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No utter surprise can come to him
Who reaches Shakespeare's core;
That which we seek and shun is
There—Man's final lore.
— *Herman Melville,* Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War, *1866*

DURING HIS EARLIEST DAYS AS AN AUTHOR, BEFORE HIS DISILLUSIONMENT with the idea of literary fame, Herman Melville first encountered the subject that not only haunts *Billy Budd* but also supplies the novella with its subliminal coherence of form, connecting the historical shell of the allegory—the 1797 rebellions of the *Nore* and *Spithead* and naval discipline on board the Georgian "man o' war"—with the literary and philosophical questions that had absorbed him for many decades. The novella, on which he worked from 1888 until the year of his death, 1891, was not published until 1924; the seeds were planted in 1848 when his Wiley & Putnam editor Evert A. Duyckinck, recently installed as editor of the *Literary World*, sent him a review copy of Joseph C. Hart's *The Romance of Yachting: Voyage the First* (1848). Hart's rambling travelogue takes extensive detours on subjects completely unrelated to seamanship, including an early attack on Shakespeare as a "fraud upon the world" and a call for inquiry into the identities of "the able literary men who wrote the dramas imputed to him." Melville was unimpressed. He hated Hart's book with such an abiding passion that he unconditionally refused Duyckinck's request:

> What the deuce does it mean? . . . Here's a book positively turned wrong side out, the title page on the cover, an index to the whole in more ways than one. . . . then I'm set down to a digest of all the commentators on Shakespeare, who, according to 'our author' was a dunce and a blackguard—Vide passim. . . . Seriously, Mr. Duyckinck, on my bended knees, & with tears in my eyes, deliver me from writing ought upon this crucifying *Romance of Yachting.* What has Mr. Hart done that I should publicly devour him? I bear the hapless man no malice . . . the book is an abortion . . . take it back, I beseech, & get some one to cart it back to the author.

At first glance, Melville's splenetic reaction to Hart's book might seem to

exonerate him from any accusation of dabbling in unconventional theories about Shakespeare. But with Herman Melville, nothing was ever so simple. In an 1851 letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne he was soon remarking on his own unrestricted capacity for endlessly remodeling his whole conceptual universe, the very sort of capacious *rethinking* that would soon estrange him from contemporary intellectuals unable or unwilling to follow his intrepid mind:

> I am like one of those seeds taken out of the Egyptian Pyramids, which, after being three thousand years a seed and nothing but a seed, being planted in English soil, it developed itself, grew to greenness, and then fell to mould. So I. Until I was twenty-five, I had no development at all. From my twenty-fifth year I date my life. Three weeks have scarcely passed, at any time between then and now, that I have not unfolded within myself.

Only three months after his encounter with *The Romance of Yachting*, apparently still vexed by Hart's attack on the learning and talent—not to mention the identity—of Shakespeare, Melville "unfolded" himself again, embarking on an earnest quest to read the Bard's collected works. In a space of days, as if struck by lightning, he blazed through a copy of Hilliard and Gray's 1837 edition of the collected works, dashing off a letter to his confidant Duyckinck:

> Dolt and ass that I am I have lived more than 29 years, and until a few days ago never made acquaintance with the Divine William . . . Ah, he's full of sermons-on-the-mount, and gentle, aye, almost as Jesus. I take such men to be inspired. I fancy that this moment Shakespeare in heaven ranks with Gabriel, Raphael and Michael. And if another messiah ever comes, 'twill be in Shakespeare's person.

Melville's New England irony had taken root in fertile Old World soil, inaugurating a lifelong obsession that inspired his greatest literary art. As F. O. Matthiessen observed, Melville had "just begun to meditate on Shakespeare more creatively than any other American writer ever has,"[1] and the encounter "brought him to his first profound comprehension of the nature of tragedy," stoking the charge which "released *Moby-Dick,* and . . . carried him in *Pierre* to the unbearable desperation of a *Hamlet.*"

Melville soon qualified his reaction to the "Divine William": "Do not think, my boy, that because I impulsively broke forth in jubilations over Shakespeare, that, therefore I am of the number of the *snobs* who burn their tuns of rancid fat at his shrine." The ironic allusion to the idolatry of "snobs" at the Stratford "shrine" hints at subterranean currents in Melville's thinking, ideas that would not begin to appear in explicit form until three years later, and then only under the cloak of anonymity, in his 1850 review of Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse.* Although he rejected Hart's formulaic Bard-bashing, Melville's own close reading had launched him on a private inquiry that would last—as his own words abundantly attest—until his death forty years later.

In retrospect, the collision between Melville's aesthetic principles and the

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1 F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, Oxford: The University Press, 1941, 189.

Barnum & Bailey mythos of the emerging Shakespearean industry may seem inevitable. By Melville's day, the life of Shakespeare may have been a "fine mystery," to quote Charles Dickens, but the elements of what was to become a powerful orthodox tradition was already assuming institutional shape in Stratford-upon-Avon. As early as 1769, when the actor-impresario David Garrick founded the Stratford Jubilee, the township had given birth to a dynamic—not to mention profitable—industry. Like whaling, "Shakespeare" was big business; tourists flocked to the bard's "shrine" to manifest their devotion.

Suspicion that "the birthplace" was the embodiment of a profitable hoax proved impossible to extinguish, especially in America where skepticism ran deep. By the time Washington Irving in the *Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* had trained his self-deprecating wit on the Stratford shrine—in 1820, just a year after Melville's birth—the Shakespearean industry was already suffering from the exposure of a series of forgeries by William Henry Ireland. Despite their crudeness, Ireland's forgeries had hornswoggled such giants of the London literary scene as Johnson's editor James Boswell, also a Shakespearean editor. Ultimately, these forgeries not only failed to satisfy the hunger for biography, but—to the embarrassment of Boswell & Co.—were also exposed as frauds. After his debunking by Edmund Malone in 1795, Ireland even published a confession. Fifty years later, a faint but unmistakable air of fakery still hovered over anything "Shakespearean," giving frequent rise, especially in America, to such expressions of resistance to unreflective cultural fashion as Melville's ironic designation of Shakespeare as the "Divine William."

Back in America—now supplied with the Shakespeare reading that he had lacked when he was first exposed to *The Romance of Yachting*—Melville was assembling notes for his legendary review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846), which appeared in the August 17, 1850, issue of the *Literary World* as the work of "A Virginian Spending July in Vermont." Ostensibly a review of Hawthorne's collection of stories, the essay, as Laurie Robertson-Laurent has emphasized, is in essence Melville's manifesto for American literature. At a time when American English professors still scoffed at the idea of an *American* literature, the young Melville is already pondering the nation's rising literary greatness and contemplating the very problem announced in Hart's *Romance of Yachting*. The anxiety of Shakespeare's influence instills a singular awe in the twenty-nine-year-old Melville, and raises a perplexing doubt: *can* great literature exist *after* Shakespeare? Melville is optimistic. Joseph Hart's rhetorical query—"are there no more fish, no more Kraken in that wondrous sea from which thou [Shakespeare] wert taken?"—receives a thundering affirmative response from "the Virginian": more "Shakespeares are *this day* being born on the banks of the Ohio." But the more enthusiastic he becomes about "*new* Shakespeares," the less Melville seems able to tolerate the merchandising of literature to self-infatuated tourists. In his review of Hawthorne, Melville now manifests an increasingly unapologetic skepticism over the popularly-accepted story of Shakespeare. He seems already aware, as Mark Twain would later declare

in *Is Shakespeare Dead?*, that the figure of Shakespeare is a Brontosaur—"nine bones and six hundred barrels of plaster of Paris." Anonymity furnishes Melville "sea room" to muse productively on the literary issue that Hart had handled so clumsily in his attack on Shakespeare as a plagiarist:

> Would that all excellent books were foundlings, without father or mother, that so it might be we could glorify them, without including their ostensible authors . . . I know not what would be the right name to put on the title-page of an excellent book, but this I feel, that the names of all fine authors are fictitious ones, far more so than that of Junius—simply standing, as they do, for the mystical, ever-eluding Spirit of all Beauty, which ubiquitously possesses men of genius.

Melville was then halfway through writing *Moby-Dick*, the book in which Shakespeare manifests himself as an "immense, unnamed presence,"[2] and in which, as Walter Bezanson has noted, "Kaleidoscopic variations" on Shakespeare's language, imagery, and diction pervade "every page."[3] More important than mere verbal influence, however, is Melville's learning from Shakespeare techniques that possessed the power to "express the hidden life of men," which—in Matthiessen's estimation—"had become [Melville's] compelling absorption"[4] even before he discovered Shakespeare's mastery of the writer's art. A distrust of literary idolatry still percolates in the deep well of Melville's fertile imagination: ruminating on those acolytes eager to offer their "tuns of rancid fat" at the Stratford shrine, Melville now suspects that an "absolute and unconditional adoration of Shakespeare has grown to be a part of our Anglo Saxon superstitions."[5] Most troubling of all, he suggests, these superstitions are in fact a serious impediment to comprehending the subterranean traces of meaning in the plays, which can come only through "deep reading": "few who extol him, have ever read him deeply, or, perhaps, only have seen him on the tricky stage."

