have been religious in nature because they seem to her to have grown “out of the deepest needs of the whole man” (284). But there is no doubt that he wrestled mightily with unseen phantoms that resided in the most private part of his being.

On one such night, the interminably restless Herman Melville, upstairs at his massive desk, penned a small sketch about an old sailor also nearing the end of his life. It is a sad tale with an ignominious end, but it contains Melville’s thesis about the essential, unsolvable mystery of human life and the unrecoverability of human truth from the public remains: “To disentangle his true history from contemporary report is superfluous,” he tells us for “a sailor’s name as it appears on the crew list is not always his real name, nor in every instance does it indicate his country” (424).

Melville names the old sailor, Daniel Orme, punningly suggesting that he is a figurative stand-in for himself. Like Melville, Daniel Or-me, is a moody old man. Unsettling rumors hint at an unsavory past, and he engages in disturbing behavior that alarms those around him. “At times, but only when he might think himself quite alone, he would roll aside the bosom of his darned Guernsey frock and steadfastly contemplate something on his body. If by chance discovered in this, he would quickly conceal all and growl his resentment... This peculiarity awaken[ed] the

curiosity of certain idle observers, lodgers living under the same roof with him” (426).

“A drug was enlisted as a means of finding out the secret” and the story is related by a “certain old-clothes man,” who tells of the crucifix of indigo and vermillion tattooed to the old sailor’s chest, as the reason for his odd behavior. But the lodgers don’t buy it. “They took another view of the discovery and...reported to the landlady that the old sailor was a sort of *man forbid*, a man branded by the Evil Spirit and it would be well to get rid of him” (427).

As usual with a Melville story, what it hides is more telling than what it reveals. The story is about disguises and *is* a disguise at the same time. What Melville means by *man forbid* can only be guessed, and why Daniel is unhappy with something on his body can only be guessed as well. What is an “old clothes man” and what if anything does clothing have to do with the hidden truth behind the layers of disguise: the Guernsey Frock, the tattoo and even the conventional metaphor of the crucifixion? And why are the everyday folk, the lodgers, so skeptical of that excuse? Obviously, something is so totally disturbing and unacceptable to them that they can only call it “Evil.”

What Daniel’s transgressions in the past were, Melville never tells us, but he does say, “Even admitting there was *something dark* that he chose to keep to himself, what then? Such reticence may sometimes be more for the sake of others than one’s self” (my emphasis 428).

It is the purpose of this dissertation to shed some light on that “something dark,” to pull aside the conventional garments, the “old clothes” of Melville tradition

in order to reveal what disturbs him about his body, and what disturbs others about his behavior. He has been hinting at it all along, since his first writings. This sketch, written near the end of his life, may be a snapshot of his family and the troubling and troubled man at its center.

I propose to examine Herman Melville's life and art through the lens of gender identification. It is my thesis that the essential mystery in Herman Melville's life, the one around which all the others revolve, is his hidden feminine identification.

I argue that while his body was male and his public life masculine and heterosexual, he was haunted by another self, a feminine self, which he continued throughout his life and art to personify in recurring figures of spectral and forlorn women in his texts. These women are often represented as illegitimate, abandoned by life and parents, and yearning for recognition and acceptance.

The woman in Herman Melville was never able to come out and be recognized by the world and so she is an elegiac figure abandoned and grieving. Twice, with Isabel in *Pierre* and Marianna of "The Piazza," he yearns out loud to bring her home. The inability of these women to come out or come home leaves them in a sad and distinctly Melvillian limbo: orphaned, homeless, outcast, like almost all Melville's characters, both male and female.

The list of Melville's women is short but most (except the first one, Fayaway) have this sadness surrounding them. From the impossible Yillah in *Mardi*, Isabel in *Pierre*, to Marianna of "The Piazza," who envies the writer his home in the sunlight while she, unrecognized, must struggle alone in obscurity, there is a poignant yearning and deep despair surrounding them. This is because Melville's women are

born out of their author's feeling of being imprisoned by his masculine gender role and the enforced heterosexuality of his time. It is an eternal imprisonment, of a less gothic and horrific cast perhaps, but of the same kind his contemporary Edgar Allan Poe portrays in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Cask of Amantillado*, as well as in the "never more" of the lost Lenore in *The Raven*.

While he strove mightily to write her into the world and into the house, the dilemma for Melville is that his inner woman, his feminine self, ends up imprisoned by the very same art that yearns to emancipate her. Melville seeks to write her out of the social incarceration she suffers but succeeds only in further isolating her and in memorializing her sorrow at being left behind. An inner truth so at odds with external reality and the codes and conventions of his time forces him into allusive maneuvers, talking about his feminine second self in oblique ways at the expense of what his contemporary readers most wanted, a frank and realistic portrayal of life as they understood it.

Unbeknownst to his readers his stories are really about his struggles with an unauthorized and unacceptable cross-gender identity and serve to express only his own private turmoil at the expense of what his readers need.

Suggesting but never coming out with it forces him into all the evasive strategies so characteristic of his work: the circumlocutions, digressions, and perorations with which he hectors and dominates his audience. These frustrating maneuvers impede the narrative and often function like deceptive departures for which there are seldom any corresponding arrivals. They not only confuse the common reader, they also confound the most scholarly interpreters and critics of his

work who, forced to grapple with persistent mystification end up in denial, unwittingly colluding with him in hiding his secret.

Refusing (or being unable) to name a thing consigns it to a ghostly existence. Hence, the persistent efforts to find in his work meanings that *can* be named: connections to the social, cultural, political and religious conditions and issues of his time. Yet, in spite of this, scholars have noted in him the occupational narcissism of a writer who talks mainly about himself in his work. It is surprising then that so many fail to recognize that Melville is talking about himself in his female characters, too. Imprisoned in their own cultural bias, scholars and common readers alike have consistently ignored the obvious, seeing his women as objects of desire instead of identification.

In *Pierre*, perhaps his most self-reflexive novel, he says “God hath given me a sister, and...covered her with the world’s extremest infamy and scorn,” after which he says, “Pierre felt that deep within him lurked a devine unidentifiableness that owned no earthly kith or kin” (Kraken Edition 129).

It is common for biographers and commentators on Melville (past and present) to impute his refusal to name this “unidentifiableness” as a radical refusal to reduce life to specifics as if to name a thing were to reduce it to something trivial and common. I argue he is unable to name it because his culture as yet has no name for what he feels that is not shrouded in shame and a sense of pollution, and that is why he must deny and circumlocute his way around it.

Feeling powerfully feminine in a man’s body is to feel somehow a monster, a hybrid creature, like “two beings thrown unnaturally together,” which, as Lewis

Thomas explains, generates “a profound kind of human anxiety (*The Medusa and The Snail* 66). It is the same cultural and personal anxiety that overwhelms discussions of science, recombinant DNA and stem cell research today. Such transgressions of boundaries believed to be natural, mixing of matter and overturning of conventional boundaries are “disturbing in a fundamental way” (71). What we can accept, Thomas says, in classical mythology “peopled with mixed beings—part man, part animal or plant,” we cannot accept in society (71). It upsets our notions of everything and every one in his place when the boundaries are seen to be moveable. And it is not without danger as most classical hybrids are “associated with tragic stories” as hybridity is often the gods’ punishment for sexual transgression or unauthorized desire (71).

For these reasons Melville’s feminine identification is the elephant (or whale) in the room that no one will acknowledge is there. It is safe to see Melville’s search for the lost Yillah in *Mardi* as a search for transcendent truth that will always be out of human reach and beyond understanding, literally unidentifiable. But this verbal fluff obscures a more terrestrial and concrete explanation and the culturally more disturbing one. The “unidentifiableness” of which Melville speaks is the unidentifiableness of a mixed gender identification trapped in a binary world.

In these pages, I will attempt to show how this mixed gender identity might have occurred in Melville’s life. I will discuss the ways in which I see it manifested in his work, how it both enriches and impoverishes it at the same time, and how, in the complexities and ambiguities of his art, as well as his cultural situation and his

turbulent emotional life, we can see a “fast fish” struggling at the end of a mighty line.

To do this I will weave together several strands of inquiry: Melville’s family history, Freudian and object relations psychology, the psychology of gender and cultural anthropology and contemporary theories of cross-gender behavior. And I will re-interpret several of Melville’s major works in light of what these theories have to say about cross-gender identification and behavior.

It is only for the sake of making her more visible to the mind that I call his feminine identification: the woman in Melville. By this I do not mean some transhistorical, essentialist notion of womanhood, but rather Melville’s own sense of having an unrecognized feminine self the way he would have defined it according to the cultural codes of his time and according to the paradigms of femininity most powerfully influencing him in his female centered family.

Tragically, the very codes and family dynamics that helped to shape his feminine identification were the very codes and pressures that forbade its expression. Real as Melville might have felt her to be, his inner woman was wholly unacceptable to his world and also to his family, “the lodgers under the same roof with him,” and that is why she could never fully come out or be let in and had to remain imprisoned in his art. It was what made him, like his surrogate, Daniel Orme, *a man forbid*.

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ILLUSTRATION

Samoan Girl in a Canoe, John La Farge 1895-1896

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CHAPTER I

"The Trick of Grief" Maternal Depression And Femininity In Melville

*Her infant babe
Had from his mother caught the trick of grief
And sighed among its playthings*

William Wordsworth

In "The Ruined Cottage" William Wordsworth describes a child who caught the "trick of grief" from his mother. The mother's husband had gone away and not come back and the mother mourns his loss with such intense passion and withdrawing from life and from engagement with her child that the boy cannot help but take her sadness as his own. Wordsworth's poetic insight, that a child can catch a mother's grief, anticipates the psychological theories and clinical experience of Sigmund Freud, Salvador Ferenczi, Michael Balint, D.W. Winnicott, Judith Butler, and Susan Coats. Using these theorists and others I argue that disabling maternal depression with subsequent maternal abandonment lead to a feminine identification in Melville, which though successfully hidden in his public life became enshrined in his art. I also argue that this feminine identification did not completely replace a core gender identity as male, but co-existed, uncomfortably with it, thus the spectral woman alternates in his work with recurring depictions of damaged manhood.

In 1831, when Melville was twelve years old, his father, Allan Melvill, died, and his mother, Maria, entered into a period of mourning that was, by all accounts, dramatic, inconsolable, and prolonged. Neal Tolchin has shown in his work, *Mourning, Gender and Creativity in the Art of Herman Melville* that culturally, mourning was women's work in 19th century America and that "mourning rituals both

prolonged the process of mourning and blocked the expression of feeling in bereavement" (xii), especially for men. He also notes that conflicted feelings about the dead "were driven underground...and the mourner often formed a pathological identification with significant behavior of the deceased, especially a last illness" (xii).

But there are indications that Allan's death was not the first time grief and depression had overwhelmed Maria. In a departure from Tolchin's thesis, or perhaps as a companion to it, I will reinterpret the known facts of Melville's biography to show that instead of identifying with his deceased father, or even his mother's conflicted representations of him after his death, Melville identified most powerfully with his depressed and mourning mother, whose unstable, inconsistent, yet dominant role in his life, coupled with her severe and frequent bouts of depression had already established in him a deep feminine identification.

In my argument the object of identification differs from Tolchin's, however we both describe essentially a double bind. Though Melville's lonely, financially stressed and abandoned mother encouraged him to identify with her *suffering* (as a way of keeping her company and validating her existence), she would naturally have been very uncomfortable with any expression or imitation of her feminine behavior, any outward signs of feminine identification, as these would have been seen as inappropriate and would be forbidden in the strictly binary gendered culture of 19th Century America. So as with mourning, the culture often creates a double bind: encouraging with one hand what it discourages with the other.

To complicate matters, the desire of the mother to have her suffering recognized and consoled prevents her from being able to recognize and console the

suffering of her children. Therefore to maintain a relationship such that they can be cared for, however minimally and with erratic and contradictory impulses, they are forced to adopt her suffering as their own. There is almost no chance that they will be able to identify with the father who is now dead and whom history shows was of doubtful help while alive.

The absence of a father as a counter-balancing influence, coupled with persistent maternal absence as a result of depression with its consequent withdrawing of support from the child, can lead to an intolerable separation anxiety. I argue that Melville attempted to manage and assuage his own sense of abandonment through an incorporation of a powerful identification with his mother, which led to a failure to identify with the father and follow the socially prescribed path to heterosexuality and masculinity.

Early theorists, Sigmund Freud and Salvador Ferenczi, and also Donald Winnicott and Michael Balint, have all noted the role of maternal depression in the formation of cross-gender feminine identity in males, leading to eventual homosexual orientation. However, I will not focus my discussion on the already well-documented homoerotic elements in Melville's work. Rather I will focus my argument specifically on gender identification and its representation in his art. I will also step into the mine field of long held and cherished notions about Melville to posit what I see as the plausible, concrete manifestations of gender identity conflict in his life.

To do this, I will need to cover some complicated theoretical ground, hoping as I do that I can make my case without getting lost in a thicket of abstruse psychological jargon. Following my discussion of psychoanalytic and object

relations theory which posits the relationship between family dynamics and developing intrapsychic sense of gender identity, I will discuss the more recent theories of gender by Jessica Benjamin, and theories on cross-gender behavior published by scientists, scholars and clinicians. Among them are: Richard.F. Docter, J. Michael Bailey, Robert Stoller, and Susan Coats who also note the role of maternal depression and absent fathers in the formation of cross-gender identity in male children.

It would seem that absent fathers and maternal depression create a fatal failure of recognition, which can undermine healthy object relations in both male and female children, but is particularly damaging to the formation of unconflicted and unambiguous masculine identification in males.

Maria

We get an enduring image of Maria Melville from one of the earliest narratives on Melville's life, *Herman Melville: Mariner and Mystic* by Raymond M. Weaver (1921). According to Weaver, Maria Melville was "remembered as a cold, proud woman, arrogant in the sense of her name, her blood, and the affluence of her forebears" (84). Weaver places quotes around terms like, "haughty" "proper" "cold" and states that "the oral traditions that survive *do not halo* her memory" (my emphasis 60).

Even though she was remembered as contemptuous of Herman Melville's modest domestic economy, it is worth noting that Maria was largely dependent on him for most of her life after Herman was married. She lived in his home until 1862.

This means Herman would have been reminded on a daily basis of his shortcomings through her visible and verbal expressions of disappointment. It also suggests that her haughty behavior may have covered a deep sense of inadequacy.

Her husband had failed to prosper and live up to his family's and her expectations of him. He had died in debt and thrust upon her a life of humiliating penury and obligation to her parents and her children. What did she have to be so "proud" of? Only the achievements of her ancestors. It seems that Maria built her self-esteem on the backs of her children, the only human beings she could feel superior to and who, bound by custom, were compelled to respect her.

A telling story passed down in this "oral tradition" and recounted by Weaver and then repeated decades later by Laurie Robertson-Lorant in her biography of Melville (1996), indicates that Maria depended on her children to reflect back to her not only her proud heritage but her suffering as well. As the story goes, she compelled her children to sit on stools around her high four-poster bed while she napped (perhaps complaining of one of her "bad headaches") and waited for her husband to come home from work (60). It seems she depended on her children to recognize (be a witness to) not just her suffering but also her existence, as if their small eyes, fixed upon her body, could tether her to the world and comfort her in her misery simply by witnessing it.

One can only imagine the effect such rituals would have on her children. It is a kind of emotional domination that would rob them of their own spontaneous feelings. How could a child experience his or her own sorrow, anger, frustration or jubilant joy with the specter of a suffering mother always before them? Weaver calls

this story "perhaps apocryphal" but if it is untrue yet widely circulated, its enduring message reaches out beyond the grave to tell us that Maria was the sort of woman who *would* do such a thing. It tells us what her children felt to be essentially true about her. Robertson-Lorant calls this a "family legend" perhaps to suggest it is an exaggeration. Yet it rings true, and so perhaps like Melville's own fictions, it endures because it conveys more of truth than of fact and is all the more compelling for it.

Robertson-Lorant recognizes the caretaking function children take on when a parent is unable to cope. According to her, Maria's fragile emotions kept her husband silent about his troubles lest he exacerbate her depression and that as a consequence "The sensitive Herman did the suffering for the family" (26). It is important to note that "Little Herman" did not suffer his own grief and sadness, but assumed his family's suffering, very like Wordsworth's infant babe.

If even Maria's husband was afraid to approach her with his own deep feelings and desperation over business concerns, how then could a small child hope to do it? It is revealing that not only did Maria suffer bouts of depression but her own mother, Catherine Van Schaick Gansevoort, did too, and these episodes persisted into her old age. This is important to show how maternal depression can become systemic in a family. If Maria's mother demanded caretaking from her daughter, Maria would very likely be depressed also and demand caretaking from her own children to make up for what she did not get as a child, hence the "trick of grief," is the contagion-like progress of depression from mother to child.

In *The Gansevoorts of Albany*, Alice Kenney describes the relationship of Maria and her mother. "Especially close to Caty was her youngest child and only

daughter, Maria" (172). Even after her marriage to Allan Melvill, Maria "remained especially close to her mother" (175). Caty spent a good deal of time in Maria's home always during her confinements but often at other times as well, and it is clear that her presence there was not just to take care of her daughter but to receive caretaking in return. In a letter Maria writes to her brother Peter, "Mother requires a person of good sense and some judgment to be with her constantly" (179).

It is worth noting that Caty died in January of 1831. Just one year later, in January of 1832, Maria's husband, Allan, died, too. Two devastating losses, one close upon the other, of the two most important people in her life, the two she most depended on for security and comfort, must have brought Maria close to emotional collapse. With no income and crushing debt to bear, Maria was forced to depend on the kindness of relatives to help her manage, and upon her eight children for solace.

The generational emotional fragility on the Gansevoort side combined with the emotional instability on the Melvill side of the family. Kinney notes that Allan Melvill came from a family "of which members were notably emotionally unstable, and...suffered from internal tensions, which drove them eventually to nervous and physical collapse, susceptibility to infection and early death." And yet, despite this, Maria remembered her husband with "continuing devotion" (187). This keeping up a good front, and the obvious denial of her own feelings, suggests that Maria's children would not have been allowed to express unacceptable feelings based on reality either.

The obvious sadness in Herman Melville's life and that of his brother Gansevoort, and the death of Melville's son Malcolm by suicide and the mysterious wayward and early death of his other son, Stanwix suggests that depression was

endemic in the Melville family. Whether caused by environmental factors, chemical imbalance in the brain, or a genetic predisposition, when depressed parents fail to provide all important recognition and emotional support, it forces the child to identify with the sadness of their parent at the expense of having their own sadness recognized. Keeping up a good front, Maria managed her household with "cold" authority but we can see from her frequent periods of depression, and her needs for attention and solace, that her mothering was erratic, both domineering and dependent—a paradoxical combination often found in Melville's fiction: especially in "Bartleby the Scrivener" and *Benito Cereno*.

Being emotionally needy but also detached, Maria's preoccupation with her own suffering left her children abandoned. There was only one way they could relate to her—through identification, and Melville, being the second son and the "sensitive" one was perhaps particularly vulnerable to identification with her moods as Robertson-Lorant suggests.

Object Loss Identification and Melancholia

"Object loss identification," according to Sigmund Freud, "is common in young children who have been rejected by their parents" (*The Primer of Freudian Psychology* 77). "When a person has lost, or cannot possess a cathected object, he may attempt to recover or secure it by making himself like the object.... The motive force for identification... is frustration, inadequacy and anxiety and the purpose served by identification is the discharge of painful tension through mastery of the frustration, inadequacy or anxiety (77-78) We can see that if the parenting is erratic,

if the caretaking and support is interrupted by periods of maternal depression and anxiety, the infant would feel both frustration and anxiety. The parent's unavailability must be remedied. Identification is the compensatory strategy that brings the parent inside the ego. But it is not the healthy, encouraging, devoted parent, rather it is the depressed parent, whose sadness and withdrawal from life (and the child) becomes the model.

Identification, according to both Freudian and more recent psychology, is a regressive form of object relation and is connected to loss, mourning and melancholia. According to Freud in his 1917 *Mourning and Melancholia*, the object was lost through a real or imagined slight or disappointment (i.e. a withdrawal of affection) [and] the relationship was shattered. But the free libido then was not displaced on to another object; it was withdrawn into the ego and served to establish an identification of the ego with the abandoned object. "Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego" (*The Freud Reader* 586). It is my contention that the "Shadow of the object," for Melville, was a woman, first his mother and then the woman in himself modeled on her. Her presence could not be ignored by him, yet her existence could not be recognized by anyone else, hence, like his mother, the woman in Melville is melancholic, always abandoned and abandoning, always grieving.

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler summarizes Freud's argument in *Mourning and Melancholia*. She makes a specific connection to gender identity: "In the experience of losing another human being whom one has loved...the ego is said to incorporate that other into the very structure of the ego, taking on attributes of the other and sustaining the other through magical acts of imitation. The loss of the other

whom one desires and loves is overcome through a specific act of identification that seeks to harbor the other within the very structure of the self.... This identification is not simply momentary or occasional, but becomes a new structure of identity" (73). Butler makes explicit what Freud only alludes to. His concept is not just referring to ego or character formation, "but the acquisition of gender identity as well" (74).

The repudiation of the mother (as an object of desire in the oedipal drama) becomes the founding moment of what Freud calls "gender consolidation." "Forfeiting the mother as object of desire, the boy either internalizes the loss through identification with her, or displaces his heterosexual attachment in which case he fortifies his attachment to his father and thereby 'consolidates' his masculinity" (76).

Butler sees Freud's metaphor of consolidation as indicating that before the oedipal moment, "there are bits and pieces of masculinity to be found within the psychic landscape but they are diffuse and disorganized, unbounded by the exclusivity of a heterosexual object choice. If the boy will not or cannot choose the heterosexual path and "renounces...heterosexual cathexis...*he internalizes the mother and sets up a feminine superego which dissolves and disorganizes masculinity, consolidating feminine libidinal disposition in its place*" (my emphasis *Gender Trouble* 76).

I see Melville's dissolved and disorganized masculinity as a keenly felt wound that finds expression in deranged Ahab, detumescent Bartleby, depleted Benito Cereno, and the cynically disillusioned Confidence Man. His fictional feminine personae embody his identification as well as his conflict with his mother. Their progressive development follows an arc that begins exuberantly with Fayaway in

Typee, and the search for Yillah in *Mardi*, then trudges through the anger and despair of Marianna of "The Piazza," Isabel in *Pierre*, the women paper mill workers in "The Tartarus of Maids" and ends in the final transcendent blossoming of Billy Budd.

Butler states, "Because identifications substitute for object relations, and identifications are a consequence of loss, gender identification is a kind of melancholia" (78). Following Freud and Butler, Melville's life long depression and marital unhappiness can be seen as the direct result of a powerful experience of loss, not of his father, whose presence in the home was limited (and whose failure served as a poor model of masculinity), but of his mother with whom he identified, whose influence was emotionally powerful and also erratic.

Melville was forced to cope with a mother who created the weather in the home, sometimes sunny and warm, other times raining tears and demanding attention and at other times physically absent. This maternal domination and absence occurs at the critical period when his identity is forming. It is through the incorporation of the lost object, Melville's distracted, depressed and detached but nevertheless emotionally intrusive mother, that leads to a powerful identification with her and a lifelong dilemma for him. As Freud pointed out, internalization of loss is compensatory. But it is clear this kind of compensation (a boy identifying with his abandoned and abandoning mother) would create consequences of its own that that would make it difficult for a boy to remain comfortable inside the gender and role society has assigned to him.

In more recent work, psychologists Susan Coats et al have clinically observed a pre-oedipal boy shifting his gender identification to feminine as a result of a

melancholic response to his mother's depressed withdrawal. Shifts of gender identification in response to separation and loss are crucial to my thesis about Melville, not only identifying with his mother's depression but as an adaptation to it, developing a feminine identification.

The development of a feminine identity inside a masculine body is problematic in so far as cultural demands would force one identity to be hidden and the other to be feigned, worn as a mask. For Melville, this throws the entire idea of identity into chaos. His last novel, *The Confidence Man*, is a testament to an acutely felt impossibility of a stable, recognizable and trustworthy identity. In it he says, "...there can be but one original character in a work of invention. Two would conflict to chaos" (Library of America 1098). If he felt his public life to be a work of invention and a mask, too, here we see him commenting abstractly on the pain his dual identity caused him, describing the conflict of two in one work (his life) as resulting in chaos.

In *Mardi*, *Pierre* and "The Piazza" particularly, the feminine is represented as haunting, while in *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* and "Bartleby..." the masculine is represented as unstable and damaged, suicidal and deranged. Melville characters stand alone and do not establish relationships with others. They are driven by things we cannot see, preoccupied with a loss, abandoned by life and often they simply die or disappear from the tale with no explanation, as if we the reader had no need to know who they were or where they went. This lack of respect for the reader and failure to recognize readerly expectations for coherence and rational process comes from a writer whose own needs for recognition were denied him.

As happened within his own family, he passed on his isolation to his characters and then to his readers. The result was an almost unanimous rejection which was interpreted as his audience's failure to recognize what he was trying, albeit obscurely, to tell them. Except for the exotic allure of his first two novels, Melville's subsequent work grew stranger and stranger. His readers could not see his attempts at representing a hidden part of himself as anything but self-indulgent unintelligible non-sense. They could not recognize the workings out of his essentially regressive identification with his mother, nor would they have had any way of understanding the concept of a deeply ingrained cross-gender identity co-existing under a mask of manhood.

Basic Fault

Michael Balint, an object-relations psychologist and student of Salvador Ferenczi, also describes identification as a regressive substitute for object relations. In *The Basic Fault: Therapeutic Aspects of Regression*, he describes the basic fault as a sense of a defect in the self. This wound is buried in the deep past, in the pre-verbal, pre-oedipal period of development, the period Jacques Lacan refers to as pre-symbolic, before the father's influence. In his view, "the origin of the basic fault may be traced back to a considerable discrepancy in the early formative phases of the individual between his bio-physical needs and the material and psychological care, attention, and affection available during relevant times. This creates a state of deficiency whose consequences and after-effects appear to be only partly reversible. The cause of this early discrepancy may be congenital...or may be environmental,

such as care that is insufficient, deficient or haphazard, over-anxious, over-protective, harsh, rigid, grossly inconsistent, incorrectly timed, over-stimulating, or merely un-understanding or indifferent" (22).

"Basic Fault" does not mean a complex conflict, situation or split in an already formed personality, but a fault in the basic structure of the personality itself, akin to a scar or defect occurring at the pre-verbal level in the exclusively two-person relationship between mother and infant. In Balint's view, "all these processes happen within a very primitive and peculiar object-relationship, fundamentally different from those commonly observed between adults. It is definitely a two-person relationship in which, however, only one of the partners matters" (23).

In Maria Melville's mothering, tormented as it was by depression and devastating loss, only one person mattered: herself. This inability to recognize the emotional needs of her son had far reaching consequences for the development of Herman's masculinity. It lead to what Balint refers to as a sense within the person of "something distorted or lacking...producing a defect that must be put right" (29).

Melville's art is dominated by damaged, imprisoned, tormented, and rage-filled men. What eats away at them is never revealed, only represented symbolically. In *Moby-Dick* Ahab's missing leg, an obvious allusion to castration, and his facial scar, are symbols of something lacking or distorted inside the man, and the story is about his monomaniacal quest to right a wrong that was done to him. That wrong is embodied by a White Whale. Ahab has no one that he loves, none that he can feel a brotherhood with except perhaps the whale. In her *Sexual Personae*, Cammille Paglia states, "Melville plumbs and dissects his whale measuring and naming each part. But

his epic catalogs are *feinings of inclusiveness*. They give every name to the whale but one: mother" (584). Her provocative and insightful assertion is that the great white whale represents Melville's mother. Perhaps it is not too far a stretch to suggest the quest to wreak revenge on the whale is the drive to kill the mother who damaged his manhood by encouraging too deep an identification with her.

Bartleby's affliction is hidden, too, but the portrait Melville draws of him is one of depression: He is "a victim of an innate and incurable disorder," (653) the narrator tells us. He is "incurably forlorn" and catatonically resistant to relationships with others. He seems to be trying to protect and heal something inside himself by rejecting any human concern for others at all. In the end, he simply wastes away, taking his secret with him.

In *Billy Budd*, John Claggart's hidden affliction provokes his attempt to make it right, and it, too, leads to his death. Melville alludes to Satan when he describes Claggart as afflicted with "a mania of an evil nature [that] folds itself in a mantel of respectability" (325). For Eve Sedgwick in her *Epistemology of The Closet*, Claggart is the "homosexual in this text" (92) and "he feels toward his own desires only terror and loathing" (96). He is a homosexual who is also at the same time homophobic. It seems obvious to me that both conditions are a hidden secret, hidden even from Claggart himself. He is a closeted homosexual, who, when he encounters the lovely and handsome Billy Budd he is torn by conflicting emotions of desire, envy and homosexual panic. We can see that in his attempt to get rid of Billy he is desperately trying to heal the basic fault in himself.

From the "natural depravity" of Claggart to the vocally challenged Billy Budd, we can see that there are always "Basic Faults" in Melville's characters that drive the story, but they are never revealed, nor can they be. The sense of loss and damage, and the hidden identity they are written to personify, happened too early in life, at the preverbal stage before there was a vocabulary to name it, and also in a century without the psychological vocabulary and awareness to accept it. If we look closely at the narratives, however, we will see that the damage unmistakably involves gender: the unrecognized woman and damaged man.

If Melville had been born in the middle of the 20th century instead of early in the 19th he would, perhaps, have been a psychologist and written many a forgettable journal article or case history. As it is, for want of a psychological vocabulary, but the prodigious autodidactic acquiring of a Romantic one, we have his self-analysis in his sometimes beautiful, often frustrating art.

Viewed from Balint's perspective it seems clear that the "scar," the "defect that must be put right," in Melville is the sense of a split identity: an insufficiently "muscular" masculinity, and a persistent yet socially unacceptable feminine identity. Raymond Weaver intuited as much in 1921, saying of Melville, "When he compared himself to Narcissus tormented by the irony of being two, Melville may have been hotter on the trail of the truth than he knew" (127).

The feminine side of the split-gendered personality in Melville is consistently embodied in his texts by the periodic intrusions (more like hauntings) of grieving, lonely, isolated women who never become real and often are never seen by anyone else in the story, only by the narrator. The phantom women usually disappear without

a trace. Like an echo or a ripple in a pond, they simply dissolve back into the substance from which they emerged—Melville's consciousness. That the women are represented as suffering and the men rage filled and self destructive corresponds to Melville's early life with a grieving mother and memories of a father who died convulsed in a violent deathbed mania.

The Tyranny of Suffering

Salvador Ferenczi, a colleague of Freud, and Balint's mentor, describes in his famous essay, "The Confusion of Tongues Between Adults and The Child," a phenomenon he calls, "Tyranny of Suffering." By this he means the power of a parent's suffering to influence the child such that in order to defend himself he must perform a feat of identification. "The fear of the uninhibited, almost mad adult, changes the child...to defend himself against dangers coming from people without self control, he must know how to identify completely with them" (165).

Of course we cannot know what specific episodes or events may have demonstrated the lack of self control that young Melville, at the earliest stages of his childhood might have felt compelled to manage through intense identification with his mother. However, it seems plausible from what we do know of Maria, that she was both fragile and emotionally intense and that she demonstrated this to her children and depended on them for support. She is a textbook example of the kind of mother Ferenczi had in mind when he states, "In addition to passionate love and passionate punishments there is third way of helplessly binding a child to an adult. There is the *terrorism of suffering*. Children have the compulsion to put to rights all

disorder in the family.... A mother complaining of her constant miseries can create a nurse for life out of her child, i.e. a real mother substitute, neglecting the true interests of her child" (166).

Caretaking, mothering, managing the feelings of others is now and was even more so, women's work in the 19th century and it seems plausible that turning a male child into a caretaker would have the effect of feminizing him. Before, during and after the calamities that intruded upon her life, Maria Melville's protracted and passionate grief filled the house and distorted the family. The comments about her within the family and quoted by biographers indicate that her behavior was bizarre, and often out of control. I argue that her very real suffering, both her earlier depressions and her grief at her husband's death, had the effect of turning her children into caretakers of their mother, at the expense of their own needs, and that in her son Herman's case it led to a melancholic identification with her and a failure to establish a solid, unconflicted and "muscular" masculine identity.

It seems clear from Freud, "Any identification means a change in the ego under the influence of an external object" (*Ego and Id* Ch. 3), Ferenczi's *Tyranny of Suffering* and Balint's concept of *The Basic Fault*, that when a parent's emotions and needs are too strong, and the only path to relationship with them is through caretaking, the child cannot develop the capacity for object relations but must content itself with regressive identification. I contend that Melville's art mourns for a loss that can never be made good. His work continually describes two irreconcilable aspects of himself: his masculine side, threatened, damaged, enraged and suicidal,

and another part of himself-- his feminine side--hidden, denied and mourning for the loss of an unlived, unrecognized life.

Object Relations and Object Use

D.W. Winnicott, renowned British child psychiatrist and pediatrician and psychoanalyst and President of the British Psychoanalytic Society (1956-1959 and 1965-1968), contributes several important concepts to any discussion of childhood development. Those of particular value to my argument are: 1. The effect of maternal depression on the developing ego of the child. 2. The "False Self," an ego defense constructed specifically to comply with maternal demands and expectations. 3. The Intellectual False Self as a result of a split between mind and body. 4. The concept of the "good enough mother" and the "transitional object."

In *Playing and Reality* Winnicott's distinguishes between "object relation" and "object use" (88). The former is a "bundle of projections" in which the subject sees external objects as essential extensions of himself. In contrast, "object use" is achieved when the subject recognizes the object as other, completely outside his omnipotent control. This "recognition of it as an entity in its own right" is "perhaps the most difficult thing in human development" (89). "The object, if it is to be used, must necessarily be real [and] usage cannot be described except in terms of acceptance of the object's independent existence" (88). An object can only become usable for the subject if it can survive his anger, frustration and aggression, if he cannot destroy it with his rage. A mother who is not able to tolerate (survive) her

son's aggression, who collapses in despair or falls ill or who retaliates by withdrawing love and emotional support will not be able to facilitate her son's transition from object relating (projective identification) to object usage.

The Good Enough Mother

As already discussed, Maria Melville was not the sort of mother who was strong enough to withstand her children's aggression and was precisely the sort of mother who would compel them to identify with her suffering in order to assuage her own depression and to control them. Winnicott's signature concept of "the good enough mother" is defined as "one who makes active adaptation to the infant's needs, an active adaptation that gradually lessens, according to the infant's growing ability to account for failure and to tolerate the results of frustration" (10). Further, "Active adaptation demands an easy, unresented preoccupation with one infant" (10). The ability of the mother to identify with her child and adapt herself to his needs and then support his needs for independence without retaliation at the appropriate time requires that she be attuned, that she *recognize* her child. I argue that in Melville's life, failure of maternal recognition engendered all the other failures of recognition he suffered in his life and represented in his art.

Mother's Depression and Female Identification

It is clear that the mother who is depressed will not be able to be "good enough," as she will be unresponsive and too preoccupied with her own misery to adequately care for the needs of her child. Robertson-Lorant reports that Maria

suffered post partum depression that lasted "many months" after the birth of her fourth child, Augusta, and this occurred just at the point when she was weaning young Herman (*Melville* 24).

The sudden loss of maternal nurture and sustenance at this crucial point in his development had to have created anxiety and a sense of loss and mourning in the young child whose mother was precipitately taken away from him. We can wonder to what extent she was *ever* there or, if present at all in the beginning, whether Maria ever returned in any meaningful way. It may be just at this time that Melville constructed his maternal identification to keep a sense of his mother always with him.

There are noticeable distortions in the development of child that are "a consequence of the child's having to manage the mother's moods" (*Winnicott* 90). "Children with a depressed mother," Winnicott writes, "have a task which can never be accomplished. Their task is first to deal with mother's mood" (*Winnicott* 91). Winnicott believed the infant had a natural right to use to use his mother unconditionally for his own growth. "But if the mother was depressed and unable to adapt and respond to her infant, the process was reversed, and the mother used the child to sustain something in herself" (*Winnicott* 91). The consequences of this are that the child, in order to sustain her, must "take on the mother's guilt and depression by identifying with it" and the risk is he may "use the mother's depression as an escape from his own" (*Winnicott* 92).

But for Winnicott, "the worst environment is the erratic one, where the child must compensate too much for inconsistent mothering" (*The Language of Winnicott* 240). We can see the inconsistency in Melville's early childhood brought about not

only by maternal depression but frequent and often abrupt dislocations that resulted not only in emotional but also physical maternal absences as well.

When Herman was three years old, another child was born, Allan Jr., and Robertson-Lorant quotes Herman as saying, "Now Pa got two little boys" (25). Robertson-Lorant dismisses the obvious error in arithmetic (Including Gansevoort there were now *three* boys in the family) saying that Herman "evidently identified more closely with the new baby than with his priggish older brother" (25). I think the most obvious interpretation is the one more difficult for Robertson-Lorant to make: Herman was not counting himself in the troupe of Melville sons.

Even as early as three he did not consider himself male. We can wonder if Herman's mother and father denied the obvious too, or whether they simply ignored him, or if they chided, shamed, or punished the boy for his error. At the age of three he came right out with it, without fear of censure. It would not be long before Herman would learn to keep such unacceptable feelings to himself. Hidden, they gather greater force because they are magnified by guilt and shame, longing and sadness. It is the persistence of the hidden force of this female that we see Melville struggling to express in his art.

Bisexuality—Male and Female Elements

Winnicott reports the analysis of a patient who continued analysis for many years without success because of the patient's gradual recognition that something fundamental had remained unchanged; there was this "unknown factor, which had kept this man working at his own analysis for a quarter of a century" (*Playing and*

Reality 72). A breakthrough came when Winnicott suddenly realized "I am listening to a girl. I know perfectly well you are a man, but I am listening to a girl, and I am talking to a girl" (73). After this interpretation, Winnicott noticed a considerable change in the patient. He seemed to experience relief.

After a pause the patient said, "If I were to tell someone about this girl I would be called mad" (73). "I myself could never say, (knowing myself to be a man) "I am a girl." I am not mad that way. But you said it, and you have spoken to both parts of me" (74).

Winnicott realized that his patient had been "released from a dilemma" that had held him prisoner all his life. This is the dilemma I posit for Melville, of having a hidden "female element," as Winnicott would put it. What released Winnicott's patient from his dilemma was the *recognition* of this female element by another. I believe this is the recognition lacking in Melville's life that necessitated the splitting off of the female element into his art, where she remains elusive and threatened and sad because of her inability to be recognized.

Another factor may be important here, and that is if the mother already has a son, a first born son, she may not be able to see her second son as male and may unconsciously support his feminine identification. In Maria's case she was not able to see her son Herman as an individual let alone a separate and distinctly *male* individual. Gansevoort occupies the male slot in the family being the first male, and Robertson's Lorant acknowledges this belatedness as having an effect on Melville's sense of maleness. This fact of Melville's belatedness combined with his mother's

depression leaves his sense of maleness unacknowledged and unsupported and leaves open the door to a strong (an unconsciously supported) feminine identification.

As early as three, Melville did not think of himself as male. This early awareness of gender is recognized by most gender theorists. In his 1968 *Sex and Gender: The Development of Masculinity and Femininity*, psychoanalyst, physician and gender theorist Robert Stoller, posited the existence of a "core gender identity" which he says "is derived from three sources: the anatomy and physiology of the genitalia; the attitudes of parents, siblings, and peers towards the child's gender role; and a biological force that can more or less modify the attitudinal (environmental) forces" (40). Using two clinical cases, both male children born without external penises and who each experienced early medical trauma, but nevertheless had the support of parents and siblings who raised them as male and supported maleness, demonstrated distinct maleness well before the age of 4 (45-47).

From these cases, Stoller arrives at two important conclusions: 1. That "the sense of maleness (or core gender identity) is present from earliest life." And 2. "That the penis is not essential to this sense of maleness...so long as both parents felt unquestioningly that their child was male" (46-48). "It follows from this argument," Stoller asserts, "that clinical states in which there are fantasies and behavior of a feminine sort...are not evidence that the core gender identity, the sense of maleness, has been uncertain, but rather that these fantasies and their behavior overlies and hides the core gender identity" (46).

Applying Stoller's thesis to Melville, we can see from the biographical data and Lorant's insightful analysis, that Herman was not seen as exhibiting valued

masculine traits and that his older brother occupied the primary masculine role in the family. This may lead us to suspect that Herman's "core gender identity" may not have been male as demonstrated by his not counting himself among the male children in the family. However, the fact that Melville's feminine fantasies, manifested in his art, never persist or culminate in recognition and acceptance, indicate that perhaps his feminine identification may have simply "overlayed" a core masculine identity (which also was not recognized). As evidence for this, we can observe that the woman in Melville never wins. She comes forth and then retreats, her story line never resolved. But if the woman never wins, neither does the man.

In Melville's art, a clear sense of male identity persists but it is severely threatened. From Tommo in *Typee*, to Ahab, Pierre, Bartleby and Benito Cereno, to the last and most poignant, Billy Budd, masculinity is not only threatened from without but undermined somehow from within. A deep flaw (Basic Fault?) works against it, but just what that flaw is, is never revealed. Benito Cereno's empty scabbard may be the most graphic symbol of masculinity represented as feeling empty and meaningless. Tellingly the threat to Benito's manhood is personified by a seemingly kind and devoted manservant, Babo, who performs the feminine and nurturing function of a mother or wife. I see Babo as Benito's (and Melville's) feminine identification whose very persistence is dominating as it silently and invisibly undermines manhood from within.

As stated above, the "core gender" is dependent upon the attitudes of parents, and I would say upon *recognition* from parents. This recognition *identifies* the child to himself as male (or female). It is the *engendering* moment between parent and

child that confers life: social and sexual existence and meaning. In Stoller's case studies and analysis of the mothers of males who manifest strong feminine identification, it is obvious that it is astonishingly easy for a parent, and especially a mother, to undermine a male child's sense of maleness without her ever realizing what she is doing. Her own unacknowledged grief and sadness, her own disappointments can have a powerful and detrimental effect, especially if she unconsciously uses her son to assuage them. Typically, she does this through blurring of both gender and generational boundaries between them, encouraging him to identify with her. Also, typically, she does not have the capacity to tolerate his natural aggression and so he will have to distort or deny them to accommodate her needs

Stoller's theory is that such a mother may be using her male child as a Winnicottian "Transitional Object" for her own mother. If, as history suggests, Maria's own mother was emotionally fragile and depressed, she may not have been able to recognize and respond to her daughter's needs and thus her healthy, age appropriate separation, thereby setting Maria up to resist the separation of her own children. Stoller states that such a mother feels "deprived and empty" (124) so she keeps her children close "to bridge the incompleted separation between herself and her own mother" (*Sex and Gender* 125).

Suspended between mother and an elusive potential masculine self, the male child of such a mother will not be able to fully own and fully inhabit his body or recognize in himself the gender society has assigned to him. Stoller's hypothesis about the origins of masculinity in *Presentations of Gender* states: "To the extent that

merging [between mother and child] is intensified by having been encouraged too much, the sense of being like her—identified with her—interferes with his masculinization. The boy who does not value masculinity—in whom it has not been encouraged—will have little reason to resist his sense of femininity and at being one with his mother's femaleness" (182).

The "Oral tradition" Weaver speaks of describes Maria as cold, proud and haughty, etc. It is possible this grandiose behavior was a mask to hide from herself and others how depressed she was. Grandiosity, Maria's imperious, "Queenly" behavior, her excessive pride in her ancestral heritage, status and accomplishments can be seen as a kind of narcissistic defense against a feeling of despair and emptiness.

Portrait of The Child

No photos exist of Melville as an infant or child or even as a young man around Redburn's age. We don't know what he looked like as a young sailor on the *Acushnet*. All we have are the mature years encased in the flesh and flowing beard of middle age. We cannot prove that he was in any obvious way feminine in appearance or behavior during his early years. Eleanor Melville Metcalf, his granddaughter, reports that in later life "the loose garments worn around the house" greatly embarrassed his family (*Herman Melville: Cycle and Epicycle* 217). But as for his youth, it seems the best we can do is look at his work and interpret the known facts of his life according to current understandings of sex and gender and the family dynamics that influence both these aspects of the Self. The family did not talk about

little Herman very often in letters and that has led many biographers to assume he was not the favorite and not impressive as a boy. It is entirely possible his invisibility began early and continued until his anonymous death.

But in the process of re-reading the biographical material in light of modern psychology, a new image of Herman Melville emerges, one composed of the same lines used to create the by now familiar and traditional version of him. The first volume of Hershel Parker's mammoth and exhaustive biography on Melville was published in 1996, so was Laurie Robertson-Lorant's smaller yet more insightful biography. They both relate the story of what Herman Melville said after the birth of the third son.

Parker states that these are indeed "the earliest recorded words of Herman Melville," "Pa now got two ittle boys" (27). Parker makes the same assumption as Robertson-Lorant, and in almost the same words, saying that Herman's words "*curiously* (my emphasis) indicate that the boy identified with the baby nearly four years his junior rather than Gansevoort, three and half years his senior whom Herman could never, at any time, rival in the esteem of his parents" (27). Robertson-Lorant states, "Herman...evidently identified more closely with the new baby than with his priggish older brother" (*Melville* 25). Why does Parker say "curiously" and Robertson-Lorant say "evidently"?

In my view, both Parker and Robertson-Lorant are operating under a heterosexual bias, seeing Herman as unambiguously male in gender identification, forcing his words to comply with their understanding of gender as automatically congruent with sex, rather than taking him at his word. What Robertson-Lorant calls

"evident" is simply repeating the party (and family) line on Melville (he was not as clever as his older brother). What Parker calls "curious" is the obvious and yet illogical miscalculation on Herman's part.

And he is right to call it "curious." Parker reports that as a student Herman was good with numbers. At age eleven he won first prize in arithmetic at Albany Academy. Even at the age of three, he would not likely have made such a counting error. Yet, both Parker and Robertson-Lorant pass on their similar interpretations, ignoring what Herman actually said.

In Melville studies, the received wisdom, the so-called "facts," have been repeated so often they are now carved in stone. But the graven image they have made is a false idol. I chart a different course through the same material and conclude that Herman, a male child born between two girls, did not (for a variety of reasons) consider himself one of the males in the family.

Another "fact" rarely questioned is the idealistic portrait Parker draws of Maria Melville and Herman's early life. In marked contrast to the unhaloed picture of Maria based on "oral tradition" reported by Weaver in 1921, Parker crowns Maria with a halo of perfect womanhood: "During Herman's first decade Maria Gansevoort Melville was a thoughtful, loving daughter, sister, wife, and mother. Herman was secure in the knowledge that there was a large and seemingly permanent cast of characters in his personal drama..."(22).

Yet as Parker himself reports there were numerous separations, illnesses, and pregnancies and other unexplained absences that disrupted Herman's relationship with his mother from the very beginning of his life. And in one spectacular trauma,

as Allan's business was crumbling, Maria was visited with a "sudden depression" and fled Albany with all her children except Herman and Gansevoort, "who remained to witness the disintegration of their world" (*Melville*, 49). Parker does not credit these maternal abandonments as being in any way traumatic for young Herman. "Loving and Thoughtful" Maria may have been, but we know her recurring depressions and the stress of many pregnancies certainly disrupted the peace of the home and undoubtedly whatever sense of security Herman may have been able, through his precocious identification with her, to maintain.

Being moved around from place to place each time Maria was about to give birth, being moved to other relatives' homes when she was too stressed out to cope or when post partum depression set in, would have removed her as a loving caretaker for her sons.

These are in fact traumatic experiences and would cause frustration, anxiety and despair, especially for a young child. It would require young Herman to distort the reality of his inconsistent and troubled mother in order to imaginatively provide the mother he needs. He does this through identification with her.

The "Clang" of Mother

In her important work, *The Psychological Birth of The Human Infant*, Margaret Mahler, et al, discuss the importance of the transitional object as something that stands for mother. Quoting from Dr. P. Greenacre (1960):

The transitional object itself as described by Winnicott, is a testament to the need for this contact with the mother's body, which is so touchingly expressed in the infant's insistent preference for an object

which is lasting, soft, pliable, warm to the touch, but especially in the demand that it remain saturated with body odors...(54).

And, quoting from Brody and Axelrad, (1966):

From about 7 to 8 months...the baby becomes interested in "mother" and seems to compare her with "other," the unfamiliar with the familiar, feature by feature. He seems to familiarize himself with what *is* mother, what feels, tastes, smells, looks like and has the "clang" of mother (56).

I suggest that the transitional object Herman used to keep the resonant "clang" of his mother's presence close to him during times of absence may have been items of her clothing, saturated with her odors at first but then, increasingly saturated with his own odors so that eventually their "clang" combined.

Mahler observed in her clinical setting that "mother's preferred soothing or stimulating pattern is taken over, that is assimilated, by the infant in his own way and so becomes a transitional pattern" (55). Might it not also be that the child "assimilates" other patterns from his mother as well? Such as her pattern of femininity?

Maria's many absences undoubtedly created a need for self-soothing and since her emotional presence was demanding and domineering, it seems plausible that the substitute bond with her might have been through inanimate objects that could be relied upon to remain satisfyingly present no matter what the reigning mood was in the mother or in the home.

In the presence of absence, trauma and neglect this self-soothing strategy can lead to the development of a fetish that substitutes a reliable part for a problematic and unreliable whole. I suggest that in the absence of recognition and a consistent

relationship that would create a specific bond between mother and infant, this compensatory reliance on an object can lead to the development of fetishistic cross-dressing, a feature of heterosexual transvestites that will be discussed later.

The Winnicottian transitional object is used by an infant to ease the process of distancing from the mother that normally occurs during what Mahler refers to as the "the first sub-phase of separation and differentiation" (52). But what if the natural instinct of the child to begin to separate from his mother is challenged by the strenuous distancing of the mother who cannot be present to her infant? I suggest this would prevent the child from letting go of whatever part of his comforting mother he is able to grab hold of, an object that would create what Mahler calls, "inner pleasure due to safe anchorage within the symbiotic orbit" (53) of the mother.

In *Transvestites and Transsexuals: Toward a Theory of Cross Gender Behavior*, Richard F. Docter, a research psychologist at California State University at Northridge discusses theories on the "Childhood Origins of Transvestism" (54). He quotes Bradley (1985) that "Mothers of transvestites are outstanding in the degree to which they overtly reject their children" and that children that are rejected suffer "increased anxiety and poor anxiety management perhaps because of major inadequacies in family relationships" (56).

Whether Maria overtly rejected her son Herman because of her depression or her preference for her elder son, Gansevoort, or whether she simply could not see Herman and could not make a meaningful connection with him for whatever reason, must be left to inference. Based on what we do know of the difficulties she experienced and the family history she inherited it seems clear, in contrast to Parker's

placid, benign and even idealizing views, that there were "major inadequacies" in Herman Melville's family relationships.

Docter, again cites Bradley (1985), that the "Use of maternal garments may act as a fantasized protector against fears of loss of the mother at these times. In later adolescence, the use of cross-dressing and masturbation...may have an immediate reinforcing value as an anxiety management tactic and serve a self-soothing function..."(56).

Citing Ovesey and Person (1976), Docter, who clearly favors a more cognitive approach, favorably describes their object relations approach to transvestism:

These security blanket responses are perhaps the most familiar examples of substitutive or compensatory behavior predicted by object relations theory...the clothing of the mother, being highly available are a natural choice as conditioned stimuli and as secondary reinforcers. This line of reasoning is powerfully supported by the affectional research of Harlow (1958) which showed how infant monkeys, separated from maternal contact from birth, clung to their "cloth mother" and valued these emotional supports when faced with fearful stimulus objects (205).

