Excerpt from the Preface to *Bringing Her Home: The Woman in Herman Melville*

By Claudia Dixon

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 Alan 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.

As so often happens in Melville, we are left to wonder what it all means.

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.

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 …

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 Edition129). 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).

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.

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 unidentifiablness 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.

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