It was through Hawthorne himself that Melville's next—more revealing—encounter with Shakespeare would come. Although their friendship waxed and waned over the years, no other living writer would ever touch Melville as deeply as the author of *Mosses from an Old Manse*. The dedication to *Moby-Dick*, written during this period when the two authors lived six country miles apart, testifies to the profundity of Melville's feeling for his literary companion: "In token of my admiration for his genius, this book is inscribed to Nathaniel Hawthorne." Hawthorne's wife, Sophia, observed the special rapport between the two men with tender perceptiveness: "Mr. Melville, generally silent and uncommunicative, pours out the rich floods of his mind and experience to [Hawthorne], so sure

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2 Walter E. Bezanson, "*Moby Dick*: Document, Drama, Dream," in *A Companion to Melville Studies*, ed. John Bryant, Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1986, 172.
3 Matthiessen, 452–53.
4 Matthiessen, 423.
5 Melville, "Hawthorne," 245.

of apprehension, so sure of a large and generous interpretation, and of the most delicate and fine judgment."[6]

Fortune and temperament drew them apart but also furnished an unexpected larger context for their continued association. When his Bowdoin College friend Franklin Pierce became US President Pierce, Hawthorne received an offer of lucrative employment, with plenty of spare time for writing, at the American Consulate in Liverpool. Here, in July 1856, he entertained Delia Bacon (1811–1859), the American intellectual whose work on Shakespeare was then becoming a cause célèbre among New England intellectuals. To this day Bacon remains a controversial and profoundly misunderstood woman. To the general public she was first a star, and then a madwoman. Walt Whitman described her troubled relationship with a fickle public with perhaps greater precision than any other contemporary observer: she was "the sweetest, eloquentest, grandest woman . . . that America has so far produced. . . . and, of course, very unworldly, just in all ways such a woman as was calculated to bring the whole literary pack down on her, the orthodox, cruel, stately, dainty, over-fed literary pack—worshipping tradition, unconscious of this day's honest sunlight." "For too long," add Warren Hope and Kim Holston in one recent reassessment of her significance,

> Critics have depicted [her] as a tragicomic figure, blindly pursuing a fantastic mission in obscurity and isolation, only to end in silence and madness. . . . This is not to say that the stereotype is without basis. On the contrary, her sad story established an archetype for the story of the Shakespeare authorship at large—or at least one element of it: an otherworldly pursuit of truth that produces gifts for a world that is indifferent or hostile to them.[7]

Despite a temperament susceptible to the monomaniacal and a difficult, even convoluted, prose style, Bacon was in her better moments a forceful, charismatic, and erudite scholar and raconteur. In an era when women rarely set foot on the stage of public discourse, her oratorical finesse and broad knowledge—in lectures that ran the gamut from world history to Shakespeare—earned her the expressed admiration of Ralph Waldo Emerson and the curious respect of many other leading New England intellectuals, both men and women. She was also swiftly becoming the leading public advocate for a notion towards which Herman Melville had already been moving in his review of Hawthorne's *Mosses*: the notion that the very name of the fine author "Shakespeare" was—to use Melville's description of all authors from his "Virginian" essay—ultimately just a "polite fiction."

The "deep-diving" Transcendentalist Emerson, as Melville affectionately

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6 Cited in Rose Hawthorne Lathrop, "My Father's Literary Methods," *Ladies Home Journal* (11:4), March 1894, 1–2, p. 2. The passage is from a letter, dated August 13, 1581 to Sophia's mother.

7 Warren Hope and Kim Holston, *The Shakespeare Controversy: An Analysis of the Claimants to Authorship, and Their Champions and Detractors*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 1992, 1.

dubbed him, had prepared the way for Bacon's career. He not only arranged for publication of her first essay in the January 1856 issue of *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*[8]—then New England's leading literary journal—but he soon became an outspoken advocate for her project to rediscover Shakespeare through the application of "common reason." An agnostic on the authorship question, Emerson nevertheless believed that the topic deserved serious inquiry:

> The public are distressed because Bacon and Judge Holmes[9] are engaged or enraged to show that Shakespeare did not write the plays. But the public is no loser. Somebody wrote them, and we shall still enjoy our fill of wonder and delight, if we must spell the name differently. Confucius says, 'a soldier of the Kingdom of Ci has lost his buckler. What then? A soldier of the Kingdom of Ci has found the buckler.'[10]

Emerson would later assert, in a letter to Caroline Sturgis Tappan, that America had only two "producers" during the 1850s, "Our wild Whitman, with real inspiration but choked by [a] Titanic abdomen; and Delia Bacon, with genius, but mad and clinging like a tortoise to English soil."[11]

"How can we undertake to account for the literary miracles of antiquity," wondered Bacon in her *Putnam's* article, "while this great myth of the modern ages still lies at our own door, unquestioned?"

> This vast, magical, unexplained phenomenon which our own times have produced under our own eyes, appears to be, indeed, the only thing which our modern rationalism is not to be permitted to meddle with. For, here the critics themselves still veil their faces, filling the air with mystic utterances which seem to say, that to this shrine at least, for the footstep of the common reason and the common sense, there is yet no admittance.[12]

Although he supported her inquiry, Emerson found the manuscript of Bacon's book, in which she enlarged upon on her *Putnam's* thesis, obtuse, confusing, and ultimately unsuitable for an American readership. In desperation, the penniless Bacon—then already living in England—journeyed to Liverpool to solicit Hawthorne's aid. Overcome with a mixture of pity and admiration for this eccentric yet strangely charismatic woman, the American consul agreed to write the preface to her monumental *Philosophy of the Plays of Shakspere* [sic] *Unfolded* (1857), and went on, like Emerson, to become an equivocal supporter of Bacon's heretical views. Although urging respect for the book's philosophical

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8 "William Shakespeare and His Plays: An Inquiry Concerning Them," *Putnam's Monthly* (January 1856): 1–19. Vol. VII, No. xxxvii

9 Nathaniel Holmes, author of *The Authorship of Shakespeare*, New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1867.

10 *The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 1843–1871, Vol. 2: 1855–1871, ed. Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 385.

11 Ralph Leslie Rusk, *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (October 13, 1857), Vol. V, New York: Columbia University Press, 1966, 86–87.

12 "William Shakespeare and His Plays: An Inquiry Concerning Them," *Putnam's Monthly*, Vol. VII, No. xxxvii (January 1856): 1–19.

erudition and "richness of inner meaning," he also recorded his reservations over Delia Bacon's identification of Francis Bacon as the primary author of the plays.[13] Still, Delia Bacon (no relation to the subject of her inquiry) had done something Joseph Hart could never have done; she had secured the endorsement of two of the greatest literary figures of her day to promote her conclusion that someone *other* than the Stratford bourgeois was the true author of the Shakespearean oeuvre.

Bacon was not alone, of course, in entertaining this radical idea, rooted in the ambiguities of the original documents of the 1590s. On the contrary, this general sense was very much "in the air" for the better part of the nineteenth century. Emerson's "Wild Whitman" had led the charge. By the 1880s, a series of essays published by that poet in the *North American Review*,[14] the *Critic*,[15] and *November Boughs*[16] had elevated the Shakespearean question to a remarkable public prominence among the nineteenth-century American literary intelligentsia[17]—a prominence that it would come to lose during the next century, under the influence of the thorough professionalization and institutionalization of Shakespearean studies. One 1884 essay by Whitman invoked the enigma posed by the history plays and unambiguously expressed the poet's long-enduring skepticism regarding the official Shakespeare:

> Conceiv'd out of the fullest heat and pulse of European feudalism—personifying in unparallel'd ways the medieval aristocracy, its towering spirit of ruthless and gigantic caste, with its own peculiar air and arrogance (no mere imitation)—only one of the "wolfish earls" so plenteous in the plays themselves, or some born knower and descendant, would seem to be the true author of these amazing works.

Despite his respect for Delia Bacon and his conviction that the traditional account of Shakespearean authorship was a species of modern idolatry, Whitman declined to endorse the most popular contemporaneous alternative. Instead of Francis Bacon as author of the plays, he preferred an unidentified member of the higher nobility, a "descendent and knower" of one of the "wolfish earls" who populate the Shakespearean history plays. "I am firm against Shaksper—I mean

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13 Delia Bacon, *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakespere Unfolded, with a Preface by Nathaniel Hawthorne*, London. Groombridge & Sons, 1857. AMS Reprint 1970: lv. Bacon, strictly speaking, was a groupist, who believed the works were the product of a secret cabal of writers with Bacon as the ringleader.