And Docter admits that young adolescent boys who cross-dress may do so out of "unfulfilled dependency or security needs" (205).

It is my contention that Melville may fall into this category and I hope in the following chapters to suggest a plausible closeted career of heterosexual transvestism, which I see as beginning early in his life with Melville's troubled relationship to his mother and his identification with her, which had its roots in the family's failure to recognize and support him.

Parker minimizes both maternal *and* paternal failures of recognition when he minimizes the effect of Allan's characteristic denial. "Allan had perfected before

now his dumbfounding ability to behave at moments as if nothing were wrong with his situation—an ability that struck his sons as alternately reassuring and unnerving" (*Melville* 49). "Unnerving" is a very genteel word which denies the seriousness of the feelings involved. I suggest the pattern of denial extended to Herman's need for a real relationship in which he could see himself clearly mirrored by his parents

Adam Phillips cites three essential Winnicott papers that can be read as a series: "The Mirror Role of Mother and Family in Child Development" (1967), "The Use of The Object and Relating Through Identifications" (1969) and "Ego Distortion in Terms of the True and False Self" (1960). He elaborates on Winnicottian theory: "In the Beginning 'the self of the infant is only potential' It is gradually constituted through *recognition* by the mother of the infant's spontaneous gestures, through being reliably seen by her; and it is consolidated through aggression, the mother's survival—meaning her non-retaliation—of the infant's destructiveness (my emphasis *Winnicott* 128).

Recognition and The Mirror Role of The Mother

According to Phillips, "The mother's role [is] of giving back to the baby the baby's own self" (128). When the infant looks at the mother's face he can see himself, how he feels reflected back in her expression. If she is preoccupied with something else, when he looks at her he will see only how *she* feels" (128).

It is abundantly clear that Maria Melville was unable to provide the kind of mirroring required for the infant to get a secure (cohesive and recognizable) sense of himself. "The child with an unresponsive mother—the mother whose face is frozen

by a depressed mood—is forced to perceive, to read the mood at the cost of his own feelings being recognized....he has no way of know what, if anything, he has contributed to her mood" (*Winnicott* 130). For Melville the misrecognition of the mother may have lead to his failure to recognize himself and to the necessity of having to identify with her instead. These are the foundational moments (traumas) that undermine a sense of self and gender. But these are the moments no one sees between mother and child, and no one documents.

For Parker the major influence deemed deleterious to Herman's psyche was his father's declining financial and physical health culminating in a traumatic and prolonged death. Still, Parker characteristically understates it. "Herman being the oldest child not in school was very much aware of the stages of his father's decline" (63). This remark strikes me as bland. While Parker devotes considerable space to Allan's decline and his hysterical ravings and the torment of his death, he says almost nothing about what effect this was having on an already fragile mother and on Herman.

I believe we are challenged to re-examine the historical record for the biases they contain which have accreted over a century. We must realize the letters of family members in the middle of the 19th century can hardly be relied upon to tell us what we most want to know. It seems to me applying object relations psychology to the known "facts" reveals a very different picture than we are used to seeing of Herman Melville, and may be as close as we can come to a true portrait of his childhood, one which would help us understand the ambiguities in his writing and his stormy married life.

Parker tells us that even at the age of seven "Herman had not yet attracted much attention from his father" (*Melville* Vol.I. 34). But we can see from the scanty record he never achieved much recognition. Most biographers stress the primacy of Gansevoort, "and his evident genius" (34) and many agree that Herman must have had a sense of inferiority, perhaps even envy because of it. But we should look closely and with fresh eyes at the words used to describe Herman Melville as a child.

As early as the first year of Herman's life, his father had consigned him to the limbo of non-recognition. In comparing his children he says: Gansevoort is "a most promising child in every respect" and Helen Maria "a most lively intelligent child" (Parker 25). But Herman is described as "full as interesting as the others although not as interesting in ways that specifically differentiated him from the other two" (25). This lack of differentiation is important. It means in his father's eyes he had no real existence. He was a mere place-holder between two noteworthy figures. Perhaps his father ignored him because he was not active enough to engage his interest or, perhaps Herman was passive and undistinguished because his father had failed to notice him.

In a letter pushing young Herman off to stay with another relative his father describes Herman as "docile," "amiable," "backward in speech, slow in comprehension" (35). Parker states that docility may have been a strategy Herman employed after realizing "he had no hope of competing for attention with Gansevoort..."(35). Or, as seems more likely, perhaps he was docile and amiable because, lacking his father's attention and active approval, he identified with his mother and with traditional feminine traits and behavior and not the masculine

attributes always ascribed to his elder brother. In order to make a place for himself Herman may have been forced to accept the *not male* position in the family.

Feminine Second Son

Using a case study of Winnicott's, describing gender confusion in a second son, Claire Kahane in "Gender and Voice in Transitional Phenomena," speculates, "This case of a second son suggests a relation between sibling position and gender construction. The mother's view of her second son as a girl may be part of a more general family dynamic regarding second sons who are reflected as "not-man," because the place of the man is already occupied by the first son" (289). As Winnicott observes, "in mother dominated households the position of the second son is often characterized by mother-son identification rather than oedipal desire" (*Transitional Objects and Potential Spaces Literary Uses of D.W. Winnicott* 289).

Bracketed by girls on either side and separated in time from the birth of Gansevoort and Allan Jr., Herman simply joined the tribe of girls which enabled him to stay as close as he could to his anxiety ridden mother. Three things are important here: 1. Lack of fatherly attention, 2. Absence of both paternal and maternal support for masculinity and, 3. Shuffling around of the young child as an indication that he was not much cared for, but rather mostly ignored. His father makes clear that Gansevoort was the favorite and Parker quotes from Allan's letter that Allan Jr. "was cock of the walk among the boys." It seems Herman was not considered a male child in the usual sense by his father.

Herman seems to have been overlooked in many ways by a mother *and* father who declined or were unable to treat him as male. This lukewarm attention and failed recognition contrasted with their vociferous promoting the manhood of Gansevoort and Allan Jr. and leaves "docile" Herman to cobble together a sense of self as best he can under the circumstances, using the strong emotional imprint of his mother, whose very emotional instability and physical and emotional unreliability bonded him to her through the anxiety she created in him.

The True and False Self

Phillips describes Winnicott's position on the False Self: "The mother implements the sense of fulfilling the infant's gesture by her response. If she is unable to respond to him through identification, [recognizing and responding to HIS suffering and anxiety] he must compulsively comply in order to survive. The False-Self organization at its most extreme results in feeling unreal, or a sense of futility" (134).

One cannot read these words without seeing the forlorn face of Bartleby the Scrivener staring back at us.

1. The False Self replaces and appears to be the real person, while the True Self is so hidden as to seem absent.
2. The False Self protects the True Self, that is acknowledged as a potential and is allowed a secret life.
3. The False Self '*built on identifications*' *copies others* to protect the True Self from misrecognition. (my emphasis 134).

What we see in Bartleby is the resistance so extreme as to prove fatal.

Bartleby is a human being who is not alive in the ordinary sense of relatedness and fails to thrive precisely because of it.

Melville scholars have often made the interpretation of Bartleby's refusal to copy ("I would prefer not to") as referring to Melville's own desire not to copy his early successes (*Typee* and *Omoo*) in spite of the fact that nothing he wrote after them was commercially or critically popular. But this is too literal. As a faceless, empty shirt, Bartleby's effect is yet powerful and his main purpose is to communicate what is ultimately incommunicable –the True Self. This is Winnicott's essentialist notion of an innate potential in every human being, "rooted in the body, of a piece with it...but a body without erotic connotation. The drive of this potential True Self was not pleasure but development" (Phillips, *Winnicott* 97).

The True Self is everything the False Self is not. It is a theoretical position from which comes the spontaneous gesture and the personal idea, but it seems to coincide with another of Winnicott's notions: "The Incommunicado Self" described in *The Language of Winnicott*: "Winnicott assumes the existence of a core self from the beginning of life. This core self can only come into being in an authentic way if it is protected and allowed to remain isolated" (61). Quoting from Winnicott's paper on "The Parent-Infant Relationship" (p. 46):

Another phenomenon that needs consideration...is the hiding of the core of the personality...It seems necessary to allow for the concept of isolation of the central self as a characteristic of health. Any threat to this isolation of the true self constitutes a major anxiety at this early stage, and defenses of earliest infancy appear in relation to failures on the part of the mother...to ward off impingements which might disturb this isolation (*Language of Winnicott* 61).

Bartleby is a potential that never is fulfilled. He is a dead letter, as Melville, so cleverly analogizes him, that never arrived. Bartleby is perhaps the most iconic of Melville's "isolatoes" who represent the sacred and sad unknowability of the self.

As an isolato, Melville seems to be experimenting with four distinct selves: an abandoned grieving woman (Yilla, Hunilla, Marianna, Isabel); an invisible man, (Ishmael, Bartleby, Benito Cereno,) a damaged or threatened and obsessed man (Bartleby, Benito Cereno, Ahab, and Claggart), and the hybrid figure that is half man, half woman, (Marnoo in *Typee*, Yoomy in *Mardi*, Carlo in *Redburn*, and Billy Budd).

These gender identities represent not a strictly binary choice between male and female but rather a continuum that slides from female to male. Each partial persona reflects Melville's sense of being many and yet being none at the same time. None, in the sense that these personas float free and are never able to coalesce into one whole person capable of living and relating to others in a coherent and consistent way.

As Mahler has suggested, a toddler "may get caught up in uncertainty about his own identity as a viable separate being. Such uncertainty may be the effect of insufficient separation..."(223). Melville may have failed to separate from his mother due, paradoxically, to her emotional unavailability alternating erratically with her intrusiveness, so that he developed a compensatory strategy of defending himself with a fetish-object for the purpose of self-soothing. But in isolating himself from engulfment by her, he consigns himself to isolation from the free reciprocity of normal human relationships.

The free floating isolatoes in his art may have represented how Melville felt about himself, but they frustrated the reader's need for a sense of reality and coherence and perhaps found a receptive audience only among those who intuitively recognized themselves in the mirror of Melville's art.

Intellectual False Self

Winnicott discusses the split in mind-body that can occur when the mother is not good enough during the holding phase. “...then her baby may never feel at one within his body, and a mind-body split occurs” (Abram *Language of Winnicott* 236). “The worst environment is the erratic one—when the infant is forced to compensate intellectually too much and too often for the inconsistencies of a mother who is sometimes good and sometimes bad. This leads to the defense of intellectualization” (240). Winnicott sees the “activity of intellectualization as the defense strategy of the False Self. In effect the mind usurps the environment and “the child uses his own intellect to mother himself” (Abram *Lang of W.* 240). Unconsciously:

The mother exploits the baby’s power to think things out and to collate and to understand. If the baby has a good mental apparatus this thinking becomes a substitute for maternal care and adaptation. The baby mothers himself by means of understanding—understanding too much” (from “New Light on Child Thinking (156 in *The Language of Winnicott* 278).

It is clear from the biographies that ‘little Herman’ was the silent sensitive child in the family but he was hardly “slow to comprehend” as his father claimed. Herman’s problem may have been that he understood too much and too often as a result of having to mother himself in the absence of sufficiently intuitive maternal care. And though Winnicott does not extend his theory this far, it seems clear to me, as I mentioned before, that a child so driven to mother himself in the absence of maternal care has yet another reason to identify with her, literally with her social role and gender as the nurturing and caretaking.

The "intellectual false self" makes intrusive appearances in Melville's art and is responsible for the worst parts of it. One only needs to remember the endless perorations that interrupt the narrative flow in most of his work, but especially Babbalanga in *Mardi*, whose endless philosophical babbling demolishes the novel and in its day sent Melville's fans fleeing to safer and more coherent shores in disgust. From *Mardi* onward, Melville displays an aggressive lack of concern for his readers. Feeling no obligation to them, he tells Hawthorne famously in a letter that although the way he writes "is banned," he can write no other way.

We can wonder if the intellectual False Self was not a family model. Parker cites Allan as "a master of persiflage" (60) and glowingly reports that Herman and Gansevoort "who had heard Allan's words the longest, in adult life could imitate and even outdo him in parody [and] they also learned to imitate the formal diction Allan excelled in" (61). Parker goes on to supply an example of Allan's high sounding rhetoric from a letter to a young cousin:

"You are now fairly launched at an early age upon the great ocean of life with honor for a compass & Glory for a watchword...but above all forget not your creator in the dawn of youth..." (60).

Parker cites the appearance of similar rhetorical flourishes in *Moby-Dick* and expresses his praise for them unequivocally. In Parker's view, the verbal inheritance Allan left his children was a wholly valuable legacy. "In such ways did the voice of Allan Melville live on in the writing of and speech of his first three children" (62).

In contrast, I argue that imitation of his father rang as false and hollow as rhetorical flourishes often do when they exist only for themselves, as a kind show,

rather than revealing anything true or real. It is precisely this kind of rhetorical hypertrophy that overwhelmed *Mardi* scuttled *Pierre*, almost stove *Moby-Dick* and ultimately sank his literary career.

The empty rhetoric of his father represented a mask of words behind which Herman had no way to penetrate and identify with the "muscular" manhood he would so yearn for in the pages of *Pierre*. Inside the empty scabbard of false-self rhetoric, lies the hollow and damaged sense of manhood so remarkable in Melville's work. If meaningless word play was the best Allan had to give his sons, it was an outmoded guide like the obsolete guidebook in *Redburn*. Allan's way of being a man was not good enough for Herman to make his way through the complex and confusing byways to manhood. "...amid the avenues of modern erections;" *Redburn* laments [in words so like Allan's], "to how few is the old guidebook now a clue!" (225).

Parker has noted that Allan was a master of denial, citing "his dumbfounding ability to behave as if nothing was wrong..." (49). Allan's habit of denial, his verbal narcissism and Maria's grandiose narcissism based on ancestors and status were both defensive in nature. They covered a deep sense of emptiness and loss. Combined, they created a like sense of futility which was covered over with style in Herman and left him struggling to build a sense of the physical and social reality of masculinity inside himself out of the trifling "persiflage" he was given in place of recognition and understanding.

One only has to read the overstuffed pages of *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick*, *Pierre*, *Clarel* and *The Confidence Man* to see each as an extravagant white jacket filled with words. In *White Jacket* Melville analogizes his jacket to the novel he is beginning. It

is a piece of work, "of my own devising, to shelter me from the boisterous weather we were soon to encounter" which is made "with many odds and ends of patches...bedarned and bequilted...till it became all over stiff and padded..."(351).

Wai-Chee Dimock in *Empire For Liberty: Melville and the Poetics of Individualism* has rightly noted *Mardi*'s unrealistic and unconvincing uniformity of speech across the wide spectrum of characters as well as Melville's total disregard for the common reader. And we can observe the same kind of disregard and compulsive overwriting in many of Melville's works. In the end, as Dimock has noted about *The Confidence Man*, Melville's disregard for his reader is an "authorial exercise...[that] turns out to be also pointless" (213-214). Like much of Melville's writing, it is a torrent of words, words, words, all trying stylishly to simultaneously deny and describe the torments of the Intellectual False Self. He makes a defensive commotion on the surface of reality that belies, because it cannot name, the leviathan of grief lurking below the surface.

The psychologists I have cited here have all noted the marked tendency of children of depressed parents to fall victim of mood disorders. They become so deep in their own melancholy (as their parents were) that they cannot recognize or respond to the real needs of others (as their parent could not recognize and respond to them). Melville's intellectual False Self is just one manifestation of the "Trick of Grief" he learned at his mother's bedside, a pattern of coping with loss and separation passed on like second hand garments, left to be "bedarned and bequilted" into the unique and often creative personalities by their inheritors.

In *The Shadow of the Object*, Jessica Benjamin quotes a passage from Freud:

[All] human individuals, as a result of their bisexual disposition and of cross-inheritance, combine in themselves both masculine and feminine characteristics, so that pure masculinity and femininity remain theoretical constructions of uncertain content (35).

Building on Freud's concept of gender as a theoretical construct, Benjamin, like Butler, seems to reject the notion of a biological, transhistorical foundation of sexuality and gender and also, like Butler, objects to the idea of gender identity as a coherent, seamless, reified entity (36). While recognizing that modern gender theory upsets the categories of masculinity and femininity, she also recognizes that they "inescapably organize experience" (37). Benjamin admits binary categories are analytically necessary to explain deeply embedded psychic experience.

The binaries of masculine/feminine, active/passive, public/private are polarities, which however much feminist gender theorists object to them today, do still, and certainly did in 19th century America, organize human sexual and social experience. Melville's inner feelings crossed the line between these polarities and he found ways to describe his inconstant or fluctuating gender (I like to think of them as multiple identifications) using the liminal, boundary blurring tropes and strategies of the Romantics which take for granted that the boundaries they cross literarily are both socially and biologically real.

In fact, it is the binaries that make boundary blurring seductive and fascinating. Without secure and static social and sexual boundaries to challenge and confuse, border crossings would hold no interest. This brings us back to the "core gender identity" posed by Stoller. Perhaps, as he has suggested, the core is merely overlaid with its binary opposite to accomplish obscure psychic purposes. This

leads us into the notion of perversion (and specifically fetishism and transvestism) and what kind of psychic needs may be at the root of them. But a full discussion of perversion is beyond the scope of my inquiry. I only wish to show the feminine and hybrid gender identifications central in Melville's work and suggest the reasons for them.

Women's Role

According to Nancy F. Cott, in *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Women's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835*, "The canon of domesticity required women to sustain the milieu of task-oriented work...a special sort of usefulness" (71). But it also "created expectations in and of women to excel in their vocation" (74).

Maria Melville was a woman of her time, class and religion. She accepted the popular notions embodied in the "cult of true womanhood" and "the cult of domesticity" that the family ruled the transmission of culture and that within the domestic sphere of influence the mother's was the dominant role. And as Alice Kinney has pointed out, this was very much part of the Dutch mother's role. Perhaps this was the reason Maria dominated her family with intrusive suggestions on how they should live their lives. She held Gansevoort up as the savior of the family's fortunes and reputation perhaps placing an undue burden on him that helped him to an untimely end. In Herman's case, she decided when and whom he should marry, criticized his writing and meager economic circumstances and tried hard to push him into the arms of the church. Her sense of her own right to exert this influence was based on the ethos of her time.

There was always something manic in the way Maria tasked and heaped her children. It is likely that, like her contemporaries, Maria would have felt it her solemn duty to manage the souls and fortunes of her family. But being a mother did not begin this role. It would merely have been an extension of her management of her mother's depressions, which she took on as her job, even as an adult. She undoubtedly felt taxed and overwhelmed by this responsibility, a burden she shouldered since childhood, and this may have also played a part in her own recurring depressions. Yet, as difficult as it must have made her life, she never gave up the fight to control her family and admonish them to do right as she saw it.

According to Cott, "The importance given to women's roles as wives, mothers and mistresses of households was unprecedented" at this time (2). Women's public life, Cott explains, was "generally so minimal that if one addressed a mixed audience she was greeted with shock and hostility" (5). It is logical to assume that women's pent up need to have a say in the affairs of men would find welcome release within the confines of her dedicated sphere of influence—the home and her children (5).

Cott also notes that "Motherhood was...the central lever with which women could budge the world and in practice, it offered the best opportunity to women to heighten their domestic power" (84). It is clear since the episode of having her children sit by her bed while she slept, that Maria took full advantage of the power allowed her by the socially sanctioned "cult of domesticity" to dominate a captive audience within her home.

In a Freudian-like stress on the formative importance of childhood, Cott notes that domestic educators of the 1820s and 1830s declared that mothers could decide their children's fate and warned "that they could produce misery or joy for *themselves* through their own parental acts" (my emphasis 84). Maria must have taken this harsh warning to heart as she strenuously tried to save herself by managing first her own mother's life and then her children's lives.

As an example of the pressure put on mothers at this time, Cott quotes from a manual: J.C.S. Abbott's, *The Mother at Home: or the Principles of Maternal Duty* (New York 1833): "Mothers have as powerful an influence over the welfare of future generations as all other earthly causes combined" (85). True or not, this is indeed a heavy burden to bear and must have intimidated mothers all over the east coast. As a parentified child, subject to depression, it must have weighed on Maria Melville's mind especially.

I say "especially" not only because Maria was trained from childhood to take precocious responsibility for her mother's well being, as a way of managing her own access to nurture and security, but also because Maria was a devout Calvinist and would have seen it as her God given duty. Cott explains that from the turn of the century, "New England ministers had pointed out the importance of the mother's role" (85). "Even Calvinists," she says, "assimilated some of the new emphasis on the formative importance of early childhood" (87).

"Calvinist tradition," according to Cott, also "encouraged self-examination and exposure of oneself to God" and diary writing, "An individual's written record of her life aided her in monitoring her progress toward salvation" (15). However, from

all we know about Maria Melville, she wrote no diary and confined herself to writing letters. Characteristically, her letters concerned not her own progress but rather her children's (and especially Herman's) progress toward salvation. Her letters and her family reputation are the only record we have of Maria's character and domestic management style. Her actual behavior for the most part, as Cott says of most women in her time, "must be left to inference" (17).

But it is likely, given what we do know, that Maria from early childhood got into the habit of managing others as a way of managing her own feelings. She was not introspective and made it her business instead to advise others and arrange their affairs in what she invariably considered their best interests. Lacking insight into her own feelings, she could not be expected to recognize and respect the feelings and emotional sovereignty of others.

A very poignant picture of Maria emerges from between the lines of her often-dubious reputation for being cold and haughty, interfering and overbearing. What we see is at once both pitiful and powerful. She was an overwhelmed and depressed woman struggling in the grip of severe dependency, both emotional and financial, while at the same time striving mightily to save her own soul and those of her children. In her constant struggle, she remained completely unconscious of the effects she created. Nevertheless, the power she exerted within the domestic sphere was enormous. She was her own planet, and like a dark star her massive size and weight was sufficient to warp the orbits of all around her. In Herman's case that may have resulted in a swerve toward femininity.

CHAPTER 2

Drag in Polynesia: Sartorial Signs in *Typee*
Fayaway and The Missionary's Wife

"Mr. Typee is interesting in his aspect—quite. I see Fayaway in his face"
Sophia Hawthorne

The few words Sophia Hawthorne used to describe their family friend are among the most suggestive and perceptive we have of the otherwise invisible Herman Melville. Yet, though almost every biographer quotes her, hardly any take her at her word. Parker interprets her comment this way: "Seeing Fayaway in his face means that Sophia saw him in terms of his erotic prowess in tropical climes..." (Parker Vol.I 753).

Like many Melville scholars who worship their hero with a gender bias, Parker wants us to see Melville as masculine and heterosexual, so of course he reads Sophia's remarks in the conventional way. It is a protective desire to defend his reputation against any unseemly or undignified aspersions about Melville's sexuality. But as with other of Parker's interpretations, and Laurie Robertson-Lorant's as well, this ignores the more likely and more obvious explanation of what Sophia saw. Sophia remarks upon Melville's "aspect," not on his sexuality or his sexual prowess, which if it had seemed unequivocally masculine to her might have suggested some other male character out of *Typee*. Why not Tommo the author/narrator? Why not Toby? Why not Kory-Kory or Marnoo?

Fayaway is the first of Melville's feminine self-portraits and she is a figure unlike those who come after her. Being the first, she represents the artist's own joy

and hope in his first voyage out into the deep and challenging waters of a literary career. To reflect that feeling of hope and creative power, Fayaway is represented as joyful and powerful. Moving out into waters already dominated by other writers, Melville casts her as he views himself, a transgressive figure, both sexually and socially. Her scene, reclining in the back of a canoe smoking a pipe, presents her in what we unmistakably feel to be a gentleman's posture. She is an androgynous figure, and Tommo tells us he is attracted to her precisely because of this masculine feature of pipe smoking.

But Fayaway breaks another gender barrier just by being in the canoe. It is a strict taboo in her tribe for women to enter a canoe. How she gets there is a mystery, not adequately explained in the text, but the fact that she is there is undeniably symbolic. In this scene the canoe is a craft that represents *craft*, and the impulse at the heart of it is not Melville's desire to possess a woman, as Parker and others claim, but to connect the power of artistic expression with what he viewed as its creative source—his feminine gender identity.

Chapter 18 begins with a Spenserian scene of Tommo bathing with naked nymphs but unlike Spenser's "Bower of Bliss" in *The Faerie Queene*, he does not describe the nymphs sexually. He is no Red Cross Knight tempted by their breasts. He blandly says, "Bathing in company with a troop of girls formed one of my chief amusements," and here again (as when he was a child) he seems more at home with girls and does not identify himself with boys (158). When he attempts to pull them under he describes how they "swarmed about" him, "took hold" of his limbs and tumbled him about and then finally left him, laughing at his "clumsy attempts" to

“reach them,” but there is no sense of sexual arousal (158). He is trying to join them, not for sexual purposes, but simply to play as one of them.

Immediately after this scene of failure, is a scene denying masculine identification as well as homosexual desire. Tommo persuades “the indefatigable Kory-Kory,” the manservant who both waits on him and holds him prisoner, to give him a boat which he calls “a prohibited craft guarded by the edicts of the taboo” (158). The nymphs flee the waters around the craft apparently because the taboo against women being *in* a canoe extends to the waters *around* the canoe as well. Kory-Kory and “two other youths” swim after him “shouting and gamboling in pursuit,” but Tommo tells us he is not interested in the boys and is more interested in “the society of virtuous and intelligent young ladies” (158). Never mind that these nymphs can scarcely be called virtuous and intelligent by the western standards of the time. Kory-Kory is confused at his request ostensibly because of the taboo but it is also because it seems strange that Tommo refuses the company of the boys.

Perhaps some homosexual leanings are being hinted at here. Perhaps Kory-Kory and his boys recognize something in Tommo of which he is not himself aware. Or perhaps they simply do not understand Tommo’s preference for hanging around with girls. If he had conveyed the slightest impression that he was interested in them sexually it is unlikely Kory-Kory would have been confused. No. This scene comes at a moment when Melville apparently needs to make it clear that though he wants to play with girls he is not homosexual. He finds it necessary to declaim (unpersuasively and for a public audience) that he is “partial to what is termed in the ‘Young Men’s Own Book’—‘the society of ...ladies’” (158). He wants to stress that

he is a *normal* heterosexual man. But it can also covertly suggest that he prefers the *society* of women, that is he identifies in a corporate and affiliative way with girls as a group, as a gender.

When Tommo requests the return of the nymphs, Kory-Kory is both confused and bewildered. Then, as if to throw up an obstacle, he says that unless the canoe is removed “the ladies will not return” (158). This proscription against women floating in the same water near a canoe is both specious and suspicious. It contradicts an earlier scene in Chapter 2, where Melville mentions the taboo against women *in* canoes but then describes “a shoal of ‘whihenes’” (young girls) swimming in the water “just ahead” of the canoes on the way out to the ship (24).

Aboard ship the young girls dance with “abandoned voluptuousness” and engage in “every species of riot and debauchery” with the crew (25). Melville describes this scene of debauchery and “unlimited gratification” as an outsider. Tommo does not participate in the sexual scene. He is apparently not “partial” to *that* kind of “society” with young ladies.” And he describes the scene primly and demurely, almost as a lady might. It is not wholly credible to claim he is merely pandering to, or poking fun at a genteel American audience, for other writers of his time did not mince their words as delicately. Rather, I see Melville is participating in the ethos of gentility, precisely as a lady might. He is luxuriating in hinting at the obscene in gossip terms fit for “the society of ladies” with which he secretly identifies.

When Tommo says he wants the “Beauteous Fayaway” to get into the canoe and paddle with [him] around the lake,” Kory-Kory is “horrified” and claims it “too

monstrous to be thought of” (158). This taboo is mentioned in Chapter 2 and here it is pushed to the foreground as a set up for the most symbolic transgression in the novel. Tommo is “determined to test [the taboo’s] capabilities of resisting an attack” (159), and from this we expect a fierce assault against a deeply ingrained tradition. But after the chief explains at length the justification for the taboo, Tommo simply rationalizes (offstage) to himself, and to us, “I could not understand why a woman should not have as much right to enter a canoe as a man” (159). This is a limp and ladylike argument indeed and when the chief relents, we cannot quite believe that a taboo could so easily be cast aside. And Melville/Tommo does not explain it. “How it was that the priesthood of Typee satisfied the affair with their conscience, I know not; but so it was, and Fayaway’s dispensation from this portion of the Taboo was at length procured” (159).

This is unpersuasive on the grounds that a taboo, which sets a boundary between the genders, is not breakable without a sense of pollution. Something which is not only “monstrous,” is also “polluting,” and cannot be rationally argued away by an outsider to satisfy an outsider’s whim. This is because taboos are not just arbitrary rules imposed from the outside or by a dominant in group. They are deeply imbedded in every individual psyche. They are tightly woven into the fabric of the natives’ identity, reflecting and controlling not only their relations with one another but also their notion of their place in the cosmos. For the tribe’s priests to summarily suspend one of its most fundamental and profound understandings as to the proper place for a woman to be (and not be) is highly unlikely, and for the other men to tolerate such a

crossing of what to them would seem like the natural boundary between them would be unthinkable.

Neither is the traditional reading of this scene as a metaphor for sexual union persuasive. This is perhaps another example of wishful thinking on the part of Melville scholars who want to see Melville as heterosexual. One would have to twist the text like a contortionist and bend their relationship unrealistically to find any textual support for sexual passion between Tommo and Fayaway.

Mary Douglas, in *Purity And Danger*, discusses at length the notion of pollution in primitive societies. It is powerfully connected with identity and a sense of defilement when the boundaries that define identity are crossed. Douglas states, “The reason for separating, purifying, demarcating, and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without [as in the canoe], about and below, [as in the water] male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created” (4). Something so fundamental cannot be set aside by western “civilized” logic. It involves issues no less significant than “the relation of order to disorder, and being to non-being...life to death” (6). Following this it seems clear that for a woman to enter into a canoe would rend the whole fabric of Typeean identity and would amount to a social death. This is why boundary transgressions typically carry a heavy punishment.

But there is no punishment for Fayaway. This scene is wholly fictional and not based on what would have been realistically plausible in Polynesian culture of the Marquesas in the 1840’s. Therefore it is better viewed as expressing a wish of the

author, a way of expressing a *desire* to transgress, to bring the woman in himself into a previously all male domain, something he could not do in his house or his 19th century American world.

Implausibly, we are led to assume Fayaway is fine with entering a canoe even though in reality to cross such a boundary would likely create intense anxiety and tension in her as well as rage and consternation in the men of her tribe. But no tension, reticence or fear is present in the scene. Tommo does not have to convince *her* to break the taboo, only the men.

Taboos and traditions, even in our own culture, are held firmly in place by those who are most constrained by them (in Africa and Indonesia today it is the women who enforce and perform genital mutilation on their own girls). Early feminists viewed the social taboos that kept women in their place as created and enforced by the patriarchal dominance of males. But later feminists understood that the strictest enforcers of male dominance and female incarceration within the disenfranchised “domestic sphere” are the women themselves. The social boundaries are so deeply and powerfully internalized that women feel unclean, unworthy and unfeminine if they break the traditions that keep them in their place. Therefore if Fayaway were a real character or based on one, and if this scene actually took place, it would have been accompanied by tension, fear and uncertainty in her.

What would a Polynesian woman’s choices be after transgressing the taboo? Where would she be able to go? Who would want to be with her, or marry her, after she had crossed into male territory? The sense of pollution and defilement would damage her life in the community forever. Douglas uses the analogy of the prisoner’s

dilemma in society: “A man who has spent any time “inside” is put permanently “outside” the ordinary social system...he remains on the margins...” (98). Fayaway would have been afraid because she would suffer the fate of being forever outside her community. Such would have been a real Polynesian woman’s fate after having been once “inside” the canoe.

In fact, it is not the local taboos that Melville is arguing against. It is the taboos and traditions of his own culture. It should be obvious that the fictional Fayaway is in the canoe to serve another purpose, as Sophia Hawthorne might say—“quite.”

By crossing the boundary between her proper place and the proscribed domain, Fayaway crosses a symbolic threshold and instantly becomes a transitional figure, a liminal person, what Douglas calls an “interstitial person,” and as such, she is automatically a rebel. But we are given no indication that she in fact *is* a rebel, that she desires to make that inherently dangerous crossing over the boundary into the male canoe. And the fact that there is no consequence for this transgression, no aftermath and no change in her social status, reinforces it as a fictional moment and not a real one. The fact that Fayaway virtually disappears from the text after the boundary-crossing incident is yet another clue that she is not based on reality, that her meaning for her author is symbolic. What the scene accomplishes is to get his woman not only into the craft (the boat and the *craft* of literature), but also into the public domain in a more general way. It brings her out of the closet, so to speak, and floats her in full view.

It is also interesting to note that Kory-Kory, at first horrified by the very idea of a woman even in the water near a canoe, is now in the boat with them and has brought along a picnic of food for their mutual enjoyment. At first Kory-Kory paddles the canoe while Fayaway and Tommo recline in the stern “on the very best terms possible with one another” (159). The next thing to notice about this odd scene is how Fayaway is so relaxed as if being in the canoe were the most natural thing in the world to her. She is also smoking a pipe, perhaps not a taboo in her own culture but definitely counter to the traditions of femininity in Melville’s.

And Melville tells us it is precisely this traditionally male attribute that makes her appealing. “Strange as it may seem, there is nothing in which a young, beautiful female appears to more advantage than in the act of smoking” (160). He calls it “strange” in front of his western audience because it would seem strange to them; and it would seem even stranger to them that a western man would find it attractive. What he is hinting at is the mixed gendered identification that allows him to merge feminine and masculine traits and he is hoping a western audience under the sway of his scene will come to find it attractive as well.

As they are floating on the lake Tommo’s eyes go from the “warm, glowing tropical sky,” to the “transparent depths below,” to Kory-Kory’s “grotesquely tattooed form” and finally to the “pensive gaze” of Fayaway (160). He says he feels “transported to some fairy region, so unreal did everything appear” (160). We will observe in later works that whenever Melville says he feels like he has entered a “fairy region,” he uses a Spenserian liminality to announce a gender crossing mood

and then an encounter with his female self. We will see this especially in his journey to visit the spectral Marianna, in “The Piazza.”

“One day” Melville writes, as if this journey had taken place over a period of days, “I disembarked Kory-Kory and paddled the canoe to the windward side of the lake” (160). Suddenly Fayaway seems “all at once struck with some happy idea, and spreading it out like a sail, stood erect with upraised arms in the head of the canoe...a prettier mast than Fayaway made was never shipped aboard of any craft” (160). With her dress a sail, “distended by the breeze”...the canoe glided rapidly through the water...seated in the stern I directed its course” and Kory Kory apparently delighted, “clapped his hands in transport” (161). This scene, which some have interpreted as a scene of orgasm like the canoe scene, utterly fails to carry the burden of such a wishful interpretation. “Mast,” standing for a stiff prick can just as easily, and in my view more persuasively, stand for the hidden feminine identity, represented as phallic.

Melville says, “Many a time afterward was this feat repeated” (161). We are still left wondering how many days, how many times. But the sense of time is altogether irrelevant. It is collapsed into this iconic visual image of Fayaway disrobed, with arms “erect” and sailing the craft. But it is the craft of writing, not craft or female body as receptacle for a “mast,” that is rampant here. Melville has mixed his gender signs creating a masculine woman which hints at a feminine man. Fayaway *as* the mast is clearly a masculine image. To see this scene as coital, with Tommo the mast and Fayaway the craft is to miss the mixture of masculine and feminine Fayaway represents. She is a complex cross between genders: a feminine and also androgynous exterior, hiding a masculine albeit feminine interior.

Immediately after this scene, Melville once again draws our attention to women's dress. Genteely saying he is an admirer of "Miss Fayaway," Melville attempts to persuade us that he is in love with her but he says it in such an oblique and overstuffed and shyly feminine way as to ring absolutely false in our ears. He then tells us that he made a dress for her, "out of the calico he brought from the ship" (161). During his preparation for his escape from the ship, Tommo earlier mentions the "cotton cloth" with which he says he "intended to purchase the good will of the natives," and he adds that he stuffed them into the bosom of his frock which, "...caused a considerable protuberance in front" (49).

First, it is important to notice his use of the word "bosom" and "frock" which taken together might suggest both feminine body and apparel and do not convey an image of gentleman's or sailor's body or garb. In stressing the "protuberance in front," Melville clearly suggests the image of feminine breasts. Thirdly, the calico he uses for Fayaway's dress is never mentioned again as used for barter with the natives. Rather, it seems to have been brought along specifically to serve this hidden agenda: to allow the woman in himself to pass as a woman in his own Victorian culture.

Tommo dresses her as he wishes to dress himself. He clothes the wild transgressive and culturally unacceptable woman in himself in a homely Victorian calico housedress, in an attempt to bring her home in the dress of his culture's feminine ideal. Then, he praises his creation saying, "I made a dress for this lovely girl. In it she looked ...something like an opera dancer...the drapery of my island beauty's began at the waist and terminated sufficiently far above the ground to reveal the most bewitching ankle in the universe" (161).

Richard F. Docter, in his study of transvestites, observes: “In transvestites, the less overbearing feminine self, or cross-gender identity is...brought forth by the act of cross-dressing...and we argue it is progressively strengthened through a two step process: First, through the social interaction of this pseudo woman who is publicly presented in the cross-gender role-and therefore finds some measure of acceptance (or tolerance at least). Second, through the enhancement of self-esteem (e.g., “I am the woman I’ve always wanted to love”),” (*Transvestites and Transsexuals: Toward a Theory of Cross-Gender Behavior*, 82).

Research psychologist J. Michael Bailey in *The Man Who Would Be Queen*, posits that the heterosexual transvestite, or the fetishistic cross-dresser (as opposed to the homosexual or primary transsexual) is in love with the woman in himself and that he experiences sexual arousal at the idea of himself as a woman” (164).

In dressing Fayaway in feminine clothes of his own culture, Tommo/Melville magically transforms her into an image of himself, cross-dressed. Both Docter and Bailey suggest there is a sexual component to this behavior and it is clear to see in Tommo’s description of his calico Fayaway that he is fascinated and sexually aroused.

And the next step for Melville, as well as for the beginning transvestite, is to have his feminine self pass in public and be affirmed as a woman. This, as Docter says, enhances self-esteem.

The day that Tommo dresses his Fayaway in calico is significant for him in another way as well. He tells us this robe she wears “was rendered memorable, by a new acquaintance being introduced to me” (161). Here we are told (disingenuously)

that the most important thing about the dress is that it signifies for him the meeting of a new acquaintance who enters the narrative just at the point where Fayaway disappears into her dress. This character is Marnoo, who literally and figuratively follows Fayaway as another of those hybrid figures, incorporating both masculine and feminine attributes, that will mysteriously and in a timely manner make their appearance in Melville's novels: Harry Bolton in *Redburn*, Yoomy (you-me) in *Mardi*, Carlo in *Redburn*.

Fayaway disappears without ever saying a word or making an intimate gesture to her supposedly devoted would-be lover, who has just dressed her in unfamiliar clothing. She does not say a word about it. Instead after praising her beauty Melville draws our attention away from her entirely and we are invited to view this beautiful man, an Apollo with hair, "curling brown and entwined about his temples and neck in little loose curling ringlets which danced up and down continually when he was animated in conversation. His cheek was of a feminine softness and his face was free of the blemish of tattooing..." (162). Masculine Fayaway cross-dressed in her calico is replaced by a feminine man. Or rather, as a masculine woman, Fayaway morphs *into* Marnoo, a feminine man who takes no notice either of Fayaway in her dress or of Tommo who is "thrown into utter astonishment" to be so ignored (163).

Now out of the picture, Fayaway will not appear again until the end of the novel and then will be represented as silently crying to see Tommo about to leave the island. Her overarching purpose as a woman in the narrative has been to transgress a social taboo and represent Melville's own feminine gender identity in a masculine domain. Fayaway is Melville/Tommo's feminine self, and the Polynesian isles are

just the place, loosed from the taboos of western culture, for Melville to try her on and take her out for a ride, and he ends her story in the novel with a cross-dressing scene, dressing her in the feminine clothes of his own culture.

But the most important scene of transgression and the one that lifts Fayaway far above the rest of the novel is the canoe scene. And this scene is remarkably similar to a seminal moment in William Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, an autobiographical poem tracing the development of the poet's mind. In it, he describes a scene of theft and sexual power, which is his budding poet's version of his coming of age as an artist. It is analogous to the Promethian theft of fire from his god-like precursors, Milton, Spenser and Shakespeare, and it is illuminating to compare Melville's canoe with Wordsworth's "Elfin Pinnace" to see what they each can tell us about the writer's sense of himself as an artist.

Wordsworth is alone and led by what he calls a "gentle visitation—quiet powers" (line 366), to a "shepherd's boat." Alone he enters the boat and says, "I pushed and struck my oars, and struck again. In cadence, and my little boat moved on. ...it was an act of stealth and troubled pleasure" (line 375-390). Again, alone, he rows across a shining clear lake surrounded by steep, threatening crags. "As suited one who proudly rowed with his best skill" (395-6).

His rowing has a triumphant masturbatory rhythm to it, "And as I rose upon the stroke my boat went heaving through the water like a swan" (404-5). "Lustily I dipped my oars into the silent lake" (401-2 in 1805 version). As he is rowing triumphantly "from behind that rocky steep ...a huge cliff, as if with voluntary power, upreared its head. I struck and struck again" he says, but the cliff "growing still in

stature” as if alive strode after him. “With trembling hands” he turns around and heads back to return the boat to its cavern and trudges home “with grave and serious thoughts” (405-415).

The upreared cliff represents both the superior penis of the father and what Harold Bloom would later diagnose in other contexts as the poet’s “anxiety of influence,” his fear that the mighty precursors he wants to challenge will be too powerful and then there will be humiliating consequences. It is a fear of castration, of being shown to be impotent against his literary fathers and as such, the whole scene is an Oedipal challenge, suffused with Oedipal anxiety. He tells us days after the experience his “brain worked with a dim and undetermined sense of unknown modes of being” (l. 420). Wordsworth’s Oedipal challenge to the father(s) is his artistic challenge to them represented as sexual rivalry.

In contrast, Melville’s scene is not Oedipal or sexual and leaves no troubled pleasure in its wake. It is a feminine scene, as passive and yet as powerful as a sail. Melville is not challenging masculine precursors. There is no threat of castration, the ultimate penalty for challenging the dominance of the father. And he does not attempt to steal their craft. Instead he is representing the woman in himself as the power behind his artistry and he gains her admittance into the craft by persuasion and an appeal to fairness. And with his weak argument he somehow, against all odds, gets the men of her tribe to agree. In this scene, Tommo does not steal, does not challenge, and he does not fear his precursors.

Unlike Wordsworth, for Melville/Tommo there is no rhythmic rowing, no sweat and troubled pleasure. Instead he passively guides it from the rear while his

feminine alter ego leaps up to provide the power. But it, too, is passive. Like an Aeolian harp, Fayaway lifts her tappa to the wind and makes herself accessible to its creative power. Through his unique and exotic adaptation of a familiar Romantic figure, Melville paints the artist/woman in himself as the passive recipient of creative inspiration, but it is his female self, and her feminine dress that enables the act of transference to take place. Alone above Melville's subsequent feminine alter-egos, Fayaway is a triumphant and joyful figure. She was his first voyage out and as such carries none of the sadness and defeat, bitterness and rage of later representations.

Typee expresses hope and triumph, too, and it fulfilled all its youthful promise. It established Melville's reputation as a dashing adventurer whose "true" tale about jumping ship in the Marquesas and falling in love with a beautiful Polynesian woman fulfilled public expectations of what happens to a young man under the influence of the tropical climes. Though evangelists objected to its unflattering depiction of missionaries, most of the general public fell in love with the story and the man who wrote it, and Melville enjoyed his celebrity and dramatizing his story on the lecture circuit. However, while satisfying a public craving for stories set in exotic locales, Melville at the same time manages to smuggle in an even more exotic notion. Hidden in the plain brown wrapper of an ordinary travel/romance, is the unacceptable truth his public had no vocabulary to imagine. He manages to both conceal and reveal his own self-portrait as a woman, more precisely an androgynous woman: pipe smoking Fayaway.

"If you look for it," Melville tells us in "Hawthorne and His Mosses," "you will almost always find that the author himself has somewhere furnished you with his

own picture” (Library of America 1166). This self-portrait is often an idealized image, not a realistic one.

In an article on John La Farge and Henry Adams’ sojourn in the South Seas, art historian James Yarnell discusses Lafarge’s watercolor representation of Fayaway, an image he interpreted from Melville’s canoe scene. “The actual representation of Fayaway was only conceived after the South Seas trip as part of a commission to provide the frontispiece illustration for an 1892 edition of Melville’s *Typee*. Over the next several years, La Farge evolved the final idealized watercolor representation of Fayaway...from his ruminations” (103).

La Farge’s ruminative portrait of Melville’s Fayaway looks nothing like a real Polynesian woman, realistic paintings of which he had made by the dozens. His interpretation of Melville’s Fayaway looks like a white, androgynous pre-pubescent boy, breastless and with cropped hair and fine Caucasian features--very *un*-Polynesian in appearance. Melville describes, “The long luxurious, and glossy tresses of the Typee damsels” and says, “Typee girls devote much of their time to the dressing of their hair and redundant locks” (267). Therefore we are not prepared for La Farge’s portrait of her, which was inspired not by the reality of Polynesian feminine appearance but by the distinctly Melvillian image of androgynous power.

Perhaps La Farge found in Melville’s image a mirror of his own philosophical conviction “that primitive cultures reflected or preserved the uncorrupted state of ancient civilizations, particularly that of the Greek Golden Age” (101). Obviously, La Farge felt a sympathy and perhaps identification with Melville that runs deeper

than we know. Perhaps his representation of Fayaway is an idealized self-portrait, too.

In this famous scene as depicted by La Farge, Tommo is completely and tellingly absent. If this were a faithful representation of Melville's canoe scene as written, then Tommo would be seen paddling the boat in the rear. The fact that he is not included in the painting indicates that for La Farge at least, Tommo is not relevant. Perhaps for La Farge, too, Fayaway *is* Tommo and Melville, a projection of feminine identification made visible yet combined with masculine traits so that it stands alone to embody both man and woman.



John La Farge, *Samoan Girl in a Canoe*, c.1895-1896
Watercolor and gouache over pencil on cream-surfaced artist's board.
15 3/16 x 21 13/16 inches. Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.
Museum Purchase 60.6

The Missionary's Wife

Right from the start, *Typee* is preoccupied with the cultural mystery and surfaces of femininity, feminine clothing and feminine bodies, especially their genitals. In an anecdote supposedly derived from “Ellis, in his Polynesian Researches” (Library of America 14). Melville says he “cannot avoid relating” this “amusing incident.” He relates the tale of the missionary’s wife, “the first white woman to visit their shores” (15). The islanders strip the lady naked and once they see beneath the skirt Melville tells us they are filled with contempt. There are several things to note in this anecdote. T. Walter Herbert Jr. in his *Marquesan Encounters* tells us the incident did not take place in the American Mission of 1833-34. The missionaries came from London, not America. And it did not happen “a short time before” Melville’s arrival on the island, but considerably earlier (circa 1837). But these are but quibblings over facts. What interests me is not whether the facts are true, but what kind of truth the misrepresentation of the facts is meant to reveal (or hide).

Why did Melville choose to use this story in his first chapter, and why does he ascribe feelings of curiosity and then contempt to the natives? These would have been unknowable either to the missionary who first relates the experience, or to Melville who repeats it. I suggest that Melville may have made up the emotional details of this anecdote, to convey his own feelings. According to Melville the natives at first regard the missionary’s wife “as some new divinity” and they are “jealous of the folds which encircled its form” (my emphasis 15). This seems highly unlikely, given what he tells us later in the novel. But perhaps what we have here is a

peek at Melville's gender envy, which Docter says underlies the heterosexual transvestite's initial impulse to appropriate a mother or a sister's clothes as a way of appropriating a feminine identity for himself.

Then, Melville says, they "sought to pierce the sacred veil in which it was enshrined." After ascertaining her sex the natives were "exasperated at the deception," and their "idolatry was changed to contempt" (15). They stripped her naked and gave her to understand "that she could no longer carry on her deceit with impunity" (15).

What is this all about? Deceit? What is being misrepresented? Did the natives assume the male missionary to be practicing deceit because he was dressed in western clothes? No. It is specifically the woman who hides something under her skirt that is worthy of contempt. But we know from the later story of Fayaway and the sexual play of nude Polynesian maidens with men aboard ship and with Melville who claims to swim with them, that women's genitals were not regarded with contempt. Melville represents the natives of the Marquesas as sexually freer than their western, would-be saviors. Indeed, he immediately cites the case that the island queen herself was not "shy of exhibiting her charms" (Library of America 15).

Melville is deliberately contrasting "civilized" versus "savage" in order to portray the putatively civilized as backward and prudishly repressed. But if the queen can expose her charms to view and be revered why, then, is there contempt for the same equipment under the missionary's skirt? Could it be the natives were simply having fun? They are represented as jovial and happy people and sexually free. But why contempt?

It could be interpreted as contempt for the sanctimonious posturing of the missionaries, the assumptions they make that they are there to save the savage, but why then is the wife singled out for abuse and ridicule? The costume itself cannot be the cause, since in the later scene, Fayaway, dressed in calico, does not arouse contempt in the natives. And why is it specifically her sexual parts that are the objects of contempt? I suggest that the true objects of contempt under the Missionary's wife's skirt are not the female genitals so frequently seen in Polynesian society but the male genitals of a man who is (in Melville's imagination) cross-dressing as a woman.

Melville is playing with the notion of cross-dressing, using the anecdote of the missionary's wife and adapting it to fit his own needs. The young man in him wants to dress as a woman, to express his feminine self, but he has internalized 19th century cultural norms of gender and projects his own culture's contempt for male transvestism through the natives onto the missionary's wife.

Given the conflicting emotions of desire and guilt that underlie the event we can, appreciate Docter's insight: "The heterosexual transvestite is ambivalent and threatened by his own cross-gender fantasies," which include, "having sex with men while cross-dressed and of striving to be attractive to men" (211). The emerging and increasingly persistent fantasies of appearing in the costume of the feminine self would clearly be "threatening to self-perceived heterosexuality" (211). And I suggest that the contempt of the natives personifies the ambivalence and guilt surrounding this fantasy.

Docter has also said that the formation of a cross-gender identity is a long term process with increasing amount of “cognitive dissonance” (209). According to his research data 79% of his subjects, did not appear in public cross-dressed prior to age 20 but most had “had several years of experience” (209). Given that his data was gathered in the late twentieth century, it is safe to assume that conditions for Melville were quite different. It is doubtful that he would *ever* have cross-dressed in public, but that is not to say he did not do so in part or in whole in some private setting. I would suggest that the Polynesian Isles are essentially a private setting, away from the condemning eyes of his own family and friends.

Docter notes, “There is substantial (anxiety, depression, tension, periodic guilt, and threats to self-esteem associated with developing a cross-gender identity and in perceiving oneself as a transvestite. All aspects of this gender deviance are socially disapproved, if not *taboo*, for males in our culture” (my emphasis 209). Surely this was more the case in the 19th century. It is no wonder Melville in the Marquesas became fascinated with taboos. He was harboring a transgressive desire and its accompanying guilt that he, too, was tenanted a cultural canoe off limits to him..