14 "The Poetry of the Future," *North American Review*, 132 (1881); *Americans on Shakespeare,* ed. Peter Rawlings, Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999, 319.

15 "What Lurks Behind Shakspere's Historical Plays," *The Critic*, (September 27, 1884): 357–59; "A Thought on Shakspere," *The Critic* (August 14, 1886).

16 "The comedies, exquisite as they certainly are, bringing in admirably portrayed common characters, have the unmistakable hue of plays, portraits, made for the divertissement only of the elite of the castle, and from its point of view. The comedies are altogether non-acceptable to America and Democracy," Walt Whitman, *November Boughs*, Philadelphia, 1888, 56.

17 For modern reprints of most of these essays, see Rawlings.

the Stratford man, the actor," he told his table talk companion Horace Traubel: "As for Bacon, we shall, we shall see. . . ."[18]

Whitman was a formidable advocate for Delia Bacon's general position but by no means the only one. Within a year of her death in 1859, the attempt to discredit her as a lunatic was already gathering head. The fiery abolitionist William Douglas O'Connor was among those who sprang to her defense: "I wish it were in my power," wrote O'Connor in response, "to do even the smallest justice to that mighty and eloquent volume . . . the candid and ingenuous reader Miss Bacon wishes for, will find it more to his profit to be insane with her, on the subject of Shakespeare, than to be sane with Dr. Johnson."[19]

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Delia Bacon's importance as an inspiration for Melville's thinking about Shakespeare, and ultimately the bearing of her views on the origins of *Billy Budd*, has been underestimated by a tradition of scholarship that has neglected to consider the long shadow that the Shakespearean question cast over nineteenth-century American intellectual life. It was a question that seems to have had the power to divide families. Ironically, another public intellectual ready to be counted "insane" with Delia Bacon was the well-known New England Unitarian theologian W. W. Furness, father of Variorum Shakespeare editor W. H. Furness. Much to his son's dismay, no doubt, Furness counted himself as

> one of the many who has never been able to bring the life of William Shakespeare within planetary space of the plays. Are there any two things in the world more incongruous?[20]

As for Melville, we have seen that as early as 1851 the question of Shakespeare had prompted his imagination to ponder the relationship between fame and anonymity from a relatively unique vantage point. Shortly after her July 1856 stay with Hawthorne, Delia Bacon entered into a heated correspondence with her patron which might well have planted a critical seed that would in time flower in Melville's 1888 novella and inspire its cryptic allegorical structure as an "inside narrative." Then living in emotional and intellectual isolation in Stratford, Bacon was advised in a September 12, 1856 letter from her solicitous brother Leonard, to advance her controversial thesis in the form of fiction:

> As I have returned to this subject, I will make another suggestion. Your theory about the author of Shakespeare's plays may after all be worth something

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18 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden. Vol. 1 March 28–July 14, 1888*, New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1908, 1.

19 *Harrington: A Story of True Love*, Boston: Thayer & Eldridge, 1860, quoted in Ignatius Donnelly, *The Great Cryptogram: Francis Bacn's copher in the so-called Shakespeare Plays*, Chicago: R. S. Peale, 1888, 1887, 924. On Douglass's anti-Stratfordian conviction, see Hope and Holston, 22–38.

20 Letter to Nathaniel Holmes, October 29, 1866.

> if published as a fiction. You might introduce such things into a Romance, as a work of the imagination, and be gratified with it, and find readers who would accept it respectfully, when if the same things are brought forward with grave argument, as facts to be believed, they will reject the whole work with contempt.[21]

Dismayed by her brother's suggestion, Bacon even went so far as to suppose that her patron Hawthorne had consented to—or, worse still, was *the author of*—this undignified plan to capitulate to public bias and traditional dogma by presenting her argument as sheer fantasy. She was not a dime store *novelist*, pandering to passing whims in romantic fiction, but a New England philosopher, proto-feminist, and literary critic. The difference was not just a matter of method or of honor, but of epistemology. Fiction complicates, establishing a polysemous representation of indeterminate reality that achieves meaning only through the active engagement of a reader's imagination. Bacon's search to identify a first cause, on the other hand, belonged to the modern reductionist hermeneutic of Darwin, Freud, or Marx; like Jesus among the money-changers, she would disrupt the worship of the "snobs" burning "their tuns of rancid fat" at Shakespeare's shrine, and rip the veil from the face of the Shakespeare deceit, revealing the true author and his meaning in their full apocalyptic glory.

Instead of answering her brother directly, Bacon wrote to Hawthorne to denounce not only the plan but the person she took to be merely its messenger. Her brother's candor, she declared, had forever robbed him of "this power to hurt . . . I shall never complain to him again." Hawthorne's reply is a study in tactful diplomacy: confirming his unwavering support for her original project to treat the authorship question as a matter of systematic philosophy, not as a romance, he assured her that "my opinion of the book [i.e., *The Philosophy of the Plays* . . .] has never varied; nor have I, up to this moment, spared any effort to bring it before the public, nor relinquished any hope of doing so." Hawthorne's postscript asks, apparently in vain: "Can you possibly have thought that I suggested your brother's advice to turn the book into a novel? I am afraid you did."[22]

Hawthorne's retrospective "Recollections of a Gifted Woman" (1863), published four years after Delia's death, tells a more complicated story. Here Hawthorne reveals the reason he could be so sure in 1856 that Delia had come to consider him as the source. He was, indeed, the source—a fact which his own postscript conveniently omitted to acknowledge. By 1863, however, he seems prepared to acknowledge somewhat more openly his authorship of the offending idea, delivered via the innocent brother: it was, he says, "in consequence of *some advice which I fancied it my duty to tender*" that ". . . I fell under Miss Bacon's most severe and passionate displeasure, and was cast off by her in the twinkling of an

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21 Theodore Bacon, *Delia Bacon: A Biographical Sketch,* Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1888, 250.

22 Cited in Bacon, 271.

eye."[23] Bacon's biographer Vivian Hopkins concurs that the idea communicated to Delia through her brother was in fact originally Hawthorne's: "there was just enough truth" in Delia's accusation "that Hawthorne too looked on her book as a romance to make it hit home. Whereas Leonard spoke of 'converting' the book into fiction, Hawthorne saw it, in its existing state as criticism, surrounded by a romantic aura." [24] Hawthorne's cautious 1856 preface to the published book further supports the conclusion that the accusation against which his letter protests may not have been entirely misplaced—he was, after all, not only one of the greatest American novelists of his age, but a US diplomatic consul to England:

> I am not the editor of this work; nor can I consider myself fairly entitled to the honor (which, if I deserved it, I should feel to be a very high as well as perilous one) of seeing my name associated with the author's on the title page. My object has been merely to speak a few words, which might, perhaps, serve the purpose of placing my countrywoman upon a ground of amicable understanding with the public.[25]

In expressing his endorsement so warily, Hawthorne had washed his hands of any offense towards Bacon and could safely retreat into the Transcendentalist truism that "there is no exhausting the various interpretations of [Shakespeare's] symbols, and a thousand years hence, a world of new readers will possess a whole library of new books, as we ourselves do, in these volumes old already."[26] And yet, however careful Hawthorne was in signaling his misgivings, it cannot be denied that Bacon had no small effect on him and on his literary imagination. That said, perhaps the most profound impact Delia Bacon had on any literary figure of her age was—via Hawthorne—on the perplexed Herman Melville. The author of *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre, or The Ambiguities* entered this literary drama a mere fortnight after the climax of Bacon's contentious exchange with her patient ally. In November 1856, he visited Hawthorne and for nine days toured the English countryside with his admired host. Of course one cannot help but wonder if during this time Hawthorne and Melville ever discussed Bacon and her brother's "dreadful" notion of fictionalizing the Shakespeare question. Given the intellectual intimacy of the two men, and their common fascination with Shakespeare, it would seem most surprising if they did not.

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23 "Recollections of a Gifted Woman," *Our Old Home: A Series of English Sketches, The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, Vol. 5, Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press (90–119), 1970, 114, emphasis ours.

24 Vivian C. Hopkins, *Prodigal Puritan: The Life of Delia Bacon*, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1959, 234.

25 Delia Bacon, *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakespere Unfolded*, London: Groombridge and Sons, 1857, xiv.

26 "Recollections," 106.

If Shakespeare seemed a perplexing mystery in the nineteenth century, *Billy Budd* remains one today: why does the book's innocent hero bless a captain who has just condemned him, against the wishes of the other officers of the drumhead court, for a crime he did not intend to commit against a superior who is described as an embodiment of evil? The question lives on, surfacing during the twentieth century as perhaps the most irreconcilable of the novel's many psychological and literary cruxes. Subtitled an "inside narrative," *Billy Budd* is often suspected of concealing, in the words of E. L. Grant Watson's seminal 1933 essay, "a deep and solemn purpose,"[27] ascertainable only by untangling the manifold implications of Melville's insinuating subtitle. More recently, critics have been divided about whether to read the novella in a biographical or a conceptual register. To Hershel Parker, *Billy Budd* enacts a memorial consolation for an older author living with the omnipresent reminder of human loss, representing a "fictional analogy to the lost true histories of shipmates who had died unknown to fame or had lived out long lives more obscurely even than Melville."[28] In contrast, Gail Coffler asserts that *Billy Budd* is "less a sea story than an allegorical fable about relations of truth to art."[29] Viewed from the perspective of Melville's engagement with the Shakespeare question, it might be argued that the accounts of Parker and Coffler are not mutually exclusive, but complementary. The "lost shipmates" whom Melville remembers in *Billy Budd* are not only literal friends, but imaginary literary comrades, including the exalted figure whose own meditation on the "relations of truth to art" Melville had himself dubbed "man's final lore."

Interpretation—whether of law or literature—lies at the heart of *Billy Budd*'s artistic design. Melville's narrator foregrounds the question of meaning early in the novella when Billy's farewell to his former ship—"And good-bye to you, old *Rights-of-Man*"—is taken by the *Bellipotent*'s lieutenant as literary irony, "a terrible breach of naval decorum . . . meant to convey a covert sally . . . a sly slur at impressment." Impressment was the practice, common in eighteenth-century England, of dragooning unemployed or imprisoned men into service. Melville objected to the practice, on which the British Navy nevertheless depended, and to which Billy, like so many others in real life, was subject by virtue of his birth as a foundling. The narrator, however, denies any subliminal trace of rebellion in Billy's utterance, instead assuring us that the handsome sailor was "by no means of a satirical turn," and that "to deal in double meanings and insinuations of any sort was quite foreign to his nature." On the contrary, Budd himself is presented by the narrator as the embodiment of innocent beauty, one who "like

27 Watson, 319.

28 Hershel Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography, Volume 2, 1851–1891*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 2002, 883.

29 Gail Coffler, "Religion, Myth, and Meaning in the Art of Billy Budd, Sailor," *New Essays on Billy Budd*, ed. Donald Yanella, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

the illiterate nightingale was sometimes the composer of his own song."

Confirming the mythic undercurrents that flow freely beneath the surface of Melville's novella, the comparison of Budd to the nightingale contradicts the narrator's breezy assurances of Budd's univocality and draws us toward a deeper and more comprehensive interpretation of Melville's theory of "the relations of truth to art." Ultimately Ovidian in origin, the nightingale evoked is not only a singer, but one intimately associated with the very human problems—of art, agency, violence, censorship, and law—that manifest themselves in Melville's novella. In Ovid's fable, Philomela is a woman raped by her brother-in-law, who cuts out her tongue to prevent the revelation of his crime. Before being transformed into the plaintive nightingale, Philomela reveals her rapist's identity by weaving his name into a tapestry. As Leonard Barkan observes in his path-finding study of the reception of Ovid in Western literature, *The God Made Flesh*, the Philomela motif "is centrally concerned with communication." Moreover, Philomela's is only the most extended and profound of Ovid's many stories concerning characters that "define themselves by their struggle to invent new languages . . . to discover a language of paradox"[30] fitted to their desperate circumstances.

When he is accused by Claggart of conspiring in mutiny, finding the language fitted to his circumstance is precisely what Billy Budd cannot, *quite literally*, do. Unable on account of his speech impediment to respond verbally to Claggart's accusation, Budd is reduced to articulating his outrage physically, by striking—and, as it happens, killing—the oppressive master at arms. This *physicalization* of an impulse in its origin purely *verbal* brings into focus the problem that remains today the essential riddle of the intersection between law and literature as well as a canonical conundrum of twenty-first-century speech act theory: when do *words* become *acts* (and therefore *actionable* at law)?

Interestingly, this distinction is a primary thematic element in the Shakespearean play most often and most readily detected as a pervasive and intimate influence on Melville's text. John Hennedy[31] astutely connects the situation depicted in *Billy Budd* with that of Shakespeare's Duke in *Measure for Measure*, a play (like *The Merchant of Venice*) treating the philosophical conflict between principles of law and equity. As I have argued elsewhere, Shakespeare's play revolves around "the tension between the strict application of the so-called 'letter' of the law and the merciful application of the so-called 'spirit' of the law."[32] Billy's case, likewise, is one that involves "the clash of military duty with

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30 Leonard Barkan, *The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis & the Pursuit of Paganism*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986, 247.

31 In his 1989 study of Shakespearean influences on the novella, Hennedy calls the impact of the bard on Melville "both an edifying and a mysterious instance of literary influence." According to Hennedy, the most certain and consequential manifestation of this "edifying and mysterious" influence on Melville's final book is *Measure for Measure*, a play that Melville knew well before his 1848 purchase of the Bard's collected works.

32 Roger Stritmatter, "Smallest Things in *Measure for Measure*," *The Marginalia of Edward De Vere's Geneva Bible*, University of Massachusetts PhD dissertation, 2001, 163.

moral scruple"—and Vere's own finding in the story favors "military duty" over "moral scruple." While the other officers of the court cite Billy's lack of homicidal intent as justification for leniency, Vere alone insists that intent is irrelevant. Billy has slain an officer of the British navy: the circumstances allow no other conclusion, for the freedom of millions, Vere argues, depends on the discipline of a few. In the shadow of the terrifying mutinies at Nore and Spithead, the captain reasons, mercy only invites insubordination, leading to the cycle of more death and destruction. Under the prevailing codes of conduct, shaped by the discipline of war, the Court has no option but death; mitigation invites chaos:

> War looks but to the frontage, the appearance. And the Mutiny Act, war's child, takes after the father. Budd's intent or non-intent is nothing to the purpose. . . . Your clement sentence [the crew] would account pusillanimous. They would think that we flinch—that we are afraid of them.

The narrator himself refers to this as a "closing appeal" to the "instincts" of Vere's fellow officers, and in his critical assessment of the story Phil Withim echoes this sentiment, objecting to the Captain's speech as "not a rational argument, but an emotional one: an appeal to fear."[33] To critics like Withim—such views are common—Vere is a "narrow, literal, prejudiced" man, "completely circumscribed by the needs of the navy, less compassionate than his officers," guilty of "that worst of all naval sins, over-prudence."[34] More Angelo than Duke, in this account he is a blue-blooded authoritarian, unable to bend the law to save the life of an obviously innocent and good man, instead prosecuting the letter of the law while sacrificing its spirit in Budd's execution. However, as John Wenke has noted, the evidence of Melville's extensive revisions undermines the likelihood of such a simplistic morality tale; instead, the evidence suggests that as he worked through the drafts of *Billy Budd* Melville was "consciously, intentionally, deliberately revising in order to favor problematical, or indeterminate formulations," with the effect that "sane, judicious, and well-meaning persons can reasonably take the same character, the same acts, the same words, and draw radically antagonistic conclusions."[35]

The trouble with Vere, in other words, from the point of view of professional academic criticism, is that we don't know what to do with him. The harshness of his verdict can hardly fail to confound the heart of any sensible reader. On the other hand, those familiar with the scope and development of Melville's literary imagination can readily perceive how closely Melville had tended to the character long before he was named Vere. Like a careful scrimshaw artist, Melville had over decades applied a studious attention to detail in developing the character type of which Vere was merely the penultimate expression.

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33 Phil Withim, "*Billy Budd*: Testament of Resistance," *Modern Language Quarterly*, Vol. 20 (1959), 120.

34 Withim, 115–127, 120.

35 John Wenke, "Complicating Vere: Melville's Practice of Revision in *Billy Budd*," *Leviathan* Vol. 1.1 (March 1999), 83–88; 85.

To Melville, in other words, Vere was not just a character in a book, or an embodiment of abstract principles in aesthetics or law, but one of the old friends to whom Hershel Parker alludes, a literary companion comprised of an imaginative composite of history and fable, a kind of tattoo-inscribed Queequeg to Melville's Ishmael. He had been assuming fullness in Melville's conception for almost forty years, at least since the genesis of Nord, the reclusive "Man-o-war hermit" shipping aboard the USS United States in White Jacket (1850):

> If mystery includes romance, he certainly was a very romantic one . . . I saw it in his eye, that the man had been a reader of good books; I would have staked my life on it, that he seized the right meaning of Montaigne. I saw that he was an earnest thinker; I more than suspected that he had been bolted in the mill of adversity. For all these things, my heart yearned toward him; I determined to know him . . . the man was a marvel. He amazed me, as much as Coleridge did the troopers among whom he enlisted. What could have induced such a man to enter a man-of-war, all my sapience can not fathom. And how he managed to preserve his dignity, as he did, among such rabble rout was equally a mystery. For he was no sailor; as ignorant of a ship, indeed, as a man from the sources of the Niger. Yet all the officers respected him, and the men were afraid of him. . . . In my intercourse with Nord, he never made allusion to his past career . . . concerning the past he was locked up like the specie vaults of the Bank of England.