The western woman’s dress, the outward sign of her gender, *is* a “veil” for Melville. When he is cross-dressed, it veils the biological signifiers of a masculinity he perhaps does not feel. Or, it may hide a vulnerable sign of manhood, which is fragile, ambivalently valued and yet also feared. But if putting on a dress causes indescribably pleasurable feelings, it is a source of pain as much as pleasure.

Docter says, the cross-dresser “is confronted by a subjective reality which is dissonant. He says to himself ‘I recognize that I am a man and that I can never become a woman, yet my most intensive day dreams and my sexual script include strong fantasies in which I identify with taking the role of a woman.’ These competing aspects of identity threaten self-esteem” (211). We do not know what Melville’s moods or behavior were before he left home for the Pacific, but it is clear that he suffered all the signs of a deep cognitive dissonance all his adult life, which may have been the root of the much rumored domestic unhappiness.

It is this dissonance we see acted out all through Melville’s novels but perhaps especially in *Pierre*. Here in *Typee* it is not the natives but Melville who wishes to “Pierce the veil” as later with Ahab he declares his wish to “strike through the mask.” In *Moby-Dick* it is the reality and vulnerable mystery of manhood Ahab at once seeks to penetrate, but from the burdens of its “Guinea Coast Slavery” he also wishes to be relieved. Ahab embodies the transvestite’s cognitive dissonance and resultant rage. For Melville a woman’s dress is a mystery because it is at once a costume of authority and a badge of inferiority, it is seductive and pleasurable *and* more importantly, it is a costume prohibited to him. It is the forbidden fruit.

According to Docter, the feeling of gender envy in adolescent boys “centers around competition for love and security... We believe the stresses and strains of early adolescence, with its intense new sex role demands, may exacerbate feelings of gender envy in some young boys” (208). And, “Envious feelings and subsequent identification with girls are frequently cited by transvestites as a reason for their initial experimentation with wearing women’s clothing—usually those of a mother or

older sister” (208). Docter also cites Bruno Bettelheim as a source for the notion of “the ‘wounds’ suffered by men who develop fear and envy of the femaleness of women” (115).

In *Typee* the dress conceals and misrepresents by hiding the ultimate signifier of gender, the genitals. A man’s genitals are never so hidden in masculine garb as they are under a woman’s skirt. Melville is saying it is possible to be a woman on the outside and a man on the inside. Or conversely, it is possible for a man on the outside to be a woman on the inside.

Inside/Outside

Anthropologist Esther Newton’s calls this a “double inversion.” In her fascinating ethnographic exploration: *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, Newton describes the multilayered and multidimensional significance of drag in the homosexual culture of America. Of particular interest for my argument is her discussion of the opposition of inside and outside. If Melville was hiding an inner identification as woman in his social life, we can see evidence that he explored its range of possibilities in his literary career. Throughout his work we see recurring interrogations of identity. From his earliest sense of himself, we see his failure to identify unequivocally as male. It is not unreasonable, then, to suspect, given the culture’s expectations for men and the privileged and sheltered position of women, that he could develop gender envy. Then as a sense of wanting to be female took root in him, a strong ambivalence would arise along with an uncomfortable sense of always being, or engaging in, impersonation.

His first voyage away from home, his first experience of a primitive culture with sexual mores so different from his own, must have inspired him to take chances with representing himself as a woman. In the folds of fiction and exotic circumstances, he dressed up and indulged his secret fantasy about replacing his problematic masculine outside with his increasingly persistent feminine inside.

According to Newton, “The principal opposition around which the gay world revolves is masculine-feminine... Ultimately all drag symbolism opposes the “inner” or “real” self (subjective self) to the “outer” self (social self). For the great majority of homosexuals, the social self is often a calculated respectability and the subjective self or real self is stigmatized...” (100). This is precisely the opposition and social dilemma I suggest for Melville.

Newton says, “There are two levels on which the oppositions can be played out. One is within the sartorial system...that is the wearing of feminine clothing “underneath” and masculine clothing outside...[which] symbolizes that the visible, social, masculine clothing is a costume. Which in turn symbolizes that the entire sex-role behavior is a role—an act...” (100-101). The second level is internal. It mixes “sex-role referents *within* the visible sartorial system. This generally involves some “outside” item from the feminine sartorial system...worn with masculine clothing... The feminine item stands out so glaringly by incongruity that it ‘undermines’ the masculine system and proclaims that the inner identification is feminine. When this method is used on stage it is called ‘working with (feminine) pieces’” (101). I suggest that Fayaway’s pipe is analogous to a drag queen’s “working with pieces” in

that it presents a feminine drag “outside” undermined by a referent that suggests there is a masculine “inside” or in this case “underneath” the feminine sartorial system.

What if we posit for a moment that instead of wearing a hidden piece of female clothing under his man’s suit, what is hidden is internal: a *desire* to wear female clothing and present one’s self as a woman? If indeed “one article of clothing is sufficient to ruin the integrity of the masculine system” (n 101), how much more ruinous would it be to reveal that underneath the role of masculinity lies the stigmatized identity of a woman. Perhaps it is this that Melville is suggesting the natives reject and ridicule, and perhaps the “natives” are but fictional stand-ins for the 19th century middle class America, the butt of much of Melville’s contempt in this novel and others. A boy who grows up feeling he hides an unacceptable secret is painfully aware of the social codes that would condemn and stigmatize him. Polynesia is exactly the sort of place to get even, to experiment with identity in opposition to the outside of the western “sartorial system” and the social roles that system both defines and enforces.

Newton states that the other level of opposition is “between sex role sartorial system and the ‘self’ whose identity has to be indicated in some other way. Thus when impersonators are performing, the oppositional play is between “appearance” which is female and “reality” or “essence” which is male...” (101). One way to do this is to show the charade by revealing something masculine underneath the dress or “to demonstrate maleness verbally or vocally by suddenly dropping the vocal level or by some other indirect reference...the desire and ability to break the illusion of

femininity is the mark of an experienced impersonator” (101). Fayaway’s feminine outside was pierced by the pipe smoking, a “piece” of the masculine sartorial system.

I believe that Melville became aware, early in his life that his feelings on the inside ran counter to his assigned masculine role. As early as three, he did not count himself in the tribe of males within his family. Inevitably a sense of incongruence grew as the social role he was expected to assume was not vigorously supported and encouraged by his mother and father. Even though he is expected to somehow form a stable and conventional identity as masculine, no one can show him how to get there. Therefore Melville begins to think of his “costume” of masculinity as hiding a feminine truth, as literally the missionary’s wife’s skirt hides what is underneath, the truth that she is not a divinity but an ordinary woman. We assume from Melville’s anecdote that when the natives find out the missionary’s wife is female (how could they not know that?) they mock her, strip her of her “sartorial system” and treat her with contempt. But this story hides a deeper meaning for Melville who already feels he hides an incongruent and socially inconvenient truth under his own costume. The story is tailor made to secretly engage the entire notion of inside/outside and to pose the question: which is the real identity?

I have suggested that what is under the Missionary’s wife’s skirt, what fills the natives with contempt, is the male genitalia of a man who feels that his “essence is feminine,” one side of Newton’s “double inversion.” It is the penis hiding under the dress that causes all the trouble. But the other side of the female impersonation for Melville is that the dress [the outside] is felt to be the essence of the man.

What are Fayaway and the missionary's wife? Are they merely fantasy projections of a creative genius in the making? Or are they practice and experiments with an alternate identity?

Melville biographer, Laurie Robertson-Lorant, has gingerly come close to saying she believes Melville had an inner woman, what she refers to as a feminine side of his nature. In discussing his novel *Pierre* she says of Pierre (the recognized authorial surrogate for Melville), "His 'union' with Isabel has released in him a tremendous flood of creative energy by putting him in touch with the repressed feminine side of himself..." (*Melville* 316).

But her notion of "feminine side" is vague and unsupported by research data. Docter's research echoes Melville's circumstances and may reflect his actual feelings much better. His research team conceptualizes gender and cross-gender identity as subordinate cognitive control systems of the self: "But very importantly, Hilgard (1977) notes that problems can occur which are roughly analogous to a minor insurrection within the self system. Once a subsystem is activated and begins to take control or share control (as through hypnosis or stress) it, '*...continues with a measure of autonomy; the conscious representation of the control system may recede, leading to some degree of automatization*'" (Docker's italics 81).

Docker states that, "Although there is much variation across subjects, both transvestites and transsexuals report the experiencing of a feminine second self akin to the autonomous subsystem postulated by Hilgard. Transvestites, for example, often report feeling 'taken over' by feminine feelings and subsequently behaving

differently [even] when not cross-dressed. Transsexuals report feeling despondent over their gender status and urgently seek to live in the opposite gender role” (81).

This may account for what Robertson-Lorant identifies as Melville’s, “tremendous flood of creative energy” but I think it is not because he is somehow made a connection to a Jungian “feminine side” but because the pressure of an increasingly autonomous second (feminine) self, demanded expression, and his art is the result of that demand. Without it, it is hard to see Melville being a writer at all, and certainly not the kind of writer he was. His art, like his life reflects what Robertson-Lorant later calls his “life long mutiny against family, self, society and God” (569).

She has also said, unlike the openly gay Walt Whitman, Oscar Wilde, Charles Warren Stoddard and others, “Melville lived a heterosexual life, *as far as we know*” (my emphasis 618). David Leverenz, Eve Sedgwick, and James Creech have argued for closeted homosexuality. So, what are we left with as a category that has within it the criteria to explain, at least in part, the enigma of Herman Melville as a heterosexual man with a feminine identity? I suggest between the openly gay or closeted homosexual and the heterosexual man lies the intriguing and little discussed niche: the heterosexual transvestite, whose career Richard Docter, Robert Stoller, J. Michael Bailey, Richard Green, and many others have studied at length. Based on extensive and some longitudinal studies as well as clinical case histories, these scientists and scholars are in virtual agreement on the path the heterosexual transvestite typically takes and all agree it is a progressive phenomenon.

According to Docter, a cognitive psychologist, “A cross-gender identity is *learned* both through fantasy and, increasingly, through cross-dressing experiences” (my emphasis 209). As heretical as it may seem, I am suggesting Melville may have been a secret cross-dresser and that *Typee* is his first fictional representation of himself in feminine clothes.

Bailey, Docter and Stoller, and others differentiate between the fetishistic cross-dresser, and the primary transsexual. The fetishistic cross-dresser is a heterosexual transvestite with a strong male role history. Their long progression may at midlife end in gender reassignment, but this usually occurs as a response to some emotional crisis, such as the death of the mother or divorce. In contrast, the primary transsexual also cross dresses but has no strong male history. He is unequivocally feminine in appearance and self-identity from his very earliest years and he typically seeks, indeed demands gender reassignment surgery early in his life.

Of course, transsexual surgery was not an option in the 19th century. The medical expertise and even the vocabulary to imagine such a thing had not yet been invented. What we see in Melville’s art may be the fantasy life of a man who undoubtedly lived a conflicted and ambivalent heterosexual life. We cannot know, if he had lived in a different time, whether he *might* have attempted to live a transgender life and even have transsexual surgery.

Robertson-Lorant states that Melville escaped “the enforced homosexuality of the forecastle,” but I wonder if the recurring tales of imprisonment and captivity we find in Melville’s work are not more informed by his sense of being entrapped in a heterosexual marriage with no acceptable outlet for his cross-dressing needs (618).

And the recurring tales (vague hints, really) of insanity and strangeness, of violence and depression we hear about in Melville's life could be but the visible signs or shadows of that thwarted desire. And the fact that the stories of his domestic unrest, like the fiction created in that circumstance, are vague and carry with them a sense of something not just untold, but strenuously hidden, speaks to the secrecy and shame surrounding the cross-dresser's life.

Though of course I can never prove my thesis beyond all doubt, I do think it worth consideration. Mixing gender referents in his work, like "working with pieces," Melville attempts to both exercise and exorcize the woman within him which he has created through both fantasy and experimentation.

Interest in cross-dressing is fetishistic, and according to Docter's cognitive theory the learning experiences crucial to a fetishistic interest in cross-dressing are:

1. Learning about one's own gender
2. Learning to be envious of the opposite gender (women have it easier than men)
3. Learning that women's apparel is forbidden fruit for males in our culture. Our culture's socialization may...contribute to making such clothing especially erotic in the eyes of young boys (222).

Docter sees the fetishism of heterosexual transvestites as "best explained by developmental factors associated with adolescence rather than early childhood" since this behavior is strongly associated with emerging sex drive and masturbation (202). However, I argue that the pre-oedipal phase of childhood may set the stage for such development to occur. Maternal depression and emotional unavailability in the pre-oedipal stage may increase the desire of the child to hold something of the mother's with them as a comforting, Winnicottian Transitional Object to soothe an overwhelming sense of loss, i.e. separation anxiety. Even Docter admits, early cross-

dressing in which the fetishistic aspects are less important “may be motivated by “unfulfilled dependency or security needs” (205). It is during the later adolescent stage when sexual drive increases and becomes irresistible, that female clothing may take on a specifically erotic flavor.

On the whole, Docter’s summary statement seems persuasive:

Early cross-dressing behavior ...is not the product of any single motivation, personality characteristic or learning. It is the product of several interacting developmental processes, which are, together, transforming the youth into a man. A key point is to view these processes as interdependent, interactive, and as highly driven by cognitive factors. The sexual script is becoming extremely explicit. Taken together, they represent the shaping forces which are basic to becoming a transvestite (206).

For Docter, transvestic stimuli, clothing and dressing, become secondary reinforcers:

Because with each cross-dressing episode there is...an inherent reinforcing experienced which strengthens and sustains these responses. Many transvestites think of the intense strength of cross-dressing expectancies as a ‘compulsion to cross dress’...but we shall emphasize the progressive strengthening of the sexual script. The reported feeling that he must cross-dress is organized around very specific sexual expectancies and the subsequent reinforcement is highly predictable...since the youth has neither the resources nor the privacy to arrange for a complete cross-gender self-presentation...it is through fantasy that elaboration of the transvestic experience must be sought. With increasing experience...the young transvestite comes to dream of himself as a beautiful woman having a unique appearance harmonious with his developing script (207-208).

Whatever his cross-dressing fantasies were before he left for the Pacific, I suggest that in *Typee* Melville is working on a “sexual script,” experimenting with cross-dressing fantasies (and fears) through his depictions of Fayaway and the missionary’s wife. The fact that Fayaway is both masculine and feminine, a pipe

smoking taboo-breaker, as well as a maiden of obvious feminine charms, speaks to Melville's gender ambivalence.

She may also be inspired by real life Tahitian transgender homosexuals, known as *Maku*, cited by J. Michael Bailey in *The Man Who Would Be Queen*:

When he visited Tahiti, Captain Bligh (commander of the *Bounty*) noted that the *Maku* participated in the same ceremonies the women did. At first their feminine behavior and speech led him to believe they were castrated, but he learned otherwise (135).

Melville may have encountered one of these transgendered homosexuals during his sojourn in the Marquesas and may, in part, have fashioned both Fayaway and Marnoo from them. Marnoo may be a sound-alike name, based on *Maku*. Still, I would argue his use of them far exceeds reportage. His work is not a travelogue. It is a fantasy memoir. I would say he found an example in the *Maku* that served his own particular needs,

If Fayaway represents an emerging cross-gender identity, we would expect her to incorporate both masculine and feminine characteristics, especially at first. And in fact, Docter has found in his study that over time and practice transvestites do indeed develop a sense of a shared or alternate feminine identity, but only when they are cross-dressed.

Docter notes a paradox of transvestism, which can cast what we do know about Melville's life in an entirely different light even as it casts shadows of doubt over conventional interpretations of his texts. The heterosexual transvestite is:

A more or less socially conventional male, often married, who seems to function satisfactorily in his various male roles. But on the other hand he lives a secret second life, *dominated* by fantasies of being a temporary, periodic woman, and he derives extraordinary exhilaration and delight in this...for some it takes on a compulsive quality roughly

akin to an addiction....When cross-dressing is blocked, the result is frustration, tension, and irritation (my emphasis 217).

And even more poignant is the dilemma of the transvestite with regard to his family, as a wife, mother or children “who communicate masculine role expectancies to the transvestite...tend to become unwanted reminders of reality” (215). If we look again at Melville’s troubled domestic scene and the disaster of his parenting of his own children we can perhaps see the “paradox of the transvestite” at work here. But before he was married and had children he was at sea, and in his first novel, in the exuberant and transgressive figure of Fayaway we can see Melville’s unfettered “exhilaration” and “delight” in transvestic fantasies.

As a woman-identified man or specifically a heterosexual transvestite, we would expect to see Melville being particularly invested in feminine clothing and in fact that is precisely what we see in his art. It is Fayaway’s dress that drives the canoe and the Missionary’s wife’s dress is a mysterious veil that hides an unacceptable secret.

Fayaway smokes a pipe like a man and arouses what seems to be homosexual desire in Melville, but only, I suggest, because “inside” Melville is beginning to solidify an alternate feminine identity, and because this alternate identity is not, and perhaps never can be, fixed, he oscillates back and forth between male and female elements.

But if we use Docter’s theory of transvestism as the integrative process toward the development of a sexual script built on a fetishistic interest in feminine garments and fabrics, we can observe that Melville’s fascination with feminine clothing is evident even before *Typee*, in his first published writings.

In “Fragments from a Writing Desk” No. I, in a letter addressed to M---, he berates himself for “Hang-dog modesty” and resolves in a rather odd declaration to, “rid myself of this annoying hindrance” by coming to the conclusion that “within this *pretty corpus* of mine is lodged a manly grace” (my emphasis 1173). It is a curious comment not likely to come from a man whose masculine identification is secure and unambiguous. What man would call his body a “pretty corpus”? And it can also indicate that Melville understands himself to be masculine (as most transvestites do) despite his interest in women’s things and in himself as a part-time woman.

Following this comes a flowery assertion of male prowess with the ladies, as if he were endeavoring to counter criticism, perhaps coming from his own failure to live up to his internalized masculine norms and family expectations. Suddenly he touts himself as “beautiful as Apollo” and claims to put all the other “village beaus” to shame with his “elegant accomplishment,” “superior parts,” his “graceful dress” and “easy self- possession” (Library of America 1175). But the rest of the fragment is devoted not to the joys of masculine self possession but to the glories of feminine charms displayed by the ladies of Lansingburgh, “where woman seems to have erected her throne, and established her empire” (1175).

Though he wishes to appear a masculine admirer of the fair sex, the text catalogs the “beau-ideal of female loveliness” (1175), as if he were trying them on and gazing at himself in an idealizing mirror. The three graces: 1. A Diana, “Her figure is bold, her stature erect and tall, her presence queenly and commanding” (1176); 2. a being “bright and beautiful” so lovely he feels as if “transported to the land of dreams” (1177); and 3. a “Lilliputian beauty, diminutive in stature, fair

haired” (1178). At the end of the fragment, he says to M--- that should he not feel interest in “these *counterfeit* presentments” (my emphasis) he should show them to an unnamed woman and “solicit her opinion as to their respective merits” (1179).

Why are these descriptions called “counterfeit”? Perhaps it is because they are the fabrications of art, but they can also be costumes or disguises. And, why ask a woman for her opinion of them? Perhaps because the ultimate judge of femininity is a woman, and if you are trying to pass, it is a woman you need to persuade. We are at a loss to discern a more straightforward motive for this fragment. It seems more like the trying on of a costume as a woman, as much as it is a style of writing as a man.

Fragment No. 2 is the first of many fictional situations where Melville imagines himself chasing an elusive female figure. In *Mardi* we will see him again, fruitlessly chase after the beautiful “Yillah of his soul.” But here in this first set of writings we cannot help noticing that the great bulk of these slim fragments is about fashion and décor, more about the accoutrement of femininity than about relationship, event or even desire. Here desire comes suddenly, but it is ushered in and vanquished without persuasive motivation.

A mysterious lady appears, but as he approaches, she recedes. Like the other mysterious women who elude in Melville’s novels, this one, too, is ghostly and here Melville specifically states that it is his masculine garments that stand in his way, “...encumbered as I was with my heavy cloak and boots, I was unable to follow” (1180). So he says, “I desperately flung the mantle from my shoulders, and dashing my beaver to the ground, gave chase in good earnest to the tantalizing stranger” (1180).

This stranger guides him to a villa where, mysteriously, and again passively, he is lifted with her in a basket to the upper story, where he encounters another mysterious lady “reclining upon an ottoman” (1186). She is “habited in a flowing robe of purest white” and “lost in some melancholy reverie” (1186). Without any reason he throws himself at her feet and exclaims, “Here do I prostrate myself, thou sweet divinity, and kneel at the shrine of thy peerless charms!” (1187). But when he asks her if she returns his love, she is mute. The fragment ends with an exclamation, “Great God, She was dumb! DUMB AND DEAF!” (1187). And for that reason he flings her away in apparent disgust.

As so often happens in Melville, we are left to wonder what it all means. The narrator seems to have fallen in love instantly with her physical beauty, an austere queenly beauty, not unlike his idealization of his mother, Maria. And yet, because she is deaf and mute he throws her away. Her inability to speak is perhaps a sign of her inability to make herself real in the world, a limitation that surely would frustrate a budding transvestite. But the mysterious woman’s inability to speak is perhaps the earliest precursor of Billy Budd, the sailor of womanly appearance and charm who has a stutter and cannot speak to defend himself. At the end of his career as at the beginning, the silent woman in him appears as perhaps the most powerful expression of his feminine identification, which cannot speak its name.

We can trace Melville’s preoccupation with mysterious women, their isolation, silence, and illegitimate status from the Fragments to *Typee* (silent Fayaway in the canoe) to Yillah in *Mardi*, Isabel in *Pierre*, and Marianna of “The

Piazza,” and finally *Billy Budd*. Even Bartleby partakes of the silence that is an aggressive refusal to explain himself, a refusal that proves ultimately fatal.

The paucity of actual biographical information about Melville has forced scholars since Weaver to mine his novels for biographical information. Yet, their interpretations of the meaning of this material are conventional and ultimately darkening because they insist on some material as fact and yet dismiss others as fantasy. But surely, the nature of Melville’s fantasies (his fictional representations) can tell us something about his inner life, his desires and identifications.

Redburn is often used to cite Melville’s feelings about his father and his childhood, yet scholars shy away from seeing the phenomenon of Harry Bolton as anything other than a bizarre fantasy unrelated to Melville’s actual life. *Pierre* is used to establish Melville’s actual feelings about his mother and father, and the ethereal Isabel is taken to be the personification of a putative illegitimate child of Melville’s father. Still, there is much in the novel that, like the elusive women in all his novels, escapes the supposedly tightfisted grasp of biography.

Isabel is not a personification of a rumored love child of his father. She is the personification of Melville’s feminine self. In my view all Melville’s women should be welcomed into the biographical scene by treating them not as conventional romantic objects but as the evolving sexual script (in Docter’s view) or simply the working through of his feminine identification. Indeed almost every woman, womanly man, homoerotic scene can be explained in terms of a strong feminine identification and its correlate, the sense of damaged manhood. My position is that *all* the material in Melville’s novels and short stories is autobiographical to the extent

that it can tell us how he felt, what was important to him and who he felt himself to be.

One thing we can trace through his autobiographical novels is Melville's preoccupation with clothes, fabric and a rather illogical stress on the manliness of masculine clothing. So far, scholars have not deemed it worth mentioning as something that *means* something. But it does. A good example is in the beginning of *Redburn*. Redburn is reminiscing about his days listening to his father talk of sea voyages and far away places. "I tried hard to think of how such places must look on rainy days...whether the boys went to school there...and wore their shirt collars turned over and tied with a black ribbon; and whether their papas allowed them to wear boots, instead of shoes, which I so much disliked, because boots looked so manly" (45).

He seems to be saying he dislikes shoes, and prefers boots, because they look manly, but the syntax of the sentence leaves that in doubt. What is it about shoes that could be called *unmanly*? And why is it necessary to stress the manliness of boots? Is it perhaps to stress the desire for manliness in the boy as if proclaiming the desire for it to the world would somehow magically make it true? Either way, the reader cannot quite tell if it is the shoes or boots that are disliked on account of their manliness. It seems Melville feels compelled, once again, to stress his manliness and yet confusion creeps in. Also, he seems preoccupied with manliness in a way masculine boys are not. Masculine boys might want to show roughness and physical strength, that is to have courage and daring and to *behave* in a manly way, but

Melville is more worried about how he looks. Melville addresses manliness sartorially.

After this long passage, once again he falls to talking more about clothing as he fantasizes about bringing home rich fabrics from far away places and wearing “them up and down the streets” (46). He dreams about “how grocers’ boys would turn their heads to look at me, as I went by” (46). This does not seem at all “manly.” It sounds rather more like a girl trying to get attention from the boys with her pretty dress. And one wonders if wearing manly boots would help this image and cause boys’ heads to turn. The boy who wants to turn boys’ heads with his fine rich fabrics is not the same boy who wants to wear boots, because “they look so manly.”

We recall from the biographies that Allan Melvill, Herman’s father, imported women’s fine clothing from Europe and so it is logical to assume this is what Redburn is relating to, but I suggest that Allan’s merchandise may have been only one of the contributors to Herman’s transvestic fantasies. Allan was a feckless entrepreneur, and an affected and even supercilious fellow in his writings. He was by most accounts a failure as a husband and father and so it is unlikely he could have served as a robust example of masculine virtue and support for his young sons.

J. Michael Bailey, a research and clinical psychologist at Northwestern University, claims to have found “several accounts of first degree relatives (brothers or fathers and sons) who discovered that both were cross-dressers (*The Man Who Would Be Queen* 170). This, and the results of twin studies that show 52% of identical twins were both gay; 24% of fraternal twins were gay, and only 11% of adoptive brothers were, lead Bailey to conclude that there is a strong genetic

component for cross-gender identification and behavior as well as homosexuality in men (109). He strongly argues for an innate, genetic cause for both transvestism and transsexualism. But I see heterosexual transvestism as possibly coming from both nature and nurture. Still, it is interesting to speculate what led Herman's father to choose to import ladies wear. Nothing could be better suited for a closet transvestite than to traffic in women's clothes and thereby be able to hide his fetish in plain sight.

Whether Allan was gay, or a heterosexual transvestite and had been a feminine boy must remain a mystery, but his chosen profession as purveyor of women's clothing may be a sign that he could have been. And it may have provided Melville not only with a feminine father as a model, but also access to and perhaps a shared fascination with feminine clothing.

Redburn goes from clothing to a long catalog of his interests in home decor: furniture, paintings, "rare old engravings" the details of which are sumptuously described and ending with the spun glass ship from which a glass figure falls, foreshadowing Redburn's fear that his first voyage will bring about his death. But this turns out to be Harry Bolton's fate instead. Since Harry Bolton is Melville's feminine self, it is the feminine self that Melville imagines will die out of sight on the trip home.

The intent of all this description is to create the image of Redburn as a refined gentleman of good breeding. Or more like Harry (and perhaps Melville's father?) a beautiful, young womanly man who is sensitive to the finer things in life and totally unfit for life at sea (or in business). It is interesting to consider that the feminine men in Melville's fiction may all be partly based on his father.

Considering Melville's penchant for puns in the names he gives his characters, we can speculate that Harry's name, Bolton, may allude to the bolts of feminine fabric Allan bought and sold in his business as well as the fact that his father bolted from the family when he died. It may also allude to Melville feeling both bolted to his feminine identity, and bolted in the sense of being imprisoned, inside a family and masculine role, which is constricting and uncomfortable.

The only scholar that has broached this subject with any insight is Robertson-Lorant who states, "Harry is Redburn's psychological double, the repressed feminine side of himself that must be nurtured to achieve full manhood, a precursor of Isabel in *Pierre*" (208). Given her perception in this case, it is hard to see why she avoids its implications. She seems to suggest a kind of Jungian anima/animus duality in Melville. She says "Melville first became aware of his bisexuality during his cruise to Liverpool" (208), but it is clear if you look at what he said that he was aware of his feminine self as early as three years of age.

Jung's universal unconscious, and universal (male and female) archetypes are simply too general to have much to say about the vicissitudes of a single life in a social context that supports a specific gender based on genitalia and punishes gender identification that runs counter to accepted norms. Perhaps this is why though Robertson-Lorant posits a feminine self for Melville, she avoids both the early and specific indications of it and the later implications of it as well. How does a man *live* with a strong feminine identification? Perceptively she does state that, "Probing the wounds of masculinity was painful, especially when it brought Melville face to face with the fugitive self that swam below the culture in a twilight world where those

who did not conform to strictly delineated gender roles were defined as deviants” (208). But it seems clear that she does not want to describe Melville in specific terms that could be called deviant. She also does not delve into the causes of this deviance and imagines that somehow Melville just became aware of it on his trip to Liverpool.

Sartorial Secrets Behind the Door

When he is in New York getting himself ready for the voyage, Redburn buys a rough red shirt, a canvas hat and other sailor’s accoutrement. In a scene redolent with secrecy and shame, he goes to his room and locks the door behind him. He hangs a towel over the knob so that no one could peek in through the keyhole and in his closeted room he puts on the red wool shirt, “to see what sort of a looking sailor I was going to make” (68). As soon as he puts on the rough, red wool shirt he feels “warm and red about the face” (68). He puts it down to being a reflection of his red shirt, but the warmth he feels can also be shame and perhaps fear that the voyage he is embarking on, both real and symbolic, into manhood, is being undertaken without the right stuff—without sufficient masculine underpinnings to support him.

After this he cuts his hair, “which was very long” (68). This image is a womanly boy secretly and uncomfortably trying on the costume of manhood. He is ashamed to feel so ill at ease inside the rough red shirt, and inside the gender it proclaims. Weaver reports that “It is said that throughout his life [Melville] clung to the practice of draping door knobs” and we can wonder if he cross-dressed in women’s clothes behind that door. But it seems clear that when he tried on the rough red shirt of a sailor and cut his hair he felt as if he were cross-dressing in the “sartorial

system” of manhood, and it did not feel natural to him and because he thought it ought to, it filled him with shame.

We can see hints from the “Fragments” to *Typee* and beyond, that fascination with feminine attire remained with Melville his whole life. In his old age about the same time as he was writing *Billy Budd* and “Daniel Orme,” Melville’s granddaughter, Eleanor Metcalf, reports that he made them very uncomfortable by wearing loose fitting garments, (delicately referred to as “Constantinople” pajamas) around the house. (Reported by Eleanor Melville Metcalf and repeated in Robertson-Lorant’s biography). If these garments were loose but still recognizably masculine, would there have been a family uproar about them? The fact that they are described vaguely as foreign and also Middle Eastern, suggests they were more like Arabian robes, skirts, rather than leggy pajamas. We can legitimately wonder if perhaps he dressed in frankly feminine attire around the house--or behind closed doors, with a towel hanging on the doorknob. But whether to his grandchildren’s chagrin, he wore a dress like the missionary’s wife or like the one he made for Fayaway out of calico around the house, it is likely that while the outside dress was a source of shame for his wife and grand daughters, what was under the dress was a source of lifelong shame and ambivalence for him.

Another incident reported in Parker, with his characteristic interpretive maneuvers, concerns some mysterious “goings on” that occurred when Melville was left alone to mind his children. In 1863, as Lizzy was contemplating another trip away from home she writes: “I cannot leave them and Herman alone—there were such goings on the last time...and in the village it would be worse” (517).

Parker suggests that the “goings on” were “on the order of rowdiness by the girls rather than dubious behavior by their Papa” (517). Vague as it is, his guess may be correct, but it is worth taking another, more unbiased, look at this story for clues it may provide. Perhaps Herman Melville used his time alone with his daughters to play house with them, to dress up and play at being a girl with them. It’s especially interesting that almost immediately after this anecdote, Parker brings up Herman’s “habit of wearing fewer and looser clothing than most respectable men” (517). He says it is “a carryover from his South Seas days which caused his youngest child, at least, some embarrassment when she was a young woman” (517).

Really? That Parker connects these two incidents seems to suggest that perhaps he subconsciously connects what Melville did that was unacceptable had something to do with his clothing. And laying it at the door of the South Seas suggests Melville’s ruse was successful. Unacceptable cross-dressing can be covered over nicely by recourse to his Polynesian adventure and the loose clothing of the natives.

But if Herman was a heterosexual transvestite more comfortable in women’s clothes, he would perhaps feel that dressing to go out in men’s clothes was an uncomfortable burden that, like manhood itself, he had to bear. And in fact Parker quotes Melville’s 1850 words on the binding of Cooper’s *The Red Rover*: “The intolerable infliction of dressing to go into society” which Parker says “was not an infliction he had imposed upon himself at Arrowhead...” (517-518).

If we consider that Melville may have struggled with an insistent and demanding feminine self, and that the desire to dress her up at times became

irresistible, then certain of the problems in his marriage, and his relationship with the woman in his life as well as the sad fate of his male children begin to fall into place. So also do the recurring themes in his work: incarceration, entrapment, captivity, slavery, and haunting feminine presences. The underlying tones of rage and sadness in his work lie side by side with a sense of damaged manhood and speak to a profound sense of isolation, futility and rage one might expect to see in a domestic prisoner of gender.

During most of his novel-writing life, Melville was surrounded by women, many of whom he depended on for the copying of his manuscripts. According to Elizabeth Renker, his marginal notes show he verbally insulted and abused his women copyists while they worked for him. In *Strike Through The Mask*, Renker argues Melville was torn between need and hatred, a common enough dilemma borne of prolonged, helpless dependency.

There may have been no way out of this dilemma, except behind closed doors, to write out (or dress up) his sense of entrapment, with a towel hung over the knob. This penchant for towel hanging can be seen as a metaphor for the difficulty we all have in seeing Melville whole and entire.

All of this is conjecture, of course. It is an attempt to find an answer to the persistent mystery that is Herman Melville, to explain the tensions in his marriage, the death of his sons, the estrangement of his daughters, and the whole mess of his domestic life, so much of which is hidden from view—the way shameful things usually are in families. Letters are destroyed and family members will not divulge, except obliquely, what went on inside the most private parts of their lives.

Only the family knew what went on inside the home and they did not (could not) talk about it, except in occasional hints. And those hints were mostly ignored by the early scholars and are even ignored or denied by Melville's biographers in the present day. It is easy to understand. First, the recuperation of Melville's reputation in the 1920's was important to many who had fallen in love with his work. Second, there was no proof. His family could not talk about it frankly because it was embarrassing and also too hard to explain. How much more embarrassing it would have been in the 19th century to discuss a man who liked women's clothes, and who could find no peaceful, face saving way out of wearing a man's clothes and shouldering a man's responsibilities. We only need to look into Melville's work to see what Melville himself thought of it. Listen to tormented Ahab. "When I think of this life I have led; the desolation of solitude it has been; the mason-walled town of a Captain's exclusiveness, which admits but small chance to any sympathy from the green country without—oh weariness! Heaviness! Guinea-coast slavery of solitary command!" (Library of America *Moby-Dick* 1373).

There were rumors circulating in his family that Melville was insane, but no specific behavior was ever brought forward as an example. What constitutes madness or insanity in the 19th century? Surely, it is not merely abuse, violent behavior. Wife beaters are not routinely called insane, and wife beating was and is, sadly, a common enough occurrence. I submit Melville was called mad because he did things that were so beyond the bounds of what was considered "normal" 19th century behavior that there was no other way at that time to define it. Melville's internal conflicts may have provoked violence that seemed unexplainable by the circumstances. Surely

cross-dressing, gender confusion, or any kind of cross-gender behavior or feelings would have been called sinful in Melville's Calvinist family, but it also would have seemed odd enough to be described as insane.

There had been talk of Melville's unhappy marriage since the very beginning, but Melville scholars have protected his reputation, practicing strenuous denial of the implications based on scant anecdotal evidence that he was violent toward his wife. Parker seems especially eager to cover the Melville "doorknob" by insisting in the "goings on" incident with his daughters that, "Melville was probably guilty of nothing more, at this time, than laxness in supervision" (518).

Parker puts down charges that Melville had abused his wife as "reckless" (517). Others put persistent rumors of abuse down to his titanic struggle with his own genius and to being surrounded by inferior unsympathetic family members. And they insist nothing bad could have happened because there is no documentary evidence to support it. But this is a ridiculous argument. How many cases of domestic violence *are* supported by documentation? Even today, most go unreported because of the fear and shame involved.

However, in 1975 Rev. Walter D. Kring discovered letters that proved beyond doubt that the domestic scene in the Melville home was far from happy or peaceful. Family members had plotted to have Elizabeth Melville kidnapped away from her abusive husband. The Melville Society's reaction to this discovery was, to say the least, subdued. A tardy six years after Kring's discovery, the Society finally published a report on the letters entitled "The Endless Winding Way in Melville: New

Charts by Kring and Carey.” This was a nondescript title designed to ward off the curious and to keep people from seeing the evidence.

Renker found the pamphlet obscurely located in an Ohio State University library. She describes finding it as the beginning of her own “intellectual awakening.” She said she “forever gave up her sense of Melville’s personal ‘nobility.’” Philip Weiss, in an article in the *New York Times Magazine* (December 15, 1996), just about the time the Parker and Robertson-Lorant biographies were published, traces the history of Melville scholarship and the responses to the Kring discovery.

According to Weiss, Renker says of the letters, “Suddenly a lot of these nagging questions I had about things that seemed to come up in the criticism but weren’t really dealt with, like Malcolm’s suicide, seemed to be answered.” Her response to this new information led to her own article, “Herman Melville: Wife Beating and The Written Page” in *American Literature* 1994, and her book, *Strike Through The Mask: Herman Melville and the Scene of Writing*. Her thesis is “Herman’s simultaneous dependence on and resentment of Elizabeth and the other Melville women constitutes the secret ‘madness & anguish of his writing.’”

Also reported in *The Times* article are several stories of Melville’s abuse of his wife: one told by Melville’s granddaughter, Eleanor Melville Metcalf, to William Braswel (on condition of silence) was that Melville struck his wife. Another story, reported but not written down, has Melville chasing his wife around the table with a carving knife. Another says that he pushed her down the back stairs. And a decade before the Kring letters were discovered in a book entitled “*Call Me Ishmael*,”

Charles Olson asserted that Melville “remained periodically violent toward his wife.” None of these reports had carried weight with diehard Melvilleans--until the Kring discovery appeared. After it did, many of the really hardcore simply refused to talk about it, replicating the shame that kept it a secret in the Melville family.

And the conservative old line Melvilleans were not pleased with Renker’s thesis either. They scoffed that her work was “pure conjecture,” “wrongheaded,” “inappropriate,” full of “moldy feminist assumptions.” Clare Spark said “If a student turned in a paper based on evidence as flimsy as that, I couldn’t accept it” (*New York Times Magazine*, Phillip Weiss December 15, 1996).

Still, other scholars value her work and continue to build on Renker’s insights. Accusations will no doubt be leveled at my unorthodox thesis about Melville, too. Of course, I can’t prove a thing. I can only attempt to connect what I see going on in his work with what little we know about his life and, filling in the gaps, come up with a unified thesis that can explain both.

In spite of no evidence, no smoking gun of cross-dressing behavior filmed or documented by his contemporaries, I see the Fragments as the first textual evidence that Melville was more than casually concerned with the inside/outside of feminine/masculine identities. Fayaway and the Missionary’s wife represent a further elaboration of his interest, indeed a further step in the process of developing and elaborating his cross-gender identity. Because of his preoccupation with their clothing and what lay underneath, I think the feminine identification I posit for Melville, makes sense.

In the end, how much of what we can understand about human life is based on recorded documents, film evidence, tape-recorded speech? The most important parts of anyone's life are often left unspoken, unrecorded, and must be interpreted from scant evidence. In Melville's case the evidence, what *is* written down, are the novels, short stories, poems and fragments. And these will have to be evidence enough.

CHAPTER 3

Melville's *Maskulinity*: Reading The Rage Behind the Mask

Even admitting there was something dark
That he chose to keep to himself what then?
Such reticence may sometimes be more
For the sake of others than one's self.
"Daniel Orme" / Herman Melville

Since the Kring discovery, the fact that Melville was violent and abusive to his wife and children is beyond dispute. When we consider Melville's troubled domestic life in light of Daniel Orme's sad excuse, we must ask ourselves: what is the cost of attempting to live one's life "for the sake of others"? What are the consequences for an individual and his family when a significant part of the self is denied and suppressed? If Melville, like Daniel, felt he was sacrificing his own desires for the sake of his family, he did so grudgingly as one, now confirmed, example from Charles Olson, an early biographer, makes clear. Herman "came home drunk on brandy, beat Elizabeth up, and threw her down the stairs" (in Renker 52). It is hard to see this as the behavior of a man who loved his family and made willing sacrifices for them. It is logical to assume that the violence and rage Melville expressed toward his family grew from a sense of injustice, entitlement and thwarted desire, but we can never be certain what it was that drove him to it. The family's reticence to talk openly about it has from the beginning frustrated biographers, but from what little we do know, it seems clear the family sacrificed its own wellbeing to keep the secret of Melville's abuse, and perhaps other secrets as well.

Indeed domestic abuse and alcoholism, while sufficiently shameful to keep hidden, may have served as a convenient cover for another kind of unacceptable behavior. As the title of my dissertation makes clear, I believe the overriding theme, indeed the preoccupation verging on obsession of Melville's life and work is the failure of recognition, both of his feminine self and his art, which is an expression and exploration of that feminine self and the wounded manhood that is its twin. Given my premise, it seems logical to assume Herman Melville may have cross-dressed, or engaged in other kinds of cross gender behavior which his wife and family would have found much more shameful to discuss than common abuse.

Secrecy about family matters had until relatively recently extended to Melville's literary reputation as well. It has been typical of biographers and scholars within the *Melville Society*, to blame the external circumstances of his life: financial stress, commercial failure, or his wife Lizzy's poor housekeeping and lack of intellect and understanding, for his unhappy state and his abuse. But this participates in the usual excuses wife beaters and alcoholics use to rationalize their bad behavior. One does not beat a person or throw them down the stairs because they are bad at housekeeping. They beat because they are angry and cannot control their rage, *and* because by succumbing out of shame to the abusers demand for strict secrecy, the family allows them to get away with it.

To uncover the secrets of Melville's life and art it is important for us not to succumb to family shame and the impulse to protect our subject and ourselves from associations we may find embarrassing or unworthy. Respect for our subjects and an unflinching resolve to uncover what may turn out to be the untidy and inconvenient

truths of their lives are not mutually exclusive. To that end, while I am proposing an admittedly unorthodox reading of Melville's life and work, I cede to no one a greater respect for my subject than I have for Herman Melville. His struggles with life and "The Angel--Art" can be instructive and illuminating if we are not pressured into keeping his secrets, or dressing them in the conventional uniforms of gender. He struggled all his life with failures of recognition he himself abetted. Our job, as scholars and biographers, it seems to me, is to recognize, without prejudice, what he tried to keep hidden.

Melville's first two novels, *Typee* and *Omoo*, belong to the giddy period of adult freedom and exploration before he was married. As literature, they are markedly different from the novels and stories that came after them. That is because the rest of Melville's work was written in the crucible of marriage and family life. Though the first two novels contain captivity scenarios, they are a far cry from the imprisoned Ahab's furious struggle against invisible bonds. Tommo's "luxurious repose" among the Typees and his indulgent captivity in Tahiti provide narrative space, a sense of stopped time, which allows for the leisurely consideration of many disparate subjects, native customs and the difference between them and white Europeans who came to dominate their culture. Increasingly, after *Typee* and *Omoo*, his novels express the growing sense of frustration in his marriage and a sense of imprisonment, without visible walls, within his male role.

The first novel written within the confines of marriage is *Mardi*. As Melville describes its genesis, he employs a theme of imprisonment perhaps to convey more than prosaic artistic constraints. "I began to feel...a longing to plume my pinions for

a flight, & felt irked, cramped, & fettered by plodding along with dull commonplaces—So suddenly abandoning the thing...I went to work heart and soul at a romance...It opens like a true narrative...till it becomes a story wild enough I assure you & with a meaning too” (Parker 177).

Mardi is so heavily larded with inconclusive meanings as to have confused scholars and disappointed readers almost from the start. The most significant meaning appears early in the novel and becomes the central quest of the story. It is the mysterious arrival of a new woman in Melville's work, a woman completely unlike the women who came before her. Parker notes, “Melville wrote a scene in which more or less realistic characters encounter a large double-canoe...carrying a maiden to sacrifice...the infinitely mysterious and unimaginably beautiful Yillah...representing something like an early state of consciousness” (575). I argue that Yillah appears just at this historical moment because Melville's consciousness *is* feminine, and after his marriage, she is threatened and in need of rescue. Parker seems to assume that this is a “stage” he grew out of to become fully masculine and heterosexual. In my view, the early stage of his feminine identity is just that, an early stage of what would grow to a fully realized feminine self in his mature years. If this is the case, the marriage he entered into would almost certainly have been uncomfortable and would have seemed like a prison, not like the luxurious repose of his Polynesian adventures.

It is significant that Yillah is being held hostage by the high priest Aleema. His priestly status alludes to the patriarchal institution of marriage, increasingly, in Melville's experience, a religious, civil and gender prison. At this stage of Melville's

life, the woman in him is being sacrificed to a marriage “she” does not want which, like the Indian Purdah, would force her into silence and social invisibility. Exploring her, keeping her in front of him by creating a narrative in which she needs to be rescued functions like a barricade behind which his feminine self can remain invisible but continue to be the intense focus of his inner life as well as the source of his creativity.

The pressures and travails of married life gave birth to this representation of Melville's feminine self, different from the first foray, Fayaway, who was free, transgressive and androgynous. In *Mardi* Melville's feminine persona is not free, she is threatened, a fragile phantom. It is this new, vulnerable, imprisoned self that the narrator, Taji, identifies with and devotes himself to saving. Yillah represents the captive woman in Melville. She will always need to be rescued. She will materialize as Isabel in *Pierre*, whom Pierre feels he must rescue and bring into the light of day, despite his mother's objections.

Robertson-Lorant suggests Melville's inner struggle during the writing of *Mardi*. “‘Wild’ was how he felt while he was writing *Mardi*. He could feel dark undercurrents tugging at his soul as he searched for a way to express what had gone unsaid in the two travelogues for which he was famous” (176). What had gone “unsaid” was Melville's feminine identification. Robertson-Lorant claims that Melville's genius is “his ability to heal himself by writing” (177), but she neglects to say what infirmity or condition he needs to heal in himself. I believe he writes to both liberate and mourn the woman in himself. He will celebrate her existence in his art, yet resent the necessity for her to remain silent and sealed within his heart. Her

captivity is his captivity, too. In his anger at his imprisonment he will make his life and home a prison for his family and enforce a silence upon them as strict as the one their very existence forces upon him.

Elizabeth Renker has noted, there is “a link between Elizabeth’s misery and enforced silence, and Herman’s writing...” (64). Just after their marriage, Lizzy took up the task of making fair copies of her husband’s manuscripts. Within nine months of this labor, Lizzy began to show the first signs of a strain. Robertson-Lorant cites “sudden tensions” and a new “self deprecating tone” uncharacteristic of Lizzy which appear in a letter to her mother (180). Lizzy blames the book as the cause of the problem. She asks her mother to excuse her poor punctuation. For some reason he had admonished her to leave out all punctuation so that he could fill it in later. What is curious about this is that, according to Robertson-Lorant, Lizzy’s punctuation and spelling were “far superior to any one in the Melville family, including Herman” (180). Robertson-Lorant blames Maria Melville’s “obsession about other people’s writing” for undermining Lizzy’s confidence, which had been “built up by twenty-five years of careful nurturing by her parents and teachers” (180). Renker reports “Elizabeth was clearly afraid of her husband, who apparently scrutinized her correspondence and commanded her secrecy” (65).

If we look at this through the lens of what we now know to be common in cases of “Battered Wife Syndrome” we see a similar pattern. The abuser begins by trying obsessively to control every aspect of the wife’s behavior. This is the stage before physical violence occurs. The wife typically tries harder and harder to meet

the demands of her husband hoping in vain to earn his respect and love. Finally, in abject submission, she cowers in the corner just hoping to avoid being hit.

No one was there to record what went on in private, but when we read some of Lizzy's letters we can hear her anxious and fearful pleading. In a letter to her cousin, Catherine Lansing in 1876, during the final stages of preparing *Clarel* for the publishers, Lizzy writes: "If ever this dreadful *incubus* of a book (I call it so because it has undermined all our happiness) gets off Herman's shoulders I do hope he may be in better mental health—but at present I have reason to feel the gravest concern and anxiety about it—to put it in a mild phrase—please do not speak of it—you know how things get exaggerated" (E. Metcalf 237). And in another letter written in 1869, "If you see Herman please do not tell him that I said he was *not well*" (in Renker 64).

It is well documented that Maria was obsessive in her control of Herman and here, Herman, seems obsessive in his efforts to control his wife. Renker cites Edwin Haviland Miller in his biography of 1975, "Herman forced Elizabeth to be secretive, and in order to live with him she 'had to accept his abuse, the anger which he projected on her, and to lie and to apologize in order to salve the feelings of his relatives'" (64). Given this early insight, it is remarkable that no one has yet applied modern understanding of Battered Wife Syndrome to the Melville family dynamics.

Documentary evidence is sufficient to suggest that when he was writing *Mardi*, *Redburn*, *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, *Israel Potter*, *The Piazza Tales*, and beyond, Melville was at constant war within himself and with his family. "He was," according to Olson, "periodically violent to his wife and strange with his mother" (in Renker 52). The connection between wife and mother as objects of Melville's violent

and “strange” behavior comes into sharper focus when we consider that he was virtually forced to marry as a result of his mother’s persistent arm-twisting and emotional manipulation. An unwitting tool of his mother’s powerful coercion, Elizabeth Shaw began her married life on shaky ground.

Agreeing against his better judgment to marry meant Melville had to keep the feminine part of himself hidden. This would have been especially difficult in the close quarters and intimate circumstances of married life. The pressure to perform his role with no possibility of escape would surely cause tensions to increase and boil over. And since the reasons for his wrath remained hidden, Lizzy, Maria and the other women would surely have been confused and worried about his behavior.

Melville could not achieve either the freedom or the recognition he so desperately needed within his most intimate circle. Feeling trapped in a double bind of wanting what he could not allow himself to have, and what his family and his culture’s norms would not allow, he vented his rage upon those close at hand. It is clear that Melville desired to be free of domestic concerns and the necessity of providing for his family. As he wrote to Hawthorne, “I am pulled hither and thither by circumstances...dollars damn me and the malicious Devil is forever grinning in upon me, holding the door ajar” (Norton *MD* 557).

In his biography, Andrew Delbanco reports comments passed down from Lizzie to Melville’s niece, Josephine Shaw, (also cited in Weaver): “Herman violent--Lizzie not always safe...Herman kinder to daughters—hated sons...Malcolm hated father for violence” (261). These comments might, among many possibilities, suggest a man who hated being a man, who saw his unacknowledged feminine self in

his daughters and could not identify with, or nurture, the resented manhood of his sons. Living “for the sake of others” behind a masculine mask of conformity, Melville resented his wife and produced children he could not love.

In addition, in the early years of his married life Melville was continually beset by his intrusive, domineering, and hyper-critical mother. We can only guess what Olson was specifically referring to when he said Melville was “strange to his mother” but if we look at the trajectory of their relationship it seems clear it was far from healthy. He had gone from being a parentified child and surrogate husband, “His mother’s captive confidant” (Delbanco 27), to being an adult whose every effort was insufficient to please her and whose soul she was attempting to save by thrusting him into the church. One can also speculate why during this time Maria felt the intervention of the church to be especially necessary for her son. Might it have been to turn him away from alarming and “sinful” behavior?