Vere is a Nord who has learned to sail; like Nord, or like Melville himself on the whaling ship *Acushnet* in his early days, he is set apart as much by his bookish intellectualism and secretive manner as by his aristocratic ethos, being one who

> had a marked leaning toward everything intellectual. He loved books, never going to sea without a newly replenished library, compact but of the best . . . books treating of actual men and events no matter of what era—history, biography and unconventional writers, who free from cant and convention, like Montaigne, honestly and in the spirit of common sense philosophize upon realities.

The casualness with which the narrator introduces the marked affinity of Vere for Montaigne is a characteristic ironic feint. Since before 1850, when he singled out Nord as one of Montaigne's devoted readers, Melville had regarded the French philosopher as the influence *sine qua non* on Shakespeare.[36] In his annotated Shakespeare, next to Hamlet's soliloquy "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so," Melville penciled the words: "Here is forcibly shown the great Montaignism of Hamlet."[37] According to Lawrance Thompson,

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36 The influence of Montaigne on Shakespeare was well documented before 1888, and seemed much more prominent for nineteenth-century intellectuals, in both America and England, than it has subsequently become. See, for example in Jacob Feiss's *Shakspere and Montaigne: An Endeavor to Explain the Tendency of 'Hamlet' from Allusions in Contemporary Works.* London: Kegan Paul, 1884, a book Melville may certainly have read. Intriguingly, Feiss summarizes Montaigne's philosophy as one which "aims at making us conversant with death as a friend" (86).

37 Jay Leyda, *The Melville Log: A Documentary Life of Herman Melville, 1819–1891,*

in fact, Melville regarded Montaigne as Shakespeare's "spiritual father."[38]

If Captain Vere's affinity for Montaigne connects him to Melville's Shakespeare, his aristocratic history and mien confirm his link to the historic earls of Oxford. The narrator in the story's final revision describes Vere as one whose

> settled opinions were as a dyke against those invading waters of novel opinion, social, political and otherwise . . . while other members of the aristocracy to which by birth he belonged were incensed at the innovators mainly because their theories were inimical to the privileged classes, not alone Captain Vere disinterestedly opposed them because they seemed to him incapable of embodiment in lasting institutions but [also] at war with the peace of the world and the true welfare of mankind.

In justifying his decision to strictly enforce the letter of naval law, Captain Vere not only argues from the principle of unintended consequences, but cites case law as contrasting precedent to emphasize the unique circumstances of his rigor—in this case, quite remarkably it must be said, that case law is, once again, the same one found at the heart of *Measure for Measure*:

> The exceptional in [Billy Budd's case] moves the hearts within you. But let not warm hearts betray heads that should be cool. Ashore in a criminal case will an upright judge allow himself off the bench to be waylaid by some tender kinswoman of the accused seeking to touch him with her tearful plea? Well, the heart here, sometimes the feminine in man, is as that piteous woman and hard though it be, she must be ruled out.

Vere's case law is a summary of the plot of the play, in which Isabella, the sister of an unjustly accused man, appeals for mercy from an onshore Judge to countermand the ordered execution of her condemned brother.[39] The anecdote is a reminder that leniency is sometimes the handmaiden of self-interest—in *Measure for Measure*, Angelo allows himself to be "waylaid" by mercy only on the condition that Isabella "lay down her body" to his carnal desire. Melville's citation of the play is a good example of the subtle interleaving of Shakespearean thought and language that pervades *Billy Budd*. That the reference must be premeditated is confirmed in the narrator's caveat noting Captain Vere's practice of "cit[ing] some historic character or incident of antiquity" and his "unmindful[ness] of the circumstance that to his bluff company such remote allusions however pertinent they might really be" to the case at hand were "altogether alien" to company whose reading was "mainly confined to the journals [i.e., newspapers]."[40] In other words, the reader is placed on notice that

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New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1951, 291.

38 *Melville's Quarrel with God*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 1952, 266, 472.

39 Shakespeare's Angelo is, like Vere, a strict upholder of the letter of the law against the accused. Unlike Vere, he is also a hypocrite, a blackmailer, and an unrepentant sensualist.

40 Hayford and Sealts, 63 (folios 86–87). Emphasis ours.

this is a work in which oblique and intricate literary allusions are likely to be at play, and to count for a great deal.

Who Is "X"?

Billy Budd's nemesis, the evil Master-at-arms Claggart, has long been recognized as a literary descendant of Shakespeare's Iago, the nihilist and materialistic tempter of *Othello*. The mystery of Claggart's iniquity, mirroring the critical literature on Iago's "motiveless malignity," takes up the entirety of *Billy Budd*'s eleventh chapter, which also contains the novella's most curiously evasive (and readily ignored) digression:

> But for an adequate comprehending of Claggart by a normal nature these hints are insufficient. To pass from a normal nature to him one must cross "*the deadly space between*."[41] And this is best done by indirection.
>
> Long ago an honest scholar, my senior, said to me in reference to one who like himself is now no more, a man so unimpeachably respectable that against him nothing was ever openly said though among the few something was whispered, "Yes, X—is not a nut to be cracked by the tap of a lady's fan. You are aware that I am the adherent of no organized religion, much less of any philosophy built into a system. Well, for all that, I think that to try and get into X—to enter into his labyrinth and get out again, without a clue derived from some source other than what is known as knowledge of the world—that were hardly possible, at least for me."
>
> "Why," said I, "X—however singular a study to some, is yet human, and

41 Hayford and Sealts say that Melville's reference here "remains elusive" (161). Melville evidently found the curious phrase in Thomas Campbell's "Battle of the Baltic," a short epic about Admiral Nelson's successful March 30, 1801, attack on the combined forces of Russia, Sweden, Prussia, and Denmark, allied under the banner of "Second Armed Neutrality," in the Danish Harbor of Copenhagen:

> But the might of England flushed
> To anticipate the scene;
> And her van the fleeter rushed
> O'er *the deadly space between.*
> A subsequent stanza exhorts the English victors to
> . . . think of them that sleep
> Full many a fathom deep,
> By the wild and stormy steep,
> Elsinore!

Of course the reference to "them that sleep" by Elsinore reinforces the impression of Melville's self-conscious interweaving of Shakespearean themes in *Billy Budd*. But the significance is even more pointedly observed by Hayford and Sealts's note to an earlier reference in the text to Copenhagen, in which they quote from Southey's *Life of Nelson*: "the channel was little known, and extremely intricate; all the buoys had been removed, and the Danes considered this difficulty as almost insuperable." After successfully navigating this "deadly space," Nelson "thanked God," for it had been, he said, "infinitely more grievous to him than any resistance which he could experience from the enemy" (cited in Hayford and Sealts, 150).

> knowledge of the world assuredly implies the knowledge of human nature, and in most of its varieties."

If *Billy Budd* is a puzzle, surely this passage forms an essential piece—is, as it were, the keystone of the arch of Melville's rainbow. And yet, critics have been disappointingly reticent about how it fits into the larger design of the novella. Hayford and Sealts' assurance that the scholar is "a spokesman invented to dramatize a point of view" is, unfortunately, typical. Why does the "point of view" articulated by the "honest scholar" require such studied obfuscation by Melville's narrator?[42] Hayford and Sealts neither identify the point of view nor comment on the connotations of the perplexing algebraic sign, "X," let alone any of the many other literary or philosophical associations embodied in the enigmatic passage.

To my ear, the passage recalls the description of Delia Bacon's doomed but romantic quest to arrive at a material solution to the "labyrinth" of Shakespeare's mind in Hawthorne's "Recollections of a Gifted Woman":

> It was a very singular phenomenon; a system of philosophy growing up in this woman's mind without her volition—contrary, in fact, to the determined presence of her volition—and subsisting itself in the place of everything that originally grew there. To have based such a system on fancy, and unconsciously elaborated it for herself, was almost as wonderful as really to have found it in the plays. But in a certain sense she did find it there. Shakspere [sic] has surface beneath surface, to an immeasurable depth, adapted to the plummet-line of every reader; his works measure many phases of truth, each with scope large enough to fill a contemplative mind.[43]

Recalling not only Hawthorne's own Transcendentalist aversion to organized religion and "systematic" philosophy, but also his fascination with Bacon's romantic quest to plumb the heart of Shakespeare, both passages emphasize the limited utility of any "systematic philosophy" as applied to the intractable complexity of the "human" subject they both seek to address. To Hawthorne, Bacon was a living embodiment of such romantic heroines as Zenobia or Hester Prynne; her quest "deviated from possible, even from probable experience," all the better to exemplify "the truth of the human heart."[44]

If we are starting to think that Melville's "X" might stand for "Shakespeare"—the great literary cipher—we will find support for this hypothesis not only in

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42 Does the figure conceal a reference to homosexuality, a "variety" of human nature clearly intimated in Melville's novella? Some critics have assumed so, but this interpretation strains the text beyond recognition: grammatically, X stands for a person, not a philosophical abstraction or a sexual preference—a "man so unimpeachably respectable that against him nothing was ever openly said though among the few something was whispered." Entering "his labyrinth" is a perilous endeavor, not reducible to a "nut to be cracked by the tap of a lady's fan," but instead requiring a clue "derived from some source other than what is known as knowledge of the world."

43 "Recollections," 106. Emphasis ours.

44 Hopkins, 217.

Melville's text and in the role Delia Bacon played in Hawthorne's imaginative life, but in the wider discourse of the Shakespeare controversy at the precise time when Melville was revising his novella. That Shakespeare was already in 1888 becoming a "singular study," often divorced from the general comparative study of "human nature," was apparent in the widening public rift between those eminent men and women who readily proclaimed themselves "insane" in the company of Delia Bacon and such authoritative-sounding academic "experts" as Richard Grant White, who confessed to having scuttled Bacon's chances of publishing her second *Putnam*'s article, already set in type for the February 1856 issue, with a behind-the-scenes negative review.[45]

By 1888 these cultural forces were converging in dramatic opposition. The very year in which the form of Melville's novella began to assume coherence in his mind, the embers of controversy first ignited by Bacon's 1856 book burst anew into open flame, as a result of two very different developments. The spark was *Delia Bacon: A Biographical Sketch*,[46] by her brother, Theodore—a work that depicted Bacon's quixotic literary career, and that included copies of her quarrelsome 1856 correspondence with Hawthorne. In 1888 the former Minnesota Senator and populist intellectual Ignatius Donnelly also published *The Great Cryptogram*, his controversial book on Shakespeare authorship, popularizing the idea that the plays contained a message to posterity enciphered by Francis Bacon. In other words, exactly when Melville began work on *Billy Budd*, the Shakespeare question was very much "in the air," and more intensely than ever before.

An omnivorous reader like Melville might well have had his curiosity rekindled by either the appearance of Delia Bacon's brother's biography or Donnelly's *Cryptogram*, or both of them together. Given his fascination with military history, Melville seems likely to have encountered a third book published in 1888 that turns out to be directly pertinent not only to the themes of *Billy Budd* but to the name of Melville's mysterious captain, "The Honorable Edward Fairfax Vere." Clement Markham's *The Fighting Veres* traces the military careers of the two illustrious cousins of Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford–Horace (1565–1635) and Francis (1560–1609) Vere. Their campaigns on behalf of international Protestantism in the Lowlands and later the Palatinate became the stuff of Jacobean legend[47] and may well have inspired the naming of

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45 Hopkins, 287.

46 Theodore Bacon, *Delia Bacon: A Biographical Sketch.* Houghton Mifflin, Boston & New York, 1888.

47 J. Thomas Looney. *"Shakespeare" Identified in Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford*, London: Cecil Palmer, 1920, notes the similarity between these names and the two soldier comrades of Hamlet in the Danish play: "Sir Horace Vere . . . had followed the vocation which had been denied to the Earl of Oxford, and in becoming the foremost soldier of his day, and chief of the 'Fighting Veres,' had maintained . . . the kind of glory which Edward de Vere had wished to win: an ambition that has left distinct marks in the Shakespearean dramas" (477–79). See also Charlton Ogburn, *The Mysterious William Shakespeare: The Myth and the Reality* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1984), 763–64.

two characters, Horatio and Francesco, in *Hamlet*. Horace, or Horatio as he was often known, was the grandfather of Mary Fairfax (1638–1704), the student of Andrew Marvell whose estate had inspired his poem "Upon Appleton House," in which Melville had discovered—and underlined—the phrase "starry Vere."[48]

Whether or not Melville knew Markham's book, he definitely knew the name of this "wolfish earl," de Vere, and much more about him. By 1872, when Alexander Grosart published some of de Vere's juvenilia in his *Worthies of the Fuller Memorial Library*, the same series in which Melville would have encountered Marvell's poem, it was apparent—at least to Grosart, one of the century's leading literary scholars—that "an unlifted shadow lies across his memory." Long before that, the third volume of Isaac Disraeli's *Curiosities of Literature*, a compendium listed in the inventory of Melville's library,[49] includes three pages devoted to a "Secret History of Edward Vere, Earl of Oxford." Disraeli's Vere, while a courtier of the "highest rank," is also a "coxcombical peer" infamous for his prodigality, literary aura, and Italianate manners. In one of Disraeli's anecdotes, de Vere authorizes his steward, the translator Nicholas Hill, to give ten pounds—a princely sum—to a beggar in order to "make him a man." Ultimately, however, Disraeli's generous de Vere becomes the laughingstock of posterity by banishing himself to Venice for breaking wind in the presence of the Queen. Did Melville take a tip for his subtitle, "an inside narrative," from Disraeli's concept of "secret history"? Certainly the comic story of Vere's exile would have piqued the curiosity and imagination of the author of *Moby-Dick*, for whom the figure of the wanderer was such a potent symbol for man in the state of original sin, and in whose book Ishmael muses over breakfast that

> a good laugh is a mighty good thing, and rather too scarce a good thing; the more's the pity. So, if any one man, in his own proper person, afford stuff for a good joke to anybody, let him cheerfully allow himself to spend and be spent in that way. And the man that has anything bountifully laughable in him, be sure there is more in that man than you perhaps think for.

The "secret history" to which Disraeli refers surfaces in copious detail in the anonymous 1827 English novel *De Vere, Or The Man of Independence*, which Alice Chandler[50] judges to be as a likely inspiration for the name of Melville's

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48 Markham portrays Horatio's notorious literary cousin, quite typically, as a talented and precocious *bon vivant* and a wastrel: "He traveled in Italy . . . distinguished himself at jousts and wrote poems, some of which are preserved. But he quarreled with his wife and father-in-law [Queen Elizabeth's Prime Minister, Lord Burghley], got into dissolute and extravagant habits, sold his estates one after the other and ended by destroying the power and wealth of the great family of which he was the head" (24–25).

49 Merton Sealts, *Melville's Reading: A Check-list of Books Owned and Borrowed*, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966, 56. Sealts entry #186 is the edition of 1859, with Melville's dated annotation, "Feb. 26 1862 N. Y."; Disraeli's enormously popular work had been in print since the 1790s, so it is possible that Melville was acquainted with it earlier.

50 Alice Chandler, "The Name Symbolism of Captain Vere," *Eighteenth Century Fiction*

protagonist. Written by the antiquarian and Pitt administration tax official Robert Plumer Ward, the novel traces the political, legal, and romantic adventures of "Mortimer"[51] de Vere, a nineteenth-century scion of the Vere clan who discovers his Elizabethan literary ancestor, the impecunious Earl Edward. Steeped in a Shakespearean ethos, each chapter of the novel begins with an epigraph from the bard.[52] Apparently a roman à clef,[53] the book identifies Mortimer as "another Orlando,"[54] and models his early life on the pastoralist formula of *As You Like It*, affirming that a life of leisured inquiry is more fulfilling than one caught up in the political intrigues of the court and the struggle for status or advancement. Mortimer remembers his namesake, the seventeenth Earl, as one who "in the days of Queen Elizabeth united in his single person, the character of her greatest noble, knight, and poet."[55] Printed simultaneously in London and in New York, Ward's novel seems to have reached a large American audience and exercised a larger and more profound influence on nineteenth-century Anglo-American literature than has generally been acknowledged. It seems to be the source, for example, of the character "Lord de Vere," prominently featured in Hawthorne's 1837 "The Great Carbuncle," who—with a touch of Hawthorne's gentle American satire that recalls the gravedigger scene in *Hamlet*—"was said to spend much of his time in the burial vault of his dead progenitors, rummaging among their moldy coffins in search of all the earthly pride and vainglory that

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22.1 (1967), 87. Chandler contrasts the positive associations of the name in Ward's novel with the more generally "pejorative connotation in nineteenth-century fiction where it was often used to suggest a vapid, if not actually villainous, aristocracy" (86). For a more sophisticated analysis of the name's symbolic and literary implications, see S. A. Cowan, "The Naming of Captain Vere in Melville's *Billy Budd*," *Studies in Short Fiction*, 21:1 (Winter 1984): 41–46—an analysis which, however, is not very well informed historically.