Even under normal circumstances, Maria was a woman who demanded care and solace from her family and especially, when he was young, from her gentle and compliant son. As a married adult living with his mother, Melville might have felt that she had turned on him, denying him credit for the sacrifices he made to provide her with emotional support and solace. Given all he was struggling with privately, her continuing demands for support, emotional care and deference from her son must have been a especially hard to bear. Also, if Maria represented the woman he wanted to be and could not, she might also have been seen as a competitor and a constant reminder of what he could not have. Melville must have felt that Maria, who had all

but forced him to marry, was the insurmountable obstacle to the fulfillment of his deepest desires.

And as if the emotional turmoil inside the home were not enough, Melville also had to face the critical and commercial failure of *Mardi*, his third and pivotal novel, which expressed his inner life and longings and his budding talent better than either *Typee* and *Omoo*. He must have felt that his inner feelings were being rejected everywhere he turned, and this must have exacerbated the growing tensions that arose between his secret longings and his grinding daily reality. He was beset by failures of recognition on a personal and public level, and this must have intensified his need to dominate his wife and family.

Jessica Benjamin addresses the connection between physical and emotional domination, and the desire for recognition, the most basic need of human beings. Building on the work of Hegel, specifically his chapter, "Lordship and Bondage" also called "The Master/Slave Dialectic" in *the Phenomenology of Spirit*, Benjamin suggests that domination is motivated by the desire to be recognized.

Because of his deep identification with her, Melville's increasing efforts to dominate his family were most likely modeled on his mother's "Queenly personality" and her own domineering ways. Unbeknownst to his family, his violent and emotionally abusive behavior might have been motivated by an intense and socially unacceptable desire to be *recognized as a woman*, in all the conventional ways he saw womanhood recognized in his culture and in his family: being able to wear flowing, pretty garments and be loved romantically by men, to be passive and not have to work

in the public square for his living, and finally to be able to openly mourn his losses as women were allowed to do.

Watching in silence at his mother's bedside while she mourned the death of her husband, Melville, was not free to mourn his own loss of his father. Neal Tolchin has persuasively argued that blocked mourning for his father was at the root of his struggles in life and in his art and that the cultural codes enforcing masculine gender were major obstacles to mourning. I see Maria's particular demand that Melville console her suffering as the reason he could not mourn his father. Surely, of all the failures of recognition he suffered in his life this is the most poignant: that as a child was forced to mourn in silence (or not at all) and have no one around him recognize his own suffering.

Winnicott also sees mourning or maternal depression as a major complication for the developing child. "The child of such a mother," he says, "runs the risk of "using his mother's depression as an escape from his own" (Phillips 92). He also sees the development of maternal identification as being the result of insecurity. If the mother withdraws from her child into her own anxiety and depression, the child can form a strong identification with her. This is a "maternal identification based on his own insecurity in relation to his mother, and this could develop into homosexuality" (*Playing and Reality* 19).

As Winnicott also suggests, items associated with the mother can be used like transitional objects which can eventually turn into a fetish, the buried psychological function of which is to keep mother near by denying separation (*Playing and Reality* 19). I would argue then that preoccupation with items of the feminine "sartorial

system" fall into this category. Women's clothing, especially their intimate apparel, can be used as a fetish to mend the break in relationship and keep elements of the mother near and deny that any separation has occurred.

Elements of clothing, associated with the mother, may serve as a comfort to a small male child, but they can be totally unacceptable in an adult man. What originally gives comfort and meaning then becomes banned. What is a man in such a circumstance to do? The seeming perks and privileges of womanhood, all the elements surrounding it, the accoutrement, must have been even more tantalizing to Melville because they were barred.

The consequence of this thwarted desire became an ever tightening knot woven of envy, resentment and rage—specifically against the women around him whose status and recognition as women and whose access to the accoutrement of femininity is culturally given and valued without having to be earned. Adding salt to this narcissistic wound is the fact that these "recognized" women were both a financial and emotional burden to him.

Resentment, envy and rage motivated his misogynistic abuse of them, even as they struggled to render him service by devoting themselves to his writing, slavishly copying his manuscripts. In *Melville's Marginalia*, Walker Cowen notes that Melville's margin notes were erased by the women of the family who copied the manuscripts, because they were misogynistic and abusive. They note "unpleasant aspects of women in general," and some "censure wives in particular and criticize family life from the point of view of one held captive by and alienated from the family circle" (in Renker 53). In a telling comment, Cowen states that many of these

erasures, “reveal that Melville spent a life time thinking of women in spite of the rather limited use he made of them in his fiction” (In Renker, 53).

It is clear Melville felt trapped in his domestic situation, but he was also trapped psychologically and socially inside the role of a man. He did obsess about women, but it was because womanhood was forbidden to him. Cowen and others have failed to recognize that the women in Melville's texts are representations of Melville's feminine identification. Even the men in his texts represent men struggling with gender identity and a sense of damaged manhood. To say he made “limited use of” women stops at the literal surface of the text and ignores the profoundly important feminine identity at its core. The fact that it had to remain hidden in the process of being allusively revealed accounts for the confusion in his texts and the overpoweringly frustrating sense of secrecy, of something still *not said*, that runs all through all his work.

Melville's resentment and abuse of his wife is variously manipulated by most scholars and biographers dedicated to his work. In fact, Melville's courtship of Elizabeth Shaw is mostly a tissue of conjecture and is highly dependent on the agenda of the biographer. Parker attributes love and desire to Melville. Both he and Robertson-Lorant characterize the courtship as similar to that between Othello and Desdemona. Melville came to the Shaw home in Boston (mysteriously delaying his return to New York and his mother after returning from his four year voyage around the Pacific).

Supposedly, he stayed to regale the Shaw family with tales of the Marquesas. Supposedly, Elizabeth fell in love with him “for the dangers [he] had passed” and he

fell in love with her “that she did pity them” (*Othello* Act1, scene3, ln 194-95). But there is no evidence that either of them felt this way. In the vacuum of documentary evidence, both Parker and Robertson-Lorant see what they want to see. They want to create a love story, and Shakespeare's doomed couple offers itself as a likely model. If true, then it is worth noting that it was Othello's madness and rage at Desdemona, completely unjustified, that killed her and ultimately himself. Jealousy, “that green eyed monster that doth mock the meat it feeds on” may be a factor in the Melville marriage too--if we see it in the form of gender envy.

Parker romanticizes Melville as a sailor who was “handsome...darkly tanned...” and who “combined athleticism and eroticism in his gait.” And Parker assumes “Herman's arrival must have had something of the magical in it for Elizabeth” (306). This is a movie star image of Herman Melville made up out of whole cloth, or Parker's own love for his hero. Building his romantic story up as one of a tender longstanding connection between Lizzy's father, Lemuel Shaw, and the Melville family, Parker sees the courtship and eventual marriage as almost inevitable. Parker insists on painting a picture of Melville as a “brilliant, dark, muscular, handsome young” suitor, spinning yarns of the Pacific that enthralled the sheltered, stay-at-home Lizzy (311). Yet, Andrew Delbanco, in his biography, resists the pull of idealization. He says, “Perhaps. Or perhaps she was out of town. Or he may never have visited the Shaws at all” (63).

Robertson-Lorant sees Maria Melville's machinations behind the putative courtship, though she too analogizes the courtship as Othello-like. “Like Desdemona, she loved him for the dangers he had passed” and he her “for the image of himself

that he saw reflected in her admiring eyes" (156). It is also her view that Melville had misgivings about the marriage and it was his mother who pressed for it.

Though he had just seen his first novel, *Typee*, published simultaneously in London and America, Robertson-Lorant states, "Melville was not making enough money to live comfortably on his own, much less support a wife," and Lizzy's father, despite his long standing friendship with the Melville family (having once been betrothed to Melville's aunt Nancy) had "reservations about his solvency" and "was not ready to give him the go ahead" to marry his daughter (155). Also, during this time, Robertson-Lorant notes that Herman himself had misgivings and "began noticing references to marriage in everything he read. The oxymoronic phrase 'holy wedlock' probably did not describe what he had in mind..."(158). "Noticing that Herman seemed 'very restless and ill at ease and very lonely without his intended' Mother Melville wielded 'a steering oar' behind the scenes to get the couple to the altar" (158).

On this issue, Melville is silent. It is Maria who claims Herman is "lonely without his intended." It is Maria who wants the marriage. We can imagine all sorts of reasons why she's in a hurry, not the least of which is the added security she would feel with Herman married to the daughter of a rich and respected man, one who had also been her husband's close friend and the executor of his estate and had helped him out financially in the past. Keeping such a resource close, and binding him through marriage to her family, Maria must have felt she could legitimately expect financial assistance from him in the precarious future.

It could also be that through marriage any misgivings she might have about Herman's masculinity and marriageability could be laid to rest. Nothing would confirm manhood and heterosexuality in the nineteenth century public mind better than marriage.

As soon as the engagement was announced Melville's beloved sister, Helen, writes "Herman has returned from Boston and has made arrangements to take upon himself the dignified character of a married man...I can scarcely realize the astounding truth" (Robertson-Lorant 159). Why would this be such an "astounding truth" for Herman Melville? Using my own imagination to fill in the gaps, I think it may very well be that besides the fact that Herman had no visible means of support with which to take on a wife, one of the things "not said" in the Melville family was that Herman did not strike them as particularly masculine or interested in women.

Robertson-Lorant notes that the engagement was delayed for two important reasons: 1, that Melville was not solvent, and 2, that "Lizzy was not eager to start her new life in another woman's house," that "she was a little afraid of Herman's mother" (159). Yet, Maria persists, saying, "I can see no reason why it should be postponed any longer, if Lizzie loves Herman as I think she does with her whole heart and soul why, she will consent to live here for the present, and she can be happy too—all the elements of happiness are thick around us if only we will hold them to us" (159).

In addition she has Augusta, Melville's other sister, deliver a message to Lizzie in Boston, "If Lizzie loves him she can be as happy here as elsewhere...he is really unsettled and wont be able to attend to his book if Lizzie does not reflect upon the uncertainty to the future & consent to name the day say in July" (159). Once

again, it is Maria who speaks for the silent Herman. What kind of courtship is this where the suitor is silent and his mother does all the talking? Clearly, Melville's was an arranged marriage.

And there was nothing subtle in Maria's approach. Here she is clearly coercive and manipulative, and we can see her life-long habit of not recognizing the legitimate needs of others when they conflict with her own. It seems obvious that Herman felt the pressure to measure up and get it done, for his mother's sake. He may even have convinced himself that marriage would quell the persistent feminine feelings that troubled him. But it can truly be said of Lizzy, as Ahab says of his own wife, that Melville "widowed that poor girl" when he married her (N *MD* 443). Given this, it would be easy to see why his novels, written in his mother's house and surrounded by women and a wife he did not love, came increasingly to focus on captivity and domination.

Someone is always being dominated. Ahab dominates all on board the *Pequod*, but he himself feels dominated as well. "What is it," cries Ahab, "what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozening hidden lord and master, and cruel, and remorseless emperor commands me; and against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper, natural heart, I durst not so much as dare?" (N *MD* 445).

Melville learned early that the "lord and master" of his life was Maria. Buttressed by the cultural norms of "sanctified womanhood" surrounding her formidable self, Melville was hemmed in on all sides. Marriage was not among his

“natural lovings and longings.” It was his miserable fate, a fate he first surrendered to and then struggled against his whole adult life.

When Raymond Weaver writes about the engagement, he misguidedly bases Herman's supposed love for Lizzy on his idealization of his mother. “In his approach to marriage Melville showed none of the prosaic circumspection of his father. From his idealization of the proud cold purity of Maria, Melville built up a haloed image of wonder and mystery of sanctified womanhood: without blemish, unclouded, snow white, terrible, yet serene” [and it was] “To Elizabeth Shaw, Melville transferred his idealization of his mother” (259-260). Unwittingly perhaps, Weaver's description of Maria reminds us more of Moby-Dick, “White as a snow hill.” Weaver also engages in a little psychoanalysis of his own when he says, “The very profundity of his frustrated love for Maria and the accusing incompatibility between the image and the fact made his early life a futile attempt to escape from himself... When with Maria, he had craved to put oceans between them; when so estranged, he was parched to return” (259).

And yet, though supposedly “parched,” when Melville did return from the South Seas, he delayed, almost seemed to strenuously avoid, returning to New York and his mother's house. “Perhaps” he stayed in Boston to regale the Shaws with his tales. “Perhaps” he stayed there soaking up information about his family from Lizzy and falling in love with her in the process, as Parker claims. But in the unlikely case that this was his motivation, he was attempting to learn by a safe proxy what would be too costly to find out from Maria herself. What the cost to him was of communion with Maria can only be imagined. It seems likely it was a loss of self, of his true self

and the “natural longings” which she would inevitably deny and frustrate. She was the loved and hated dominatrix of his life and if home was a dangerous “Lee Shore,” Maria was the pounding sea.

As he says in *The Lee Shore* chapter of *Moby-Dick*: “The port would feign give succor; the port is pitiful; in port is safety, comfort, hearthstone, supper, warm blankets, friends, all that is kind to our mortalities” (97). But in the storm of Maria’s domination which expressed itself in fierce determination to do what she felt must be best for herself and her children, she created a place deadly to the sensitive and socially unacceptable desires of her second son. All the effort of his life was “to keep the open independence of [his] sea” and avoid the “treacherous slavish shore,” yet he could not live on his own. He needed Maria and the other women who helped him, yet the push-pull tension of independence/dependence, of self-assertion and submission, created frustration and anger reminiscent of the infant’s rage.

The structure of domination begins, Jessica Benjamin tells us, in “the relationship between mother and infant” and the age old “conflict between dependence and independence in human life” (*The Bonds of Love* 8). It is clear that Maria Melville was dependent all *her* life. Her persistent pleading for money to sustain a respectable middle class life after her husband died wore out the patience of her relatives. Her neediness and demands upon her children for support and solace no doubt complicated their feelings for her and impeded their separation from her. Indeed, they all stayed together in Melville’s home, mother, wife, and sisters for most of Melville’s adult life.

To say the least the Melville maternal environment did not facilitate independence. Melville was dependent on Lizzy's family for funds and on nearly everyone: Maria, Lizzy, their children and even his sisters for help in preparing his manuscripts. Whatever it had been in previous generations, after his father died and left his family dependent on the largess of others, dependency became a family style and a probable daily source of humiliation. It is no wonder then that Melville's own dependency rankled him and led to fierce efforts at domination and control.

Maria's volatile emotional dependency and need to control expressed itself in domination of her children. Through his identification with her, Maria's "Queenly personality" lived on in Melville and found expression in Ahab. The psychologically wounded slave of maternal domination becomes a domineering master in his home, acting as his mother did and trying to achieve what she was trying in vain to achieve--recognition.

Similarly, Ahab, wounded by a whale, turns his wrath upon it and dominates all on board until they commit to join him in the chase. It is not too far a stretch to see the inscrutable yet, to Ahab, malign great white whale as the embodiment of Maria Melville who forestalled the consolidation of Melville's nascent manhood by dominating him and demanding he recognize and identify with her, yet forever stood in his way and prevented any outward expressions of that wounding identification. Many scholars have seen the loss of Ahab's leg to the whale as a symbol of castration—an oedipal fear. But Benjamin's work on domination/recognition shows how Ahab and the whale can be seen as a pre-oedipal struggle between two co-

dependent souls, mother and child, locked in mortal combat, each futilely demanding recognition of the other.

Maria Melville was too depressed, too self absorbed, too demanding of caretaking herself to recognize the needs of her children. Instead she demanded they service her needs and given her recurring depressions it is likely she reacted to their natural struggles for independence, their infantile rages when things did not go their way, with feelings of having been wounded by them. In a Winnicottian sense then she was not a "good enough mother."

For Winnicott, a good enough mother is able to tolerate and survive her infant's omnipotent rage. She does not withdraw from her child. Neither does she retaliate with punishment or by making the child feel guilty for hurting her. It is her ability to survive his attacks that establishes her as real, as totally other, and therefore an object he can love, and use. What good enough mothering provides is the ability to cope with what Winnicott calls "the immense shock of loss of omnipotence," a shock which occurs over and over again when the environment fails to meet our needs (*Playing and Reality* 71). Clearly, Melville's characters embody this titanic struggle against a loss of omnipotent control and they attempt to dominate their environment to wrest an illusory omnipotence from a resistant reality.

The development of a "capacity for concern," absent in most of Melville's characters, can only develop in an infant with the mother's survival of its attacks. Maria's inability to tolerate independence in others as well as model it herself accounts for what we see as a continuing sense of struggle in Melville's relationship with his mother recounted in every biography since Weaver's. The titanic struggle

between them for a mutual recognition that can never take place finds its way into Melville's art in the form of Ahab and his whale, Bartleby and his boss, and Benito and Babo. In *Benito Cereno*, an inversion of roles occurs where Benito, the captain turned slave, and Babo, the slave turned dominator, perform a masquerade for that ultimate exemplar of failure to recognize—Captain Amasa Delano—who always interprets what he is seeing in the most simplistic and conventional way.

In another inversion of roles, it is the pallid copyist, Bartleby, who dominates his employer with iron-willed resistance in "Bartleby the Scrivener." The narrator/lawyer who hires a copyist becomes his enabler and his slave doing everything he can to accommodate his needs. When he discovers that no matter what he does, the copyist steadfastly "prefers not to" copy; he learns Bartleby, this pale and forlorn other, is absolutely beyond his control. But unlike Ahab, this lawyerly commander does not vent his omnipotent rage. He does not want to "strike through the mask" of Bartleby's resistance and inscrutability, he only wants to change him. His frustration at his inability to do so is humorous but when, in the end, Bartleby dies unreconciled to reality and the demands of others the tone turns wistfully sad. A futile life and struggle comes to a futile end and here is nothing that can be said about it, except, "Ah Bartleby. Ah humanity." Bartleby has failed to learn one of life's most important lessons, that mutual dependence is necessary, and we are not omnipotent and cannot control others even with our most elemental weapon, our refusal to live.

But whereas Bartleby dies a passive death, Ahab dies violently. Like Bartleby, Ahab goes to his death refusing reality, refusing to acknowledge, that is to recognize, the absolute otherness of the whale. It is Ahab's will to omnipotence that

drives *Moby-Dick*. It is the reason for the chase and the desire for revenge of Ahab and his need to "Strike through the mask" of the inscrutable reality of a wounding and withholding beast (breast?). His will to power is infantile, as unreasonable as it is powerful. It is a tantrum of overwhelming rage at the loss of his leg and his inability to make his peace with "the immense shock" of his loss. To cover his loss and his narcissistic wound he engages in an exercise of monomaniacal power that makes him *feel* omnipotent, at least within the world of the *Pequod*. Ahab treats the whale as a being like himself, capable of hate and malice. "The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some men feel eating at them till they are left living with half a heart and half a lung...he piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam on down..." (N *MD* 160).

Starbuck, the lone rational being on board besides Ishmael, who stands apart from the debate, knows the whale is a brute, an absolute other, and that "to be enraged by a dumb thing...seems blasphemous" and crazy (N *MD* 144). It is unreasonable to blame a mere brute. What Starbuck knows in his bones is that the will to omnipotence, in an adult, is madness. But Ahab will not listen. He attacks the beast, and the beast retaliates. The result is the death of both because each has failed to achieve mutual recognition of the other and life saving independence.

In the last image of Ahab and Moby Dick, they are lashed together, crisscrossed with the harpoon lines of a lifetime of combat. Like his creation, Ahab, Melville was lashed to his mother all his life, first as a child out of sympathy for her suffering and in the end out of hatred for the mother in himself and the actual mother

who could not recognize the woman in her son. In his will to dominate his family he was perhaps even more like his mother than he knew.

In 1849, two years before *Moby-Dick* was published, Melville wrote to his friend Evert A. Duyckinck, commenting on the psychotic breakdown of Duyckinck's successor as editor of the *Literary World*. His remarks give us a window into his insight and the stuff out of which he will create Ahab's madness:

This going mad of a friend or acquaintance comes straight home to every man with a soul in him...for in all of us lodges the same fuel to light the same fire...What sort of sensation permanent madness is may be very well imagined—just as we imagine how we felt when we were infants, tho' we cannot recall it. In both conditions we are irresponsible & riot like gods without fear of fate. (Cited in Robertson-Lorant's *Melville* 187)

As his remarks make clear, Melville was intimately in touch with the infantile nature of his own madness as well. And Ahab is his dramatic creation of a madman “without fear of fate.”

It is not surprising that Melville wrote Ahab's mighty struggle while living in a house with his own mother. In fact, he wrote all his novels while sharing a roof with her and did not write another novel after she left. His novels are responses to his sense of entrapment, and expressions of his conflicted gender identity and his ambivalent relationship with the dominating and austere Maria Melville. It was inevitable that Melville's conflicts with Maria would poison his relationships with his wife and children. Increasingly hemmed in by the duties and responsibilities of the slavish shore, Melville used his novels to exorcize his own demons and at the same time as weapons to attack his wife and women in general. Maria's ultimate departure from his home may have resulted in a lessening of tensions, but it did not take away

the prison walls or relieve the mounting pressure of Herman's "natural lovings and longings" which could find no safe expression at home.

Lizzy and the children became easy targets for the rage behind Melville's mask of heterosexual manhood, a rage borne of intolerable dependence that made him unable to recognize and accommodate their needs. In his home, enforced manhood and heterosexuality may have been the motivating force behind his comment to Hawthorne that he felt like a "hired man" doing his "days work from sun to sun" (In Parker 140).

What saved him from a sense of anonymous drudgery was that while he was writing *Moby-Dick* Melville came under the beneficent influence of Nathaniel Hawthorne, who instantly became a companion of his heart and an alternative to his domestic scene with all its turmoil and sense of imprisonment. It is altogether appropriate that *Moby-Dick* is dedicated to Hawthorne because he provided the emotional liberation that enabled Melville to soar and was the artistic catalyst that enabled *Moby-Dick* to blossom into the immense and complex masterpiece it became. Hawthorne's words regarding the novel are lost to us but it is enough for us to read Melville's letter ecstatically echoing Shakespeare's romantic heroines:

Whence come you, Hawthorne? By what right do you drink from my flagon of life. And when I put it to my lips—lo they are yours and not mine. I feel the Godhead is broken up like the bread at the supper and we are the pieces. Hence this infinite fraternity of feeling. Now sympathizing with the paper, my angle turns another page. You did not care a penny for the book. But, now and then as you read, you understood the pervading thought that impelled the book—that you praised. Was it not so? You were archangel enough to despise the imperfect body, and embrace the soul" (Norton Critical *Moby-Dick* 566-67).

Textual scholars, Hershel Parker, Harrison Hayford, and G. Thomas Tansell, editors of the Newberry Edition of *Moby-Dick*, declare that the “imperfect body” Melville refers to in his letter to Hawthorne is the imperfect body of his *text* with all its, “conceptual discrepancies, factual inconsistencies, patched-over flaws in transitions, lapses in technique and stylistic lurches” (N *MD* 582). But since Melville is speaking to a soul mate, someone he feels perfectly recognizes him in his perfect soul, it is more likely that he intends Hawthorne to read a double meaning into the term, “imperfect body.”

I think he wants to communicate that his art, which attempts to describe the indescribable (socially unacceptable), obliquely, abstractly, allegorically, and symbolically, can never perfectly represent the truth of his intentions. Also, his art is an expression of the imperfect body of the man, whose sense of himself is feminine and fluctuating and, because it is situated uncomfortably in a binary gendered culture, can never perfectly represent his intentions, his “perfect soul.” Hence, his art, like his personality and his body, is also fluidly inconsistent--imperfect.

In his letter, you can feel Melville's sense of accomplishment and his rapturous fraternity of feeling with Hawthorne. It comes from the immense blessing of recognition he felt he had received from his new friend. It was perhaps the first time in his life Melville had ever felt recognized. Or perhaps, after all, it was only a projection. In his famous line in *Hawthorne and His Mosses* where he calls for bestowing a “shock of recognition” upon American writers, he is not *recognizing* Hawthorne, but recognizing himself *in* Hawthorne. And his plea is not as much for Hawthorne's as for his own sake. He is pleading for recognition for himself.

Melville knows what has been missing in his life. He knows a thing, like Emily Dickinson knows it, through deprivation and absence. He is painfully aware of what he lacks, the life giving rain of recognition. It is why he says, "Hawthorne has dropped germinous seeds into my soul." At last, there was someone in the world who could understand him.

Comparing his book to an "imperfect body" and praising Hawthorne for being able to reject the body yet embrace the soul of the book, Melville projects onto Hawthorne's his own sense of a body and soul at odds. He also suggests Hawthorne understands that his male body does not reflect the perfect body of his feminine soul. As he would say through Ishmael in *The Chapel*, "Methinks that my body is but the less of my better being...take it away I say, it is not me" (N *MD* 41). Melville's love song to Hawthorne continues in a romantic vein, imagining an embrace:

Once you hugged the ugly Socrates because you saw the flame in the mouth, and heard the rushing of the demon—the familiar—and recognized the sound; for you have heard it in your own solitudes" (Norton *MD* 567).

Many years later, when Melville met with Hawthorne's son, Julian, who was then writing a memoir about his late father, *Hawthorne and His Circle*, (1903), Julian had this to say about Melville:

He told me during our talk that he was convinced that there was some secret in my father's life which had never been revealed and which accounted for the gloomy passages in his books. It was characteristic of him to imagine so; there were many secrets untold in his own career (33).

There were indeed many secrets in Melville's life, and almost everything he wrote, from *Mardi*'s hidden Yillah, to Ahab's "state secret" to Pierre's hidden sister, Bartleby's hidden past, and Benito's hidden power shift and role reversal, is about something hidden. But it was also characteristic of Melville to imagine himself in others, and others in him. In *Hawthorne and His Mosses* he imputed to Hawthorne what he felt to be true of his own writing, and asked for Hawthorne what he so desperately wanted for himself. Robertson-Lorant rightly calls "Mosses" a "tour de force of self-discovery and self-disclosure" (248). It was also a cry of despair over the failure of *Mardi* in which he felt himself and his genius to be unrecognized by the public. Whether or not Melville was imputing a secret to his fellow writer that is really a projection of his own secret, it is clear Melville felt Hawthorne to be a kindred spirit, not just a fellow author but fellow human being who likewise sheltered an unacceptable secret in his heart.

The literary picnic in the Berkshires in August of 1850, when Melville met Hawthorne, is reported in both Weaver and Parker. The famous two hours "of enforced intercourse" Hawthorne and Melville spent together in "a narrow recess of the rocks" sheltering from a thunder storm, in which J.E.A. Smith said they revealed "so much of thought, feeling and opinion in common that the most intimate friendship for the future was inevitable" suggests that they shared more than dry philosophy (Weaver 314). The ripples from that private sojourn in that narrow space of time away from the others on that day, reverberate through Parker's account of the subsequent composition of Melville's essay on Hawthorne, which followed the picnic and which Parker assures us "had left him more than a little febrile—excited

intellectually, emotionally, and sexually—sexual arousal being for Melville an integral part of such intensely creative phases” (760).

As we have seen, it is characteristic of Parker to impute sexual feelings to Melville, especially heterosexual ones. Roberson-Lorant does not make the claim, and neither does Weaver. It is clear Lizzy was far out of Melville's mind and heart just then, and perhaps it is logical to assume a sexual attraction to Hawthorne. But no one was there and no one can really say for sure what happened, so I will add my bit of fiction to the enormous amount surrounding Melville. I suggest the recognition that sparked between them in their recess from the others may have come from mutual recognition of shared “tendencies” as Eve Sedgwick calls them, or shared identifications which they intuitively recognized in each other's art.

Around the time of the picnic, as he was writing *on* Hawthorne, Melville was also writing *to* Hawthorne. Lizzie and his domestic scene were far out of mind although she was geographically near. In fact, it was Lizzie who made the fair copy of the manuscript for the publishers. Nevertheless, Parker makes an extraordinary claim, “In this state of intense *undirected* arousal Melville acted out an extraordinary display of deflected sexuality. Lacking someone more appropriate to lavish an excess of esteem upon, Melville abducted a younger man's bride” (760).

First of all, you cannot have it both ways. If it is deflected, it cannot also at the same time be undirected. It has to be caused by something in order for it to be deflected away from it. Undirected arousal makes no sense. And clearly, if he was aroused sexually, it was by Hawthorne and not Lizzy, as Parker's persistent heterosexual bias seems to suggest. Also, if Melville's arousal was heterosexual in

nature, his own wife, Lizzy was close at hand, so there would have been no reason to deflect his sexual desire away from her onto some other man's wife. Parker is so tortured in his efforts to say and not say the unacceptable, that he ends up confusing himself and his readers and perpetuating the confusion surrounding Melville's sexuality.

Parker says, "Melville's dangerous skylarking is incomprehensible" and can only be understood "In the light of aroused sexuality and literary ambitions of his morning's work" (761). It is well for us to remember Docter's point that the heterosexual transvestite "is ambivalent and threatened by own cross-gender fantasies, which include having sex with men while cross-dressed and of striving to be attractive to men" (211). I suggest that Melville is aroused by Hawthorne and throws himself dramatically into an evasive maneuver to deflect attention away from his unacceptable desire.

Apparently aroused, Parker would have us believe, not by Hawthorne but by his writing of *Mosses* (*about and to* Hawthorne), Melville kidnaps another man's wife. If this is "deflected sexuality," it is deflected not away from its "appropriate" object, his own wife, but rather from Hawthorne. Feeling randy, Melville is supposedly substituting a blatantly heterosexual abduction for his hidden homosexual desire, in order to disguise his desire. And yet, Parker insists that Melville is the dangerous lover of Fayaway, "notorious for his sexual conquests" (760). So, we have a homosexual displacement by a man who is a famous heterosexual adventurer? I would rather follow Delbanco and suggest that "Perhaps" none of this is true.

Later that day at a costume ball given by Sarah Morewood, Melville conflates his conflicting sexualities by wearing a Turkish costume. Parker says "Melville bedecked himself, *or allowed the women to bedeck him* as a figure society saw as sexually vigorous and threatening" (my emphasis 761). I suggest the Constantinople robe and the beard create a picture that is dangerous *because* it is sexually ambiguous and transgressive.

It is telling that Parker introduces a passive element here, suggesting that Melville would not have done this on his own. Parker says he *is fitted* (again passively) with a turban and a "make do scimitar" and we can't help but see the meaningless accoutrement as reminiscent of Benito Cereno's empty scabbard which he is also passively forced to wear. Parker takes pains to absolve Melville of any agency in this episode, but the image he paints for us is unwittingly that of a man being cross dressed at the hands of women, a common scenario reported by present day transvestites of their first experience being dressed in women's clothes by a sister or mother or by other boys.

Robert Stoller in *Sex and Gender* notes, "males crossed dressed by older women...is a very frequent finding in adult transvestites" and that "whenever the history is found, the clothes have been put on a passive boy who in the beginning is not seeking such an experience..."(226). Given this clinical data, and Maria's recurring depressions, it is tempting to consider whether Maria ever dressed her second son in girl's clothing as a child in order to increase his identification with her.

Parker wants to deny that Melville had any desire to wear women's clothes, how then can we account for the fact that Parker also makes reference to: that in his

later years Melville liked to wear the loose fitting clothes that were “so loose as in years later to *confuse and offend* his growing and grown daughters” (my emphasis 761). This is reported by his granddaughter Eleanor Metcalf in *Cycle and Epicycle* and repeated in Robertson-Lorant's biography as well. I suggest Parker's word “confuse” is appropriate but not for the reasons he may have had in mind. Herman Melville's inner confusion was often manifested on the outside by mixing gender signifiers as with Fayaway's pipe smoking in her canoe, in exactly the manner Esther Newton has suggested of female impersonators in 20th Century America. At the ball, Melville's fresh passion for Hawthorne loosened his inhibitions causing him to giddily conflate masculine and feminine gender signifiers.

Stoller and others have suggested that especially in early childhood a mother's clothing serves as a transitional object to provide a sense of security when the mother is not available (Stoller 124). Therefore, in a symbolic sense, for the developing transvestite, feminine clothing = mother. Perhaps, as a boy Melville grew attached to his mother's clothing and used items of hers for comfort to soothe him during his anxious separations from her.

The path to a feminine identity in a young male child can be a two way street. The mother dresses her son in girl's attire to soothe her own depression, and/or he might have used items of her clothing to soothe his own anxiety. However Melville came to be attached to women's clothing, perhaps these ultimately became fetishes, the function of which is defensive in nature. As Delbanco cautions us, we must always qualify our theories with a healthy dose of, “Perhaps.” But in any case, it is clear from his work and certain enigmatic episodes of his life that Herman Melville

was from an early age preoccupied with the clothing of gender and the inner truth it could hide.

Robertson-Lorant cites one such episode, which occurred in 1849 when Melville attended a dramatic reading of *Lady Macbeth* by Fanny Kemble. He said Miss Kemble was “so unfemininely masculine that had she not, on unimpeachable authority, borne children, I should be curious to learn the result of a surgical examination of her person in private” (184). Robertson-Lorant calls this an “uncharacteristically crude remark,” yet I would submit that his misogynistic marginalia and the comments of his wife and children over the years indicate Melville had a pattern of verbal abuse. The fact that they erased the marginalia and were too reticent and perhaps ashamed to repeat them, indicates he was probably prone to making crude, indecent remarks. I argue that crude remarks came out of the frustration and rage which built up behind his mask of masculinity and that he enjoyed using indecent words in order to dominate them. But the more telling part of this episode is the obvious concern Melville expresses about what was under the actress's skirts. As he did with the *Missionary's Wife* in *Typee*, Melville suggests that what hides under the dress may in fact be a man.

Melville's projective identification with Hawthorne kept him from feeling competitive with the older and more popular writer at least for a time. “The Divine magnet is on you,” he tells Hawthorne, “and my magnet responds. Which is the biggest? A foolish question—they are *One*” (Letter in *N MD* 568). But he must have envied Hawthorne his domestic situation, and particularly Sophia, the companion/wife who was intelligent, insightful, generous and consoling and

absolutely devoted to promoting Hawthorne's writing career. Lizzy could not compete with Hawthorne and Sophia and it is clear from the correspondence that Melville thought and wrote more to and about them than about his own wife and family. Melville wrote to Sophia, "...You with your spiritualizing nature see more things than other people..." (Letter in Norton *MD* 568). Indeed, it is her "spiritualizing nature" that enables Sophia to see "Fayaway in his face."

But she was not the only one. Her son Julian saw her too: "When the narrative inspiration was on him, he looked like all the things he was describing—savages, sea captains, the lovely Fayaway in her canoe, the terrible Moby Dick himself. There was a vivid genius in this man, and he was the strangest thing that ever came into our circle" (*Hawthorne and His Circle* 32). This "strangest thing" seems otherworldly, a changeling, not just a dramatic performer of his characters in the manner of his contemporary, Dickens, but a person who outwardly seemed to lose himself in his characters. I would argue he actually found himself in them, as he perhaps lost himself for a time in Hawthorne in order to find himself as a kindred writer.

There is another telling description of Melville's permeable personality that comes from the "spiritualizing" Sophia. She describes his eyes: "It is a strange, lazy glance, but with power in it quite unique—It does not seem to penetrate through you, but take you into himself. I saw him look at Una so yesterday several times" (Parker 773). I imagine Melville looked at Una, Hawthorne's little daughter, that way because he is identifying with her, merging with the girl child, which necessity forbade him to acknowledge in his own life. He will memorialize the lost girl in

himself in *Mardi*, where he searches in vain for the beautiful "Yillah of his soul." In *Pierre*, with Isabel, and Marianna of *The Piazza* and also in the later poem

"Immolated" where he tells the story of his own suppression of this girl child:

Child of my happier time
When one yet lived with me, and threw
Her rainbow over life and time...

Jealous of your future lot,
I sealed you in a fate subdued.
Have I not saved you from the dread
Theft, and ignoring....?

In suppressing his girl, sealing her away from public view, Melville may have thought he was saving her from ridicule and theft, from shame and ignoring, but in making his art out of her, he inevitably created narratives that were as confusing to his public as actually revealing his feminine identity would have been. In this way he participates in his own failure of recognition, both as a feminine man and as a writer.

By adopting the social mask of heterosexual manhood, a mask that functions like a Winnicottian "False Self," he protected his true feminine self from harm by attempting to comply with his culture's and his mother's needs and expectations. But it was the suffocating power of that mask that drove him to violence and rage against his family and found expression in his art. Ahab is the apotheosis of his inner conflict with masculinity and an allegorical battle with the mother.

In *Pierre* we see the effort to challenge his mother and overtly claim the woman inside him descending into narrative dissolution and despair. Melville's struggles with his own identity will find final, cynical expression in his fractured novel, *The Confidence Man*, his last novel, in which he will say life is "A picnic *en costume*" in which "one must take part, assume a character, [and] stand ready...to

play the fool” (Library of America *Melville*, 983). This reminds us of the Berkshire picnic and the ball later with the costume of mixed gender signifiers and deflected desire.

When Melville moved his family to Pittsfield to write his planned book on the whale fishery, he found it increasingly difficult to find the time he needed to write. Struggling to find time to work amid the chaos of uprooted family life and the necessity of working to restore order to the new house, Melville's temper grew short. And in addition to the obvious settling-in chores, Melville also had to cope with losing space to family gatherings, and losing his library to the family Thanksgiving dinner, as well as milking cows daily and driving Lizzie into town for necessities, all of which interrupted and diminished his time for writing. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, he had to suffer the increasing pressure his mother, Maria, put on him to join the local church. She was, in Parker's words, “a supremely bossy woman whose reforming zeal now focused all too sharply on her oldest living son” (795). Given these mounting pressures we cannot be surprised to find, pouring out on the newly written pages of *Moby-Dick*, the mounting rage of its author.

Most of his male characters, from ship-abandoning Tommo, to refusing Bartleby, to poor runaway Pierre, one way or another, embody Melville's resentment at being what he called a “hired man.” But none convey his resentment of the burdens of masculinity and having to bear the responsibilities of command, his love/hate relationship with his mother, as well as his infantile rage and will to omnipotence more completely than Captain Ahab.

Ahab's will to omnipotence can be seen in his satanic claim to being on a

level with god, which is consciously Miltonic. In Book IV of *Paradise Lost* Satan says to the sun:

O thou that with surpassing Glory crownd
Looks'st from thy sole Dominion like the God
Of this new world... to thee I call,
But with no friendly voice, and add thy name
O sun, to tell thee how I hate thy beams...(PL IV 31-38)

And Ahab, in *The Quarter-Deck* says to Starbuck: "Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me" (N MD 144).

As a measure of Satan's overweening sense of omnipotence, Satan claims to be self-begot, co-equal in time with God:

We know no time when we were not as now;
Know none before us, self begot, self-raised,
By our own quick'ning power...
Who is our equal? (PL VI 859-865).

Similarly, Ahab says to Starbuck, "Who's over me?" (N MD 144).

Satan and Ahab reject both human and divine connection, seeing any kind of dependency as humiliating and degrading. Both Satan and Ahab are filled with "obdurate pride and steadfast hate" (PL Bk I). Both are content to reign in the hell of their own making rather than bend the knee to God, and both attempt to dominate all around them into submission. And because they do, they suffer the loneliness of men who, because of their own narcissistic omnipotence, consign themselves to live in a godless world.

Though the style of Melville's masterpiece is perhaps most influenced by Milton and Shakespeare, I argue what most informs his work is not "the library of his mind" as Lentricchia claims (Delbanco 11), but his own personal struggle with his lot

in life. Like Ahab, he was forced to be a man, to be married, to support a family, and to wear the mask of command.

Melville employs a hodge-podge of styles and images that mimic his famous precursors to dramatize his rage at his circumstances. None could better embody his rage than those noble strugglers against fate and their own characters--Satan and Lear. Both are mad, narcissistic, and in great pain. Yet, like them, Ahab, too, strikes us as fresh and unique, as if we were seeing him for the first time but still knew him intimately. This is because, like Lear and Satan, Ahab's struggles are timeless, eternal and powerfully human. He is simultaneously the old man, and the raging and sometimes senile infant/tyrant in us all. As Delbanco says, "Ahab seems more a part of us that apart from us" (12).

Ahab's *Maskulinity*

To get a sense of the prison the mask of manhood creates for Ahab and Melville, hear Ahab say in *The Quarter-Deck*: "All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks...If man will strike through the mask!" Then he says, "How can a prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through a wall?" (N MD 144).

Suddenly we notice that a striking inversion has taken place. Ahab has shifted from outside to inside the mask, now striking through it from the inside, like a prisoner trying to escape. In using this analogy Melville has perhaps inadvertently shown us that the mask he is most concerned with is the one he wears, the one that Ahab wears, the mask of manhood.

The emblem of Ahab's manhood is his leg. It is also the emblem of the "dismasting" maternal identification. Moby Dick has taken the true leg and left him with the necessity of wearing a false one, one the carpenter must make for him, which because it is not felt becomes "The dead bone" of his masculinity (N *MD* 385). Yet, he feels the true leg sometimes. In *Ahab and The Carpenter*, Melville represents Ahab's manhood as both false *and* true. Ahab tells the carpenter, "I shall nevertheless feel another leg in the same identical place with it; that is...my old lost leg; the flesh and blood one.... Cans't thou not drive that old Adam away?" (N *MD* 391).

Ahab seems to be saying he wants his manhood, or the remembrance of it, taken away. This reminds us of Ishmael in *The Chapel* when he says of his body, "take it away I say. It is not me" (N *MD* 41). Like Melville's comment to Hawthorne about the "imperfect body" of his novel, we can also see Ahab's "old Adam" as the imperfect body of his manhood, maimed in flesh and in spirit.

The actual flesh of manhood, the penis, the signifier of masculinity, remains with him, but it is empty as wood, a "dead bone," or an empty scabbard, as it was for Benito Cereno. And indeed, he may see it as even more than meaningless. Melville may see it as marring the perfection of a body that secretly yearns to be female. The living spirit of manhood, the confident, "muscular" manhood he will yearn for in *Pierre*, eludes him. Here it is a phantom, not a potent and muscular reality, but something that never fully developed, and therefore in a social context it must be merely performed. The mask, and its inherent sense of falseness, covers not only his feminine "longings and lovings" but also his omnipotent rage and self-loathing.

For Ahab, masculinity is a mask. That is why he wishes to “strike through” it and be rid of “the old Adam” because the social customs that adhere to it still dominate him, still “Task and heap” him and drive him to ever increasing rage and self-loathing.

The “dead bone” (N *MD* 385) of his manhood may also allude to the feminine man's nemesis, his penis. He curses the “mortal interindebtedness” that ties him to the carpenter who makes his false leg, and to god who made the true one, because for him, as for Satan, dependency is humiliating (392). In his will to omnipotence he wants to be free of all human connection and dependency. “I would be free as air,” he says (392). And it is worth noting here that Ishmael's narration genders the air as female.

In *The Symphony*, he says, “The firmaments of air and sea were hardly separable...the pensive air was transparently pure and soft, with a woman's look, and the robust man-like sea heaved with long strong, lingering swells, as Sampson in his sleep” (N *MD* 442). If Ahab is like *Sampson Agonistes*, and the heaving masculine sea, he is also a man who is imprisoned and bound in the chains of masculinity. He wants to be “free as air” soft and pure with a woman's look. Through Ishmael, Melville tells us these genders, male and female, sea and air, are, “hardly separable” meaning that they coexist, as he experiences them--in one body.

Ahab says “all legs true and false” are collected in a final judgment (392). For Melville, as for Winnicott and Ahab, too, the false and true selves are part of one person. While one part is manifested as the social body, compliant to the demands of parents and culture, the other is pure potential, silent and fragile. One is flesh and

blood, bound by the norms and consequences imposed by society. The other is a phantom, a wish, or rather a complex of potentialities.

In *The Grand Armada* Melville alludes to two lives lived simultaneously when he describes the nursing whales and compares them to humans: "Human infants while suckling will calmly and fixedly gaze away from the breast, *as if leading two separate lives at the time*; and while yet drawing mortal nourishment, be still spiritually feasting upon some unearthly reminiscence" (my emphasis N MD 325). This nostalgia for a past time, this "unearthly reminiscence" is like the child in his poem, "Immolated."

Melville's feminine self is most often represented in his novels through spectral, elusive and abandoned women. However, the woman in Ahab is no fragile phantom. The full embodiment of his rage is "Queenly," ranting, royal and vengeful. Like Melville's other powerful women: Hautia in *Mardi*, and Mrs. Glendenning in *Pierre*, "She feels her royal rights" and attempts to dominate all around her. In his long working out of his feminine self, *Moby-Dick* is Melville's grand symphony, the culmination of a rage that has been visibly building ever since he was married. Unlike his premarital heroines in *Typee* and *Mardi*, unlike the joyful androgynous transgressive, Fayaway, or the fragile, vulnerable Yillah, Ahab's woman has been pushed into a domestic corner and is so angry she "would strike the sun" if it insulted her, and "her" situation, her prison in the world, is the worst insult of all. In Ahab, his true and false legs, his masculine and feminine selves, are at war, but it is the Queen who dominates.

The passage in *The Candles* where the Queen makes her appearance is one of the most confusing and suggestive in *Moby-Dick*. Inspired and emboldened by the thunder and corpulent lightning all around him that terrifies his crew, Melville sets the stage for Ahab to come out. Ahab abstractly labels his manhood, “personified impersonal” meaning embodied but false, corporeal yet empty—not felt. Then he insists that there is another personality in him, and this personality is a woman. “In the midst of the personified impersonal, a personality stands here....” And he tells us wherever he came from and wherever he goes, this woman remains with him, “Yet while I earthly live, a queenly personality lives in me” (N MD 417).

In the midst of heavenly fire, he calls to a “clear spirit” as if to God. But it is not the patriarchal, Calvinist God of his mother. It is not a masculine god, but a gender neutral one. This Clear Spirit is the engendering force that forged him into the alloy of man and woman that he is. “Of thy fire thy madest me” Ahab declares, and “I do glory in my genealogy” (N MD 417). He seems to be saying he both values and celebrates the woman in himself as a gift from a special sort of god, not punishing and patriarchal but a clear spirit.

Yet, though it is initially clear and neutral, suddenly this force becomes fatherly. “Thou art my fiery father; my sweet mother I know not. Oh cruel! What hast thou done with her? There lies my puzzle” (N MD 417). Here he seems to be saying patriarchy created him and then abandoned him. The parent he most identifies with is his mother who likewise is bereft, cruelly abandoned by the father. She is the woman in Ahab and the woman in Melville. Cruelly abandoned by his father and left to witness and identify with his mother's torment, abandonment and grief, Melville

can heap his rage on the absent, abandoning father. His mother, her “speechless, placeless” nameless, contribution to the fiery history of his bi-gendered creation, is cruelly forsaken and forbidden him at the same time.

Like D. H. Lawrence, whom Delbanco calls Melville's “soul mate” (57), and David Leverenz calls “another such man” (287), Melville is torn between a deeply felt femininity and a manhood too fragile and fluctuating to be consistently real and supportive. But Melville seems not as consciously aware as Lawrence was of the consequences to his manhood of his close identification with his mother. That is why he tells his story allegorically, symbolically. Yet, if he could have read *Sons and Lovers*, and especially *Women in Love*, where the boundaries between male and female are every bit as blurred, and “muscular” manhood yearned for every bit as poignantly as it is in *Pierre*, Melville would surely have recognized the dilemma of the womanly man struggling to find and hold on to his manhood, while still trying to honor and protect the socially illegitimate but “true” woman in his heart.

In *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Lawrence, keenly aware of the power of his own mother over the manhood of her son, and feeling kinship with Melville says, “He...pined for Home and Mother, the two things he had run away from as far as ships could carry him. HOME and MOTHER. The two things that were his damnation” (144).

Home for Melville and Lawrence is “The Lee Shore,” but home also *equals* mother, not just as the place of hearth and family, but in the sense of home as identity, as the True North of the Self. It is also, as Lawrence observed, a place of decomposition (146). Home/Mother is place/person that causes the fragile manhood

of the son to collapse into the amorphous non-being of merging with the mother. Under her roof, he feels he will lose forever what little sense of manhood he has been able to feel. This merging is seductive. Like the mother's piano playing, in Lawrence's famous poem, "The Piano," it is a siren song that, "betrays [him] back" to his childhood, which is the loss of his separate existence as a man.

If mother is seductive, she is also at the same time hated for the loss of self that her very being causes. Lawrence knew, perhaps better than Melville, that his identification with his mother had damaged his manhood and his ability to find peace either in his relationships with other men *or* with women. He and his wife, Frieda, fought continually and loudly over the years of their marriage. In a collection of poems entitled "Look! We Have Come Through" Lawrence traces the early years of struggle beginning with a failed wedding night.

All his life, Lawrence, like Melville, struggled in limbo between worlds and genders and human relationships, a limbo particularly applicable to, and represented through, the metaphorical slipperiness and boundary crossing capacities of literature. But Lawrence would go further and attempt to challenge psychoanalysis and describe his own dilemma of mother identification in prose with *Fantasia of The Unconscious*. Like Melville and his Ahab, Lawrence, too, was an "Isolato," always at sea, in constant conflict with his wife and with the mother inside him. Both men had too much of the woman inside to ever feel entirely at home inside the skin of a man.

In *The Cassock*, in *Moby-Dick*, which Lawrence calls "surely the oldest [oddest?] piece of phallicism in all the world's literature" (164), Melville gives us an astonishingly vivid image of a faceless man encased (imprisoned?) in the penis of a

whale. The image is both canonical and comical, and at the same time, it manages to sartorially signify the burden of manhood and the essential hiddenness of gender identification. It reminds us of Ester Newton's discussion of a transvestite "working with pieces." Perhaps Melville is suggesting that the man inside the penis is cross-dressing, that underneath the penis or behind its mysterious veil, the man's second-self, the woman in him, is hiding. The penis here is overtly a costume. It is *worn* on the outside, and Melville suggests through this image that it may not truly represent the person who resides inside it. We never see the man inside the penis. His true face and personality are hidden. Only the monstrous signifier is presented to us, which Melville calls "a very strange, enigmatical object," as if the object were ambiguous, which for Melville it most certainly was (N *MD* 350).

The fact that he can call it an "object" indicates a certain estrangement from the body, unlikely in a man who feels his manhood to be natural to him rather than imposed. And its gargantuan size, "Longer than a Kentuckian is tall; a foot in diameter at the base, and jet black as Yojo, the ebony idol of Queequeg" (N *MD* 351), is reminiscent of the huge phalluses in Aubrey Beardsley's drawings in *Salome*, so huge the man is dwarfed, as he labors under the burden of carrying it. Having to carry a penis, with all its burdens and responsibilities, is perhaps never easy, but it is doubly hard if a man does not identify with the gender role it signifies.

Melville draws our attention to the various levels of signification the penis serves. He shows that the penis is a religious and cultural icon by referring to the biblical idolatry of Queen Maachah whose son Asa deposed her for worshiping the male genital idol. (As perhaps Maria worshiped the male gender). And as the

“mincer” slips the penis on, Melville says, he “now stands before you invested in the full canonicals of his calling” and “this investiture alone will protect him, while employed in the peculiar functions of his office” (N *MD* 351).

Though he refers here to the job of mincing the blubber, Melville also means to suggest the “office” of manhood, for which the penis is the bona fide emblem and credential. In using the word “canonicals,” he plants the penis firmly in the religious history of patriarchy, which forbids any blurring of boundaries between male and female. Yet, the “investiture,” the cassock, is a feminine style of dress only allowed men of the priesthood or holy orders. In contrast to trousers, its skirt’s function is to hide, blur or cancel signs of manliness within its generous folds.

Here as elsewhere in Melville, in his most strange and ambiguous scenes, we are witness to preoccupation with feminine-like clothing and the inside/outside nature of gender. Multivalent personalities are hinted at in the androgynous, the mixing of items from one “sartorial system” into that of the other: the woman’s clothes that hide a man, or the clothing or accoutrement of the man that hides presence of a woman.

The cassock hides a man, protects a man and literally *invests* a man with both power, privilege, and responsibility, yet the image of the mincer is of a man literally incased in a gender signifier, and because it is a costume, a mask, male gender cannot be seen as real but rather more like a prison. It is only a disguise, something applied to the exterior of a person. This image of a man wearing a huge penis also anticipates the discomfort and unreality modern day transgendered and transsexual men often express, of being born in the wrong body—to them, the “imperfect body” of a man.

It is also important to see the connection Melville subtly makes between the mincer hiding in the penis and himself as the writer. The mincer cuts the blubber into thin pieces, as thin as "Bible leaves" and like "sheets from an orator's desk" (N *MD* 351). The mincer is making a book, as Melville is, while encased in the protective (and socially and psychologically burdensome) disguise of a penis.

David Leverenz devotes a chapter to Ahab's Queenly personality in his *Manhood in The American Renaissance* and yet the woman at the heart of it all is still ignored as if she was only a symbol for something else. For Leverenz she stands for the male desire to be passively beaten by a strong fatherly male. For Leverenz, Ahab's declaration of feminine feelings can only mean Ahab has a desire to be beaten by a man, as if femininity were always all about being in masochistic subjection. Yet, the Queen in Ahab is anything but passive. She is strong and domineering. All the men on board the *Pequod* are at her service. They are her slaves. This is the mother as boss, as dominatrix, exactly the way Melville experienced his own mother.

Whereas Leverenz sees Ahab and Ishmael as, "doubles of a self that loathes itself...twinned in their desire to be beaten" (280), it seems to me that there are multitudes of twins in the novel: Ahab and his whale represent the tyrannical "Queenly" mother's monstrous need to dominate her children, a need borne of her own repressed rage. Twin selves abound and are symbolically referred to throughout. This speaks to the point I am making about Melville, that he is torn between two distinct and conflicting identities, male and female, and that the necessity of living a secret double identity drove him to the brink of madness and an art preoccupied with

double and hidden identities and secrets within secrets, or as his grand daughter alludes to in the title of her biography of him, *Cycles and Epicycles*.

Elizabeth Renker, in "Wife Beating and The Written Page," traces the rumors of a "secret" that many scholars have theorized lay at the heart of Melville's family. Most the scholars and biographers refer to this "secret" as his abuse of his wife and children, but I suggest that the beating is not the primary "secret," only a derivative one. The reason none of his children, grandchildren or great grand children ever wanted to talk about it is because it filled them with shame and confusion.

More shameful than violence and abuse, which was as common in the 19th century as it is in our own, I believe the real secret that no one can talk about is Herman Melville's cross-gender feelings and perhaps also his cross-gender behavior. And since Melville himself kept referring to secrets of his life (without revealing them) and made character secrets the core of his novels, it is safe to assume the family secret was more than just abuse. The hidden "something dark" of Daniel Orme, and the hidden "state secret" of Ahab, the secret sister of Pierre, and all the secrets alluded to throughout his work suggest something more than the ordinary and conventional. It is abundantly clear that Melville was obsessed with his secret, whatever it was.

Melville has always been hard to read. His work frustrates us with endless digressive interruptions and narrative circumlocutions, extraneous information, vanishing characters, dead ends, and sermons. In the push-pull of his need to both hide and reveal an unmentionable secret, he seems all over the place and no place at the same time, like the "colorless all color" of *Moby-Dick*. He is hyper allusive and

elusive and demands strenuous and often tortured strategies of analysis to make sense of his writing. In the end, the sense we make of it is our own projection onto a blank screen. And if his art is packed with details we can make our own, his life frustrates us because of the lack of documentation and the obsessive guarding of family secrets, which we also fill in with our own imaginings.

In the end, literary scholars and biographers are forced to make their own fictions out of the paradoxically scanty yet voluminous artifacts of his life and work, and in the years since his death, they have produced oceans of pages on him. In art he dominates his readers as in life he dominated his family, and he continues to dominate scholars devoted to preserving his reputation. There is an obsessiveness in all this that Ahab would appreciate. It seems to suggest a contagion between like minds. If we make a lifetime career out of chasing Melville and trying to unravel his enigma, perhaps we can say, using Leverenz's theory, that, like literary Ahabs, we must enjoy being beaten.

CHAPTER 4

Castaways: The “Special Lunacy” of Invisible Boys

“His special lunacy overwhelmed his general sanity”

“all mortal greatness is but disease”

“A sort of sick, and yet he don’t look so”

Moby-Dick

If we consider just the masculine side of the sea and air of Melville’s double identity, we can see that *Moby-Dick* is full of castaways that embody Melville’s own sense of being the lost boy, the invisible, unrecognized male child: Ishmael is named after the biblical son, cast out with his mother, Hagar, into the desert, as Maria Melville was cast out on the harsh mercy of the world after her husband died. Symbolically, Ahab is self-begot and therefore fatherless, but his mother is briefly described as a “crazy widowed mother who died when he was only twelve month old,” so we know he is also literally fatherless almost from birth and motherless soon after (N *MD* 77). Either way, self-begot or orphaned, Ahab is cast out from the community of men into a social desert and eventually into the vortex of his own omnipotent rage, which will pull all aboard into it. And as a father himself, Ahab, so preoccupied with his own losses and the necessity of gaining recognition from others (his crew and more importantly his whale), abandons his own son to the same fate, that of being an invisible son of an abandoning, absent father.

The black boy, Pip, one of the two literal castaways in the story, falls out of the whaleboat and is left by Stubb to float alone in the vast sea. Melville sums up Stubb’s character as: “the invulnerable, jollity of indifference and recklessness” (N *MD* 162). In this act Stubb represents a certain kind of abandoning father who W. H.

Auden says, “does not guess what the consequences of leaving Pip in the water will be because *he has never really looked at him* (my emphasis Bertoff in *N MD* 704).

But Ishmael urges us not to judge Stubb, the abandoning father, too harshly.

Abandonment “is common in that fishery” he says, and “it will be seen what like abandonment befell myself” (*N MD* 347).

Explicitly comparing himself to Pip, Ishmael foreshadows his own abandonment at the end of the novel. Left alone on the sea, abandoned by Ahab, his captain/father and his crew--like Pip--Ishmael is cast away. Eventually he, also like Pip, is rescued, but his mind is not drowned as Pip’s was. In what seems like an extended metaphor of abandonment, he is picked up by the *Rachel*, a ship whose captain is still searching for his own lost boy, who, significantly was lost at twelve, the same age Melville was when he lost his own father. The son of the *Rachel* was the same son Ahab had refused to help find in favor of chasing after the white whale. As a doubly abandoning father, Ahab refuses to recognize the needs of the boy he never sees. It is as if the captain of the *Rachel* and Ahab are constructed to represent the good and bad father of an invisible boy whose very existence in the story, like Pip, is to represent the lost and invisible boy in Herman Melville.

As Pip was invisible to Stubb, Melville was virtually invisible to his mother and father. From an early age he was overlooked in favor of the firstborn son, Gansevoort, and almost from the first did not count himself among his father’s male children. All through his childhood, during his mother’s confinements and recurring depressions he was often foisted off on other relatives and referred to in vague terms

as compliant and gentle but “slow of comprehension” (In Parker’s *Herman Melville* Vol. I. 35).

Not being recognized by his father for the man he could become, the nascent man in him never fully emerged. Co-opted by his mother after his father’s humiliating death to be her confidant and identify with her suffering, Melville was virtually invisible to her. He molded his personality to reflect his mother’s “queenly” personality, which was fused with her gender identity. And so, stuck between genders and invisible to the world around him, Melville suffered from a profound lack of recognition. He was nobody’s boy and everybody’s pawn, and perhaps, wittingly or not, his mother’s wished for girl.

Stoller and others have frequently noted and commented on the mothers of transsexuals and transvestites who because of their own sadness and emptiness unconsciously feminize their sons to be their companion, blurring gender and generational boundaries, to fulfill what is missing in their lives. We will see this chillingly embodied by Pierre and his mother, Mrs. Glendenning, in *Pierre*, which most biographers take to be a fictional representation of Melville’s relationship to his own mother.

Pip goes mad as a result of being abandoned by Stubb, his “father,” and Melville describes the madness of the boy as “an intense concentration of self in the middle of a heartless immensity” in which “...the sea had jeeringly kept his body up but drowned the infinite of his soul.” The heartless sea, Melville says, “carried him down to wondrous depths...where the miser merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps (N *MD* 347). It is a madness Melville calls wisdom. “He saw God’s foot upon

the treadle of the loom and spoke it; therefore his shipmates called him mad” (347).

Melville invests the boy with a special wisdom, born of invisibility and abandonment, and conferred by an ambiguous god, a hybrid man/fish, that suggests the more conventional hybrid, woman/fish--the mermaid.

When Ahab embraces Pip and takes him to his cabin he is rescuing the lost boy in himself, the boy who was invisible to others, “in the middle of a heartless immensity” of the world, and particularly to the father who abandoned him. Ahab and Pip are often compared to Lear and his fool, but it is not the fool with whom Lear identifies. It is Edgar, Poor Tom a Bedlam, the hidden true son of Gloucester who pretends madness in order to stay near Lear and protect him. Like Lear, Ahab sees himself in the raving mad boy. “Here boy; Ahab’s cabin shall be Pip’s home henceforth, while Ahab lives. Thou touches my inmost center, boy; thou art tied to me by cords woven of my heart-strings.” (N *MD* 428).

Ahab and Pip are embodiments at different points in time of Melville as the invisible son. Each displays the age appropriate form of madness that comes from being unrecognized by the world of men around them. Invisible to their fathers they grow to become invisible to themselves. For Ahab, in the adult stage of “special lunacy,” the only recourse is to dominate and try to compel recognition from others, which is a desperate attempt to make himself at last visible to the world around him.

He must also find an enemy that will serve as a receptacle into which he can project all the incoherent, universal rage he feels. This enemy, which is inside him, is a complex mixture of Melville’s dominating mother, his absent and abandoning

father, and all the fear, humiliation, self loathing and hate that being abandoned and invisible to others and to himself creates.

That is why Moby Dick is the white, “Colorless All color” that he is. He is everything and nothing at the same time, a chimera, a female monster made up of many disparate parts, both the living and the dead bone of a manhood, the sensibilities and desire of a woman, and the overwhelming fear of being betwixt and between and nothing at all. At once empty and full of meaning, the meaning of the whale, as the meaning of Ahab, eludes recognition because inside the invisible boy who hunts her, there is no experience of recognition, which could serve as a model. Suffering from failure to be recognized as a child, he cannot recognize himself or others, and so he tries to compel recognition, a sense of really existing through domination.

And Ahab’s madness is all domination. Even before he makes his entrance, fear and portents of doom foreshadow his appearance. He dominates with his story, and uses the code of masculinity to coerce his crew to take up his insane quest. He dominates them with a powerful *performance* of manhood, and in fear of losing theirs, they agree to avenge the loss of his leg. As with all dominations that are really cries for recognition, the thing that demands recognition remains hidden and so there is nothing the crew can identify with but their own sense of manhood, and the awful specter of its loss. Therefore, their submission cannot be truly satisfying for Ahab, as it is based on a lie. Ahab dominates to prove a masculinity he doesn’t really feel, from behind the mask of command that the circumstances of his job and his life force him to wear. And since, among men, masculinity always has to be proved, the men

of his crew feel compelled to take up his challenge as if it were their own. Even the placid observer/narrator admits:

I, Ishmael, was one of the crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded to theirs; and stronger I shouted, and more did I hammer and clench my oath, because of the dread in my soul, a wild, mystical, sympathetical feeling was in me; Ahab’s quenchless feud seemed mine (N *MD* 155).

Similarly, Melville, the abandoned and invisible son, takes up a challenge that is not his. He must prove his manhood. Propelled by his domineering mother who nails the doubloon of manhood to the domestic mast, and demands that he fulfill the social and gender expectations it represents, he marries and begets children and struggles to support them. He lives a life ostensibly “for the sake of others” but cannot make his peace with it and turns his pent up rage and vengeance upon them, as if it were their fault that he is forced to live an imprisoned life.

He hates his sons and by a thousand cuts of verbal, emotional and physical abuse he both punishes and abandons them. He casts them away. All the while thinking of himself as a boy who needs to be rescued, he cannot rescue his own sons. He cannot see them through the dense self-protective mask he wears over his own sense of imprisonment and rage. Both Malcolm and Stanwix were as invisible to their father as Pip was to Stubbs, and this primary failure of recognition leads to their lack of connection to their family and eventually to Malcolm’s suicide and Stanwix’s lonely life and drifter’s death far away from his family. Like Ahab, Pierre, Pip, the son of the *Rachel* and its adopted son, Ishmael, Melville’s sons are fatherless boys, cast adrift on the sea of life, abandoned by a father who unlike the ship’s carpenter, was no “man maker.”

Lack of recognition from a father creates a hidden, hated self. And it was, “The mad secret of his unabated rage, bolted up and keyed in him...” that is the root of Ahab’s madness as Melville makes clear in the chapter *Moby Dick*:

Ahab in his *hidden self* raved on...yet Ahab’s larger, darker, deeper part remains unhinted...his whole *awful essence* sits in bearded state...and from your grim sire only will *the old state-secret* come...to mankind he did long *dissemble*...if only his old friends on shore but half dreamed of what was lurking in him...(my emphasis N MD 161-2).

What was lurking in him could not be guessed at by the men of the Pequod, nor any of his friends on shore. It was the woman who while he earthly lived, also lived inside him.

Jessica Benjamin’s work on domination and submission helps us understand how “Assertion and recognition constitute the poles of a delicate balance” (12). And we can see that Ahab is a personality dangerously *out* of balance. Ahab is all assertion and domination. He cannot recognize the white whale for what it is, a dumb brute just trying to survive. He cannot recognize the needs of his men, or even the needs of his ship’s owners for a commercial profit. His monomania consumes him and excludes all else. If “Recognition is that response from the other which makes meaningful the feelings, intentions, and actions of the self” (Benjamin 12), then Ahab’s “special lunacy,” his secret, is a profound lack of meaning in himself, and paradoxically too much meaning floating all around him in the world. It is the too much and too little of “the colorless all color” that is the direct result of being invisible to himself and others.

And what is the force driving Ahab to keep his secret? It is fear of dependency, that old bugaboo of manhood, especially American manhood in the 19th

century. As Benjamin states, “When the conflict between dependence and independence becomes too intense, the psyche gives up paradox in favor of opposition...the conflict of opposites replaces the balance within the self. Opposites can no longer be integrated; one side is devalued, the other idealized (splitting)” (50).

We can see that splitting an idealized self from a devalued other, like the “good and bad breast,” splitting of the mother in Kleinian psychology, would make recognition, reconciliation and reparation impossible. Ahab has split the good and bad in himself and so he sees the world that way. For him life is a perennial battle of opposites. The purpose of such splitting into irreconcilable opposites is to avoid the humiliation of dependency.

David Leverenz, in frankly sado-masochistic terms, sees “Preoccupation with manhood” in the 19th Century as derived from “fear of humiliation...usually by other men,” and that *fear* of humiliation becomes the *desire* to be beaten (72-73). Leverenz sees Ahab as, “The bad self of an unloved child, the self that deserves a whipping. Ahab rages to be beaten by an enormous symbol of both the father’s and mother’s power, a sperm whale and a milk white breast, at once mutilating and abandoning” (290). But Ahab does not want to be beaten by a strong mother/father. He already feels punished and left abandoned in a world and to a role he does not want to play.

Leverenz claims, “that as the male workplace became quite separate from the home, competition intensified, and men defined manhood much more exclusively through their work” and that “Beneath a greater preoccupation with manhood and competition...lies a greater fear of humiliation” (72). But as Stoller, Winnicott and

others have noted, gender identity, a sense of being male or female, begins early, in the home. Manhood is not born in the work place and neither is fear of humiliation.

A sense of wearing a mask begins early, too, as the child learns through subtle and not so subtle cues that feminine feelings are unacceptable in a boy. It is in the home where fear of discovery of feminine feelings leads to dissembling and disguise to avoid humiliation and it leads ultimately to rage. As Wayne Koestenbaum has so aptly put it, the family is “gender boot camp.” And we can see Melville’s resistance to the training at two crucial stages in his life: At the age of three, Melville did not feel himself to be male. At the age of 28, he does not want to marry but reluctantly agrees under his mother’s persistent pressure. Thereafter, he is forced to lie down in the bed that was only partly of his own making and wake up every morning in a rage. Ahab, created in the crucible of that marriage, is its fictional embodiment.

Like many other theorists, scholars and biographers, Leverenz has argued away from, or around, the core issue of gender identity. If manhood must be proved, then it is always in doubt, and if it is in doubt, the default gender position is female. It is suspected femininity in a man that is isolating and humiliating. What Ahab wants is not to have to be a man. What Leverenz leaves unsaid is that Ahab harbors a secret desire to be a woman. If it is true that he loathes himself, as Leverenz suggests, then I argue the reason he loathes himself is *because* he wants to be a woman, to be treated as a woman, to be loved as a woman--by men. This feminine “subsystem” of his otherwise masculine self, as Docter and others have conceptualized the emerging cross-gender identification in males, is an inner conflict, a mutiny, continually threatening to overthrow the self. This subsystem gradually becomes the primary

source of pleasure, but the conflict it causes is also the source of shame, humiliation and rage.

What Ahab hates is the mother (and father) who abandoned him in the world with unacceptable feelings of femininity and no way to feel comfortable or to enter wholeheartedly into his assigned role as a man. He does not wish to be beaten by his father or mother, he already feels beaten by them, mutilated, dismasted, and unmanned. Leverenz claims, “*Moby-Dick* is a voyage toward suicide, the vortex of a self-hating self unable to step beyond the inward, downward pull of manhood and humiliation” (73).

I see Ahab’s downward spiral as a losing battle against his feminine feelings. He is motivated by the murder, suicide compulsion Melville expresses in *White Jacket*, “The privilege, that every man has, of dying himself, and inflicting death upon another...are the last resources of an insulted and unendurable existence” (645). The “unendurable existence” in Ahab and Melville’s case is enforced masculinity and all that goes with it.

Invisibility is a pernicious thing. When the mother demands you identify with her in order to be seen at all, then you are *not* seen—at all. You are even more invisible when you are forced to wear a mask. Because the mask is all anyone can respond to, the sense of invisibility becomes inescapable, provoking ever more strenuous strategies of domination in order to compel a recognition that can never happen.

For Melville and his Ahab, the fear behind this mask is the fear of discovery of shameful cross-gender identifications and feelings, and so, paradoxically, it is the

hidden woman inside them that drives them to ever-greater extremes and perhaps even violence to *act* the man. Ahab’s sense of being acted upon and forced to lead an inauthentic life is evident in *The Quadrant* when he says, “Here someone’s thrusts these cards into these old hands of mine; swears that I must play them, and no others” (N *MD* 413). It is not the desire to be beaten, which motivates Ahab’s rage. What Ahab wants is not to have to be a man. He feels he has been passively (cross?) dressed in the skin of a man and, as the mincer is in the penis of a whale, and like Benito Cereno, he is forced to wear an empty scabbard and play the role that Bartleby “prefers not to.”

Ahab was abandoned by both mother and father and as far as we know, was left to consolidate a sense of manhood all by himself, unassisted by a male mentor or guardian. Melville constructs the circumstances of his birth and orphaning in order to alienate him completely from all nurture and guidance, which in his narcissistic self-pity he feels to be true of himself. Ahab’s “queenly personality” is clearly not the result of his own fictional mother’s influence. Rather, it is the embodiment of Maria Melville’s imprint on her second son, an imprint powerful enough to have cut him off from any but an inauthentically performed identification with the world of men.

The fictional Melville male, like his author, is a castaway son, fatherless, drifting in and through societies of men without touching or being touched by them. He has “state secrets” that are unmentionable, unacceptable, and isolating. And he dies like Bartleby, Benito Cereno and Daniel Orme, taking his secret to an unmarked, unmourned grave. From the moment they appear in his texts until they vanish, Melville’s men are unincorporated “isolatoes.” Only the story itself gives them a

context, and then only for a brief time. If they have histories at all, like Ahab’s, they are brief and alienating. More likely, like Ishmael, who is both a literal and metaphorical castaway, or Bartleby, a “dead letter” man, their family origins are never mentioned.

The castaway in Melville’s fiction is akin to what Melville calls in *Moby-Dick* a “Loose-Fish...fair game for anybody who can soonest catch it” (N *MD* 331). The castaways are unincorporated males drifting on the sea. They are “liminal personas,” transitional figures, floating, unattached, betwixt and between. Anthropologist, Victor Turner, in *The Forest of Symbols*, states, “If our basic model of society is that of a ‘structure of positions,’ we must regard the period of margin, of ‘liminality,’ as an interstructural situation” (93). All Melville’s male characters can be understood as being in between, interstructural, as inhabiting the margins.

But the Melvillian male is also powerfully a “Fast Fish” that “belongs to the party fast to it” (N *MD* 331). That “party” is always invisible. It is a force or feeling which is inexpressible and malign, and like the white whale, it is always out there threatening to stove the boat and drown the man. Melville says that we are all both loose and fast, but if we are fast, each of us is held fast in our own unique way. As for Melville, I suspect he was “fast” in the way Karl Menninger’s hooked fish is, a person beset by a troubling secret or conflict that binds him to an unseen master and against which he struggles mightily but incomprehensibly. Melville says that a fast-fish can be controlled by anything, “a mast, an oar, a nine-inch cable, a telegraph wire, or a strand of cobweb,” but no matter what holds us, “it is all the same” (331). Though he has drawn out the thread of domination to as fine a filament as a cobweb,

he only stops there for convenience. He intends us to understand that as fine as a cobweb is, there are means of holding a person fast that are in fact invisible. This kind of hooked, or fast fish, is a man with a “state secret” that dominates his life and often, like inexorable fate, leads him to his death.

Rites of Passage and the Hero’s Quest

“The more mother and the less father, the more femininity”

Robert Stoller *Presentations of Gender*
(25)

In 1921, in his *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, D. H. Lawrence says that as things stood at that time the best a father could do was tell his boy, curtly, and coldly, “And the only thing I want of you is to be manly”(147). And it is clear he feels this British way of preparing a boy for manhood to be a sorry state of affairs. Then he proposes:

As a matter of fact, there should be some sort of initiation into true adult consciousness. Boys should be taken away from their mothers and sisters as much as possible at adolescence. They should be given into some real manly charge. And there should be some actual initiation into sex life. Perhaps like the savages, who make the boy die again, symbolically, and then pull him forth through some narrow aperture, to be born again, and make him suffer and endure terrible hardships, to make a great dynamic effect on his consciousness, a terrible dynamic sense of change in the very being. In short, a violent initiation, from which the lad emerges emaciated, but cut off forever from childhood, entered into the serious, responsible pale of manhood (147).

Perhaps Lawrence had read Arnold Van Gennep’s 1908 treatise *The Rites of Passage*. He doesn’t say, but it is clear he must have read some anthropological studies that describe the type and purpose of initiation rites. It is also clear that he

feels a firm boundary between childhood and adult manhood to be precisely what is lacking in his own culture and in his own life.

Decades later in 1985, Robert Stoller describes that psychological barrier. “For masculinity to develop, each infant boy must erect intrapsychic barriers that ward off the desire to maintain the blissful sense of being one with mother. Conversely, to the extent that merging is intensified by having been encouraged too much, the sense of feeling like her—identified with her—interferes with masculinization” (*Presentations of Gender* 182).

Leaving aside the term “blissful” as an accurate reflection of what “oneness” with Melville’s mother might have felt like, we can at least see why it would have been essential to maintain it in spite, or because of, Maria’s volatile mood swings. As we have seen, there seemed scarcely any encouragement, either as a child or an adult, for Melville to separate from his mother. Her constant, intrusive presence in his life was certainly not blissful. It would have made the establishment of barrier between them virtually impossible.

As a son bound tightly to his mother, Melville was a “fast” person. As a man who could not find safe harbor in the role of masculinity he was also, ambiguously, a “loose” person. Thus, he was betwixt and between. To understand the significance of in-between states it is useful to look at universal patterns of initiation rites, which consist of three stages: separation, transition and union or incorporation. It is the transitional state that I think most applies to Melville and his work.

Human life is a series of transitions between birth and burial. In most societies, these changes are ritualized, celebrated, commemorated. A boundary is

crossed and acknowledged by the community in some formal way, but these are not just transitions, as Lawrence intuited, they are also dynamic transformations. A new identity is inscribed in the mind and often on the flesh of the subject not only to memorialize his or her new status in the community, but also to change him forever from what he was before to what he is now. It is the recognition of this new identity by the family and the community that helps to create and solidify it.

The primary purpose of rites of passage, or initiation rites, is to establish sexual identity. They contextualize a person within his own skin, and his skin in relation to other skins in his family and community. Without such contextualization, the human being cannot know who he is or how he is supposed to behave, in relation to others. In the introduction to anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep’s, seminal treatise, *The Rites of Passage*, Solon T. Kimbali summarizes the importance of initiation rites: these are “rites of separation from an asexual world followed by rites of incorporation into a sexual world” (ix). And they are confirmatory, and the consequences of not being confirmed within a given culture are severe:

The critical problems of becoming male and female, of relations within the family...are directly related to the devices which the society offers the individual to help him achieve the new adjustment... One dimension of mental illness may arise because an increasing number of individuals are forced to accomplish their transitions alone and with private symbols (xvii).

This, I think, aptly describes both the “special lunacy” of the invisible boy, and the special wisdom of Melville’s art. If we accept for a moment my premise that Melville lacked the support for masculinity within his family and thus grew up attached to and identified with his mother, then it is easy to see Melville’s entire body

of work as containing private symbols for the inner turmoil he faced as a result of having to find his way and make his transitions in life on his own.

His art can also be seen as an attempt to write from the perspective of one who feels himself to be cast out into the literal no-man’s land of ambiguity, the liminal margin, the interstructural space, which, as an unrecognized and unconfirmed male, he felt he inhabited. This was a project doomed to failure in his own time since the more structured, conventional readers of the nineteenth century who were perfectly at home in their simple binary world, had no way to know what he was trying to get at and would inevitably have found his private symbols anxiety-provoking and impossible to understand. Only those who found in Melville a resonant voice for their own inner longings would find in his work a mirror of their own sexual liminality.

The insanity his family remarked upon in him can also be seen as the result of losing himself in his private symbols and thus confusing others with his odd behavior. As Karl Menninger states, in his own view of the fast and loose fish of mental illness, “The struggles are all that the world sees, and it naturally misunderstands them. It is hard for a free fish to understand what is happening to a hooked one.” As confusing to his family as he was to his later readers, Melville made his art out of failures to recognize the fluctuating but nevertheless demanding cross-gender inner truth of a man, and in so doing he thwarted his readers’ needs for shape and closure.

That shape and closure is provided by the story-telling tradition of the Hero’s Quest. According to Clifford Geertz in *Interpretation of Cultures*, the traditional

hero’s quest (the one readers are trained from childhood to expect in their myths and stories) contains three parts:

1. A precipitate departure from ancestral shores grown familiar, stultifying and in some uncertain way menacing.”
2. A journey to a darker world full of surprises, tests, revelations.
3. A return, resigned and exhausted, to ordinary existence...with a deeper sense of reality and an obligation to communicate what one has learned to those who have stayed behind” (347).

Not surprisingly, Rites of Passage (another masculine invention) also follow the pattern of the hero’s quest and consist of three parts:

1. Separation--from the mother and the world of childhood.
2. Transition--a passage into and through ambiguity, filled with trials and tests.
3. Incorporation—accomplishment of new sexual identity at the end of the trials which is then confirmed by the community.

This is the familiar pattern for stories, not just in our western culture, but also in cultures world wide. It is precisely the traditional pattern of separation, journey and return that demonstrates a fundamental growth and change in the hero, or as in the rite, a transformation to a new social/sexual identity. But this never happens in a Melville story.

In *Mardi* the narrator’s quest for his feminine self leads to meandering, seemingly pointless conversation and eventual narrative dissolution. What begins as a separation from the world of the ship and a journey of island-hopping, loses focus and energy and becomes endless wandering with no return and no transformation.

In *Pierre*, a departure or separation does take place, and perhaps there are events that might qualify as tests, but, if so, Pierre fails to pass them, and in the end no arrival or return happens. In that sense, no transformation can be said to have occurred. Pierre remains a sad and ambiguous man trapped in binary folds of

necessity, which he can neither manipulate nor surmount. He can have no resolution, no arrival at a new status or identity and no incorporation back into his community. His only destination is artistic failure and death.

Pierre is an example of a sexually ambiguous man who wants to introduce and affirm his feminine identity to his mother but fails, necessitating a flight with his illegitimate sister-self that ends in his (and her) death and narrative failure. A more traditional pattern of return and transformation might have seen Pierre returning to the old manse to install Isabel in her rightful place by challenging his mother and winning her respect by putting her in her place, but his failure to do anything like that reinforces the abysmal futility of Pierre’s life and therefore the novel itself.

In *Moby-Dick* the journey is clear as is the quest, but the separation is vague. We never know what world Ishmael is leaving or why. We only know that he is in his “hypos,” meaning he is depressed but the story behind it is hidden from us. There is a quest of sorts, but it is Ahab’s and only Ishmael’s and the rest of the crew’s by adoption. There is no return. Ishmael is rescued and the “great shroud of the sea rolled on” (N *MD* 469). No transformation and no change except in death. And in most of his novels and almost all his poems, like Wagner, there are some wonderful moments but some terrible half hours. They drag, they detour abruptly and pointlessly and end in death and that lingering feeling we so often have in Melville, that something was tried but whatever he was trying to say failed to get out in any straightforward way we can grasp. This is because Melville seems stuck in the middle stage of the hero’s quest or the rite of passage.

As Victor Turner says of the rite of passage, “The ritual is transformative, the ceremony confirmatory. [But] The subject of the rite is, in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically *invisible*” (my emphasis *Forest of Symbols* 95). In the journey toward sexual identity, Melville himself remained suspended in sexual limbo, in the vast ambiguous almost Coleridgian fog between worlds. Always between departure and arrival, he was invisible to those around him and to himself. Likewise, his characters are unable to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion to their journey as well. Bartleby, Benito, Ahab, Pip, Ishmael, *Mardi*’s narrator, Taji, Tommo and Pierre are invisible boys, and their “special lunacy” derives from being stuck in limbo, too. They are unable to arrive anywhere and be recognized. For, in essence, recognition *is* arrival. Until you are recognized, you cannot be said to have arrived.

Early anthropologists referred to initiation of males as puberty rites. However, as Van Gennep notes, “...puberty rites were misnamed since this type of rite occurred at ages which had no specific relation to the physical appearance of sexual maturity” (ix). “Physiological puberty and Social puberty are essentially different and rarely converge” (65).

Bruno Bettelheim, in *Symbolic Wounds*, notes that the very complexity of the rite is a strategy designed to compensate for the relative vagueness of male maturity as compared to the onset of menstruation for females. The problem for the male is that “There seems no exact moment at which the boy can say, ‘Now I am a man’.” Therefore it is the function of the male initiation to punctuate a growth sequence that is inherently *unpunctuated*” (my emphasis 134).

In theorizing around Melville’s gender identity, and the lack of support for masculinity, it is intriguing to recall how the issue of punctuation troubled Melville’s writing life. It is common knowledge now, thanks to Parker, Robertson-Lorant and Renker and others, that his wife, Lizzy, was not allowed to punctuate the fair copies of his texts, ostensibly because she was poor at it. Yet Robertson-Lorant has said Lizzy was far better educated and more proficient at punctuation than anyone in the Melville family. We can see in *Redburn* that the eventual punctuation, placed there by Melville himself, was odd to say the least and confusing. Similarly, in one of the letters in which Maria Melville is attempting to coerce her future daughter-in-law to set a date for the wedding, the lack of proper punctuation is remarkable:

If Lizzy loves [him] she can be as happy here as elsewhere, and you must tell her so, Herman is able to support her here now, and to wait for an uncertain future, which none of us can penetrate, would be unwise he is really unsettled and wont be able to attend to his Book if Lizzy does not reflect upon the uncertainty and consent to name some day say in July (in Robertson-Lorant 159).

The only punctuation here is the comma and it is used frequently to connect words that should be organized into separate sentences. The sentence boundaries are blurred. I wonder if the lack proper punctuation in this long run-on sentence can be extended further to serve as a metaphor for the lack of proper boundaries within the family. As sentence boundaries were routinely violated and contested (in the case of Lizzy being forbidden to punctuate), so too might the emotional and gender boundaries have been both ambiguous and contested ground. Is it possible that by refusing Lizzy’s attempts to place the punctuation where she knew it ought to go, Maria and Herman were actually refusing to accept other boundaries she may have

attempted to assert and defend? That is, her privacy and respect for her dignity, her person and her thoughts.

The letter lets us eavesdrop on Maria’s conversational style, which suggests a certain confusion in her mental functioning, if not a personality disorder. As she gathers momentum, she is relentless and unstructured, coercive and demanding. She seems to have rejected the very idea of a full stop in her letter. Might she also have refused to accept other “stops” to her run-on power? It must have been hard for Lizzy to stand up against the full onslaught of Maria’s disorganized verbal persuasions, laced as they always seemed to be with guilt inducing innuendos. Against her better judgment, Lizzy did in fact set a date, but after their marriage, as Robertson-Lorant notes, disorganization and shifting or blurred boundaries, at least in the matter of punctuation, undermined her self-confidence noticeably as she struggled to copy the often incoherent and inscrutable words of *Mardi*.

Melville’s behavior in the home and in his close circle of friends at times struck them as troubled if not actually, by our twentieth century standards, clinically insane. Arguments in the household as to proper punctuation can be seen as arguments over territory, over structure and control, over how to make meaning, not just in texts, but also in living a life. One might say the grammar of the family was confused and Lizzy, try as she might, must have had trouble making sense of it. In the end she simply endured it.

The early reception and criticism of Melville’s work, especially of *Mardi* and later *Pierre*, noted that it, too, tended to be confusing and disorienting and that it did not have either a coherent structure or a recognizable point. As I stated above, it

lacked the three traditional stages of the hero’s quest. From his experience in his home with his mother’s boundary-rejecting interference, Melville’s attempts to express thoughts and feelings about what he was experiencing would inevitably have been disorganized. Hence the digressions and perorations that violate the narrative flow. The helter-skelter outpouring of words and ideas must have struck many of his contemporary readers as a shapeless bag, full of interesting nuggets of truth and wisdom as well as vivid images, but ultimately confusing as to its purpose.

Neal Tolchin also recognizes the essentially disorganized nature of *Mardi*. “Melville’s own sense of a ‘certain something unmanageable’ a kind of explosive energy that had made him feel ‘irked, cramped & fettered’ early in the composing process, both speak directly to the disorderly, adolescent energy that infuses *Mardi*” (60). But whereas Tolchin sees this disorganization as evidence of “Melville’s unfinished, conflicted grief for, or his dangerous imaginings about, his father,” I see the disorganization as a result of a larger and more pervasive maternal influence, the drama of which Melville tried and often failed to capture and control with his art. In the end, he recreated the narrative boundary confusions rampant in his family.

Annatoo

Tolchin states that the character of Annatoo in *Mardi*, “...personifies the disorderly energy about to plunge the narrative into a wild, interminable quest” (61). Yet “disorderly energy” is non-specific, and the “interminable quest” is really another term for a shapeless narrative without closure (return or arrival) and without change in the protagonist that I have suggested is typical of narratives of invisibility.

As I have argued, the traditional quest narrative structure is impossible for Melville to complete either in life or in his art precisely because of the disorganizing influence of his mother, and the family dynamics swirling around her. Therefore, Annatoo does not vaguely personify an abstract quality of “disorderly energy,” but rather she is a specific maternal figure, whose disorganizing influence precisely mirrors Maria’s. Because Annatoo steals from the men, Samoa, Jarl and the narrator, and especially because she steals the compass the men need to find their way, she embodies the mother who prevents her son from finding his way to separation and manhood.

And because Annatoo is a thief and unreliable, she is confusion personified, but she is especially harmful to men. Her thievery obliterates their personal boundaries and property and undermines every attempt they make to separate from her and have some control over their vessel and their fate. Annatoo’s disorderliness is menacing because it mimics Maria’s confused and confusing conversational style, and her habit of undermining all opposition with her moods and her verbal circumlocutions that, like a vortex, threatens to suck all who are unfortunate enough to float nearby into its maw.

The character of Annatoo, the lone woman on board the *Parki*, married to Samoa, must have been especially confusing and hurtful for Lizzy to read. As a menacing maternal figure, she is the object of misogynistic verbal assault from her narrator whose meditations on the discomforts of Samoa’s marriage to her and on wedlock in general can be seen as expressing Melville’s own distaste for his marriage. Given that Lizzy was copying the manuscript, it could not have escaped

her notice that Melville was disparaging the very voyage upon which they both recently set sail. The narrator’s comment on their marriage, “Unlovely Annatoo! Unfortunate Samoa!” (740), may well have summed up Melville’s feelings about himself and his wife, but they could not have been a comfort to the newly married Lizzy. She must have wondered what she had gotten herself into.

Through his narrator, Melville openly refers to Samoa’s marriage to Annatoo as suicide, which not only suggests a vivid distaste for it, but also that it literally is the end of his life. Perhaps this is but one of the many ways Tolchin has argued that, “Melville obsessively focuses on death and the afterlife from the beginning to the end of *Mardi*” (64). But I argue that Melville’s verbal barb is aimed indirectly at Lizzy (who is copying the manuscript), and it strongly suggests his anger at his own married state.

Tolchin also states, “conflicted adolescent grief for Allan Melvill...is linked to *sexual issues*...[and] the need for a stable center, a viable masculine role model” (my emphasis 61). I agree that Melville’s sense of manhood was damaged by an absent father, who might have served as a helpful role model. However it is far from certain, given what we know of his fecklessness, that Allan, even if he had lived, would have served as an ideal masculine model or that Maria’s influence over her son would have been lessened.

I argue that the preoccupation with death in *Mardi* is only indirectly related to Melville’s father’s untimely departure from the world, and from Melville’s developing masculinity. The main focus is Melville himself and the captive sense that he is not able to claim his authentic self and that he is drowning in his

uncomfortable heterosexual marriage within the prison of his mother’s house. *Mardi* is partly a meditation on masculine identity under threat of annihilation by marriage and a woman. It is more powerfully a story about a hidden and threatened feminine identity. But it is not “unfinished and conflicted grief” over his father that lies at the heart of this novel and the others as well, but rather an unfinished and conflicted gender identity, which is the result of a Rite of Passage to manhood left unfinished.

If we look at *Mardi* as an incomplete rite of passage, many confusing things become clear. The great bulk of the unwieldy, disorganized and shapeless novel is suspended in the interstructural, liminal space between worlds, between departure and return. It begins with two men, the narrator and Jarl. Each of them is a cast-away, “or sailaway as the case may be” (Library of America, *Melville*, 705) alone and disconnected from home and family. They leave their ship the *Arcturion* and sail away in a small craft and soon encounter a seemingly abandoned ship, The *Parki*, which has an odd couple on board, Samoa and his wife Annatoo. The three men, like other castaways in Melville’s fiction, from Tommo to Pierre, are portrayed as having damaged or ambiguous masculinity.

Samoa is androgynous, “theatrically arrayed in kilt and turban; the kilt of calico print, the turban of China silk” (726). Like the Berkshire costume ball, which Melville attended dressed as a Turk, Samoa combines masculine and feminine attire and is sexually ambiguous. His in between status is confirmed by the narrator’s remark, “For myself, I ever regarded Samoa as but a large fragment of a man, not a complete man” (738). Like Ahab who comes after, Samoa is missing a limb, but his amputor is not a whale but a woman, his wife, Annatoo. She is a castrator in many

ways but it is significant that in costume they look very much alike. She is “dressed very much like Samoa” (726). And soon the narrator gratuitously compares Samoa’s decision to marry her as “meditating suicide” (728).

Another more visual indication that Samoa is an incomplete man are his incomplete tattoos. He is tattooed, “from crown to sole” (759) but only on one side of his body. “...He looked like a union of the unmatched moieties of two distinct beings.... When he turned around upon you suddenly, you thought you saw someone else, not him whom you had been regarding before” (759). Since tattooing is part of the rite of passage, the initiation into manhood, it is as if ritual had been somehow interrupted and was therefore left unfinished, indicating the transformation to manhood was also left incomplete. If he is only half tattooed and therefore only a fragment of a man, it is interesting to consider that his wife’s name, Annattoo, may be a conscious construction to indicate a person without tattoo, meaning female. Once again as in *Typee* and *Omoo*, Melville’s obsession with tattoos seems to suggest a fear of manhood, or rather the fear of the ordeal of bodily and psychic change that signifies the transition from boy to man.

Jarl is a silent Viking, partner of the narrator when they escape from the *Arcturion*, yet it is significant that he functions not as a generic “good parent” as Tolchin views him, and not as a father either. Jarl is quite distinctly a mother. Time and again the narrator refers to him in feminine terms. “My sea tailor plied the needle and thread; or turning laundress, hung our raiment to dry on the oars...” (712). “His fingers would be flying at their task, like an old lady knitting. Like an experienced

old wife, too...” (706). “Indeed he never spoke, unless to give pithy utterance to the wisdom of keeping one’s wardrobe in repair” (707).

Jarl, whom Tolchin has called, “The seemingly good parent” (64), becomes merely an extra mouth when, before encountering the *Parki* water runs low and a parched narrator actually wishes his “parent” dead. If Jarl is a father figure, this would seem a Freudian, oedipal wish for the father’s elimination as a rival for the mother’s attention and affection if it were not that Jarl so clearly represents the mother and there is no father/rival. Wishing him dead seems in this context to be exactly what the narrator says it is. “I wished I was alone...for one the water would hold out longer than for two” (709).

On the other hand, if we consider Melville’s conflicted identification with, and ambivalence concerning his mother to be the central dilemma of his life as well as the driving motive for his art, perhaps we can see that in the house, as in the world, there is only room for one woman at a time. Or, perhaps, the narrator’s passivity and Jarl’s caretaking (not unlike the dependent relationships between Tommo and Kory Kory in *Typee*, and Pierre and Mrs. Glendenning in *Pierre*), replicate a preoedipal relationship of mother and son which, if not counterbalanced by a strong father, soon becomes too restrictive and then menacing. Either way, it is clear that mother figures, from the caretaking captor Kory-Kory to the castrating whale to the incestuous Mrs. Glendenning, are often dangerous: emotionally, metaphorically and literally cannibalistic in Melville’s work, and their fictional sons want to escape them or destroy them.

Finally, like Jarl’s feminine caretaking, and Samoa’s androgynous dress and “incomplete” manhood, the narrator displays marked cross-gender tendencies. After Samoa, Jarl and the narrator join the natives on the canoe and begin their journey, Samoa tells the narrator that the natives regard him as, “A superior being...A sort of half and half deity” called a Taji (826). The name, Taji, a hybrid god, like the “merman” dispensing wisdom in *Moby-Dick*, suggests a dual gendered nature.

And so does his costume. In fact, it may be his costume that prompts the natives to call him Taji. Upon quitting the *Parki*, and just as the strange double hulled canoe approaches, Melville has Taji break into the action, letting the air out of the tension he has built, to inform us, “Here it must be mentioned, that from the various gay cloths and other things provided for barter by the captain of the *Parki* I had very strikingly improved my costume; making it free and flowing, and eastern. I looked like an Emir” (788). We should ask ourselves, why does the narrator feel his costume *must* be mentioned?

Once again, Melville plays on his performance in the Berkshires when he paraded at the party dressed as a Turk. In life, donning an eastern mode of dress allowed Melville to mix elements from the feminine sartorial system with those of the masculine and thus play with his gender under the guise of a costume for a party. “Eastern” can be interpreted as code for feminine and homosexual. In this novel, he uses his Berkshire strategy to play with gender in the costume of a fictional romance. As in the *Fragments* and in *Typee*, Melville is attracted to, and compelled to describe, feminine clothing, which really has no bearing on the events in the narrative. I think we must begin to notice these gratuitous gender related interruptions in his writing if

we want to move beyond the trite, traditional and often obfuscating interpretations of Melville’s life and art.

Yillah

Taji’s dual nature is indicated not only by his divine appellation, and his ambiguous dress, but also by a new character, the beautiful maiden, Yillah. She has been captured by the high priest, Aleema, and is meant for sacrifice (Aleema may be Melville’s conflation of his father’s first name, Allan, and his father-in-law’s name Lemuel, suggesting that the high priest is the fatherly patriarch who would sacrifice the woman in Melville to conventional married life). Taji’s quest for Yillah becomes the only recognizable story line and is clearly a search, in the face of a threat, to find, or rescue for the feminine part of himself.

When they first encounter the ceremonial canoe, Taji says there is “no woman on board” (791), and in a certain ironic sense this is true, since the lovely Yillah is really the feminine half of Taji. It is also true to the taboo of women not being allowed in canoes, which is a pivotal part of the transgression in Fayaway’s canoe scene in *Typee*. How Yillah is introduced, hidden in a tent on board a craft taboo to women, conveys her ambiguous nature and her symbolic purpose of representing the hidden feminine in Taji. His oddly unmotivated but nevertheless intense personal investment in her life is made clear almost immediately.

Taji is told that the “beautiful maiden” is being borne as “an offering from the island of Amma, to the gods of Tedaiee” (793). Upon hearing this Taji says, “...how stirred was my soul toward this invisible victim...” and without even seeing her he

declares, “I was bent upon rescuing the captive” (793). Soon he is totally consumed by her. “My whole soul [was] full of thoughts of the captive” (794). When the priest, Aleema, tries to evict Taji, Samoa and Jarl from the canoe. Taji, who has been a passive narrator up until now, suddenly draws a cutlass and “made a quick lunge” thereby killing the priest (795). It is clear the maiden means more to him than the peril of his immediate circumstances. It is as if the whole purpose of the canoe’s appearance in the story is to introduce the reason for the story, the hidden maiden meant for sacrifice.

Upon entering the tent, Taji is taken with her unusual appearance, her, “snow white skin; blue, firmament eyes...” and says, “For the soul of me I could not link this mysterious creature with the tawny strangers” (798). She is white, like him, an idealized European/American and, like Taji, surrounded by “tawny strangers.” But he suggests her unreality when he says, “Did I dream?” And when he says, “...the maiden crouching in the further corner...was wholly screened from all eyes but mine” we instinctively feel she is a dream, or his invisible other self (798). Her familiarity is enhanced by her ability to understand English and by Taji’s ability to understand her, for even though she does not speak English, Taji states that her language “seemed familiar,” and when she relates her story the full meaning seems clear to him (799).

In spite of his willingness to risk his life for her, Taji relates her “unearthly story” in such a way that we are never able to see her as real. She seems to be more a pure potential, like a Winnicottian True Self. “She declared herself more than mortal” and “by some mystical power she had been spirited away from Amma, the

place of her nativity” (799). Then in a scene of Spenserian liminality or Ovidian metamorphosis, she is magically and fatefully “...snared by the tendrils of a vine” and “Drawing her into its bowers it gently transformed her into one of its blossoms, leaving her conscious soul folded up in the transparent petals” (799). “Here hung Yillah in a trance, the world without all tinged with the rosy hue of her prison” (799). “Her spirit was about to burst forth in the opening flower” when “the blossom was snapped from its stem and borne by a soft wind to the sea, where it fell into the opening valve of a shell which in good time was cast upon the beach of the island Amma” (799). Yillah is found by Aleema. She condenses out of a mist. “Enshrined as a goddess, the wonderful child now tarried” in a sacred temple only visible to Aleema.

After Taji kills Aleema (a kind of patricide), he decides to take Yillah with him. Still enshrined in her tent and hidden from view to all, Taji, assisted by Samoa and Jarl, transfers her to his boat. When the narrator tells us she is concerned about all the commotion this has stirred and asks about Aleema, Taji paints a picture of their childhood together and says:

Think not of him...look on me. Am I not white like yourself...am I not as you? They snatched you away from your isle in the sea, too early for you to remember me there. But you have not been forgotten by me, sweetest Yillah...Still forgetful? Know you not my voice? Those little spirits in your eyes have seen me before...Think of the time when we ran up and down in our arbor...Oh Yillah, little Yillah, has it come to this? Am I forever forgotten? Yet over the wide watery world I have sought thee...and now we part not (805).

Nothing previous prepares us for Taji’s confession. Is it true? Or is it just a story to capture the maiden’s loyalty and calm her down? The intrusion of this heartfelt history seems as if it had been waiting there all along, long before they left

the *Arcturion*, before the *Parki*, indeed before the *Arcturion* ever set sail. It speaks of a longing from Melville’s childhood.

If she were just a singular instance, it would be possible to see Yillah as a romantic spirit well within the Spenserian or Romantic vein of magical women, but she needs to be seen in the context of Melville’s entire body of work. It is possible to see in this impossible scenario, the desperate drawing of physical similarities and a shared childhood as a precursor to the buried child in the poem “Immolated.” Yillah is a representation of Melville’s inner girl child who was separated from him and forced into the limbo of non-recognition by the cultural forces surrounding her. She is a prisoner sacrificed to patriarchal values and norms and Taji even says she is “about to be immolated” (793), employing the same burning image Melville will use years later to mourn his youthful girl self. Yillah is hidden from view in painful isolation and non-recognition like Marianna of *The Piazza* and Isabel, Pierre’s illegitimate sister.

We can imagine Melville’s ecstatic sense of transgression at being able finally to represent himself in this way in his work. *Mardi* was his first coming out and it was also his first career disappointment. Coming out is often met with rejection and his fictional one was no exception. His public did not understand what Yillah was about any more than they would later comprehend the equally mysterious phantom self--Isabel.

But if Yillah was Melville’s artistic coming out, and if the passion of Taji to rescue her is to be believed, it is hard to understand her failure to materialize out of the dream stuff that surrounds her. Still in her tent of words, she is as invisible to us

as she is to Jarl and Samoa. Partly because of the strictly narrative style, with no action or interaction, no dialog, even Taji, the narrator, remains invisible to us. Things told to us are not as real as things seen, and Melville’s art here is mostly telling not showing, hence the invisibility. Significantly, the only thing Melville thinks is important to tell us about Taji is what he is wearing when he meets the canoe with Aleema and Yillah on board.

Almost immediately after landing on the islet of Odo, Taji meets King Media and gets distracted by other things. Occasionally he returns to Yillah but they do not interact, consummate their love or plan an escape. She stays in her tent and muses. Then suddenly she disappears, (a common fate for a Melville woman) and Taji wonders aloud if she were a phantom. “Yillah! Yillah! Cry the small strange voices in me....Days passed. When one morning I found the arbor vacant. Gone! A dream.” (856).

Almost immediately, in the place opened up (made possible) by Yillah’s disappearance, we are introduced to three kinds of artists: Babbalanga the philosopher, Mohi, the story teller and Yoomy the poet singer. All three embody Melville’s art, his wish to have his say on diverse topics and on different levels, but it is Yoomy (You-me) the poet, who both in character and name suggests that he stands in for his author.