51 In the novel, "Mortimer" is a sobriquet for Edward Harley, 2nd Earl of Oxford (1689–1741) under the second (or possibly third) creation of the Earldom, 2nd Earl of Mortimer under the second creation by Queen Anne.

52 Ward was a sophisticated student of the plays, able to quote with facility from many to illustrate a point or layer his narrative with implication. Similar epigraphs appear as chapter headings in Ward's two other novels, *Tremaine; or, The Man of Refinement* (1825) and *De Clifford; or, the Constant Man* (1841). Neither of these books, however, has the same insistency of emphasis on Shakespearean language and themes as does Ward's original novel about de Vere.

53 The authors acknowledge and thank independent bookseller, scholar and book printer Nick Drumbolis for first suggesting that this term was applicable to an "Oxfordian" reading of this remarkable early novel (personal communication, 1992).

54 Anonymous (by Robert Plumer Ward), *De Vere: Or, the Man of Independence.* London: Henry Colburn, 1827, 1, 88. It deserves notice that the narrator only a few pages earlier gives a contradictory summary of Vere's talents, describing him as "a poet, and not a very good one, but ranked with those of his time," 22.

55 Macaulay in his *History of England, from the Accession of James II,* 1848, likewise recalled the 17th earl as one who had "shone at the court of Elizabeth, and had won for himself an honourable place among the early masters of English poetry."

was hidden among bones and dust; so that, besides his own share, he had the collected haughtiness of his whole line of ancestry."

As for Delia Bacon's related sense of a secret literary history, in a late poem entitled "Shakespeare Bacon's Cipher: A Clue to Scientists," published by Walt Whitman in *Cosmopolitan* in 1888, we find these lines:

> . . . In each old song bequeathed, in every noble page or test . . .
> As part of each, finality of each, meaning, behind the ostent
> The mystic cipher waits unfolded.[56]

The poem has rarely been reprinted. Whitman's "unfolded" is a transparent allusion to the title of Delia Bacon's book *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakespere Unfolded.*

Melville's Narrative Theory and Fame

The narrative theory elaborated in *Billy Budd* supports and lends nuance to the inference of the novella's association with Shakespeare and with the Shakespearean question. As much as *Billy Budd* is about law, war, art, discipline, and truth, it is also about the craft of storytelling. In contrast to Delia Bacon, the author of *Billy Budd* refuses to elevate "history" or "philosophy" over what might be seen as the merely "literary." His tale is one "uncompromisingly told" with all its "ragged edges," having "essentially . . . less to do with fable than with fact." Melville makes a strong claim for the higher epistemic value of the "fictional," and the "non-fiction" newspaper account of Budd's execution in Chapter 29 is noteworthy for its outlandish disregard for fact and blindness to the meaningful truths of the case. Melville's narrator apologizes—ironically, it seems—for the unfinished and "ragged" nature of his tale, while taking a sly pleasure in informing the reader that this competing "official" account of the affair appeared in a publication "now long ago superannuated and forgotten." He apparently solicits another sort of reader and appeals to another notion of enduring significance.

The iconoclasm of the narrator—his dedication to "fact" and "truth" fully inhabiting the "fictional," and his corresponding distrust of official, sanitized, "non-fiction" accounts—can justifiably be read in more than one register. For one thing, it does reflect the complex psychology of nineteenth-century romantic fiction generally, as well as Melville's own more intimate experience. His first book, *Typee*, an imaginative elaboration of real first-hand experiences, had been treated as wholly "fictional" by several reviewers, at least one of whom suspected the author's name to be a pseudonym. Throughout his career, he seemed destined to inhabit the precarious intersection between fact and art, and the complex interrelations between these contiguous realms remained perhaps his greatest theme over many decades. The convergence of self-presentation,

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56 *Cosmopolitan* Vol. IV, September 1887–February 1888, 142.

analytic investigation, and fictional narrative recalls the manner by which Delia Bacon's tragic life not only became a topic for public controversy, but an inspiration and muse for several prominent New England fiction writers of the nineteenth century. Among the examples that might be cited is Catherine Beecher's 1858 defense of Bacon in the McWhorter affair, which was titled *Truth Stranger than Fiction*.[57] Alexander McWhorter, a divinity student, was briefly engaged to Delia Bacon and threw her over rather contemptuously in public. Largely because of her prominence as a public speaker, Delia's personal life became hostage to the unpredictable and often cruel whims of a fickle public. Beecher's premise about Bacon, in the words of Vivian C. Hopkins, was that "the truth, shaped by her creative hand, could become more alluring than fiction."[58] Judging this imaginative persuasiveness in another way, Jane Welsh Carlyle (the wife of the influential English author Thomas Carlyle) remarked that Bacon's absorption in the Shakespeare question was "less suitable for a woman writer than . . . sentimental novels."[59] For Hawthorne, on the other hand, her "romantic aura,"[60] capable of "alluring forth one's own ideas and fantasies from the shy places where they usually haunt,"[61] made Bacon herself a suitable subject for fiction. Bacon's own idea of the relationship between the fictional and the biographical exceeded conventional distinction. In light of the merchandising of her private life in popular fiction, she read the suggestion that she fictionalize her philosophy as an invitation to a kind of salacious self-exposure, a crude capitulation to a cruel marketplace: "I will not have a novel made out of it as my brother proposes I should . . . this life and death earnest of mine is not going to be published either for the amusement or the contempt of the world. Seal it up and wait till it is true."[62]

Like Delia Bacon, Melville could readily apprehend the dilemma of Shakespeare's lawmaker in *Measure for Measure*, who must abdicate his office and return to Vienna incognito to accomplish the "delicate cause" of furthering his ideals. Indeed, Melville's own life could furnish many illustrations of the conflict between artistic integrity and accommodation to social convention, a conflict compelling the literary artist to sacrifice his art to an uncomprehending public and at the same time renounce the sin of coveting an inwardly desired fame. Writing about the art of Melville's final years, William Dillingham observes that the disappointed author of *Moby-Dick* "again and again returned to the phenomenon of fame," which "becomes a major subject of his thinking in these [later] years, as if he were struggling to reconcile himself emotionally to his lack of recognition while reminding himself, especially through his reading, of what

57 Hopkins, 121–130.
58 Hopkins, 129.
59 Hopkins, 218.
60 Hopkins, 234.
61 "Recollections," 109.
62 Bacon, "Biography," 270.

he had always known intellectually—that fame is an untrustworthy gauge of greatness."[63]

In *Billy Budd* this theme of fame surfaces prominently in Chapter 4, which introduces the "literary sin" of an extended digression on the deeds and death of Lord Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar. The artfully elaborated contrast between Vere and Nelson in this chapter is not, as has sometimes been supposed, principally about which man is a greater captain or a more noble specimen of manhood. Instead the chapter's central theme, it may be argued, is the tension between fame (Nelson) and anonymity (Vere).

Melville's Nelson is one who felt and acted on the "special virtue [of the military man] . . . an excessive love of glory impassioning a less burning impulse, the honest sense of duty"; he sought and achieved military glory in the two greatest battles of nineteenth-century Europe. In Southey's account—Melville's chief source for the chapter—Nelson is struck down in a blaze of glory by an enemy's bullet aimed at the conspicuous target of his ornate officer's uniform decorated with stars. Having coolly made out his last will and testament, Nelson has advertised his presence to enemy sailors by (in Melville's words) the "ornate publication of his person in battle"; through a "priestly motive" he had dressed "his person in the jeweled vouchers of his own shining deeds," assuming his Admiral's coat, decorated with four stars, in the heat of battle. The bullet struck on the sightlines of the stars. And afterwards both Nelson's uniform and the bullet that killed him swiftly became objects of national adoration bordering on religious zeal.

Vere, by contrast, falls from a wound inflicted by a utilitarian "musket ball from the porthole of the enemy's main cabin . . ."—a detail that emphasizes not only the haphazard nature of his death but the anonymity of both killer and killed. Vere dies anonymously, and his posthumous reputation, like that of his namesake in Disraeli's account, is burdened by scandalous gossip. In consequence of his reticence to discuss the Budd affair, he becomes the subject of "confidential talk," being "not a little criticized by some officers, a fact imputed by his friends and vehemently by his cousin Jack Denton to professional jealousy of Starry Vere." Consequently "the spirit"—Vere—"that 'spite its philosophic austerity may yet have indulged in the most secret of all passions, ambition, never attained to the fullness of fame."