Yoomy is described as we imagine Melville must have been from the descriptions of family and friends: “He was a capricious mortal; so swayed by contrary moods; so lofty, so humble, so sad, so merry; so made up of a thousand contradictions...no one in Mardi comprehended him” (859). It is Yoomy who

expresses “deep concern” for the loss of Yillah and when the band of men set sail to explore the Mardian archipelago, Yoomy says: ”The dawn of the day is passed, and Mardi lies all before us...and be this voyage full gaily sailed, for Yillah will yet be found” (862).

But then all thoughts of Yillah seem to vanish and we are taken on a long meandering journey filled with strange made up names that sound like the babblings of a child, and through an incomprehensible landscape. Yoomy then fades into the back ground and soon we meet the King of Juam, Donjalolo, whose “comeliness...was so feminine, that sometimes he was called ‘Fonoo,’ or Girl” (878).

And if Yoomy’s characteristic moodiness mirrored Melville’s, Donjalolo’s appearance and domestic circumstances and his odd behavior seem eerily reminiscent of Melville’s as well. There is a shared sense of captivity. “Donjalolo was famed for many uncommon traits: but more especially for certain peculiar deprivations, under which he labored” (880). And later:

Not more effeminate Sardanapalus, than he. And at intervals, he was the victim of unaccountable vagaries; haunted by specters, and beckoned by the ghost of his sires. At times loathing his vicious pursuits, which brought him no solid satisfaction, but ever filled him with disgust he would resolve to amend his ways; solacing himself for his bitter captivity, by the society of the wise and discrete. But brief the interval; of repentance. Anew, he burst into excesses, a hundred fold more insane than ever (886).

“Willamilla, the hereditary abode of the young monarch of Juam,” is described as a prison (886). Donjalolo is forbidden to wander the archipelago of Mardi and his kingship is represented sartorially by a regal girdle he must wear. He says it, “...would clasp my waist less tightly than my soul would be banded by the mountains of Willamilla”(883).

When Taji wonders, “Was Yillah immured in this strange retreat?” you can almost hear Melville wondering out loud if the woman in him was still there amid the domestic chaos of his marriage and his mother’s house. “Ah me! His harem, like all large families, was the delight and the torment of the days and nights of Donjalolo” (905).

Soon, having outlived their usefulness, Jarl and Samoa leave the story and the desultory search for Yillah moves on.

All feminine personas in Melville are multivalent, ambiguous and contradictory vehicles for impersonating their author. Melville/Taji recounts Annatoo’s thefts and cannibalism, her constant undermining of the men aboard by stealing their compass and their navigation charts, her ugliness and her treachery, yet at the end, he says, “The dame, perdu, remained, silent and invisible as a spirit. But in her own good time she would mysteriously emerge; or be suddenly espied lounging quietly, in the forecastle, as if she had been there from all eternity... Marvelous Annatoo! Who can expound thee?” (763). If Annatoo is a malign maternal cannibal in one sense, she is also a mysterious feminine self in another, imagined as being hidden inside like the queenly personality in Ahab, as long as the man shall live. As to if, when or how she might have “mysteriously emerge[d]” in Melville’s home is not recorded and must be left for a scholar to suggest and the reader to imagine.

Annatoo, the marvelous and malign threatener of masculine identity, has a counterpart in the last part of the novel. She is the evil queen Hautia, the dominatrix of the end of *Mardi* who threatens the protagonist’s elusive feminine identity. Yet,

she is connected to Yillah in a way the narrator fails to name. He merely alludes.

“Nevertheless, in some mysterious way seemed Hautia and Yillah connected. But Yillah was all beauty and innocence; my crown of felicity; my heaven below; --and Hautia my whole heart abhorred. Yillah I sought; Hautia sought me... Yet now I was wildly dreaming to find them together” (1305).

In a scene that echoes Spenser’s “Bower of Bliss” in *The Fairey Queene*, Melville gives us the Spenserian landscape of “Flozella--a-Nina” (1304). “And fifty nymphs preceding, who now follows from bowers, with gliding artful steps: --the very snares of love!—Hautia. A gorgeous amaryllis in her hand; Cerce-flowers in her ears; her girdle tied with vervain” (1307). And just like the Red Knight in the Bower, Taji “...dashed aside their cups, and flowers. Still rang the vale with Yillah!” (1308).

Hautia suddenly disappears and Mohi, a fellow traveler, says, “...the maidens of Hautia are all Yillahs, held captive, unknown to themselves; and...Hautia, their enchantress, is the most treacherous of queens” (1309). This suggests a seductive maternal power and its deadly effect on the hidden feminine gender identity of a son. Hautia and Yillah are one, two sides of the same feminine identification. Yillah, the feminine in Melville, is the eternal captive of the mother who gave birth to her and yet will not (cannot) recognize her existence. If the first part of *Mardi* is worried about manhood, the middle and end are concerned with an elusive and yearned for feminine identity, personified in the beautiful maiden, Yillah, and thwarted by the maternal dominatrix, Hautia (a name that reminds us of the word often used to describe Maria: “Haughty”).

Tolchin has said that Yillah represents Melville's quest for a feminine creativity. But what does that actually mean? What are the practical daily manifestations of such a "quest"? How would that impact his family relationships? We should ask ourselves why any man would *want* to have, or express, a "feminine" creativity--whatever that is. I argue that Melville is not *seeking* a feminine creativity. He is trying to express what already exists, his feminine identity.

By definition, femininity is a collection of attributes culturally assigned to women, not men. And so, to be seeking a "feminine" creativity makes no sense for a man, unless he *feels* like a woman, unless he identifies himself and his creative impulse as feminine. Melville's feminine identification would almost certainly be constructed from the same cultural codes that were operating in biological women of his time. His image of the woman he feels himself to be is completely conventional, based on his mother's model. His attempts to write *about* the woman in himself are not quests for a so-called feminine creativity but efforts to express what language itself is inadequate to grasp. He wanted to be a successful writer in a man's world, as popular as Hawthorne, Cooper and Irving, but his deep subject, his feminine identification, was a condition absolutely incomprehensible to the men and women of his time and his effort to deal with that conundrum muddled his work and doomed his career. This is the recurring and inescapable thing I keep running up against with every Melville page I turn.

Maria's maternal influence within the family is perhaps an extreme example of what Bruno Bettelheim observed in preliterate societies. As Bettelheim points out, it is male envy of the women's dominant role in childbearing, in creating life, that is

at the root of rites that seek to (paradoxically) differentiate the male by duplicating the mother’s role in a young boy’s life. Rites of Passage are designed to compete with the power and mystery of female procreation. Men in these societies created a complex, secret and symbolic rite which was barred to women, but which mimicked women’s birthing. The boy enters the domain of the ritual and emerges as from a birth to the world of men. After the rite, the boy can legitimately say “Now I am a man,” and the community affirms his new status.

An integral part of the Rite of Passage is the marking of the body in some way. Often it is circumcision. As an example of male attempts to mimic female genitalia, Bettelheim mentions the radical surgery called “subincision” practiced in a few areas of the world, but notably in Central Australia. This is not actually circumcision, *per se*. It is “the slitting open of the penile urethra along the ventral or underside of the penis from the glans to the root of the scrotum” (100).

Early anthropologists, Spencer and Gillian, noted that subincision is equivalent to the opening of the vulva,” and Roth states “that on the principle of a form of mimicry, the analogous sign was inflicted on the male to denote corresponding fitness on his part.” (In Bettelheim 103). It is also interesting to note that men who have had subincision must from then on urinate like a woman, in a seated or squatting position, not standing up as pre-ritualized boys do. It is Bettelheim’s thesis that it is the male insecurity regarding his importance in the act of creating life that lead to the rites that seek to mimic women’s more obvious role. Doubts as to the role of the male in procreation, according to Bettelheim, “are as likely as total absence of knowledge to create insecurity and lead to compensating

measures” (104). These anthropological insights into mother envy would seem to turn the Freudian notion of penis envy on its head.

It is exactly this kind of compensation I am attempting to ascribe to Melville. Physical efforts to mimic women’s anatomy and procreative role may seem a far cry from Melville in nineteenth century America, but my thesis about Melville rests on maternal identification as a compensatory strategy. It is a way of compensating for the ways in which his mother impinged upon his life: her unreliable presence in his infancy, her depressive emotional absence alternating with intrusive demands, and her performance of her grief in which her children were made to be her audience.

Melville’s primary method of managing his relationship with his mother, of maintaining closeness and obtaining nurturing from her, took the form of an intense identification with her. We can see how Melville’s identification with his mother might incite envy of her and lead to his own efforts to mimic her procreative position in his family by dominating the household with his writing and adopting a similar bossy and dominating literary style.

Also his preoccupation with women’s clothes and what is hidden under them, and themes of damaged manhood would seem to echo the anthropological evidence of male envy of women’s power. Though it is unlikely in his era that he would ever have considered surgically imitating his mother’s form and procreative equipment, it is clear from the biographies that he had a combative relationship with his mother and his wife, which we can see was at least in part founded on envy of their privileged position as women.

Robertson-Lorant has stated that in Melville’s *Redburn*, “Harry Bolton is Redburn’s psychological double, the repressed feminine side of himself ...” but then goes on to make the astonishing and contradictory claim that this feminine side “must be nurtured if he is to achieve full manhood” (208). This seems like the kind of pop psychology voiced in the movie, *Tootsie*. An actor, (Dustin Hoffman), pretends to be a woman in order to get work on a soap opera. In the end, he states that this experience taught him that his feminine side “was the best part of my manhood.” Robertson-Lorant seems to be saying something similar. Using the same kind of flimsy Jungian argument, she wants to see masculine and feminine *qualities* united into some idealized notion of a complete and psychologically whole personality. But as is often the case in discussions of sexuality and gender, even the identities we are attempting to clarify get muddled.

What I am saying, perhaps at the risk of making the same mistake, is that there is a distinct and persistently strong feminine identity, a “subsystem” or if you wish, a second self inside Herman Melville. This “woman” in Melville undermined his masculinity making the nascent man in him seem false and weak by comparison, and turned every aspect of his manhood into a willed and uncomfortable performance. Having to mimic the qualities of a man accentuated the sense of falseness.

Unlike Jung, the thesis in *Tootsie* or Robertson-Lorant, Melville’s own kind of gender mixing does not result in the comforting achievement of an ideal “full manhood.” Rather, his art (as well as some of his odd social behavior) describes a binary gender split within one conflicted and irresolvably divided self—what Clifford

Geertz has described in another context as a, “Bifurcate conception of the self, half ungestured feeling and half unfelt gesture” (*Local Knowledge* 61). Winnicott might say that the bifurcate self is the True and False Self.

As we have seen, Melville often tried to manifest his “bifurcate” self by conflating masculine and feminine characteristics in feminine men: Harry Bolton and Carlo in *Redburn*, Yoomy in *Mardi*, Marnoo in *Typee*, and masculine women (Fayaway, in *Typee* and the female astronomer in “After the Pleasure Party” who says “Could I remake me! Or set free this sexless bound in sex”).

But as if to strike a compromise, Melville suggests a third gender. Just at the point where the woman in the text vanishes, she is immediately replaced by a womanly man. When Yillah vanishes, Yoomy (you-me) the poet appears. When Fayaway vanishes, Marnoo the shaman appears who literally can pass with impunity between two cultures, the fierce Typees and the peaceful (feminine) Happers. When Harry Bolton disappears, another womanly man, Carlo, the singer with the “amazing organ” appears. These feminine men and masculine women often turn out to be artists and here is where Robertson-Lorant and Tolchin seem to have touched on the same point about Melville: they both suggest that Melville views his own creativity as feminine.

The Neutral Zone

When Tolchin says that Yillah, “becomes his creative landscape...” (72). The term “landscape” opens up an interesting spatial way to look at Melville’s creativity that can be tied to Winnicott’s notion of “Transitional space” and the “Neutral zone”

where creative or True Self can play. It also reminds us of Van Gennep, Turner and Geertz’s anthropological discussion of the third stage of the Rite of Passage, the transitional or liminal stage that is betwixt and between asexual childhood and sexual manhood.

In a Chapter called “Playing: Creative Activity and the Search for the Self”

Winnicott states:

The Search can only come from desultory formless functioning, or perhaps from rudimentary playing, *as if in a neutral zone*. It is only here, in this unintegrated state of the personality, that that which we describe as creative can appear” (My emphasis *Playing and Reality* 64).

Melville’s work often seems formless and desultory. His art is the very picture of the split off, “unintegrated” nature of his true feminine self and his weak or less than “muscular” masculine self. Perhaps Winnicott has put his finger on what makes Melville’s art so frustrating and (to us) so compelling at the same time. It is because Melville doesn’t care about us, about our needs for form and closure, for arrival. He is busy playing, creating art out of the unintegrated parts of his own personality. The very formlessness of it is the very condition of it--as art. He is playing--with himself.

Winnicott has called this area of play a “transitional space” or specifically a “neutral zone” which connects to the term anthropologists like Geertz, Van Gennep and Turner use for the middle stage of an initiation rite. My argument is that Melville and his castaway males are stuck in the liminal or transitional stage of a Rite of Passage to adult manhood that never takes place, that is left unfinished, as it is literally with Samoa’s partial tattooing in *Mardi*. But this liminal zone of transition is

also an area of creative play. That Melville manages to maintain this space, and the liminal self that refuses to (or cannot) emerge into reality, even under the intense pressure of marriage and his intrusive, demanding mother is a testament to the strength of his will, one might say his omnipotent will, to do his own thing even if it is banned. For as he said to Hawthorne, “What I feel most moved to write, that is banned, it will not pay. Yet, altogether write the *other* way I cannot” (N MD 557).

Robertson-Lorant backs away from any notion of an absolutely feminine Melville. Instead, she says he “became aware of his bisexuality during his cruise to Liverpool” (208). I argue he was aware of his feminine nature as early as three years old and that he was painfully aware, from that time forward, of his falseness as a man.

His trip to Liverpool is important for the arresting, but often overlooked, passage that describes his private ritual the night before he departs. On the eve of his departure, he hangs a towel over the keyhole for absolute privacy and then cuts his own hair and dresses himself in the rough uniform of a sailor. The scene is full of “private symbols” and so its significance has remained invisible to most readers. Uncannily it duplicates a rite of passage. Van Gennep and Bettelheim and many others report that rites of passage always include forms of ritual marking of the body, not only circumcision but also knocking out of the front teeth, scarring or tattooing of the skin and cutting of the hair.

Like other ritual markings, hair cutting signifies separation. “To cut one’s hair is to separate oneself from the previous world:...in the shorn hair, as in the foreskin...there resides a portion of the personality” (Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* 167). It is interesting to ponder whether Melville might have thought that by

cutting off his unusually long hair he might be able to shed his feminine feelings and finally be unequivocally a man. According to Van Gennep, “...there is a reason why a rite of passage should affect the hair. In its form, color, length, and arrangement it is a characteristic distinguishing an individual as much as a group, and is easily recognized” (167). Might Melville’s hair have represented his recognition of himself as feminine, as belonging to that group socially distinguishable by their long hair? And might he have cut his hair to sever that tie to the feminine world in hopes that by setting sail in short hair he could arrive in the world of men?

According To Van Gennep, “To cross a threshold is to unite oneself with a new world...rites carried out on the threshold are transition rites” (Van Gennep 20). The scene on the eve of his departure, behind a locked door with a towel over the keyhole *is* a transition rite. Melville imagines and enacts a private ritual that marks a transition and a crossing of a threshold. Yet, it is also, at the same time a rite of separation.

Van Gennep states, “Rites which involve cutting something...especially the first hair cut...and the rite of putting clothes on...are generally rites of separation” (53). This rite of separation severs Melville/Redburn psychologically from his mother’s world much as the first cutting of the umbilical cord physically separates the child from its mother.

This ritual haircutting could also fall into the category of a “purge.” In both Docter and Bailey’s interviews, transvestites report that they engaged in periodic purges to rid themselves of feminine clothing in an effort to put the compulsion to cross-dress forever behind them. These purges are almost never successful

representing as they do an irresolvable conflict between the desire to quit a socially unacceptable practice that is fraught with guilt and danger, but which is felt to be so necessary, even vital, to the self. Just as pouring a bottle of scotch down the drain is rarely the cure for alcoholism, throwing a dress away is not the antidote for the emerging feminine identity’s need for expression and recognition, or the anxious male’s need for the undeniable comfort and solace wearing feminine clothing provides.

For Melville, as for the transvestite, purges may represent an effort to, in effect, initiate himself into an impregnable manhood, to create a permanent separation from mother identification, which would act like a fortress against the seductive insurgencies of his feminine feelings. But because it is a private act, unsupported and unrecognized by other men, the private symbols are too weak to carry the transformative weight community rites do. Therefore, the separation remains incomplete. The result is the infinite expansion of the liminal, interstructural zone of transition without hope of arrival.

As Van Gennep states, “Whoever passes from one [territory] to the other finds himself physically and magico-religiously in a special situation for a certain length of time; he wavers between worlds” (18). As one might reasonably expect, this wavering between worlds is fraught with uncertainty and anxiety. The anxiety Redburn feels is represented in the text by a short statement, “As soon as I got into the shirt I began to feel a sort of warm and red about the face” (*Redburn* 68). But after he cuts his “hair, which was very long” he says, “I thought every little would

help, in making me a light hand to run aloft” (*Redburn* 68). Clearly, he feels he needs all the help he can get to become a man.

To get himself up the mast of manhood he lightens his load by shedding his feminine identification as represented by his hair. Yet there is no one there to mentor him, validate or affirm his crossing and no community of men to welcome him “aloft.” The anxiety particularly associated with threshold crossings, with being betwixt and between states is accentuated when there is no community support, when one has to make the crossing all alone. And of course without affirmation by a community, the arrival at a new identity will not stick. It will remain liminal and interstructural.

After the rite of separation, Redburn enters the liminal transitional state between worlds and this Van Gennep has also called a kind of neutral zone. “The neutral zones are ordinarily deserts, marshes and most frequently virgin forests where everyone has full rights to travel and hunt...territories on either side of the neutral zone are sacred in relation to whoever is in the zone, but the zone, in turn is sacred for the inhabitants of adjacent territories” (18).

The freedom of the neutral zone is also its danger, because there are no governing rules there and no one controls it. Anything can happen. As Redburn sails out of New York Harbor, he passes through the Narrows, and his description of it uncannily anticipates later anthropological understandings of the threshold and the neutral zone.

When you go in or out, it seems like going in or out of a door-way; and when you go out of these Narrows on a long voyage like this of mine it seems like going out into the broad highway where not a soul is to be seen. For far and away, stretches the great Atlantic Ocean; and

all you can see beyond is where the sky comes down to the water. It looks lonely and desolate enough,...It seemed too strange and wonderful and altogether incredible, that there could really be cities towns and villages...way over that wide blank sea (80-81).

In using the term “wide blank sea” Melville associates the sea with a formless void, exactly the kind of transitional, interstructural, neutral zone that marks the liminal area betwixt and between worlds.

As Redburn passes the ruined fort on Staten Island he yearns for his dead father and says the now famous lines that most biographers believe express Melville’s own feeling about his father: “I must not think of those delightful days before my father became a bankrupt, and died...for when I think of those days something rises up in my throat and almost strangles me” (82).

The feeling of strangulation is also a symptom of the anxiety of the threshold made especially painful and poignant because he has just told us he has no father to guide him. He literally and metaphorically feels “thrust out of the world” (83).

I see Melville attempting, perhaps in his art more intensely than in his life, not only to make such a transition, but also to describe it, and that is why I resist using the term “bisexual” for him. I think it is a false category, a sort of equivocation under social pressure to have it both ways and avoid the stigma of a socially unacceptable cross-gender identification and homosexual object choice. Melville is attempting to write the dilemma of difference and the difficulty of making the transition from one gender to another, expressing the madness that lies between them.

In contrast, bisexuality suggests a casual almost comfortable state of being happily both and I do not believe such a state is possible in a binary world. It is a term that does not allow for the pain and the complexity of feeling truly feminine in a

masculine body, or of feeling stuck between two conflicting social positions and not being able to settle comfortably and be at peace on either side. Bi-sexuality is just a socially convenient word for that middle ground (another liminal, interstructural space) that refuses to “arrive” at a socially inconvenient truth.

Perhaps out of sympathy with the feminine man’s struggle they suspect in Melville’s work, Tolchin and Robertson-Lorant frame their arguments gently and abstractly in order to avoid confronting directly what our society is still too divided to accept. Bettelheim attempts in his own way to heal the painful split in the human psyche that society, for its own reasons, refuses to recognize:

If we could give greater recognition to boys’ desire to bear children, to the desire of male adolescents and adult men for the more passive and leisurely enjoyment of life instead of having always to “fight and strut” our boys and men might feel less envy and anxious hostility toward girls and women (151).

It is tempting to think that if Bettelheim’s wish for social recognition of feminine wishes in men had been practiced in Melville’s time he might have found a way to have the life he wanted. But if so, it is impossible not to wonder: If he had had social recognition for his feminine feelings, would he have created *Moby-Dick*, *Mardi* or *Pierre*. If, instead of being a perennial castaway, Melville had arrived safely at the port of heterosexual manhood, would he have arrived there an artist?

Of course, we can never know for certain, but I suspect Melville’s feminine identity hidden inside the body of a man is like the proverbial pearl in the oyster. It is a grain of truth too sharply painful and irregular to pass in society until it is all covered in the shiny iridescence of art. When, at the autopsy, it is discovered, it suddenly becomes worth something in the market place. But the truth of the pearl

still remains hidden. Like little children with a glittery toy, we are drawn to the light of the pearl and not the socially uncomfortable grain of truth at its core. And a pearl sliced in half is of no value at all, so scholars prefer to play in the ever-shifting light of the pearl’s surface and see many important images there that remind them of themselves and their interests.

Not for the first time has it been suggested that art and madness are twins. Melville himself suggests as much when he says that Pip’s madness is a kind of wisdom because “He saw god’s foot upon the treadle and spoke it, therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man’s insanity is heaven’s sense” (N *MD* 347). The “special lunacy” of Ahab and Melville, and the other castaways of Melville’s fiction, are cases in point. Their shipmates and friends on shore as well, call them mad because they are “fast fish,” and their struggle “is all that the world sees, and it naturally misunderstands them” (Menninger *The Human Mind*).

Redburn’s desolation and loneliness on the “wide blank sea” anticipates Pip floating alone on the vast infinity of the ocean, which, while it kept his body up it drowned his soul. They both represent the special madness of the invisible boy, the fatherless unincorporated male child who inhabits an interminable threshold state without hope of arrival.

CHAPTER 5

What Falls Between: Pierre Adrift In the Binaries

“Say a woman is a man, or you yourself a stork.” *Mardi*
 “Could I remake me!” *After the Pleasure Party*
 You abide where you are...and it is impossible to get elsewhere.
Mardi

The first problem for Pierre is that he is invisible: to his mother who sees him paradoxically as both her surrogate husband and a part of herself, and to his dead father, who, on his death bed, fails to recognize him, and finally, and most importantly, to himself. The second problem for Pierre is that he thinks he may be a girl, or that at least that an important part of him is. These two problems are connected. Unfortunately for both *Pierre* and Melville these problems turned out to be socially and artistically irresolvable. In the nineteenth century, as far as gender was concerned, there could be only male or female. In a binary world, “What falls between is darkness” (Geertz). Artistically, what falls between is the liminal ambiguity, and critical failure, of works like *Pierre*. In his art and in his life Melville was adrift between the binaries of male and female, and found it “impossible to get elsewhere.”

Growing up invisible and feeling feminine is a painful problem for a male in a strictly binary and heterosexual culture. Yet, it might pass unnoticed as a problem for a female, since women were accustomed to being both politically and legally invisible in the 19th Century. For women then as now, the frustration and anger caused by social invisibility can lead to domination, which Hegel and Benjamin both said is founded on the desire to be recognized. In a culture that denies women full

equality and responsibility in the public sphere, women find their only sphere of influence is in the home and in the lives of their children. Yet as we have seen this is a concentration of intimate power, a domination, so solipsistic and insular, that societies the world over have constructed elaborate and painful rites of passage for males (and females, too) in order to counteract them.

The center of Melville is *Pierre*; if one would understand him, one must understand this book above all others

E. L. Grant Watson

Most biographers look to *Pierre* for clues to Melville's enigmatic life and especially his relationship with his mother. I have argued that to understand the dilemma of the woman in Melville we need to look first at the mother figures in Melville's work. Like Annatoo and Hautia in *Mardi*, like the whale in *Moby-Dick* and the cunning caretakers, Korry-Kory in *Typee* and Babo in *Benito Cereno*, a Melvillian mother figure, like her real life counterpart, is always a controlling, cannibalizing force to be reckoned with. This dominatrix reaches her apotheosis in the character of Mary Glendinning in *Pierre*. She is not the first powerful mother in Western Literature and she will certainly not be the last, but her association with sensitive young men is significant. "Sensitive" has become code for homosexual, or just another way of saying that the boy lacks "a muscular manhood" as Pierre says, capable of withstanding the coercive pressure of maternal love and devotion.

We often see mothers represented as cannibals in the works of homosexual men who have a strong feminine identification, specifically D. H. Lawrence and Tennessee Williams who both characterize mother love as devouring. It is no accident that both these writers also cite Melville in their work.

A particularly pertinent example of a mother who, like Mrs. Glendinning, is a voracious, dominating woman, is Violet Venable in Williams' play, *Suddenly Last Summer*. In a chilling scene, Violet cites Melville's "Encantadas" and then describes going to the Galapagos Islands on a kind of pilgrimage with her son. Foreshadowing her son's eventual homosexual martyrdom, her son is named Sebastian. Mother and son consciously attempt to replicate Melville's own journey by sailing in "a four-masted schooner, as close as possible to the kind of boat that Melville must have sailed on" (8).

Violet describes a harrowing scene (not found in Melville but which is also a foreshadowing of Sebastian's demise) of newly hatched baby sea turtles scampering toward the safety of the sea and on their way being devoured by sea birds. The scene serves as a metaphor for Violet and her fatal "love will," as Lawrence would have put it. The image of baby sea turtles fleeing to the safety of the sea could serve as a metaphor, too, for Melville's own flight from the lee shore of home, not just to earn a living in his impoverished and uneducated state, but also to escape his mother, perhaps the devouring sea bird perched on the hearth of the Melville home in Lansingburgh.

Violet Venable is similar to other Williams' mothers: Mrs. Winemuller in *Summer and Smoke*, and the unforgettable Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* who dominate their children and from whom their sons and daughters, too, desperately long to escape. Part of the reason for this desire to flee is that the mother and son share too much, their psyches are intertwined to such a degree that their children feel suffocated. Mothers like Violet and Mrs. Glendinning take up all the air

in the room, causing their children to gasp (and in the case of Sebastian, fatally) at life in their struggle against their mother's domineering neediness. Part of their struggle is against their too deeply ingrained identification with her, which first begins with a sense of pride at being considered her equal but ends tragically with a sense of being her slave.

Violet describes her relationship to her son proudly as one of equals: "We were a famous couple. People didn't speak of Sebastian and his mother...they said 'Sebastian and Violet, Violet and Sebastian are staying at the Lido, they are at the Ritz in Madrid. Sebastian and Violet, Violet and Sebastian have taken a house at Biarritz for the season'" (12).

Similarly, Melville's narrator describes Pierre's relationship to his mother as one of equals. Very like Violet Venable, Pierre's mother, too, is a "haughty widow" who could have any man she wanted but that her "reverential and devoted son seemed lover enough..." (American Library, *Melville*, 8). When she looks at her boy she fancies she sees, "her own graces strangely translated.... There was a striking resemblance between them" (9). And the narrator tells us that whereas she stayed preternaturally youthful, Pierre "met her half way" and "almost advanced himself to that mature stand-point in Time, where his pedestaled mother so long had stood" (9). "They were wont to call each other brother and sister. Both in public and in private this was their usage" (9). In these descriptions alone we are able to see that both the gender and generational boundaries are blurred between Mrs. Glendinning and her son.

In *Sex and Gender* Robert Stoller discusses the “The Mother’s Contribution to Transsexualism” (1975) and describes a mother/son relationship that also resembles those in *Suddenly Last Summer* and *Pierre*: “She never talked about him as though she was a mother talking about her son. When she described a conversation they had had, it always sounded as though two equals had been conversing in a sensitive, imaginative understanding and giving way” (111). As a result, according to Stoller, he incorporates her gender *and* her adult status. “...in view of the marked identification with his mother, he may have felt himself to have incorporated her adulthood (i.e. omnipotence)” (119).

Omnipotence figures prominently in the character of Ahab in *Moby-Dick* and it is worth recalling at this point Melville’s own domination of his household and what his family referred to as his being “strange with his mother.” Perhaps these are a consequence of his too close relationship with her, which did not recognize a generational (or gender) boundary between them.

According to Stoller, “When a boy’s father does not put an end to this process of two people of opposite sexes *devouring each other’s gender*, the boy who feels he is a girl may be produced” (my emphasis 125). This is the process I am proposing for Pierre (and Melville). Pierre and his mother do indeed devour each other’s gender. She cannibalistically devours his potential manhood and, deprived of it, he feeds on her femininity in order to survive in the family drama she has created, so that in the end it becomes impossible to discern gender as well as generational difference between them. This struggle between mother and son as equals may be the situation Melville’s family could find no way to describe other than “strange.”

Five decades before Stoller, (and Williams' *Suddenly Last Summer*), D. H. Lawrence, in his *Fantasia of The Unconscious*, speaks as a son who had experienced a voracious mother first hand. He also uses the word "devour" to characterize the uses a mother may make of her son as cannibalistic:

Seeking fulfillment in the deep passional self...the unhappy woman beats about for her insatiable satisfaction, seeking whom she may *devour*. And usually, she turns to her child. Here she provokes what she wants. Here in her own son who belongs to her, she seems to find the last perfect response for which she is craving. He is a medium to her, she provokes from him her own answer (my emphasis 157).

The picture Melville paints of Pierre's relationship with his mother, one who uses her son to fulfill her own "insatiable satisfaction," is chilling in its incestuous closeness: "Sister Mary, said Pierre...tapping on his mother's chamber door... Do you not smell something like coffee, my sister?" (20). She opens her door and invites her son in. Seductively she says, "But come, you shall finish my toilet;--here, brother" (20). She hands him a ribbon and: "He gracefully passed the ribbon around her neck, simply crossing the ends in front" (20). When she coyly asks what it to hold it in place, Pierre says, "I am going to try to tack it with a kiss--there!" (20). The "courteous lover-like adoration of Pierre" for his mother strikes the reader as romantic in the heterosexual sense, but also, curiously, like two sisters playing together. In each case it is a familiar and well choreographed dance.

Melville may be partially aware of the obstacles to heterosexuality, or indeed any other close relationship, this kind of mother/son bond presents when he says, "This softened spell which still wheeled the mother and son in one orbit of joy *seemed* a glimpse of the glorious possibility..." of all other "less signal relations of our many chequered life" (my emphasis 23). The word "seemed" foreshadows its

disappointing opposite: relationships made fatally *impossible* because of the devouring, unseverable bond of the mother/son dyad and the maternal identification that makes the son an outcast in his society.

Yet there are times when Pierre's mother turns bossy and domineering, placing herself temporarily above him, as when she lectures Pierre on proper manners toward servants, or when she says, "Never rave, Pierre; and never rant" (25). In her efforts to control his feelings we can see, as in her descriptions of him, that she identifies with *him* and does not think of him as masculine. She is the dominant partner in their "marriage," referring to him over and over as submissive. "Pierre, so sweetly docile," "Such sweet docilities" (27). And when she comments on his "abundant hair," "See his hair!" it is as if he was, not just a pet or pal, but a girl friend or a prideful reflection of herself. And her need for this docile reflective surface in which she can uncritically see herself is obviously so vital to her life, to her sense of wellbeing that she cannot bear the thought of losing it.

In an eerie echo of Melville's own youth Pierre's mother says, "I thank heaven I sent him not to college. A noble boy, and docile..." (26). Her need for him to remain with her is such that though she expects him to marry, she does not really expect to lose him. She hopes that his future wife, Lucy, "will not estrange him from me...claiming all the homage of my dear boy" (26-27).

It is against this background of intense maternal need and expectation, her devouring love and domination, and his fear of her power, that Pierre's attempt to escape the ravenous beak of the predatory sea bird and achieve what Ishmael in *Moby-Dick* called the "Open independence of [his] sea," must be judged. And

perhaps it is also against this prison of maternal caretaking and care demanding, that Pierre's unsuccessful effort to marry and live a heterosexual life must be weighed as well.

Two faces/Two Beds/Two hands

In spite of his mother's admonition, "Never rave, Pierre; never rant" (25), Pierre does rant and rave in his declaration of Love, which is seven pages long, and ranges over hill and dale and history yet for all of that is wholly unpersuasive and so over the top as to cause Lucy, the object of it, to doubt its authenticity. "Do I rave? Look on me Lucy; think on me, girl" (46) he says, and though she says he is young, beautiful and strong and that "a joyful manliness invests thee" she is discouraged by all his talk. "Let us hie homeward, Pierre," she says, "Some nameless, faintness strangely comes to me" (46).

The peroration on love prompts Lucy to recall a story he once told her about a face, and she asks, "Tell me once more the story of the face...that mysterious haunting face" (46). But Pierre refuses to tell her more about it and bewails that he ever mentioned it to her in the first place. The secret Pierre refuses to divulge drives a wedge between them, and Lucy tries desperately to repair the damage she sees reflected in his face during their quarrel.

When he takes her home, she invites him to her chamber to show him her art. It is an odd invitation in the circumstances, and it is also the first time we are made aware that Lucy is an artist. Crossing the liminal threshold of her chamber into a future world of heterosexual marriage, Pierre is confronted with two oppressive symbols. While he stands alone in her room he sees her "snow white bed reflected in

the toilet glass. This rooted him. For one swift instant he seemed to see in that one glance two separate beds—the real one and the reflected one—[and] an unbidden, most miserable presentiment thereupon stole into him” (49). Here it is clear that Pierre is not comfortable with what that bed signifies. The fact that there are two of them makes the bed, the symbol of heterosexual marriage, seem like an enclosure, not a Spenserian “Bower of Bliss” but a prison.

Under the influence of that “miserable presentiment,” when he reaches home, Pierre wanders in reveries “along a river bank” and sits beneath a gentle pine tree that “drops melodious mournfulness,” to contemplate what has just happened to him with Lucy (51). Here he is confronted with two faces and two fates. In an echo of the bed chamber scene in which he sees the image of the bed in the mirror, the real face of Lucy is trailing mournful thoughts of marriage and family and a settled life of heterosexual manhood. But the more pressing, pendant face which has intruded between them and which now seems to be looking down at him from the tree is a reflection of the girl inside him.

In the boughs of the pine tree he sees the face of a woman and says, “Art thou Pierre? Come to me—oh thou mysterious girl—what an ill-matched pendant thou, to that other countenance of sweet Lucy” (51). These two fates and faces are irreconcilable, leaving Pierre, like Melville’s previous castaways, floating in the indeterminate void between the binaries: “What, who art thou? Oh wretched vagueness—too familiar to me, yet inexplicable—unknown utterly unknown! I seem to founder in perplexity” (51).

And as Pierre founders in perplexity, so inevitably must his hapless reader. What would seem reasonable floating in a supportive boundaryless ocean founders and becomes impossible to understand in the rural landscape of Saddle Meadows.

Implausibly, before she actually appears in the novel, the pendant face in the pine tree introduces us to the figure of Isabel, and it is significant that she makes her entrance immediately after the mirror scene where Pierre sees the two beds and his future as a married man. Her appearance is a reaction, a flight and an escape. It is the result of a “familiar” panic Pierre cannot describe. That he is familiar with this face is obvious, because his reaction to it is neither surprise, rapture nor horror. It is identification. “Art thou Pierre?”

It is as if he were Narcissus, gazing into the pool and falling in love with his own reflection and perhaps if a recent theory about gender is correct, what Pierre loves is himself *as a woman*. J. Michael Bailey, in *The Man Who Would Be Queen* (2003), has postulated that “some people born male who want to cross genders are driven primarily by an erotic fascination with themselves as women,” a condition he calls *autogynophilia* (*New York Times* August 21, 2007).

But the appearance of this face is illogical. What does Melville intend his reader to make of it? Does he want us to ignore this question and look instead for a conventional romantic explanation? I believe Melville is not sure *what* he wants us to do with this information. His motives are as ambivalent and ambiguous as the art he uses to describe them. He is playing with the notion of his identity as a woman and he is too self-absorbed (perhaps in love) to care that his reader will be confused. It is too far a stretch to assume he is making this up as a fiction since it is much too

intimate and inscrutable and lacks a readership capable of understanding what is being hinted. Here Melville is lost in a world of private symbols, attempting to write his way (initiate himself) into manhood yet feeling a powerful pull to acknowledge and advertise the woman in himself.

Here it is important for me to make a clear distinction between what I am saying and what Henry A. Murray says in his lengthy and influential introduction to the Hendricks House Edition of *Pierre*. While on the surface they may seem similar, actually they are quite different. Murray seems to recognize Pierre's dual nature, but he nestles his argument in the comforting, high-sounding, woolly muffle of Jungian psychology. He sees an animus/anima division in Pierre. He sees Pierre as struggling to liberate the archetypal anima in his own nature, that is to "cast forth his inmost self and in so doing to disclose certain secrets that were dreadfully real to him (only the unmarried foot loose Whitman was free and bold enough to disregard the severest prohibitions of that era)" (xxviii).

Insightful as Murray may be in other areas of psychology, in the area of gender he gets lost in a mystical web of archetypes that does little to clarify what is going on in gender identity formation. As an example of the kind of language that mystifies instead of clarifying, hear Murray describe the "tragic fateful face of Isabel..." Murray sees it as "the autonomous inward operation of the aroused soul-image, or anima as Jung has named it" (xliv). What can we make of such language? The terms are so vague they actually perpetuate the ambiguity they are attempting to clarify. Murray may be indulging in subterfuge, hiding the plain facts under language

meant to obscure what was socially unacceptable at the time, but we are nowhere at all after such an explanation. That is why I resist Jungian analyses of self and gender.

Because Pierre, like Melville, is trapped in a heterosexual world, powerful feelings associated with an inner feminine identity provoke shame and fear. That is why when the face disappears Pierre experiences a rush of relief and exclaims, “I thank god I feel joy again: joy which I also feel to be my right as a man” (52).

His feminine feelings are always a source of sadness. The fact that Pierre is relieved when the woman’s face disappears and immediately connects that disappearance to the joys of being a man points to severe gender ambivalence. For him, manhood is at times a holy grail, something he searches for and tries in vain to claim.

When Pierre says, “Deprived of joy [a man’s right] I feel I should find cause for deadly feuds with invisible things” he seems to suggest that his feminine feelings are the problem, the cause of his inability to feel joy and at home in the world (52). They are a source of conflict in himself and with the world around him, but the source of the conflict is divided into two parts: shame that he has these feelings, and anger and sadness that, having them, they must remain hidden and his suffering go unrecognized. And that is why the women in Melville’s texts, who are personifications of his feminine feelings, are typically represented as mourning, lost, abandoned and alone. I submit that is why Melville is in a rage at home and abusive to his wife and children—because they do not recognize his suffering.

And when Pierre says, “Ha! a coat of iron mail seems to grow round and husk me now,” he seems to say all is well now that he is protected from the gender crisis

represented by the face (52). Yet when he says, "...the bitterest winters are foretold by a thicker husk," he mixes an agrarian and a chivalric metaphor to suggest that his outward manliness, while it may protect him, is thick and hard and unforgiving (52). It dooms him to a cold and bitter life of frustrated invisibility and denial, imprisoned in a protective layer that is not natural to him but is nevertheless socially necessary.

And like a drunkard who suffers remorse after a binge and vows to the bottle he will never drink again, Pierre apostrophizes the pine tree, "Thou Pine tree!--Hence forth I will resist thy too treacherous persuasiveness. Thou'lt not so often woo me to thy airy tent to ponder on the gloomy stakes that bind it" (52). Of course, the pine tree, like the drunkard's bottle, is not the real problem. It's what inside the addict that lures him to drink.

Pierre is really addressing the woman in himself, who demands to be recognized and is always threatening to break through his masculine shell. The "airy tent" is the always out of reach Elysium, the release from pain, that his femininity seems to offer. The "gloomy stakes" that bind are the reality of his man's body and social norms of masculine heterosexuality it forces on him. "Bitterest winters" (far from Elysium) are the destiny of a woman's feelings encased in the dry, unfelt husk of a masculine body.

Perhaps feeling he has said too much and strayed too far from his readers' expectations and understanding, Melville begins to back track. In "The Presentiment and Verification" chapter that begins Book III, Pierre claims that the face "was not made of enchanted air" but was in fact mortally real and had been "visibly beheld" by him previously (54).

Why did he not simply reverse the chapters so that the narrative unfolded chronologically? As it is, it is in no way persuasive. As he goes on to describe the scene of seeing the face for the first time in such strongly emotional terms and as having such a powerful effect on him, it is impossible to believe he would not have recognized the same face suspended in the tree only a few weeks later. When he first sees her, the narrator says, "...she lifts her whole marvelous countenance into the radiant candle, and for one swift instant that face of supernaturalness unreservedly meets Pierre's. Now, wonderful loveliness, and still more wonderful loneliness, have with inexplicable implorings, looked up to him from that henceforth immemorial face" (58).

"Immemorial" means originating in the distant past, very old. What does Melville mean by this? And "Henceforth" throws us untimely into the future. Our sense of time is jarred once again. This was purportedly the first glimpse of the face and yet from this time forward the life of Pierre begins, so that the face marks a birth of sorts, a beginning of Pierre's awareness of his divided self. In a sense, she has always been there but only now is she recognized for what she is. How could he not then recognize the same face hanging from the pine only a few weeks later?

What Isabel is there for, at this moment in the novel, is to forestall a marriage Pierre does not want. Isabel the sister-self is competing for the soul of Pierre against Lucy who personifies marriage. She is a panic reaction against Lucy and all she represents for Pierre's life. But the scene where he claims he first sees Isabel is not really the first time, for when we read the death scene of the father we become aware that she was present even before he saw her. Threading his way backwards in time,

Melville attempts to support with flashbacks scenes too inconclusive and confusing to be taken at face value.

Pierre's feminine sister-self is represented in the "Retrospective" chapter, another of the maddening flashbacks that disjoint the narrative flow. This time Pierre is twelve (the same age Melville was when his own father died) and his father, while dying of a fever, "lowly wandered in his mind" (85). The father calls out "My daughter!—God! God!--My daughter!" and Pierre hearing this cries out, "Thou hast not a daughter, but here is thy own little Pierre" (86).

But this does not settle the matter, for as Pierre grasps his father's faintly offered hand, he notices that his other hand, "now also emptily lifted itself, and emptily caught, as if at some other childish fingers" (86). The hand offered to Pierre has a "feverish flush," while the other hand grasping for an invisible child is "ashy white as a leper's" (86). It seems that the ghostly white hand is reaching for someone not real, not truly alive, while the flushed hand reaches for Pierre but is not interested in him. The scene is pulling us hither and thither, and so it is inconclusive, an ambiguous hash, full of mixed symbolism.

The symbolism might suggest Melville wants us to interpret the white hand as reaching for a daughter who died, who was perhaps still born, or as is more likely, a rejected daughter living in the shadow of anonymity and shame. The contrast between the two hands might lead us to suspect so. But I propose that under the political cover of a mind inflamed with fever, Melville is not suggesting that the father had an illegitimate daughter who died but that Pierre is a gender-divided self, the female of which has never been recognized by the father.

The fact that his father seems to pine for the absent girl while being unaware of the boy at his bedside, might indicate that both for the boy and the father the ghostly girl is more real, more powerful, more paradoxically present, than the present boy whose masculinity has always been in doubt and therefore is not present either to his father, or himself.

However, in my view, it seems more likely that Melville is re-writing his own father's deathbed scene, creating a reconciliation and recognition that never took place but was desperately longed for. It is a scene in which the dying father finally recognizes the girl in his son.

Sadly, it is too late. It is not the girl, real or imagined, who was stillborn, but the recognition scene itself, which is too ambiguous to be psychologically satisfying for the reader or healing for Pierre. And since the recognition scene has failed, the little girl in the boy remains a ghostly figure, a castaway, not stillborn but half born, a walking dead, as white and pale as the father's hand that reaches in vain for her.

Time and again, Melville has Pierre back away from the true meaning of his ambiguous encounters with his femininity. "Unmentionable thoughts" enter "into Pierre's awe-stricken, childish soul" but he quickly "threw remembrances over it, and covered it up and at last it blended with all other dim things, and imaginings of dimness, and so seemed to survive to *no real life in Pierre*" (my emphasis 86). But as a projection or personification of Pierre's feminine self, Isabel can have "no real life in Pierre." Liminal ambiguity is enshrined at the outset and is guaranteed by Pierre's refusal to acknowledge his ambiguous gender. Pierre tells us this memory of his father's lifting hands had lain dormant until Isabel's letter, whereupon he hears his

fathers' voice again "My daughter! My daughter! And to Pierre once again the empty hand lifted itself and the ashy hand fell" (87).

In a moment that seems as though it might yield at last some tangible change in him, Pierre, in the privacy of his closet, contemplates telling his mother about his newly found half "sister" Isabel. But as he contemplates revealing her existence, he has an electrical flash of insight that shuts down all possibility. "She might well have stood all ordinary tests; but when Pierre thought of the touchstone of *his immense strait* applied to her spirit; he felt profoundly assured that she would crumble into nothing before it" (my emphasis 108). He knows that "the shock of *his extraordinary emergency*" would be too much, and she would not be able to "applaud, to his heart's echo, a sublime resolve, whose execution should call down the astonishment and jeers of the world" (my emphasis 108).

Pierre imagines coming out with it:

My mother!—dearest mother!—God hath given me a sister, and unto thee a daughter, and covered her with the world's extremest infamy and scorn, that so I and thou—*thou*, my dear mother, mightest gloriously own her and acknowledge her, and,---... (108).

It is significant that Pierre conceives of this as *his* emergency, *his* immense strait, not Isabel's. This hyperbole seems in the end rather silly under the circumstances he has so far outlined. He has intensely personalized a situation, which is ostensibly about a bastard child, unbeknownst to the family, and we wonder: What does this have to do with *him*? He is secure in his rights as the legitimate only son. How does this situation warrant anything more than a passing snicker, a knowing glance, a *tsk tsk* in polite society? It wouldn't. Such situations were common enough. No. Something else is bothering Pierre. The "scorn and infamy" of the

world is reserved not for so trite a thing as illegitimacy. It is more properly the crossing of an invisible boundary not of class but of gender which brings with it what Mary Douglas calls the sense of pollution, of filth, which is both the personal and societal reaction against ambiguity.

Pierre's, like Melville's gender situation is anomalous and as Douglas has it, "anomaly leads to anxiety and from there to suppression or avoidance" (5). We have watched Pierre, both suppress and avoid the emerging truth of his hidden cross-gender identification: his reaction to the face in the tree was relieved and rescued by his joy as a man, and when his thoughts about his father's two hands became upsetting, he quickly "threw remembrances over it," veering off into more pleasant memories. His anxiety has caused him to suppress. It is as if he cannot hold two conflicting ideas in his mind simultaneously and so must split them up into opposing sides, two faces, two hands, two beds.

Paradoxically, despite the sub-title of this novel, *Or The Ambiguities*, Melville through Pierre, engages in a desperate almost Levitical effort to divide the acceptable from the abomination, to enforce a binary scheme of order that admits of no ambiguity, no hybrid creature, no interweaving of flax and cotton, or interbreeding of two kinds of animals (or two genders). Like an ancient Levite, Pierre performs a silent and invisible "Ritual of separation." He keeps himself pure and wholly holy by projecting the feminine part of himself outward onto a figure he calls Isabel in an effort to insist upon, and maintain, the illusion of purity and social order which is in stark contrast to the untidy chaos of his anxious feelings. Binaries are defended and ambiguities shunned. Even as Pierre's defenses break down they do so by imagining

two contrasting choices, which, as Jessica Benjamin has said, suggests the failure of paradox and a retreat into the false choice of opposition, which is the root of domination and omnipotent will.

In the opposition of Lucy's two beds, the pine tree's two faces, his father's two hands, one is represented as real and the other a reflection or a fantasy. I suggest the anxiety surrounding these fantasies indicate the churning gears of denial rotating around a central axis of femininity. In each case, two conflicting choices arouse intense anxiety. As if confronted with a defiling boundary that must not be crossed, Pierre retreats in a desperate mental flight to more agreeable thoughts. But the feminine persists, intrudes, haunts. She is the impossible identity that because of her very impossibility seems impossible to shake.

Pierre's narrator will refer to her as "Life's Truth" and will contrast her to the "thousand sweet illusions of Life" (109). Pierre views himself as an outcast because of his impossible feminine identification when he compares himself to Ishmael, the outcast son of Hagar. "Pierre felt that deep within him lurked a divine unidentifiableness, that owned no earthly kith or kin. Yet was this feeling entirely lonesome, and orphan-like. Fain then for one moment, would he have recalled the thousand sweet illusions of Life; tho' purchased at the price of *Life's Truth*; so that once more he might not feel himself driven out an infant Ishmael driven into the desert, with no maternal Hagar to accompany and comfort him" (my emphasis 109).

Pierre's "electrical insight" is that his mother, Mrs. Glendinning, is no Hagar. He knows her "Immense pride" will rear its high-born head when she hears about the existence of Isabel (109). And so Pierre retreats:

And as Pierre thus in fancy led Isabel before his mother; and in fancy led her away, and felt his tongue cleave to the roof of his mouth, with her transfixing look of incredulous, scornful horror. Then Pierre's enthusiastic heart sunk in and in, and caved clean away in him, as he so poignantly felt his first feeling of the dreary heart-vacancies of the conventional life (109).

Why does Pierre take the natural shock his mother might be expected to express so personally? Why is *he* feeling the pain of his mother's horror? If he were truly talking about a real bastard child of his father, why need he fear his mother's scorn? Why would she blame *him* for the existence of the illegitimate child of his father? And why does his own heart cave away inside him at the thought of her reaction? There is something so dishonest about the narrative of Pierre's dilemma we cannot identify with his suffering. This is perhaps one reason why the reading public rejected the novel, heaping upon it the scorn Pierre anticipates for Isabel. Something is being kept hidden, is being lied about. The only way to make sense of Pierre's intensity is to understand that it is something unacceptable in himself he is worried about revealing to his mother.

Also, the "heart vacancies of a conventional life" makes no sense in the context of this passage, since failing to reveal an illegitimate daughter does not in any way mean he must live a conventional life. And what does he mean by *conventional*? The most obvious meaning is his marriage to Lucy, which, as we have seen, strikes him with terror.

What we are witnessing in *Pierre* is the terror of an invisible boy, (a boy with no Rite) trying to bring himself to confront his mother and get her to recognize and accept the feminine part of himself (the girl with no rights). The ghostly persona of Isabel is a bastard, a girl with no rights of inheritance, and so her fictional status

serves as a perfect symbol for the woman in Pierre, who likewise has no legal right of recognition in society.

In the case of disclosure all human probability pointed to his mother's scornful rejection of his suit as a pleader for Isabel's honorable admission into the honorable mansion of the Glendinnings. In that case...I shall have given the deep poison of a miserable truth to my mother, without benefit to any and positive harm to all (112).

So Pierre talks himself out of trying to get Isabel admitted to the house and having his mother accept her as her own daughter. He excuses himself, averring that "sometimes a lie is heavenly, and truth infernal" (111). And then the narrator makes the case for ambiguity, for Pierre lying not only to her, but to himself as well:

For when suddenly encountering the shock of new and unanswerable revelations, which he feels must revolutionize all the circumstances of his life, man at first seeks to shun all *conscious definitiveness* in his thoughts and purposes; as assured, that the lines that shall *precisely define* his present misery, and thereby lay out his future path; these can only be defined by sharp stakes that cut into his heart" (my emphasis (112)).

Pierre will avoid crossing the boundary that defines the genders and making his feminine gender identity public, which would absolutely "revolutionize all the circumstances of his life" because to do so would be too painful. But opting to stay unrecognized he cannot avoid suffering. Consigning himself to the twilight zone of an inauthentic life, he is beset by a profound depression. "A sense of horrible forlornness, feebleness, impotence and infinite eternal desolation possessed him...dragging his ball and chain, he fell upon his bed" (112).

It is hard to imagine this reaction, at once so personal and physical, if the only disappointment were necessity of keeping his half sister a secret from his mother. In

a thousand other ways he could have been helpful to his sister without telling his mother. He could have rescued her financially and emotionally—if she really existed.

I think the real reason Pierre is so distraught is that his mother is the gatekeeper. If he cannot tell his mother about his feminine self, then for him she cannot be allowed even to exist. Because she *is* him, he too, will be forced to remain unrecognized, alone, invisible to the world. What makes the text so confusing and the emotions he is expressing so unbelievable in the circumstances is that there is no real Isabel to champion.

What Pierre fails to do is champion himself. “Horrible forlornness,” feebleness and impotence are also the inheritance of the False Self, Winnicott’s notion of the compliant public self that obscures the True self and fills the person with an overwhelming sense of emptiness.

In his following letter to Lucy, saying that he will have to disappear for a while and alluding to some mysterious calamity that calls him away he adds a postscript to the letter in which he apologizes for the confusion of his writing and that apology could stand as an apology for the text of *Pierre* as well. Melville alludes to a “thing” that cannot be named. “...where one cannot reveal the thing itself, it only makes it the more mysterious to write around it this way” (114). And “write around it” he does, so much so that *Pierre* cannot help but fail as a novel. What Pierre cannot reveal to his mother, he cannot reveal to his reader either. So, both mother and reader are forced to construe from scant and confusing details the true meaning of Pierre’s behavior. Mother is the confused reader. In fact, she represents the world.

Manly Like Mohammed: The Binaries of East and West

As so often happens in Melville's novels, when the hero is at a moment of crisis and filled with anxiety, which is often during or anticipating a confrontation, he makes a quick narrative pirouette and turns his focus to what he is wearing. When Pierre sallies forth to meet his mother he dresses himself anxiously, "striving utterly to banish all thought of that weight upon his soul" (114). However he also perfumes himself, perhaps so that he will appear utterly normal to her. It is, "one of his little femininities," he tells us, a habit established in him by his mother. But lest we get the wrong idea, he makes sure to tell us that this affectation, feminine as it is, is not unusual among manly "robust-bodied and big-souled men" like Mohammed (114).

It is significant that he connects this feminine part of his toilet to an Arabian character, for it recalls Melville's penchant for Eastern clothing, his "Constantinople" pajamas in old age, his Turkish masquerade at Sarah Moorewood's costume ball, and his descriptions of Samoa and Taji in *Mardi*. Typically, it is through Eastern dress that Melville attempts to display the masculine and feminine parts of himself in one dramatic costume. "Robust-bodied" suggests that even a big manly looking man (like Melville himself) can have feminine feelings, while "big-souled" suggests that Melville idolizes Middle Eastern men in contrast to men in his own culture (perhaps *because* of their feminine dress) as men big enough to incorporate both male and female attributes without risking shame or condemnation by others.

Marjorie Garber, in *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, devotes a chapter, "The Chic of Araby: Transvestism and the Erotics of Cultural Appropriation," to a broad discussion of the "exotic, feminized Eastern Other" (340).

The “flowing skirts of an Arab Prince” were used by T.E. Lawrence, Valentino, and Oscar Wilde, to name but a few, to covertly suggest a mixed or androgynous gender. Masculinity is masked under the flowing and feminine Eastern robes, which perform the function of a veil, “a garment that simultaneously conceals and reveals” (304).

According to Garber, this costume became, for some, a code for the European or Occidental wish to express cross-gender identities and feelings, unorthodox sexuality and danger (304). This, as we have seen, is a recurring theme in Melville’s art as well. Recall that in *Typee* the first anecdote involves the Missionary’s wife and the atypical reaction of the natives to what lay under her skirts, suggesting that female dress may indeed hide something wholly unexpected—a male penis.

Garber also notes that in “Ellery Queen’s 1970 novel, *The Last Woman in His Life*, the murderer is a closeted gay transvestite whose over-protective mother had kept him in dresses and whose library shelves are crowded with telltale works by Melville, Proust, Wilde, and Christopher Marlowe” (186). That Melville is listed first in this company of male writers and that their works are together defined as “telltale” suggests that Melville is well known to be one with this crowd of feminine men, as if, like them, his very name was now code for transvestite and/or homosexual.

Surely scenes like the infamous Chapter 46 in *Redburn*, “A Mysterious Night in London” where Redburn and Harry Bolton spend an evening in an ambiguous place Redburn intuits as “Aladdin’s Palace” is one of those events that have confirmed Melville’s place in the transvestite/homosexual camp. Jonathan Cook tells us this scene is “... almost certainly inspired by the most famous London gambling club of the era, Crockfords on St. James Street” (9). Cook seeks to establish an

historical connection for this ambiguous scene, but I think Melville's historical antecedents are a good deal looser and more heterodox. They are meant to elude any direct correspondence to an actual place, or indeed to what is actually going on there. The mystification of the scene is meant to hide an unorthodox sexual adventure.

Cook admits that the décor of the place "is not directly evocative of any known decor at Crockfords" but that paintings do suggest the visual presentation of sexuality as yet another aspect of the club's luxurious furnishings, and appetitive stimulus to "deep play" (21). I suggest that although there are design accents from all over the civilized world the dominant theme is Oriental, and being Oriental is what *makes* it sexual and ambiguous.

The accretion of Middle Eastern details: The location has a Middle Eastern name, evoking the *Arabian Nights*, and is furnished in predominantly Eastern décor. It also has a sexually ambiguous and intimidating atmosphere. All of this suggests not only an Oriental influence but also a *disorienting* sexuality, not a usual feature of a gentleman's upper class gambling club but rather of a Molly-house, a feature of gay male subculture in the eighteenth century where Garber tells us "men dressed as women, not to deceive but to be recognized as homosexuals by other men in a private club-like setting" (30).

Added to all this is the patently Middle Eastern scenario of Melville being passively swept off his feet, kidnapped and taken to a setting reminiscent of a seraglio. His very reaction to it, like a heroine in a Valentino film, palpitates with feminine alarm: "My head was spinning round like a top, and my eyes ached with much gazing" (306). Redburn, seeking to allay his fears demurely asks, "And pray

do you live here, Harry, in this Palace of Aladdin?" To which Harry replies, "Upon my Soul...you have hit it...it goes by that very name" (311).

Redburn's kidnapper makes off with him dressed in a manly disguise. The accoutrement that so changes Harry's appearance is, "whiskers and mustache" (305) and this change for some reason frightens Redburn. If Redburn is thinking of himself here as a woman being kidnapped it makes a kind of sense, but if he is merely a male friend it doesn't. Redburn then says, "I asked him the reason; and expressed the hope that he was not going to turn gentleman forger" (305). What are we to make of this ambiguous information that seems so counter to Redburn's and our expectations?

Melville, once again, is hinting at a cross-gender identity. "Gentleman Forger" is a term Melville also used for the enigmatic, forlorn waif, "Bartleby the Scrivener," when he was locked in the *Tombs*, and the term, both here and there, may have a double valence. It may signify more than a low-born man attempting to "pass" himself off as a gentleman for nefarious reasons. It may be a double entendre, suggesting that the manly beard is a veil that hides a woman. And although Harry says he is disguised, "as a precaution against being recognized by his own particular friends in London" it can also subtly suggest that his friends might actually recognize him more easily if he were dressed as a woman. Redburn asks what we all want to know, "And why afraid of your friends?" (305). None of this is explained which suggests that Melville is having a particular kind of fun with this scene and enjoys hiding its true meaning from his reader.

Other critics and biographers, Hershel Parker especially, have pointed to this scene as either unconvincing and unrealistic and as mere "literary padding." They

fail to look beyond the historical facts of London at that time to discern the sexual symbolism of East and West that would enable the genie of Melville's feminine gender identity to finally escape the dark lamp in which it has been imprisoned for over a hundred years.

Like Harry in London, Pierre is careful to dress in a very manly way so that his mother will not recognize anything amiss (feminine) in him. However, unlike Harry, Pierre is not having any fun with this charade. He feels that he is going, "to meet the keen glance of his mother...his body only the embalming cerements of *his buried dead within*" (my emphasis 114). If Isabel were meant to be a real character, she would not be characterized as "buried dead within."

Rather, this dichotomy of body and soul, configured as a masculine cover, encasing the feminine "buried dead" soul within, is meant to convey the condition of Pierre's (and Melville's) life. Here Melville has made it as plain as he is able, given the limitations he has placed upon himself, that *Pierre* is all about the conflict between his own and Pierre's masculine physical body and feminine feelings. Looked at in this light the other entombed and cast out men in Melville's work after *Omoo* paradoxically come alive: Bartleby, Benito, Pip, Ahab, Ishmael, et al. Most importantly, Melville himself emerges from the persistent darkness conventional interpretations have imposed on him, and he is released from being "buried dead within."

When Pierre presents himself all perfumed to his mother, she suspects he is keeping something from her and presses him to reveal it. He refuses and almost immediately the "abrupt entrance of a clergyman" interrupts their argument. The

Rev. Falsgrave has been invited by the mother and his presence gives Pierre a moment to collect himself. Falsgrave is introduced to facilitate the discussion of how a son should treat an illegitimate child of his father, and it prepares the way for Pierre's decision to dedicate himself to Isabel.

Pierre worries about the effect this will have on his intended, Lucy, and on her future. And one cannot help but wonder if, while making the fair copy of Pierre for the publisher, Lizzy might have recognized a reflection of her own fate in the mirror of Lucy. Because he has memorialized so many aspects of his personal life in his art, we can wonder if Herman might have had a similar moment of crisis and a tense confrontation with his mother, hiding the illegitimate woman in himself, before he acquiesced to marry Lizzy. It is interesting and perhaps not coincidental that the names Lucy and Lizzy look and sound so similar.

In an uncharacteristic lapse into speaking directly to his reader, Melville wonders aloud how he will proceed with his story. "How shall I steal yet further into Pierre and show how heavenly fire was helped to be contained in him, by mere contingent things, and things he knew not. But I shall follow the endless winding way—the flowing river in the cave of man; careless whither I be led, reckless where I land" (130).

It is clear he thinks his feminine identity to be almost Greek-like, divine, a special hermaphroditical mutation that perhaps has everything to do with him as an artist. And it is also made clear in this passage that he understands this divine presence in his being to have come from homely origins. "Mere contingent things": perhaps a mother who was widowed and used her son for solace, a father who

abandoned his son too soon, perhaps long before his death, the fact of being overlooked as a man in the family, and perhaps many other “things that he knew not.”

“The endless winding way,” (which is also the title of the *Melville Society’s* pamphlet on the discovery of his abuse of Lizzy), is another way of saying there will be no definitive conclusion. He gives himself license to stay adrift among the binaries and avoid precise destination. Everything will continue to be floating in the ether of indeterminacy and liminality. No arrivals are in store for Melville or for any of his characters.

Romantic Mirrors: Narcissus, Eve

Yet, Melville goes on to claim he will be entirely honest about Pierre. “I am more frank with Pierre than the best men are with themselves. I am all unguarded and magnanimous with Pierre; therefore you see his weakness and therefore only” (130). This is disingenuous of course, as he will not come out with it. Rather, he will tell Isabel’s story, not by revealing the mere contingencies of his own life or by inventing a completely original tale of his own, but by borrowing a conceit from another work, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

As Isabel tells her story we learn, as we did from Frankenstein’s Monster, that like him, Isabel “Never knew a mortal mother” (137). And like the Monster, she has but dim thoughts of her origins, “an old half ruinous house in some region,” and there is no map to help her find it. She says, “I think that house was not in this country, but somewhere in Europe; perhaps in France” (138). The location of her putative origins is also reminiscent of Shelley’s story.

It seems totally appropriate to cast Isabel as a kind of Frankenstein monster as she, like the monster, represents both the writer and her literary precursor, Eve of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Gilbert and Gubar in "Horror's Twin: Mary Shelley's Monstrous Eve" in *Madwoman in The Attic* have also claimed that the monster represents Mary Shelley, her sense of being alienated from the mainstream of society and abandoned at her birth by her mother's death and also of Eve, the fallen and degraded female cast out of Eden by a rejecting father. This captures the core of Shelley's own personal rejection by her own father when she eloped to marry Percy Shelley.

Isabel echoes the castaway Eve and Mary because she is rejected both by her mother and her dead father. A homeless waif, we hear Isabel talk of her loneliness and alienation, "I feel I am an exile here" (142). This also seems an echo of Shelley's Monster. Like Eve and The Monster, Isabel's story of her origin is mythologized and indeterminate. Homeless and vagabond, Isabel exists in a dark limbo of non-recognition, a hell especially made for fallen women, a non-recognition that was Eve's inheritance even before her fall since, as the second borne, she was never spoken to directly by either God or his messenger angels, Raphael and Michael.

Like Eve, Isabel is more talked *about* than talked to. Isabel tells us that the old couple she lived with never spoke to her either, "They seldom spoke to me; but would sometimes, of dark, gusty nights, sit by the fire and stare at me, and then mumble to each other, and stare at me again" (138).

The Monster, as Gilbert and Gubar point out, and virtually all the characters in *Frankenstein*, share a "common alienation...guilt...orphanhood and beggary" (228).

And this is Isabel's plight too. But another theme that *Pierre* shares with *Frankenstein* is the theme of incest. As Adam and Eve are incestuous lovers, so too are Victor and Elizabeth, his "more than sister." Likewise, Pierre runs away to live with his half sister, Isabel, in what many still insist on seeing as a romantic relationship.

As Gilbert and Gubar point out, "incest-obsession...is the 'standard' sensational matter of Romantic novels," and they describe it as, "like the solipsistic relationships among artfully placed mirrors" (228). For them, "incest was an inescapable metaphor for the solipsistic fever of self-awareness that Matthew Arnold was later to call 'the dialog of the mind with itself'" (228-229). I am suggesting that Melville felt a kinship with Mary Shelley's *Monster* narrative and followed her in the Romantic tradition in order to hold the mirror up to himself and examine his own femininity. Following Eve in *Paradise Lost*, a work he knew well, Melville gave his own female monster, Isabel, an orphanhood reflective of his own, a castaway status like his own, a non-recognition like his own, in order to tell a story of the disowned and disinherited female in himself.

The correspondences are too many between the two novels to be ignored. In Isabel's long sojourn in a house, where she says the old couple, "seldom spoke to me" (138), the mood is entirely Romantic and Frankensteinian. It is a tale of a child awaking to consciousness, not knowing who she is or how she came to be. Everything in the world is strange and incomprehensible to her. Like the *Monster's*, her first impressions are dim.

Frankenstein's monster says:

It is with considerable difficulty that I remember the original era of my being; all the events of that period appear confused and indistinct. A strange multiplicity of sensations seized me, and I saw, felt, heard, and smelt at the same time (103).

And what was I? Of my creation and creator I was absolutely ignorant (123).

Similarly, Isabel knows nothing of herself and struggles to recall her first impressions:

I knew nothing of myself or anything pertaining to myself; I felt my pulse, my thought; but other things I was ignorant of except the general feeling of humanness among the inhumanities (147).

I am not of woman born. My first dim life-thoughts cluster round an old, half-ruined house in some region for which now I have no chart to seek it out (137).

Every day that I lived then, I felt all visible sights and all audible sounds growing stranger and stranger...none of them were comprehensible to me...I knew not whence they came or what cause they had for being there (139).

Now all the wide and vacant blurrings of my early life thicken in my mind
All goes wholly memoryless to me now (140).

When the Monster first sees himself reflected in a pool, it is a scene out of *Paradise Lost*, in which Eve first see herself in a pool and like narcissus mistakes the image for another being and falls in love with it. But unlike Eve, the Monster starts at his reflection because it tells him how ugly he is compared to the human beings he has been observing in secret.

How was I terrified when I viewed myself in a transparent pool! At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror (116).

For Isabel the scene is also an echo of Milton through Shelley, except that she sees in the pool the image of her father and remarks on its similarity to her own:

But one day, looking into the smooth water behind the house, there I saw the likeness—something strangely like it and yet unlike, the likeness of his face (148).

The Monster memorably cries out his loneliness:

No father had watched my infant days, no mother had blessed me with smiles and caresses; or if they had, all my past life was now a blot, a blind vacancy in which I distinguished nothing (124).

Isabel, too, says:

I never knew a mortal mother. The farthest stretch of my life's memory cannot recall one single feature of such a face (137).

I know not where to go to rid myself of my loneliness (139).

The conceit of writing in the first person the impressions of a child awakening to life, chronicling their journey to consciousness is especially moving to all of us because we too have only dim memories of those early days. The Monster and Isabel are connected both as works of literature and as emblems of their author's own sense of their earliest beginnings.

It is also significant that both Shelley and Melville emphasize the need of the infant consciousness for the image of a benevolent father to mirror back to them a loving acceptance. Lacking that human acceptance the Monster is driven savagely mad and murderous, because he is rejected by his father and by the world. I think Melville must have identified most painfully just here with Shelley's Monster, seeing in it a mirror image of his own alien female, unacceptable and ugly to the world.

By using Shelley's Monster tale as a template for his own tale of Isabel, Melville is implicitly saying his feminine identity is monstrous, not to himself but to

the world. Melville says, before we ever hear her story that she will be “covered with infamy and scorn of the world,” foreshadowing her monster status.

In the introduction to her novel Mary Shelley compares her book to the monster, self effacingly calling her novel “Her hideous progeny” (xxxvi). Considering that the reviews of *Pierre*, according to Merton Sealts, “Were universally hostile,” it seems clear that the critics thought it monstrous too. Though Melville did not publicly respond to the bad reception of his book, the mounting fears of his family as to his mental health speak to the devastating impact it had on Melville’s mind. It must have been as if he had been rejected twice, not just for his writing but also for the feminine self he almost dared to reveal in it. Did the whole literary world enact the haughty pride of Mrs. Glendinning? Like Isabel, both Melville and his novel suffered the infamy and scorn of the world.

Though Merton Sealts takes care to list all the books that Melville read during the time he was writing *Pierre* as possible influences on it, he never mentions *Frankenstein*. It is likely Melville read it much earlier in his life. But one of the books he does cite is Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an Opium Eater* as an example of the confessional first person account Melville was interested in at the time. I suggest Melville was interested in far more than the first person confessional style of narration. Just as he adopted the conceit of Mary Shelley’s monster narrative to talk about his feminine second self, he found in De Quincey’s *Confessions* two important concepts—the tyranny of faces and the elusive woman---which were recurring themes in his own work.

Faces, Fantasies and Fetishes

Faces

Both Melville and De Quincey write about being haunted by faces. They both describe the face as enigmatic, something that frightens, is haunting and despairing, yet also dominating and tyrannical. I have already discussed the face of Isabel that haunted Pierre from the pine tree. Here is De Quincey describing faces in his dreams which eventually took over his waking life:

Hitherto the human face had mixed often in my dreams...but now that which I have called the *tyranny of the human face* began to unfold itself...now it was that upon the rocking waters of the ocean the human face began to appear: the sea appeared paved with innumerable faces, upturned... faces imploring, wrathful, despairing, surged upward by thousands, by myriads, by generations, by centuries:--my agitation was infinite,—my mind tossed--and surged with the ocean (my emphasis 107-108).

Faces can be especially problematic for a variety of reasons. Faces are the first *text*, if you will, which we learn to read very early in infancy. Scientists have observed that an infant can recognize his mother's face as early as three months of age. The infant will follow her with his eyes and soon responds to her smiles with smiles of his own. The capacity for making human connections and forming relationships is founded on this early ability to recognize, read and respond to human emotions registered in the faces of our mothers. If our earliest experience with faces is troubled by insufficient or erratic care and if the text of the earliest face we read conveys ambiguous or mixed messages about us, what then? It seems to me the capacity for self-understanding and a reliable understanding of the world would inevitably be compromised.

If the mother cannot respond to the spontaneous gestures of her child, be it joy or rage, with support and understanding; if she cannot, as Winnicott says, survive his attacks upon her without retaliating or withdrawing, then the child cannot come forth with his True Self. Instead, he must conform to maternal demands in order to maintain a relationship with her. These demands to feel her pain and solace her suffering at the expense of his own, can lead to an intense identification with her but also to deep ambivalence. As the cultural gender codes surrounding him begin to sink in, he will find himself in conflict with his maternal identification and be forced to hide his unauthorized cross gender feelings behind a mask. Having to wear the mask of a False Self will yield a feeling of emptiness later in life and, I suggest, a complex and disturbing relationship to the human face.

If we feel we are living a false identity behind a mask, how can we understand and trust other human faces presented to us? And shut off from communion with other recognizing faces how are we to find satisfaction in our lives? If a feeling of emptiness is the inheritance of the False Self, as Winnicott tells us, then faces, which normally form the bond between us and the rest of humanity, would likely seem mysterious and indecipherable. And not being able to read it, the human face as it appears to us in our dreams and in waking life becomes a mirror of our own emptiness, a text horrifically composed of parts of the self denied, and projected feelings disowned.

In a recent article excerpted from *Mirroring People: The New Science of How We Connect with Others*, Marco Iacoboni describes the “wealth of empirical evidence suggesting that our brains are capable of mirroring the deepest aspects of the minds of

others at the fine grained level of a single cell” (*Natural History Magazine* 5/2008, p.35). These cells, referred to as Mirror Neurons, are “concentrated in two linked areas [of the brain] called the ventral premotor cortex and the parietal lobule, that are important for selecting *appropriate motor behavior*” (my emphasis 35). According to Iacoboni, they “help explain an essential characteristic of humans: [the] instinct to imitate one another—to synchronize our bodies, our actions, even the way we speak to each other. This synchrony we enjoy with others often has an emotional component” (37).

It is through the mirror of his mother’s face, that Melville may have learned “The Trick of Grief” as well as his ambivalent feminine gender identification. If Melville, under the domination of his mother’s powerful grief and depression began to identify with the “deepest aspects” of her mind, science suggests he has an innate capacity (at the level of a single cell) to imitate not only her facial expressions but also the emotions to which they are connected. In the absence of a strong masculine role model who can take him away from his powerfully needy mother and give him a life outside her domain, a particularly sensitive boy like Melville might begin to mimic a whole range of feminine attributes and thus begin to feel that he *thinks* like a woman, *is* a woman in his deepest self.

Disconnected from his own feelings he is forced to search faces, especially his mother’s, for clues as to how he was doing, what the world has to say about him. And since her messages about him are conditioned upon his utility to *her*, he would be left betwixt and between, neither truly himself, nor truly her. It is this fundamental lack of recognition that turns faces into tyrannizing and ambiguous masks.

If Pierre is both tantalized and tyrannized by the face of Isabel, she, too, is troubled by faces she cannot read. As she tells her story, she says that the old couple she lived with never spoke to her, that they would “just stare” at her and “Mumble to each other and stare again” (138). This staring suggests they did not understand what they were seeing. Here Melville is describing the girl in him that was never recognized by his parents, but their staring makes us wonder if perhaps there had been an episode when Herman was discovered by his parents wearing his mother’s or a sister’s clothes and whether they might have stared at him incomprehensibly and mumbled in their shock and confusion. In any case, as Melville creates the scene of Isabel’s relationship to her early caregivers, he clearly means to convey that the spark of recognition was not there, and that there was something strange about it.

Isabel, Pierre and De Quincey portray in different ways the special solipsism of the depressed, the isolate, the orphan castaway and perhaps also the writer who uses these figures to represent himself. Never having learned to read or feel comforted and consoled, indeed situated in the world, by a recognizing human face, such a solipsist is impoverished of human connection and thereby deprived of a more realistic connection to himself.

Fantasies and Fetishes

But if a child feels abandoned and drowning in world of faces and people that have proved to be unreliable, adolescence throws out the life preserver of sexuality. Under the driving force of sex, bits and pieces of experience can be pressed into service to rescue the fragile self from its dependence on people by using fantasies and

special objects to take the place of problematic and indecipherable wholes. This is the function of fantasy and especially fetish.

Docter explains the permanence of sexual scripts. “Once a network of ideation—a sexual script—is formed and linked to innate affective systems, this regulatory ideation remains largely in place throughout life...[and] the preferences of youth often reflect the most powerful sexual themes running through a persons entire life” (101). Depending on the practice of course, what is sexually satisfying can become socially isolating which in a vicious cycle increases the need for it. Docter, Stoller, and Bailey have all noted that paraphilias (unusual sexual practices) like cross dressing, are remarkably resistant to change in spite of intense social pressures against them. Indeed, social disapproval may actually increase the sexual pleasure of crossing into the forbidden territory.

If we look at the recurring themes in Melville’s work, we can see that they all have a compulsive quality, admitting of no outside influence. They circle around damaged manhood with hints of fascination with women’s clothes, and bondage. Perhaps it is not too far a stretch, then, to see these recurring themes as part of a paraphilic sexual script resistant to change. Imprisoned in his own inner world, Melville replays his own thoughts and fantasies over and over again. These fantasies become satisfying by virtue of the reliable pleasure they provide. It is a sexual script, full of private symbols and recurring themes that are never resolved, never explained, but always can be counted on to produce the desired effect.

Docter notes in his review of the literature on fetishism that, “Freud emphasized the unique qualities of strongly preferred or fetishistic stimuli as part of

the sexual arousal process. He reasoned that a fetish may replace the ‘normal sexual object,’ the human body, thereby becoming the exclusive sexual goal object...” (106, 107). If the sexual object remains frustratingly unclear in Melville’s art, it might be because he is deep in his fetishistic dance with the woman in himself and is not concerned either with the putative love object, in this case Isabel, or with us as his readers, as partners in the dance. A history of non-recognition, like the non-recognition he attempts to express, enacts what it describes and ends up leaving him alone with himself and his fantasies.

These fantasies go round and round like flotsam in a vortex, gathering speed and intensity as they go. And as they grow more concentrated in their circularity, they seem to draw the dreamer “toward the closing vortex” like the *Pequod* into a maelstrom, or the writer into the triumphant release of orgasm. Here in his epilogue, Melville describes the orgasmic survival of Ishmael:

Till, gaining that vital centre, the black bubble upward burst; and now, liberated by reason of its cunning spring and, owing to its great buoyancy, rising with great force, the coffin life-buoy shot lengthwise from the sea, fell over, and floated by my side (American Library, *MD* 1408).

Reading the epilogue of *Moby-Dick* this way, it is hard *not* to see the sexual symbolism in it. What has often been accepted without much controversy as the poetic addenda to a dramatic story or merely an add-on to explain how it was that Ishmael survived to tell the tale, becomes a ritual of sexual release one might expect after so great an extended, if often frustratingly indirect, foreplay of a novel. That it ends in what we unmistakably sense is an orgasm is somehow fitting.

It is fascinating to observe that the coffin of Queequeg that buoys Ishmael up and saves his life is also at the same time clearly a deflated penis. After having shot up like a fountain, “rising with great force” from the sea, it now lays peacefully along his side after its triumphant rise. This suggests that for Melville the penis is the coffin of his feminine second self, the biological fact that keeps her hidden and imprisoned, and also his surviving manhood, triumphantly confirmed by the sexual pleasure it can still provide. Perhaps this sexual climax “by reason of its [p]unning spring” is what Melville was referring to when he wrote to Hawthorne November 17, 1851. “I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as a lamb” (N *MD* 566).

As satisfying as acting or writing out sexual fantasies might be, relying on them as the main source of pleasure is problematic. Isolated from human warmth, connection and reciprocity, how not to be overwhelmed, in spite of occasional sexual release, by recurring feelings of despair and emptiness? This is the fate of all Melville men from Tommo through Ahab to Pierre. It is, Winnicott tells us, the fate of the False Self when the spontaneous gesture of the True Self is not invited or encouraged by recognition.

We can see that lack of recognition has far reaching consequences for the transvestite as well as, perhaps, for a certain kind of tortured writer, imprisoned in the fantasies of his own inner world. This is De Quincey’s private nightmare, exacerbated by his dependence on opium, and Melville’s, too, exacerbated by the compulsive and therefore isolating nature of his fetishistic cross-gender feelings and fantasies. Imprisonment in a private nightmare is also, recognizably, the story of Bartleby, Benito Cereno, Ahab, and Pierre, the failed writer alone in his locked room.

Bondage is often found in transvestite sexual scenarios. As one transvestite reported in one of Docter's case histories, "All of my transvestic life I have had fantasies of forced [cross] dressing. My imagination runs wild with plots of bondage, slavery and the like" (113).

Perhaps Melville's *Benito Cereno* is a sexual fantasy, too, of a feminine man being forced to [cross] dress in the uniform of a man and carry an empty scabbard. The slavery of the suggestively named ship, the *San Dominick* is decidedly sexual, as is the tension of the scene in which the servant Babo shaves Benito. Over each hangs the frustrating fog of hints and a whiff of sado-masochism:

"Now, master," he said, readjusting the flag, and pressing the head gently further back into the crotch of the chair, "Now Master," and the steel glanced nigh the throat (American Library *Melville* 718).

And when they emerge from the cabin, Amasa (A Master?) Delano says:

Presently master and man came forth; Don Benito leaning on his servant as if nothing had happened. But a sort of love-quarrel after all (721).

We don't need a microscope to find bondage scenarios deployed everywhere in Melville's work, and their recurring presence invites us to notice links between his sado-masochistic themes and cross gender identification. Citing an important British study by Gosslein and Wilson in 1980, Docter reports their conclusion that "35% of three groups (heterosexual transvestites, fetishists and sado-masochists) shared all three predilections" (50-51). So, "Clearly there is considerable overlap of sexual behavior across the three groups. They [Gosslein and Wilson] surmise both transvestism and sado-masochism are based on fetishes learned early in life and that

the formation of a sexual script to organize this fetishism is therefore central to the sexual variations they studied” (51).

Perhaps, as part of his sexual script, Melville employed sado-masochistic fantasies and/or fetishes, together with cross-dressing as a form of self-stimulation through mental imagery. If so, they would likely have become persistent and compulsive in nature, and while undoubtedly pleasurable, they may also have been experienced as a kind of imprisonment and a domination.

As Docter states:

When a person thinks about a sexual theme and develops clearly formed images of persons or things there is intense mental activity taking place. A chain of memory processes or schemas becomes progressively organized as certain fetishes become favored...To promote self-stimulation through mental imagery is at the heart of every sexual scenario and when fetishes enliven scenarios they provide a *kind of cement* that holds this cognitive activity in place and gives it the “*locked on*” quality that many have noted (my emphasis 112-113).

Bondage in Melville begins with Tommo’s luxurious captivity among the Typees under the watchful eye of his dominator Kory-Kory and runs all the way to Pierre, imprisoned in his mother’s mansion, haunted by faces and yearning for release and recognition.

Enslaved by his mother, Pierre is haunted by a feminine face. This face, like the faces imploring De Quincey are projections of the writer’s tormented inner life. Pierre is self-orphaned and wandering when he leaves his mother’s home, and De Quincey is an orphan, too. In his placeless, anonymous wandering through the labyrinthine streets of the city, he is plagued by faces. His castaway narrative as well as his figure of the mysterious elusive woman, Ann, whom he searches for in vain, can be seen as models for Melville’s haunting face of Isabel. De Quincey found a

way to represent the lost, betrayed girl child in himself that must have resonated strongly with Melville while he was composing *Pierre*.

I also suggest that the influence of opium in De Quincey's case, and the compulsive force of fetishistic transvestic urges in Melville's, served as both the subject and the driving force behind their art. In trying to portray the ineffable, and ineluctable, both were dominated and influenced more by the altered states of consciousness they experienced under the influence of their compulsions than by the literary influences of the familiar figures, tropes and strategies of the Romantics. But like most writers who find models in their precursors, and commune with them through their own work, Melville must have intuited that De Quincey (like Hawthorne perhaps) was a kindred spirit.

The compulsive, dominating quality of the woman's face that haunts *Pierre* portends marital conflict. Lucy says, "Ah, Pierre, sometimes I have thought--never will I wed with my best Pierre, until the riddle of that face be known" (46). But Pierre could not get rid of the haunting face, "The mystical face recurred to him and kept with him" (50). This is an example of J. Michael Bailey's concept of autogynophilia. The woman Pierre is really in love with is himself--*as a woman*.

Driven by the compulsion to repeatedly act out their private fantasies, married transvestites and their hapless wives often find their marriage dominated by this *other* woman, and marital conflict is often the result. In his research, Docter found "considerable evidence from the wives was noted that supports the long-held view that blocking or stopping cross-dressing has marked consequences for the transvestite" (193), and yet most wives in his study said they would prefer that their

husbands refrain. They are especially worried that their husbands' cross dressing will be discovered by others. Out of 35 wives, 25 reported they were worried someone would find out (173). Wives also "tend to be uncomfortable with many of the investments of resources necessary to support cross dressing. They include devoting too much time, spending too much money, restricting social activities, interfering with family relationships and risking harm to children" (175).

Melville's compulsion to cross dress or act out other fetishistic fantasies, and Lizzy's fear of its discovery may, as I have suggested, be at the root of Melville's often violent and unhappy marriage. It may also explain the persistent secrecy that has always surrounded Melville's domestic scene and the family's reluctance to share the specifics of Melville's moods and behavior that so worried them. It may explain that enigmatic episode reported in Parker where Lizzy was afraid to leave Herman alone with his children when she went away. If the woman he truly loved was himself, and Lizzy was seen as an impediment and an endlessly frustrating barrier to the consummation of his true love, some of the heretofore fuzzy "facts" of Melville's life suddenly pop into focus.

As quoted in Docter, "Periods of acting out...fantasies are punctuated by intervals of renunciation and guilt, and negative self-evaluations—but the predominant sources of pleasure soon return. In fact the fantasies are a major source of pleasure, ease, and sometimes a prerequisite for orgiastic release" (Ovesey and Person in Docter 45).

Perhaps cross dressing was a prerequisite for Melville and Lizzy's love making, too, the sexual aide that helped him father children with her. But more

likely, given the corseted codes of the 19th century and the strict Calvinist influence of his mother Maria, who was still living in the home, Herman was thwarted in his desire to act out his fantasies. Melville's alternating depression and emotional upheavals were the result. But we must not overlook the other result--his characteristic art, which, like the sexual script that saved him since adolescence, was both a blessing and a curse to him. It was, like his "queenly personality," a fantasy lifebuoy that both sustained and tormented him, as it did Ahab, while he earthly lived.

Docter notes the fundamental paradox at the heart of a transvestite's marital relations. That is, "On the one hand *he* feels most sexually alive while cross dressed...On the other hand, the wife is typically turned off in the presence of a cross dressed husband" (my emphasis 176). We can readily see how this would cause trouble in a marriage, the kind of trouble, like the other double-binds we find in Melville's life and art, of wanting what he cannot allow himself to have and of trying to express what he does not want others to know. Of course, like most of my argument, these are things no one will ever be able to prove. What we can trace through the record are the violent ups and downs of a marriage that was troubled by something persistent and irresolvable—something perhaps as hardened and holding, as "locked on" as a fetish.

Like the swirling vortex that drowns the *Pequod*, Isabel feels drawn into a fantasy vortex of faces as she looks at her alter-ego Pierre. Her description reminds us of the "artfully placed mirrors" of Gilbert and Gubar, except in this case it is more suggestive of solipsism to note that the mirrors act more like an *abyss en abyme*, an infinity of self reflections that occurs when one mirror faces another.

This it is, that even now—this moment—surrounds thy visible form my brother, with a mysterious mistiness; so that a second face, and a third face, and a fourth face peep at me from within thy own...I go groping again amid all sorts of shapes, which part to me, so that I seem to advance through shapes, and yet the shapes have eyes and look at me. I turn around and they look at me; I step forward, and they look at me (141).

Rejected by her caregivers, Isabel looks upon faces as objects with eyes, but they do not tell her anything, they do not invite her into the world and into relationship through their recognition of her.

Like De Quincey, Melville uses the same term, “tyranny,” to describe the domination of his idealized feminine face, which comes to him like a fetishistic fantasy demanding release:

For the most part he felt now that he had power over the comings and goings of the face; but not on all occasions. Sometimes the old original mystic *tyranny* would steal upon him; the long, dark locks of mournful hair would fall upon his soul and trail their wonderful melancholy along with them...(my emphasis 66).

Clearly, for De Quincey, as well as Pierre and Melville, the faces that haunt are not faces of actual people with whom they have histories and relationships, nor are they wholly separate imagined characters. Instead, they are lifeless, and historyless, like the reflection of Narcissus or Eve in the pool, or Frankenstein’s Monster, signifying only the endless contemplation, and sometimes horror, of the self. But they can also be part of a sexual script that when replayed offers a “wonderful melancholy” and release.

But for Melville the face of Isabel also works like Ahab’s “pasteboard masks” and the White Whale. The face of Isabel, shoved near to Pierre represents the same kind of tyrannizing mystery. “Thou face! For me thou hast uncovered one infinite,

dumb, beseeching countenance of mystery, underlying all the surfaces of visible time and space” (64). But it is the tyranny of the solipsistic Narcissus, a self inextricably fused with itself. What Melville allows us to see in *Pierre* is not his love for another woman, but his autogynophilic love for the woman in himself. And, like it was for Narcissus, it is an impossible love doomed to failure and death.

We can readily imagine the thrilling sense of danger Melville must have felt while he was writing *Pierre*, holding the mirror up close and feeling a corporeal response, perhaps a sexual tumescence, at revealing, if only by hints, what had been growing in his heart since childhood. He was crossing a boundary, a tabooed space, into a forbidden canoe, bringing the woman into a male body, into the male role his socially assigned gender dictated. Like the image of sexual release in the Epilogue of *Moby-Dick*, the following passage in *Pierre* is unmistakably one of sexual swelling and the joy of release. The image of the face, his woman’s face, excited him.

Some hazy fairy swam above him in the heavenly ether, and showered upon him sweet pearls of pensiveness. Then he would be seized by singular impulse to reveal the secret to some other individual in the world...he could not hold all this strange fullness in himself. It must be shared (66).

Just as Pierre contemplates sharing his story with Lucy, and experiences sexual arousal at the prospect, Melville contemplates the thrill of sharing his unusual story with the world. This is similar to the transvestite’s need to cross dress in public and pass as a woman. In fantasy, as they imagine it, they become aroused. But the reality is almost always disappointing as the public reception is usually less than welcoming. Seeking recognition, the transvestite meets only stares and confusion (like Isabel’s caregivers) in the faces of others, as well as outright rejection and anger.

Predictably, the world's reaction to Melville's feminine self in *Pierre* was hostile and rejecting, too, because his self-revelation turned out to be no revelation at all. He left his readers perplexed by the enigmatic Janus-faced Isabel/Pierre and other characters they simply could not comprehend.

Melville's haunting faces left his critics and his family alike feeling that he was insane. According to Robertson-Lorant, "Even The New York *Day Book* blazoned the headline, 'HERMAN MELVILLE CRAZY'" (324).

Robertson-Lorant seems to agree although she notes, "If *Pierre* reflected a crack up of sorts, the stories and sketches were Melville's attempt to salvage and reassemble a shattered kaleidoscope of myriad selves by focusing not on the inner psychodrama, but on the outer world" (336). She is referring to the stories gathered in *The Piazza Tales*, published in 1856, but I suggest these stories have little to do with the reality of "the outer world." The title tale, "The Piazza" is solely about Melville's inner world and the woman at its core.

If Melville had failed to resolve his gender conflict with the writing of *Pierre* and had moved on to his much more successful tales for Putnam's Magazine, his alter-ego, Isabel, would not be forgotten and neither would the feminine self she represented. She would materialize again in Marianna of "The Piazza."

Hershel Parker claims Melville modeled Isabel on his cousin Priscilla, who was likewise born in France and orphaned and lived on the edge of poverty earning her living as a seamstress. Yet though her straightened circumstances and deprivation in life may have been useful to Melville, and may have actually seemed like his own, the actual writing in *Pierre* where the ambiguities suggest a more self-reflective

model, cannot possibly be seen to rest on any real life model, however apt. Any purely historical or overly literal interpretation of *Pierre*, or indeed any of Melville's novels and stories, is doomed to miss the mark, leaving too many important questions unanswered.

Isabel and Marianna both share some of the particulars of Priscilla's circumstances, true, but once again, the identification with both is the "tell tale" sign that they represent much more than that.

Taking a walk up country, the narrator discovers Marianna working in lonely isolation high up in the Berkshire Hills and as far away from the South Pacific as the environs of Pittsfield, Massachusetts are, Melville still describes her as "like some Tahiti girl meant for sacrifice" (Library of America, *Melville* 629). This is a telling detail since Yillah of *Mardi* was also a feminine alter-ego meant for sacrifice. I suggest that like all threatened maidens in Melville, the sacrifice he hints at is abandonment. In Melville's view the woman in him *is* sacrificed, condemned to live a lonely life of invisibility, hidden away and unrecognized by the society at large.

That she is a figure for the writer becomes clear as he describes her. Marianna lives and works alone, in obscurity, and she imagines characters. The narrator says, "To you shadows are as things, though you speak of them as phantoms" (632). A personification of Melville's own restless imagination, Marianna cannot sleep. But she has a brother (like Isabel has a brother), a brother who, unlike her, goes out into the world, "who stands and works in the open air," and she yearns to be like him, so she can rest. The picture Melville draws of her is so sad and lonely and yet so

specifically another side of himself, the part that hides away, slaves away unrecognized by others, and who can never come out into the light of day.

Marianna is figuratively positioned on the other side of an invisible threshold upon which Melville stands looking at her: “Pausing at the threshold, or rather where a threshold once had been, I saw, through an open door-way, a lonely girl” (629). This threshold is, like the transitional stage of a rite of passage, a “pass between two worlds, participant of neither” (629).

In his mind, the threshold between him and his feminine second self seems invisible. They are one. And yet, she is the prisoner. From her secret place in his heart as through her “lonely window” (629), she looks down to the valley at the house of the author, the other, public part of herself, and she wishes she could come down from her lonely cottage and step into his house just once. But it is a forlorn wish, for the woman in Melville can never come in (or come out) to the real world and be recognized. And so there can be no end to her story. Melville simply terminates her with a single word, “enough” and then confesses that, even so, “every night the truth comes in with darkness...to and fro I walk the piazza deck, haunted by Marianna’s face” (634).

It was Taji’s lifelong quest to find Yillah. It was Pierre’s fervent wish to bring Isabel home into the Glendinning mansion and introduce her to his mother. Later, as Melville paces his piazza, the truth comes in, and he is once again haunted by a face, a woman’s face. As with Fayaway, Yillah, Isabel, and Marianna, (and also Agatha of the aborted *Isle of The Cross*) the figurative embodiment of that truth is always a woman.

CHAPTER 6

Of Epilogues and Homecomings:
The Departure of Daniel Orme/The Return of Billy Budd

Thomas Mallon, in his review of a recent Garrison Keillor novel, says, “This one even contains an epilogue, the closest thing to an afterlife that fiction can offer” (*The New York Times Book Review* September 23, 2007).

Melville appended an epilogue to *Moby-Dick* in which Ishmael explains how he alone survived to tell the tale. And though it was his only overtly titled “Epilogue,” it seems clear that he began to seriously doubt an afterlife for his art ever since the critical failure of *Moby-Dick* and especially *Pierre*. The first example is a rather gloomy forecast of his posterity embodied in the forlorn figure of Bartleby.

In “Bartleby The Scrivener’s” final page we learn of his history as a clerk in the dead letter office.

Dead letters! Does it not sound like dead men?...Sometimes from out the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring, the finger it was meant for, perhaps, moulders in the grave; a bank-note sent in swiftest charity—he whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers any more; pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities. On errands of life these letters speed to death (46).

The passage ends with the famous line “Ah Bartleby, Ah Humanity,” and who among us has not felt both cosmic and tragic irony when our hopes and desires go unfulfilled because of poor timing? But this ending is especially poignant for Melville whose hopes and dreams for a glittering literary career and posthumous fame sank in the swampy ambiguities of *Pierre*.

It must have seemed to Melville that Bartleby was the perfect shadow of his failure and despair. And Bartleby's willful refusal to copy and indeed to live may have been Melville practicing suicide in fantasy. He perhaps derived not a little melancholic pleasure from contemplating his own demise. Self-grieving may have had its satisfactions as he contemplated that he, too, might die anonymously, even as hope and salvation might be on its way to him from an unknown benefactor.

Some forty years later, as Melville rounded that last turn and headed home for his eternal rest, he was still pondering the meaning of his life and his chances of being remembered. Perhaps with that in mind, he wrote two pieces that outline very different fates for his posthumous reputation: the sketch of "Daniel Orme" and the novella, *Billy Budd*. Each describes a different kind of death. Daniel's name, Orme, or-me, suggests that Melville contemplated Daniel's anonymous solitary death as possibly his own fate. It is a sad, self-pitying expiration, not unlike Bartleby's. He simply departs and the narrator coyly tells us whatever his transgressions were he had kept them secret, "For the sake of others" and not to protect himself. In contrast, Billy's death suggests a life after death for the artist. It is not a leave taking but a homecoming that is transcendent and luminous.

Daniel and Billy are like the two proverbial brothers, one the self-pitying stay-at-home, (despite his world travels as a sailor), the other a handsome runaway, a prodigal. Billy comes home to his fellow sailors who welcome and embrace him in spite of his crime, but Daniel never admits to his sins and is not remembered, while Billy, who has murdered another man, gratefully accepts the judgment of the court and after his death, he is loved and heralded in song.

And the same fate awaits the two stories. *Billy Budd* has been embraced by a multitude, transformed into a film and an opera, and it is widely read and revered as a staple of gay literature, while Daniel is a little known castaway in Melville's work, almost completely forgotten, seldom read or mentioned, even by Melville scholars.

Daniel's solitary departure leaves no sense of glory and redemption in its wake. It tells us each man dies alone and forgotten, while Billy's death, acted out before a crowd of sympathetic onlookers, is a willing surrender, and thus a triumph. It is inspiring and beautiful because it points toward the future. Billy's story, like the Christian story it echoes, tells us all is not lost. There is life beyond the grave.

Daniel's death, like *Bartleby's*, *Pierre's*, *Isabel's* and *Ahab's*, lacks the sense of resurrection that would extend the hero's life beyond the last page. With *Billy Budd*, Melville gives us at last a real epilogue, which includes a literal afterlife for the story: "Billy in the Darbies," the song Billy becomes after his death

Billy Budd imagines a death and simultaneous resurrection in art. It also anticipates the revival of Melville's own reputation as an artist. With *Billy Budd* Melville at last comes home to a public that had abandoned him and left him castaway on the unforgiving seas of anonymity. It rescued him from a death like Daniel Orme's. And as Billy becomes a hero in song to sailors who never knew him so, too, does Melville come alive to a readership generations after his solitary death. Billy accomplishes what in life Melville could not: lasting fame. The handsome, womanly sailor foretells and embodies Melville's literary resurrection.

After the failures of *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, Melville wrote *The Piazza Tales*, which includes "Bartleby the Scrivener," "Benito Cereno," and "The Piazza." These

remarkable short stories were written while he was suffering from severe sciatica and rheumatism. He was struggling also (and perhaps primarily) from a deep depression of the kind that dogged him all his life and plagued his mother and her mother before her as well. But during this time, his behavior had become so disturbing that his wife and extended family feared for his sanity. It was arranged to send him on an extended trip to the Holy Land, to restore his soul and also perhaps to give his beleaguered family a rest.

On his way, in October of 1856, Melville stopped in Liverpool and reunited briefly with his old friend Hawthorne, then serving as consul there. Hawthorne remarks that Melville, “as he usually does, began to talk of Providence and futurity”:

[He] informed me he had pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated...I think he will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief. It is strange how he has persisted—and has ever since I knew him and probably long before—in wandering to and fro over these deserts...he can neither believe, nor be comfortable in unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other (Parker 300).

Unfortunately, the deserts of Judea proved as empty and desolate, as full of silent stones for Melville’s doubting mind as the deserts of philosophy seemed to Hawthorne. To say the least he was disappointed, and the note of discouragement with the sacred sites of the Holy Land, especially Jerusalem is heart breaking:

Woman panting under burdens—men with melancholy faces...I began to think myself one of the possessed with devils” (*Journal Up The Straits* 79)

...so small a city pent in by walls obstructing ventilation, postponing the morning and hastening an unwholesome twilight (83)

The holy Sepulchre...ruined dome—confused, half ruinous pile—labyrinths & terraces, mouldy grottos, tombs and shrines. Smells like a dead house, Dingy light...(84)

[There is at all times a smell of burning rubbish in the air of Jerusalem
 [The so-called pool of Bethesda full of rubbish—sooty look and smell
 (91)

No country will more quickly dissipate romantic expectations than
 Palestine (91-91)

Is the desolation of the land the result of the fatal embrace of the deity?
 Hapless are the favorites of Heaven (92)

In the emptiness of lifeless antiquity of Jerusalem the emigrant Jews
 are like flies that have taken up their abode in a skull (92).

In *Power, Faith and Fantasy: America in the Middle East 1776 to the Present*, historian Michael B. Oren traces Melville's steps amid the ruins of Palestine and concludes, "Rather than uplifting him, the scenery pitched Melville into an ominous hallucinatory gloom" (162). Clearly, if Melville was searching for inspiration and a way to arrive at the snug harbor of belief, Jerusalem did not offer it. Instead, it seemed to offer only desolation and death. But it is much more likely that Melville brought with him a profound skepticism and despair that Jerusalem only mirrored back to him. Perhaps the skull full of flies was not Jerusalem but Melville's own. If at home the blame could be cast upon mother, wife and children, and unreceptive literary critics, here in Jerusalem he could blame the "fatal embrace" of a god he could not believe in.

Story-telling Clown

No wonder he found the Holy Land a discouraging place. No wonder the holy sites seemed to mock him. Palestine is a land of many faiths, and he was a man of none. Just before his journey, Melville had finished *The Confidence Man*, a work which can serve as a window into his state of mind. It is an intellectual tour de force

and also a compendium of disillusion and despair that reflects his loss of *confidence* in humanity, in reality, in the stability of character, and therefore in the very existence of an ordered universe and a benevolent God. Yet in spite of its hypertrophic excesses, it is also a fascinating distillation of all that went before it in his novels: his at first tentative and then increasingly desperate interrogations of identity, his hidden femininity and his sense of damaged manhood. His gender ambiguity and the super-intellectualizing defense against the depression and anxiety it caused him found its logical conclusion in the fractured narrative of *The Confidence Man*.

And threaded through it is a continuing discussion of the nature of fiction itself. In both its sardonic tone, preoccupation with death and its metafictionality, *The Confidence Man* anticipates Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, published first in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in 1898, just eight years after Melville's death and only forty one years after *The Confidence Man* was published.

Both Melville and Conrad make similar self-reflexive use of a clown figure, "The Harlequin." In Conrad:

I looked at him, lost in astonishment. There he was before me, in motley, as though he had absconded from a troupe of mimes, enthusiastic, fabulous. His very existence was improbable, inexplicable, and altogether bewildering. He was an insoluble problem. It was inconceivable how he had existed, how he had succeeded in getting so far, how he had managed to remain—why he did not instantly disappear... The glamour of youth enveloped his parti-coloured rags, his destitution, his loneliness, the essential desolation of his futile wanderings.... Glamour urged him on, glamour kept him unscathed (*Heart of Darkness* 90).

Conrad's character in "parti-coloured rags" with the "glamour" of reckless naiveté is an artful personification of the author's own youthful ambition as a writer as seen through the eyes of Marlow, his mature self. "His need was to exist, and to

move onwards at the greatest possible risk, and with a maximum of privation. If the absolutely pure, uncalculating, unpractical spirit of adventure had ever ruled a human being, it ruled this bepatched youth” (91).

The “impractical” harlequin is the precursor to Kurtz who represents both the writer and his goal. His rapacious, colonizing will to dominate all he sees and his inability to compromise with the real world is the face of extreme narcissism, and will to omnipotence we will see in lightning-struck Ahab. Kurtz, like Ahab, becomes inward turning, angry, ruthless, tormented and insane.

Marlow/Conrad, confronting his harlequin, is fictionally looking into the ambition of youth and is able to see its unmediated end result. Kurtz is the holy grail of a saving art turned to pot metal, or to dross. Marlow sees what his harlequin cannot. “I did not envy him his devotion to Kurtz, though. He had not meditated over it. It came to him, and he accepted it with a sort of eager fatalism. I must say that to me it appeared about the most dangerous thing in every way he had come upon so far” (91).

Kurtz, the brilliant and insane practitioner of “Unsound method,” expounds on various subjects, “Love, justice, the conduct of life and what not” (124) with a voice very like the one we hear doing the same thing in *The Confidence Man* only with an American perspective on history, rather than a European one.

In 1876, twenty years after his gloomy depression in Palestine, Melville will revise his notions of who is to blame for the death and ruin he found there. He will say in his epic poem *Clarel*, that it is the missionaries and merchants who “in the name of Christ and Trade/ Deflower the world’s last sylvan glade (in Oren 165). This

is astonishingly similar to Conrad's description of the scramble for Africa's ivory and gold that he called the "merry dance of death and trade" (Dover 11) and, "robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale..." (Dover 4).

But when was Palestine ever a "Sylvan Glade"? Not even in biblical times. In *Clarel* Melville is trying in a very Conradian way to salvage the trip to the Holy Land by recasting it as a place spoiled not by God but by man.

As the fantastic, unbelievable Harlequin is Kurtz's younger self, Fayaway/Tommo can be seen as the personifications of Melville's youthful hopes and ambitions. But because they both have a feminine identity at their core, they avoid the dangerous violence of rapacious, colonizing masculinity, which would lead them to despair and disillusion. Such disillusion will appear years later in the multiple masquerades, each one seamlessly morphing into the other, of *The Confidence Man*. The difference in the two novels is that in Conrad's there is the rational mediating observer/narrator, Marlow, who keeps the narrative from dissolving as he watches the stages of his own life passing before him in the heart of darkness. What *The Confidence Man* lacks is its own Ishmael to keep it together.

Yet, it is not a lack, since it's shifting characters are meant to demonstrate something unique and valuable about the nature of story telling. I suggest that for the hidden woman and damaged man in Herman Melville, fiction and life seemed the same. Melville, acutely aware of his own masquerade and by the time he wrote *The Confidence Man*, had traveled deep enough into the heart of his art to become consciously aware of its devilish and delicious processes. One can see his perverse delight in the magical sleights of hand and the extended riff he does on the very

notion of *confidence* in all its levels of meaning both for the art of the story and the life it claims to describe and represent. For all its flaws, it is an audacious novel, satirical and sublime, horrifying and hellish to read, which is perhaps why it appealed to the English more than it did to the American common reader. And perhaps Joseph Conrad was one of them.

It is interesting to ponder whether Conrad had read *The Confidence Man* and might, consciously or unconsciously, have been inspired by it to write *Heart of Darkness*. Just as Conrad uses his *Heart of Darkness* to enlarge upon his adopted profession, the dark art of writing fiction, so, too, does Melville, in a final burst of intellectual fireworks, use the multiple characters of *The Confidence Man* to discuss the nature of story-telling as both a transcendent and double-sided truth--a horror, a lie. The very stuff of story-telling, and especially modernist fiction like *The Confidence Man* and *Heart of Darkness*, is to shift shapes and blur boundaries so that we can never know exactly where we are. Clearly, we are not really floating down a river in either of the novels. We are inside the ever shifting, fluid landscape of these authors' minds.

In Chapter 33 "Which May Pass For Whatever It's Worth," Melville seems to anticipate Marlow's distinctive voice when he says in a very Conradian way, "How unreal all this is!" and then goes on to ask a rhetorical question. "Who did ever dress or act like your cosmopolitan? And who, it might be returned, did ever dress or act like harlequin?" (Library of America, *Melville* 1037). Once again, Melville addresses character sartorially, contrasting clothing with behavior, (or with being), and suggesting that for him inside and outside remain at odds. It is the boundary of

gender, seen through the artifacts of clothing that indicate the perplexing fault line in his divided nature. He then goes on to answer:

Strange that in a work of amusement, this severe fidelity to real life should be exacted by anyone, who, by taking up a work, sufficiently shows that he is not unwilling to drop real life and turn for a time to something different...that anyone who for any cause finds life dull (1037).

The confidence man, who plays many parts in the novel, is referred to here as “The stranger.” He is a man, dressed in “motely colorful clothing,” who advises the Missourian that his unusual dress is entirely appropriate. “Life is a picnic *en costume*; one must take part, assume a character, stand ready in a sensible way to play the fool” (983).

As Melville has repeatedly used his fiction to play in drag, obsess about women’s clothing and portray his inner femininity, it is interesting to hear this discussion of costume and the notion of life as a masquerade, a disguise. One wonders if the disguise he dons is masculine or feminine. Harkening back to Ahab we may well ask, which is the true leg, and which the false? But *The Confidence Man* will not provide us with a safe and comforting answer as it powerfully argues that *all* legs (identities) are false.

Legs

Ahab’s false leg represents his damaged manhood, but for Melville, masculinity, which is potency and manly action, is also “the guinea-coast slavery of solitary command” (NMD 443). The burden of manhood in a Melville story is often represented by a troubling affliction in the leg. In *Typee*, Tommo has a recurring and

unspecified “problem” with his leg that lays him up periodically. Later, in *The Confidence Man*, a man with a wooden leg appears along with a crippled negro.

The man with a wooden leg, described in Chapter 3 as “A limping gimlet-eye, sour-faced person” perhaps, “a discharged custom house officer” connects Melville’s ambition to secure a post at the Customs House (after writing *The Confidence Man*) and his sense of damaged manhood. “Limping” and “sour-faced” perhaps suggest his own defeat and resentment since a poorly paid civil service job is not the career he had been aiming for when he started out. This disabled man accuses the crippled negro of shamming, and the narrator admonishes him. “Cripples above all men should be companionable, or, at least refrain from picking a fellow-limper to pieces...” (851).

In Chapter 19, “A soldier of Fortune,” the man with the wooden leg gives way to another cripple, a “singular character in a grimy old regimental coat” (939) who suffers paralyzed legs. The herb doctor who is “also a natural bone-setter” (940) offers to help him, but the soldier rejects the offer fixing upon him “the hard, ironic eye of one toughened and defiant in misery” (940). The doctor accuses him of suffering not so much from his paralysis or from lack of cash but from having a lack of *confidence*.

Then another cripple, “stumping after him,” tells him a story of how he came to be in the “Tombs.” In the same prison where Bartleby meets his end, he says “the wet and damp struck into my bones” (942) so that upon his release he “had to be put into a hand-barrow with an awning to it and wheeled down to the dock and put aboard

a boat” that took him to a hospital where he “got worse” (943). After listening to his whole tale of woe the herb doctor/bone-setter says, “I cannot believe it” (943).

“That don’t surprise me,” says the crippled man, “...Hardly anybody believes my story, and so, to most I tell a different one” and he makes himself out to be a veteran of the Mexican War of 1846 (943). In this passage, I hear Melville saying that because no one would believe his real story he has been forced to fabricate a more plausible and palatable one—in effect to lie. And this may be why, as he tells Hawthorne after *Moby-Dick*, “all my books are botches.” He was always trying to artfully hint at the hidden truth of his life without being able to do so in a way others could understand. “Woes when told to strangers for money are best sugared” the crippled ex-con says (944). But even candy coating his conflicted gender identity could not help it go down well with his readers.

The herb doctor/bone-setter launches into a long lecture on the world, law, gratitude, and, like Conrad’s Kurtz, “Love, justice, the conduct of life and what not” (124). It becomes clear that the bone he wants to set is the bone of a broken *confidence* in the goodness of the world, but the cripple will have none of his optimism, and says, “You call yourself a bone-setter, do ye? Go bone-set the crooked world and then come bone-set crooked me” (946).

And as if talking of himself and his failed work in the public arena, Melville says through the herb doctor, “Now, have you no confidence in my art?” (946). So just as Marlow detests a lie but nevertheless finds himself lying for Kurtz, (the lie is the story he tells Kurtz’s Intended of how he died and what his last words were), the true horror of fiction is also seen as its chief virtue. The misanthropic, pessimistic,

unbelieving cripple, like Melville himself, tells lies for a living, and perhaps *because* of that, though others may find solace in it, he simply cannot be consoled.

There can be but one original character in a work of invention. Two would conflict to chaos (*The Confidence Man* 1098).

What a strange comment from an author who attempts so many original characters and who has set them at odds with one another in such artful and interesting ways: Taji and Hautia in *Mardi*, Bartleby and his boss, Benito and Babo, Pierre and his mother, Ahab and his whale, and the multiple personalities in *The Confidence Man*. It would seem Melville, by the time he wrote it, had fallen into despair that he had been able to make any of his characters original or real, or indeed that making anything real was possible, because reality itself is an ever shifting ground, conditional, contingent and relative. As “The Stranger” says, “What are you? What am I? Nobody knows who anybody is. The data which life furnishes, towards forming a true estimate of any being, are insufficient to that end...”(1047).

As I have been arguing, all Melville’s characters are reflections of his own divided self, his conflicts with his mother and his sense of damaged manhood. His work is full of his private symbols for these elements of his life and that is why he was so misunderstood by his public and ultimately rejected by them. It seems by the time he created *The Confidence Man* he had reached the same inescapable conclusion that he was always and only writing about himself. And perhaps that was Conrad’s understanding of his craft as well. As the harlequin, Marlow and Kurtz are all Conrad, perhaps many become writers out of a sense of unstable and divided identity, and their art is an effort to describe it and perhaps heal the divide and make themselves whole.

The Jealous Woman

We begin to encounter the figure of the jealous woman in *Mardi*, first with Annatoo, the thief, and then later with Hautia the dominatrix. We encounter her again as Moby-Dick, the white whale who steals Ahab's leg and undermines his manhood, and then as the haughty mother in *Pierre*, who infantilizes and feminizes her boy (castrating him by other means) and will not allow him to bring his sister/self into the family manse or include her in the hereditary name. Pierre tells us it is his mother's haughty pride that prevents it. The specter of the jealous woman appears again as Goneril in *The Confidence-Man*.

In Chapter 12, "Story of The Unfortunate Man," a man "with a weed in his hat," a symbol of his mourning, makes a public gesture of a grief for his dead wife that he does not feel. He only mourns Goneril because "he thought it proper" (906). This recalls Winnicott's notion of the False Self as a mixture of unfelt gesture and ungestured feeling. But Goneril, too, hides an inner core at odds with her outward appearance. The narrator describes her as a nature "anomalously vicious" causing him to wonder if the body may be but an "Unpledged and indifferent tabernacle" and that what we see is not what we always get (903).

As an indifferent container, Goneril is a composite of ambiguous gender referents. As he describes her complexion as rosy but having "a certain hardness and bakedness, like that of the glazed colors on stone-ware" we unmistakably feel she is hard and unfeminine (903). And when he says "Her mouth would have been pretty but for a trace of a mustache" and "her style of beauty rather peculiar and cactus-like" we feel again her sexual ambiguity (903). She is portrayed as a masculine woman,

rather like the actress Fanny Kemble who fascinated Melville back in 1849. He had identified with Kemble who had appeared so masculine to him, he wondered if she may have had a man's private parts hidden under her dress.

Yet, Goneril's "strange nature" is also reptilian as, "From early morning till about three o'clock in the afternoon she would seldom speak—it taking that time to thaw her...into speaking terms with humanity. During the interval, she did little but look, and keep looking out of her large, metallic eyes" (904). Serpent-like she is unmistakably figured as evil, and her inhumanity is suggested by an intriguing and delicate habit. "The only candy she loved were little dried sticks of blue clay" and when she was casting her spell over the innocent he tells us, "Inly she chewed her blue clay and you could mark that she chuckled" (904). This description has an uncanny feel, like the magical realism of Gabriel Garcia-Marquez with his, "Eyes of a Blue Dog" and the dirt eater in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Like a Marquez character, Goneril's unreality is reflected in her eyes, which are tinged with the demonic.

But this description of Goneril may also refer obliquely to the reclusive nature of the writer's life. Preoccupied during certain hours of the day with their work, they are demonically possessed and "inly chew" upon "the only candy" they love, which is their work. And the blue clay may refer to the implement they write with—a graphite pencil that is blue like clay. Goneril, both demonic and feminine, is also a writer, a metallic-eyed descendent of the long ago, more lightsome Fayaway who was Melville's first representation of the artist in himself as feminine.

But she had another disturbing habit. “In company she had a strange way of touching, as by accident, the arm or hand of comely young men, and seemed to reap a secret delight from it” (904).

Harkening back to his days in Polynesia, Melville tells us “Goneril’s touch had the dread operation of a heathen taboo” as it prevented the husband from gazing into the eyes of men touched by her for fear that he would see “some kind of more or less quizzing-knowing expression” (905). Here Melville seems convolutedly to suggest that the woman, who is a projection of his inner gender identity, desires to touch men. He is afraid that the men she/he touches will instinctively see that he is attracted to them in an unwholesome (culturally disallowed homosexual) way. The man is ashamed to see that knowing expression in the eyes of other men. That is why, “He would shudderingly shun the young gentlemen” (905).

Goneril’s touch acts like a taboo, a boundary, as Mary Douglas would say, that prevents the man with the weed from interacting with men in the way the woman in him would like to. Because of shame, that ancient defender of boundaries, the men he/she desires are now off-limits, because of the pollution inherent in the mixing of women with men or, more importantly, the mixing of genders or sexes within one man.

Goneril is Melville’s shadow feminine self figured as evil and demanding, but she is also the jealous mother figure. Then the narrator tells us that “the devil of jealousy entered her calm, clayey, cakey devil” and that “the object of her deranged jealousy was her own child, a little girl of seven, her father’s consolation and pet” (905). “He saw Goneril artfully torment the little innocent and then play the maternal

hypocrite with it” and it drove him to leave his wife (905). When he tried to rescue his child and take her with him, Goneril, backed by “some women’s-rights women” was able to take the child back. She subsequently brings suit, intending to have him committed as insane. “Upon which he fled, and was now an innocent outcast, wandering forlorn...” (906). The innocent forlorn outcast is a familiar Melville type. Here she is his inner woman, and also the man whose outside appearance belies her existence.

In this story, the innocent girl in Melville is figured as being held hostage by *real* (biological) women, the “women’s-rights women,” who are *jealous* and will always defend the singular prerogatives of their gender against all interlopers.

On what grounds is the man with the weed to be judged insane Melville does not say. One can wonder if the insanity attributed to the man with the weed is a reflection of Melville’s very real domestic scene leading to his setting out for the Holy Land for a long rest away from his beset family. Goneril’s jealousy of her daughter echoes Mrs. Glendinning’s of Isabel and leads us to wonder about the “strange” relationship Melville had with his own mother and how it might relate to the figure of the abandoned child/maiden meant for sacrifice in Melville’s art. But as we will see, the mourning man in Melville will finally bring his daughter home in the transcendent story of *Billy Budd*.

Bringing Her Home

The other side of the vengeful, jealous mother figure is the hostage female child or the maiden meant for sacrifice. Just like the theme of the broken, paralyzed

or false leg, the theme of a maiden meant for sacrifice runs like a doe through the forest of most of Melville's novels. It begins with Yillah in *Mardi* and continues through: Isabel of *Pierre*, Marianna of "The Piazza," the women paper mill workers in "The Tartarus of Maids," Hunilla the Chola Widow of "The Encantadas," the abandoned Agatha of the never completed *Isle of The Cross* and also, finally, Ruth of *Clarel*, who when he sees her in her grave provokes *Clarel* to jump in the grave and be buried with her. All of these women are outcasts too, like the castaway boys in Melville's fiction.

However, at the very end of his life, with the writing of *Billy Budd*, Melville was finally able to bring the maiden home and arrange a transcendent arrival for her, and at the same time he was able to embrace a faith that had eluded and resisted him all his life, especially as he wandered bereft through the Holy Land.

In *Billy Budd*, the sacrificed woman is totally transformed from a sad and abandoned figure to a heroic one. She becomes a *willing* sacrifice that takes the very specific and symbolically significant shape of a crucifixion. Through the "Armorial cross" and the journey on an ass, two important Christian symbols he inserted into the story of Hunilla the Chola Widow, and in the title of *Isle of the Cross*, as well as the crucifix tattooed to Daniel Orme's chest, Melville tells us he felt himself to have carried the cross of his masculine body and the pain of its hidden and abandoned woman all his life. In the creation of the handsome sailor, Billy Budd, Melville can at last surrender his male body and metamorphose into a feminine symbol of redemption that, like Christ, becomes a light unto the nations, or at least unto believing seafarers who sing his story.

Accepting his own bodily sacrifice, Billy willingly and enigmatically embraces his death as Christ did, bowing to patriarchal authority and the brutal punishment ordained for unacceptable behavior. Before he dies, he embraces his father, “God Bless Captain Vere!” (375), just as Christ embraced his God, with “Father into your hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46).

And like Christ’s, Billy’s execution is made a dramatic lesson to the multitudes. It happens in front an audience as he is hanged on the yard end in full view of the crew. “Billy ascended; and, ascending, took the full rose of the dawn” (376). Elegantly and concisely folded into the pun of ascending/rose, is the bud that opens both to the epic “rosy fingered dawn” of Homeric legend, and the homely Victorian symbol of a flower. And here we hear the distant echo of the lost Yillah in *Mardi*:

So unearthly was her story...she declared herself more than mortal, a maiden...one day strolling in the woodlands, she was snared by the tendrils of a vine. Drawing her into its bowers, it gently transformed her into one of its blossoms, leaving her conscious soul folded up in the transparent petals . There hung Yillah in a trance, the world without all tinged with the rosy hue of her prison. At length when her spirit was about to burst forth in the opening flower, the blossom was snapped from its stem and born aloft by a soft wind to the sea... (799).

In *Mardi*, Yillah emerges from the bud of her rosy prison: “Suddenly expanding the blossom exhaled away in mist perfumes; floating in a rosy mist in the air. Condensing at last, there emerged from this mist the same radiant young Yillah...a rose-colored pearl on her bosom” (800). But then she unaccountably disappears from the novel and Taji chases after her.

Melville chases after his abandoned woman too, through all his novels and all the tortured years of domestic strife, hoping to bring her home. Finally, at the end, there is old Melville, tending his beloved rose garden in the back yard of his brownstone by day and in the evening, up in his study writing *Billy Budd*.

With Billy, Melville crucifies himself and finally finds his faith. But he does the Gospels one better by arranging his rosy flight heavenward so that it is not a solitary resurrection out of a dark tomb but is accomplished in the full light of dawn and in full view of all, conflating death and resurrection in one blazing image.

Because it is witnessed and mourned by all onboard, his death becomes a transcendent moment of arrival that all Melville's early characters fail to achieve. Unlike the others, there seems to be something worthwhile that Billy dies *for*, and by dying, he redeems not only all his previous incarnations but the reader as well. Ahab, Pierre, Bartleby, and Benito die ignominiously as failures. In death, Billy becomes a hero, a legend, a myth.

Like Christ's, Billy's death sentence must be unjust for his surrender to be seen as an embrace of God's plan, the wisdom of which is beyond human understanding. And when Billy willingly surrenders his body, it becomes a ritual self-sacrifice that replicates a male Rite of Passage. It occurs where such rites typically do, in and for a company of men and it embodies a resurrection into new life, the achievement of a transformation from the innocent child of his mother in the domestic sphere, to the adult man of his father's in the public domain. And just as in a rite of passage, the bodily sacrifice, through circumcision or tattooing or a like

ordeal, becomes a covenant, the sign and seal of a new identity. Christ survives his ordeal through resurrection, and Billy, too, literally rises at the moment of his death.

But he will rise again and be reborn to a new life in legend and song.

Transcending the body that betrayed him, the risen Billy is transformed into the new testament of “Billy In The Darbies,” a gospel hymn of good news, a solace and inspiration down all the seafaring generations. Since “Darbies” means chains, Billy becomes a symbol for all mankind, suffering and bound, oppressed by authority.

However, though Billy may seem to embrace his father’s world, as in a male rite of passage, he does so with a distinctly feminine flare. Billy is quite naturally accepted by the men as feminine as confirmed by the words of the song that immortalizes him, sung in the first person as if Billy were speaking from the grave. Of particular interest is the way he describes himself hanging:

Pendant pearl from the yardarm-end
Like the eardrop I gave to a Bristol Molly—(1434)

Even here, at the end of his life, Melville characteristically brings his Billy home through an image of a feminine accessory. The hymn, written by an apostle, “one of his own watch,” turns Billy into a piece of feminine jewelry, specifically of the kind given to a male transvestite in a Molly house, a place like *Redburn’s* “Aladdin’s Palace.” This tells us plainly that Billy was a womanly man, the sort who might frequent a Molly house and dress in women’s clothes. It also tells us that the seamen accept his feminine nature as a normal part of regular life. The crew, except for John Claggart, who, as Eve Sedgwick has argued, is attracted to Billy and beset by a homosexual panic, accept Billy as the womanly peacemaker below decks. This makes Billy’s passive surrender to patriarchal authority both masculine *and* feminine.

With the image of the earring, Melville achieves a final metamorphosis. He is no longer wearing or talking coyly in his stories about women's clothing and accessories. Through Billy he *becomes* them, as if in the final analysis, clothing *is* the man, or woman as the case may be. Or, as the "motely colorfully dressed" stranger in *The Confidence Man* tells us, "Life is a picnic *en costume*..."

The Birds

Birds in Melville are often mocking harbingers of death as in *Moby-Dick* where, "red-billed savage sea-hawks...came wheeling and screaming round his head in a maze of untrackably swift circlings" (NMD 440). "...already the sable wing was before the old man's eyes; the long hooked bill at his head: with a scream the black hawk darted away with his prize" (NMD 440). The "prize" here is Ahab's hat, but it is a stand in for the leg Moby-Dick took and it portends Ahab's death. As a symbol of masculine authority, a lost hat, like a lost leg, can be equated with castration. Just two short chapters later, in *The Symphony*, as he bemoans the "guinea-coast slavery of solitary command," a literally crestfallen Ahab wears diminished and deflated head gear as "from beneath his *slouched* hat Ahab dropped a tear into the sea" (my emphasis NMD 443).

And at the end of *The Chase—Third Day* a "sky-hawk," presumably a different bird and yet carrying a similar though greater symbolic weight, "tauntingly...followed the main-truck downward from its natural home among the stars" (NMD 469):

...the bird of heaven with archangelic shrieks, and his imperial beak thrust upwards, and his whole captive form folded in the flag of Ahab, went down with his ship, which, like Satan, would not sink to hell till

she had dragged a living part of heaven along with her, and helmeted herself with it.

In another nod to Milton (and Satan, who is Ahab's unbegotten twin), the bird is now imagined as both Lucifer falling and Gabriel unfallen. And the *Pequod* now wears the hat-thieving bird as a hat as she sinks into the sea.

In the epilogue, Ishmael describes himself as being "slowly drawn towards the closing vortex ...at the axis of that slowly wheeling circle, *like another Ixion* I did revolve" (my emphasis NMD 470). Here Melville compares himself to the Greek king of the Lapiths, father of the hybrid Centaurs who Pindar says "by command of the gods...spins round and round on his feathered wheel. Punished by Zeus for coupling with Hera, Ixion is bound forever on a feathered wheel an implied conflation of bird and man.

As in most myths, the punishment of Ixion is for transgressing some rule of authority. Ixion's feathered wheel is, like Christ's cross, a symbol of patriarchal power over those who challenge authority. Melville implicitly compares himself to a Catskill Eagle in *Moby-Dick*, "And there's a Catskill eagle in some souls that can dive down to the blackest gorges and soar out of them and become invisible in the sunny spaces" (NMD355). Here he implicitly connects his life of suffering to spinning on a feathered wheel, a birdlike cross, from which he can only sometimes free himself.

And again, at the end of the epilogue, the "savage sea-hawks sailed with sheathed beaks" (NMD 470) telling us that for the moment at least Ishmael is spared the ravaging of the sea birds. He survives, as he always was, an orphan, picked up by the *Rachel*, still searching for its captain's lost boy, but his destination and his fate,

like his origins remain unknown. This is not a homecoming or an arrival of any sort. It is rather a story left tantalizingly unfinished.

Billy's feminine nature, a reflection of Melville's sense of being beautifully, if imperfectly, masculine and powerfully feminine at the same time is, as it was with his soul mates, Tennessee Williams and D. H. Lawrence, overshadowed by the specter of a devouring mother. And Billy's burial, like Ahab's, is attended by devouring sea birds. (We can wonder if Williams had them in mind as he was writing *Suddenly Last Summer*). Melville says of the sailors watching the scene that, "to such mariners the action of the seafowl, though dictated by mere animal greed for prey, was big with no prosaic significance" (379). What exactly the birds mean to the sailors, Melville never says. What they mean to him can only be guessed at by seeing how he uses birds in his work. The screaming sea fowl that circle Billy's watery grave remind us of Maria Gansevoort Melville, whose powerful shadow, through his identification with her, was with Melville to the end.

When Billy's body slid into the sea, "certain larger sea fowl...flew screaming to the spot...circling it low down with the moving shadow of their outstretched wings and the croaked requiem of their cries (379).

But notice that now the birds are not threatening, mocking or devouring. They are singing a requiem. They are no longer predatory, they are mourning. Billy has sunk beneath them and risen above them at the same time. The fact of the risen Billy mocks their ordinary greed for meat. And he will outlast them, like a newly hatched sea turtle, he has made his escape into the safety of the sea and of song.

Billy's Rite of Passage and Return

The story of Billy Budd is structured like the Hero's Journey and Rite of Passage. There is a violent separation, a painful ordeal/journey, and a return, a reincorporation of the initiate into the world of men, with a new identity. Men come and forcibly remove the child from his mother's home.

In the beginning of the novel Billy is a child as shown by his nickname "Baby Budd." His mother was a peaceful English ship, *The Rights of Man*. His trip home is interrupted when he is taken by force, "Impressed on the Narrow Seas from a *homeward bound* English merchantman into a seventy-four *outward bound*..." (my emphasis 293). It is clear from Melville's text that *The Rights of Man* is a maternal home, a feminine space. And though all ships are typically referred to with a feminine pronoun, his mother ship is replaced by something not inward turning, cloistered and safe but something masculine, dangerous and outward facing, a war ship aptly called the *Bellipotent*.

Billy's maternal home had been "a rat pit of quarrels" until he arrived there. Somehow Billy pacified the crew in a manner that strikes us as both spiritual and sexual. "A virtue went out of him, sugaring the sour ones. They took to him like hornets to treacle..." (295). *Like a crew of mothers*, they love their Baby Budd, "Some of 'em do his washing, darn his old trousers for him...anybody will do anything for Billy Budd; it's the happy family here" (my emphasis 296).

When the King's men come to take Billy to the *Bellipotent* the captain laments his loss, "'you are going to take away the *jewel* of e'm; you are taking away my peacemaker!'" (my emphasis 296). Once again Billy as a jewel reinforces his

feminine nature. That Billy is a feminine innocent is plain when he makes no argument and passively goes along without understanding what is happening to him. “And good-bye to you, old *Rights of Man*,” he says cheerfully without realizing his breach of military decorum. He is a feminine child who has no understanding of paradox, satire and double meaning. “To deal in double meanings and insinuations of any sort was quite foreign to his nature” (298).

Crucifixion/Circumcision

In Him also you are circumcised
with a spiritual circumcision

Paul's letter to The Colossians 2:6-6-15

The Rite of Passage, memorialized in the flesh of the initiate by circumcision, becomes a self-circumcision through his willing acceptance of the rite. With the symbolic crucifixion of Billy Budd, Melville attempts to initiate himself into a womanly manhood and be forgiven. He is also the forgiver. With Billy, Melville lets go of the angry, cynical, resentful, self-pitying man of his earlier days—the nihilistic author of *The Confidence Man*, the suffering doubter amid the stones of Palestine. Billy's death is not a solipsistic, self-serving, endlessly reflecting mirror, that leads to death as in *Pierre* and *Moby-Dick*. Gone also is the sexual release. It is clear Melville means to differentiate the climax of Billy as being beyond sex. He compares Billy to a bird and notes the unusual lack of a death convulsion, a spasm normally seen at the moment of hanging:

In the pinioned figure arrived at the yard-end, to the wonder of all no motion was apparent, none save that created by the slow roll of the hull in moderate weather...(376).

Because Billy's death transcends both sex and solipsism and is outward facing, it is a surer route home. But it is not the home of childhood, the home one must leave, but a new home, which is a new identity, this time recognized and embraced by a community. And just as a Rite of Passage requires suffering for a new identity to be born, so, too, does the hero's journey of myth and legend, and the Christian story. All three contain the same three-part structure: Separation, Journey (ordeal), and Return with a new identity

Most of Melville's ambiguous, enigmatic characters, like Yillah, Ishmael, Isabel, Marianna, Bartleby, Ahab and Benito, are either in bondage or in exile. They drift, or are suspended between worlds. They are orphans and castaways. But with *Billy Budd* Melville enacts a spiritual rite of passage that has a similar three-part (trinity) structure of the Christian story: Resurrection, Redemption, and Rebirth.

In addressing the uncircumcised gentiles of Collossae, Paul uses circumcision as a metaphor for crucifixion and as a path to forgiveness. He tells them they can become part of the Christian community by accepting Christ, metaphorically putting off the foreskin flesh of their past sins in a symbolic circumcision. Thus, they can initiate themselves into Christian forgiveness:

And when you were dead in trespasses...God made you alive together with him, when he forgave all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and the authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them (Colossians 2:6-15).

With his willing surrender, Billy disarms and triumphs over those who punish him, and with Billy, Melville enacts a personal rite of passage. Earlier in *Redburn* he had tried to initiate himself by cutting, not his foreskin but his hair and donning a sailor's rough costume. But the rite was not recognized, not witnessed or confirmed by any man or group of men, and so like the proverbial seed that falls on stony ground his suffering masculinity was never able to take root and become real.

With Billy, he succeeds by comparing himself to Christ in the moment of crucifixion. He puts off his body of male flesh, which represents his imprisonment in his masculine role, by dying as beautifully as a womanly savior. He is also able to set aside the sins he committed in his life-long struggle to be free of his masculine role. And with this literary rite of passage, Melville/Billy is able to ascend to the realm of immortality through the afterlife of the story.

How congenial and consoling this idea must have seemed to Melville at the end of his life, but how different Billy's story and his death is from the quiet anonymous death of Daniel Orme, with which I began this dissertation. Daniel's sad succumbing to the undisclosed sins of his mysterious life, which was lived, the narrator tells us, "for the sake of others" cannot lift us up as we read. The solitary life of Daniel with its mysterious, unnamed transgressions ends alone and though it seems peaceful and acquiescing, it ends with no arrival, transformation or inspiration for others. Billy's death dramatized in full view of the crew takes on a life beyond the grave through legend and song to inspire generations in the future that never knew him. So, paradoxically, Billy's death is more truly "For the sake of others" than Daniel's.

Daniel does not ask for forgiveness so his death can neither elicit nor embody it. In contrast, Billy's surrender to his punishment embodies forgiveness for the unfairness of his sentence and the injustice of the world his sentence represents.

Finding Faith In A Feminine God

Both Christ and Billy suffer the worst society can do to them, and they suffer it peacefully, without rancor, resentment or regret. For this reason they become heroic legends. Yet, they are also feminine and even maternal figures.

An active acceptance and yet unyielding surrender to the rage of their persecutors is the hallmark of Winnicott's "good enough mother," who suffers and survives the rage of her children, indeed their hatred of her, without retaliation. In their acceptance both Billy and Christ represent ideal maternal figures whose willingness to suffer our sins convinces us of their abiding love, but whose survival of our rage against them convinces us that they can remain unalterably themselves no matter what we do, which enables *us* to remain who *we* are in *relation* to them. Not being required to bend our identities to their omnipotent will confers upon us the awesome and terrible freedom to be wholly ourselves and at the same time to be forgiven. It is a paradoxical freedom because there can be no escape from that burden through identification with another. We cannot, as Winnicott says, use our mother's depression as an escape from our own.

The good enough mother convinces us of her love by allowing us to suffer our own depression without abandoning us. And also, as Brooke Hopkins argues in "Jesus and Object Use: A Winnicottian Account of the Resurrection Myth," "Jesus'

forgiveness of those who caused his suffering likewise serves as proof of the permanent and complete nature of his divine love” (250).

We know very little about Melville’s private life as an old man. It is tempting to think that he wrote “Daniel Orme” before *Billy Budd*, because of the completeness of Billy’s story and because the violence, injustice and surrender in it embodies the arrival of forgiveness and redemption we would like to think Melville achieved towards the end of his life. *Billy Budd* demonstrates the finding of faith in God, who, it turns out is the perfect mother, the mother he perhaps longed for all his life and was never able to have.

Maria moved out of Melville’s home in 1862 and until the end of his life, he never wrote another novel. Therefore, it is also tempting to see the novels as Melville’s attempt to manage his conflicted feelings about himself and his relationship to his mother. Living in close quarters with her, and the wife she convinced him to marry, must have been a daily irritant and perhaps the novels were the pearls that resulted from it.

However, all of this must remain conjecture. Though much has been written, little is known about him, and so all stories about Melville must, in the end, be surmises. As such they cannot avoid reflecting back the personal interests and biases of their authors.

In my imagined Melville, I see him at the end, puttering in his rose garden, collecting petals to insert into letters to friends, as Robertson-Lorant tells us was his habit. But I see him dressed in his Middle Eastern robe, the comfy housedress of his “Constantinople” pajamas that so scandalized his wife and granddaughters. And

upstairs in his narrow brownstone on E. 26th Street he is writing *Billy Budd*, finally freeing himself from the prison of his gendered life by merging the manly body he was given at birth and the transcendent symbol of feminine beauty, forgiveness and peacemaking which had been sheltered mournfully in his heart since he was a child.

Though he never gave up pursuing this elusive woman in his art, he was never able to bring her “into the house” so that she could be recognized by the world. But I think he must have died happy writing *Billy Budd*, even without knowing if it would ever be published. Like Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, which so powerfully influenced both *Billy Budd* and *Moby-Dick*, Melville was able to take the foundational Christian myth and make it his own thereby extending his work beyond his life.

Like the Christian story, Billy’s is a transcendent myth, pointing beyond its local concerns to something broader—the universal, human need for perfect love and forgiveness. And like a good myth, it contains all the personal themes Melville battled with in his long struggle with his life, his feminine second self, and “The Angel Art.”

As a man famously unable either to believe in God or, as Hawthorne said of him, to be comfortable in his unbelief, Melville was clearly not an atheist. A preoccupation with God runs deep through all his work. He went from mocking missionary zeal in *Typee*, to futile intellectual debates in *Mardi*, Ahab’s omnipotent rage against God in *Moby-Dick*, the narcissism and sexual fantasies of *Pierre* and the nihilism of *The Confidence Man*. None of these approaches to the deity provided any solace or respite from his painful doubt. It is with *Billy Budd* that he comes home to the faith of his mother and forebears.

Melville, the wandering outcast, finally comes home, but as in rites of passage, the site of arrival is not the home he left, the home of his mother. The place of return is the home that for Melville *never* was: the longed for promised land of the father, represented in fiction by the solid yet loving Captain Vere. Vere takes the place of the feckless, imperfect father who perhaps had abandoned his second son long before he died, the father who unwittingly made it impossible for Herman to believe in God or in himself as a unified masculine being.

AFTERWORD

“At the word, uprose the bearded man in the Oriental robes—
the beautiful!—dark Magician...”

The Blithedale Romance

In the Coleridgean fog that has always surrounded Melville and led generations of scholars on labyrinthine journeys into alleyways of double meanings and double binds, it was the Romantic Hawthornes, at home in fogs, who seemed to see him most clearly. Sophia, who T. Walter Herbert noted had defended Nathaniel’s own womanishness to her worried family before they were married, saw Fayaway in Melville’s face (*Dearest Beloved: the Hawthornes and the Making of The Middle-Class Family* 141), and Nathaniel clearly had Melville in mind when he composed the character of Hollingsworth in *The Blithedale Romance*:

There was something of the woman moulded into his great stalwart frame...nor was he ashamed of it, as men often are of what is best in them (42).

But the effort to describe “the woman moulded into” Melville would end in a familiar muddle. Trying in his own way to bring the woman in Melville home, Hawthorne found himself ensnared in the same web of improbabilities that tangled Melville’s *Pierre*. The same fate awaited *Blithedale*’s Priscilla that would befall *Pierre*’s Isabel. Narratives that try to discuss without naming her, the powerful presence of a fantasy woman residing in the psyche of a man, are doomed to wander in the fog of non-recognition. The reader, perhaps no less than the writer wandering in such a fog and trying to wrest meaning from it, quickly becomes testy and impatient.

Hawthorne wrote *Blithedale* and Melville *Pierre* at the same time, during the high season of their friendship which lasted only about 15 months. It is almost as if the shock of recognition they experienced with each other that day in the Berkshires, had stimulated each of them to try to capture this elusive woman inside the man. And if Melville failed to make Isabel real for his readers, Hawthorne failed to make Priscilla, the woman inside Hollingworth, comprehensible as well. Both books were botches.

Though both novels suffered the scorn of critics, Hawthorne's more mature reputation survived it while Melville's did not. And, what is even more sad, especially for Melville, is that though they had come together in a flash of recognition that ignited an intimate connection between them, the effort they devoted to writing about it had the effect of exhausting the capital of their friendship. Of his difficult and problematic main character, Hawthorne would tell his editor, "I hate the man ten times worse than you do" (Wineapple 253).

In her biography *Hawthorne: A Life*, Brenda Wineapple notes that his editor requested changes to make the novel more palatable to the public. But in spite of these changes, "*Blithedale* fails precisely because Hawthorne stands too close to his material to shape it...nor could he develop characters enough to rescue them from its improbabilities" (250).

Hawthorne had stood close enough to Melville to experience first hand the turmoil of the terrible conundrum he faced as well as the effect it was having on others, yet he was far too close to see how impossible writing about it would be. There is no way to shape a phantom. And there is no way to rescue the shifting non-

reality of, and sexual obsession with, the woman inside a man and make it palatable to a conventional public. *Blithedale* became a tar baby. Sticking to every word of it is the impossibility of rescuing its characters from their inherent improbabilities.

Pierre fails to rescue Isabel for the same reason.

Hawthorne has Hollingsworth carry his fantasy woman over the liminal threshold between the conventional outer world and the mystical egalitarian utopia of Blithedale. Brook Farm, the actual utopian commune that Hawthorne visited, presented a situation uniquely suited to serve as a metaphor for the blurring of gender categories Hawthorne saw in Melville (and perhaps also sensed in himself). Brook Farm as a social experiment may have challenged conventional boundaries of class and gender, but *The Blithedale Romance* is not about an actual community. It is primarily about Melville and his obsessive devotion to the woman in himself at the expense of all others. This is the philanthropic enterprise Hollingsworth is willing to sacrifice everything to. As Miles Coverdale, Hawthorne's prophetic narrator observes:

I loved Hollingsworth, as has already been enough expressed. But it impressed me, more and more, that there was a stern and dreadful peculiarity in this man, such as could not prove otherwise than pernicious to the happiness of those who should be drawn into too intimate a connection with him (70).

What Hawthorne loved in Melville can be guessed by the rapturous way their early friendship developed: the incandescent glow and glamour of Melville's worldliness, his dramatic storytelling and powerful physical presence. But it would not be long before Hawthorne began to see that what Melville loved about him was merely his usefulness as a mirror for contemplating himself, both as a writer and as a

closeted woman. Here Hawthorne represents the dominating nature of Melville's fetishistic attachment to his second self, his feminine alter-ego:

There was something else in Hollingsworth, besides flesh and blood, sympathies and affections.... This is always true of those men who have surrendered themselves to an over-ruling purpose. It does not so much impel them from without... but grows incorporate with all that they think and feel, and finally converts them into little else save that one principle. When such begins to be a predicament, it is not cowardice but wisdom, to avoid these victims (70).

The more time he spent with his friend, the more Hawthorne sensed that there could be no mutuality in their relationship. Like the relationship Melville had with his mother, it could only operate in one direction:

They have no heart, no sympathy, no reason, no conscience. They will keep no friend, unless he make himself a mirror of their purpose; they will smite and slay you, and trample your corpse under foot, all the more readily, if you take the first step with them, and cannot take the second, and the third, and every other step of their terribly straight path (70).

In *Blithedale*, Hawthorne mirrored back to Melville a masculine image he may not have found flattering, but the man who wrote Ahab's all-consuming quest to kill Moby-Dick could not fail to see the similarity—the monomaniacal, destructive nature of his obsession. Like Ahab, men like Hollingsworth:

Have an idol, to which they consecrate themselves high-priest, and deem it holy work to offer sacrifices of whatever is most precious, and never seem to suspect that this false deity... is but a spectrum of the very priest himself, projected upon the surrounding darkness... and the more unselfishly it may have been taken up, the slighter is the probability that they can be led to recognize the process... has been debased into all-devouring egotism (70).

I speculate that it was not sexual attraction, as many biographers and critics have theorized, that drew Melville to his friend in the first place, but the accepting nature of Hawthorne's corresponding womanliness, a trait defended by Sophia and remarked upon favorably by Margaret Fuller. It is likely that Melville intrigued the shy retiring (womanly) artist. And like the first blush of romance, it generated heat in them both. Perhaps it was what made their private intercourse at the Berkshire picnic so stimulating to Melville that he had to kidnap another man's wife to release the pent up energy their mutual "shock of recognition" had ignited.

Melville's oddly asexual and enigmatic mock abduction happened the same week he met Hawthorne, as did Sarah Moorewood's costume ball, which Melville attended dressed as a Turk. Both incidents are represented in *Blithedale*.

When Zenobia tells the tale of The Veiled Lady, another version of the woman in Melville/Hollingsworth, she describes the Lady throwing a veil over the "shadowy girl amid a knot of visionary transcendentalists, who were still seeking for a better life" which of course is the frail Priscilla at Blithedale(115).

The lady stole noiselessly behind her and threw the veil over her head...the poor girl strove to raise it ...with one glance of mortal terror and deep, deep reproach. [But] It could not change her purpose....

"Arise, Magician!" she exclaimed, stamping her foot upon the earth.
"Here is the veiled Lady!"

At the word, uprose a bearded man in the Oriental robes—the beautiful!—dark Magician who had bartered away his soul! He threw his arms around the Veiled lady; and she was his bond-slave, forever more! (116)

Here is the very image of Melville's exotic appearance in his Turkish robes at Sarah Moorewood's costume ball arising directly out of a veiled lady. This is the dark magic of gender sorcery in Melville. Hawthorne could see the woman behind the Oriental conceit of Melville's Turkish robe. And once again, Hawthorne connects this fantasy woman to slavery.

Melville's abduction of a woman is alluded to with a romantic image when Hawthorne has Hollingsworth suddenly appear at the door one snowy night carrying a mysterious, cloaked woman in his arms. Coverdale says, "The fantasy occurred to me, that she was some desolate kind of creature, doomed to wander about in snow storms..." (27). When the women of *Blithedale* are reluctant to welcome her, Hollingsworth declares, "No wonder if the poor child's tongue is frozen in her mouth...the very heart will be frozen in her bosom, unless you women can warm it, among you, with a warmth that ought to be your own" (28).

Hawthorne tells us "Hollingsworth's appearance was very striking at this moment...his great shaggy head...his heavy brow...his dark complexion...abundant beard...and rude strength...in his greatcoat all covered with snow..." (26, 28). The image of a big, brawny man carrying a swooning cloaked woman over a threshold at night is the very incarnation of the dark and brooding Byronic hero familiar to readers of Romantic literature (and Romance novels in our own time). But this sexualized silhouette, back lit by snow and a familiar trope can easily distract us from another meaning it carries. Zenobia, the other, more realistic, woman of the story, modeled on Margaret Fuller, speaks for us all when she cries, "What does this girl mean?" (28).

I suggest because she is a familiar orphan, like the sad abandoned women we have seen throughout Melville's work, she represents Hawthorne's image of Melville bringing the woman in himself home and demanding she be embraced by the other women of the house. But this is no ordinary woman. Hawthorne symbolically figures the feminine side of Hollingsworth's dual nature as an artist.

Melville had figured the artist in himself as a woman when he set Fayaway in the prow of a canoe and had her propel the craft using her dress as a sail. Now Hawthorne follows suit and figures the artist in Melville/Hollingsworth as female, too.

Priscilla comes to the commune without a past, weak and fragile and in need of the community's forbearance and support. Coverdale tells us "She has never before known what it is to live in free air, and so it intoxicates her as if she were sipping wine" (59). "Growing up without exercise, except her poor little fingers, she had never yet acquired the perfect use of her legs...she ran falteringly, and often tumbled on the grass" (73).

This leads us to envision that she had somehow and for some unknown and inexplicable reason been kept in a dungeon (or closet), locked up and forbidden to walk or run or exercise herself in the free air of society.

Coverdale says she used "some little wooden instruments" with which she would "knit or net an article which ultimately took the shape of a silk purse" (35). If the canoe in *Typee* represents the craft of writing, in *Blithedale*, the purse represents the object of the writer's craft—the story.

Their peculiar excellence, besides the great beauty of the manufacture, lay in the almost impossibility that any uninitiated person should

discover the aperture; although, to a practiced touch, they would open as wide as charity or prodigality might wish. I wondered if it were not a symbol of Priscilla's own mystery (35).

If anyone can read this passage and see in it a only an odd but literal description of a purse, they are not gifted with what Hawthorne, calls "the practiced touch." What kind of ordinary purse opens only to the initiated person? And what kind of initiation is required to find the entrance? The "aperture" that opens wide to those with eyes to see it is the *meaning* of the tale. And what are the instruments used to create this receptacle of meaning with its problematic opening? They are curious "wooden instruments," not specifically knitting needles or crochet hooks but vaguely "instruments." Could they perhaps be pencils or pens with which the mysterious girl weaves her silken threads together into a tale? This is indeed the "symbol of Priscilla's own mystery" as Coverdale says. She is the artist/writer in the man figured and understood by both Hawthorne and Melville to be feminine, frail and fantastical. Priscilla, however stands in stark contrast to the powerful Fayaway of Melville's beginnings. Both Hawthorne and Melville see the artist in Melville as having fallen on hard times. She is now, like Isabel in *Pierre*, abandoned and forlorn.

As usual, Hawthorne is able to peer deeper into Melville than most. He sees the woman inside his friend, but if she is frail and fantastical now, Melville's narcissistic obsession with her is like an iron rod, rigid, penetrating, and conscienceless. Hawthorne sees that it will ultimately drive a stake into the heart of every relationship he has: with his wife, his children, his friends, and eventually even Hawthorne himself:

But, by-and-by, you missed the tenderness of yesterday, and drew drearily conscious that Hollingworth had a closer friend than ever you could be...the cold, spectral monster which he had himself conjured up, and on which he was wasting all the warmth of his heart, and of which, at last—as these men of mighty purpose so invariably do—he had grown to be a bond-slave (55).

But “Who ain’t a slave,” Melville said in *Moby-Dick*. Hawthorne captured the dilemma of Melville’s tender nature held in bondage to an idea he had of himself as a woman. It was an image that had taken root in him as a child, gained strength and purpose in the fires of adolescence and finally exploded in rage within the bonds of his marriage. This “cold spectral monster which he had conjured up” and had fallen in love with, isolated Melville from the beginning and would not leave him in peace to live an ordinary life with his wife and family. It must have been painful for Hawthorne when he finally realized that Melville “had a closer friend than ever [he] could be.”

The woman Hollingworth rescues and brings into the house is called Priscilla, and coincidentally (or not), this is also the name of Melville’s cousin whom Parker asserts was the model for Isabel. But as I have argued, there can be no literal reading of either Priscilla or Isabel. They do not spring from real life but from the fevered brains of men who feel a powerful connection with one another, powerful enough perhaps for the sharing of a deep and troubling secret that both felt a compelling need to write about.

Hollingsworth demands that the women of the house accept Priscilla, as Pierre yearns for his mother to accept Isabel. Yet, acceptance was not possible in either case. In the year of 1852, when both *The Blithedale Romance* and *Pierre* were

published and panned, Melville and Hawthorne had already begun to drift apart. Perhaps this was because when they had finished their novels they had reached a natural end of their relationship, the initial spark had burned itself out and the literary uses they were able to make of each other had been exhausted. Hawthorne by virtue of his connections was able to leave Melville's powerful emotional orbit. He moved on to another life abroad as consul to Liverpool, while Melville, always the isolato, remained stuck at home with a diminished literary career and limited prospects for earning a living.

At this point in his troubled life, Melville is a very long way from having either the women in his life, or the readers and critics in the public sphere recognize and welcome the woman in him into their house. In the absence of acceptance, it would have been almost impossible for Melville to remain, as Hawthorne asserts of Hollingsworth, completely free of shame over his persistent inner woman. Yet, shame may have been an important part of her appeal.

In a bondage scenario, shame can provoke sexual arousal that leads to orgasmic release. This, as Docter has noted, explains why the fetish or a feminine second self can come to seem so insistent and persistent. If she harasses the heterosexual transvestite (and his wife and family), she at the same time also confirms his heterosexual masculinity through the reinforcing power of sexual pleasure. But while it provides intense and reliable pleasure, when it comes to dominate a man's life, it can result in many losses.

And Melville's life is a long list of losses. He lost not only his father, but also the psychological support of a "good enough mother," (Winnicott's concept)

who could recognize his needs and tolerate his infantile rage and hatred of her without retaliation and without making him take on her suffering in place of his own. He lost a career, two sons and the affection of his daughters, and he lost an important and inspiring intimate connection with Hawthorne and perhaps countless other potential friends and connections as well. But it seems to me that the fires of fetishistic longings that kept Melville's woman alive in his youth, and perhaps served as a helpful aide to sexual relations, must have cooled amid the ashes of old age. Rising out of those ashes like a phoenix, I like to think *Billy Budd* recuperated those losses and finally succeeded where the early efforts of *Pierre* and Hawthorne's companion piece, *Blithedale*, had failed.

With Billy, Melville finally succeeded in bringing the woman in himself home. He carried her cloaked in the Christian myth over the threshold of our conventional wisdom. And if our much belated acceptance of her can be of no comfort to Melville now, perhaps at least *we* may take comfort in a new understanding of this troubled, troubling and magnificent writer.

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