Melville's narrator attributes to Vere's cousin Jack not only knowledge of this "professional jealousy," but also the key descriptive epithet of him as "Starry" Vere. Already we have encountered the intensifying phrases "ornate publication" and "jeweled vouchers," applied to Nelson's four-starred uniform. It becomes obvious that Melville's narrator, with malice aforethought, is consciously placing great emphasis on the honorific astral symbolism shared by Vere and Nelson. Melville seems to have grasped the essential point that Andrew Marvell's symbolism employs the heraldic idiom so familiar to the early modern poet; in

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63 William Dillingham, *Melville and His Circle: The Last Years*, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2008, 74.

this case the "Starry Vere" Heraldic Shield of the Earls of Oxford prominently features the silver star of Earl Aubrey's earned achievement of the device during the first crusade.[64]

If the shared symbolism of stars underscores the contrast in destiny between the two officers, Vere and Nelson, the Southey digression also serves to deepen the work's historical implications. Melville himself seems to have thought of *Billy Budd* less as a work of unalloyed fiction than as a historical parable. Indeed, the narrator comprehensively stipulates the specific circumstances of the novella's action, and these not only frame but serve to complicate the "real world" ethics and legal reasoning of the case. Melville's narrator alludes to these larger circumstances in many ways, including via the subtle and easily overlooked detail that Vere was "unhappily . . . cut off too early for the Nile and Trafalgar . . ." By this cruel exemption Vere is contrasted to the happy former mutineers of the *Nore* who "not so very long" after the rebellion "helped win a coronet for Nelson at the Nile, and naval crown of crowns for him at Trafalgar," receiving in the end "plenary absolution" for their services. The implication of this repeated emphasis on these two British naval battles is readily grasped when we recall the transformative role that they played in eventually bringing about the destruction of what Melville had called "man's foulest crime"—New World slavery. Nelson's victories at the Nile and Trafalgar established the unchallenged hegemony of the British Royal Navy and laid the foundation for half a century of the Navy's interdictions of the slave trade through the so-called "blockade of Africa," carried out in the name of the Slave Trade Act of 1807. Although the blockade did not end slavery, it resulted in the capturing of fifteen hundred slave ships and the freeing of over a hundred and fifty thousand captives, and it systematically weakened the slave system over many decades, long before the American Civil War finally brought the barbarity to an end. We may conclude that the narrator has in mind this larger historic frame when he stresses that Vere was cut off too early to have participated in these heroic battles. That Melville has this larger arc of development in mind is confirmed by the novella's framing chapter, Chapter 1, a part of the book evidently unsynchronized with the main action of the story (ca. 1795), and instead set in Liverpool during the late 1830s ("half a century ago"—presumably looking back from 1888). At this opening stage of the story we are introduced to a character who otherwise plays no conceivable role in Melville's novella:

> A common sailor so intensely black that he must needs have been an African of the unadulterated blood of Ham—a symmetric figure much above average height. The two ends of a gay silk handkerchief thrown loose

64 Rev. Severne A. Ashhurst Majendie, *Some Account of the Family of De Vere, The Earls of Oxford and of Hedingham Castle in Essex.* London: H. T. Smith, n. d., 9. Aubrey was the 3rd de Vere Earl of Oxford (1164–1221). His grandfather, the 1st Earl Aubrey, had "come in with the Conqueror." For a detailed exemplary survey of the Vere family over twenty earldoms, see Verily Anderson, *The de Veres of Castle Hedingham*, Lavenham, Suffolk: Terence Dalton with the Lavenham Press, 1993.

> about the neck danced upon the displayed ebony of his chest, in his ears were big hoops of gold, and a Highland bonnet with a tartan band set off his shapely head . . . . in jovial sallies right and left, his white teeth flashing into view, he rollicked along, the center of a company of his shipmates. . . .

Melville is writing after the successful prosecution of the Civil War and the end of American slavery, an institution he had hated with an abiding passion ever since his youth. His narrator might have placed the frame at about 1838 for either of two reasons, or perhaps for both of them: 1) Melville had himself in 1839, at only nineteen or twenty, visited Liverpool and no doubt witnessed more than one scene similar to the one pictured in *Billy Budd*;[65] 2) the date emphasizes the *a posteriori* logic of Melville's novel as a document defined by historical reflection. The reader must be made aware of the 1830s framework to understand why the narrator emphasizes that Vere did not survive to participate in the battles of the Nile and Trafalgar.

This would suggest what is ultimately at stake in *Billy Budd*: the vision of the free African, a natural leader of men, in his Highland bonnet with giant hoops of gold in his ears—the precise counterpoint to Vere's own bookish excellence, painted with respectful complexity as a man of merit. Melville knew full well that the beginning of the end of the slave system had come not at the battle of Philippi in 1861, but effectively at the Nile in August 1798. In Melville's world, partly in consequence of Vere's decision, the discipline of the British navy held fast in battle. The former mutineers redeemed themselves, fighting to end slavery, and winning. On this historic irony both Melville's narrative and Vere's decision depend. The mutinies of *Nore* and *Spithead*, as Captain Vere recognizes, struck at the heart of the very naval discipline that eventually helped to kill slavery and transform the image of the free African in Melville's novella into a reality. This—not some textbook exercise in ethics in the "best of all possible worlds"—is the overwhelmingly shadowy historical context in which the reader is asked to consider Captain Vere's agonizing decision to sacrifice the "beautiful sailor" Billy Budd. But how does this painful sacrifice constitute a kind of self-sacrifice on Vere's part, and how does his failure to achieve fame relate not only to the example of Nelson but also that of Shakespeare?

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If Shakespeare hovers over *Billy Budd* almost as if he were a character in his own right, a "mystic cipher" never formally introduced but also quite irremovable, it is, in part, because the intricate quasi-allegorical structure of *Billy Budd*'s engagement with the literary past has already been firmly established in such works as *Moby-Dick*.[66] Although identified by name in "Hawthorne and His

65 Hershel Parker (1: 143–151) details this voyage and the many elements of that experience that are embedded in *Redburn* (1845), a thinly veiled semi-autobiographical account of Melville's own shipping to Liverpool.

66 For what is perhaps the best survey of Shakespearean influence on Melville,

Mosses," in *Moby-Dick* Shakespeare had become, in the words of Walter E. Bezanson, the "great unnamed presence," and Melville's protagonist Ishmael transformed into the survivor of "a structural *agon* wherein an American narrator outlasts his Elizabethan tragic hero (and Melville survives his contest with Shakespeare)."[67] Throughout *Moby-Dick* Shakespeare remains a signifying but usually anonymous, *sub rosa* presence, as obscure as he is vital to the book's ethos, like one of those "hieroglyphic marks" inscribed in Queequeg's flesh that embodied "a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth." Forty years later, in *Billy Budd*, the formula appears to be reversed: Melville's eponymous hero, the imaginative invention of an author facing the imminence of his own death, is condemned to physical annihilation and seizes the moment to announce his benediction for a character perhaps intended as a cipher for Shakespeare. Unfolding the riddle, he calls him, this time, by name.

Supposing that such a conceptual pattern is intimated in Melville's novella resolves many otherwise impenetrable textual enigmas, and the connections that subsequently reveal themselves have been pointed out by attentive readers over the years. Indeed, the possibility that *Billy Budd* is a novella concerned with—among other things—"Shakespeare" and his relationship to "Vere" seems to have been anticipated eighty years ago by one of the most accomplished and erudite early scholars of Melville, E. L. Grant Watson, who in 1933 already drew attention to a subterranean rapport between Vere and Shakespeare:

> We are given to suppose that there is an affinity, a spiritual understanding between Captain Vere and Billy Budd, and it is even suggested that in their partial and separate existences they contribute two essential portions of that larger spirit which is man . . . there are darker hints: *those deep, far-away things* in Vere, *those occasional flashings-forth* of intuition—*short, quick probings* to *the very axis of reality*.[68]

As the italics provided here make clear, in his attempt to capture the profound elusiveness of Vere's character, Watson reverts to Melville's own words from his 1850 essay, "Hawthorne and His Mosses"—where they describe *Shakespeare* instead of Vere.

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The use of a pseudonym is an outward manifestation of a troubled relationship between author and audience, a mask to cover the shame of transgression or a decoy to shield the author from possible reprisal by censoring authorities. Any writer whose vision transcends the expected norms of his—or her—historical moment is vulnerable to both forms of indictment. "The more a man belongs

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particularly of *Lear* on *Moby-Dick*, see Julian Markels's impressively insightful work, *Melville and the Politics of Identity*, Urbana and Chicago. University of Illinois Press, 1993.

67 Bezanson, 199.

68 "Melville's Testament of Acceptance," *The New England Quarterly* 6.2, June 1933, 324.

to posterity," writes Schopenhauer in a line marked in pencil by Melville, "the more of an alien he is to his contemporaries."[69] Melville not only underlined the sentiment, he also felt it keenly. For the last thirty years of his life he lived with the crushing disappointment of knowing that even what he might succeed in producing and publishing would not, at least in his lifetime, gain the recognition he knew it deserved. "What I feel most moved to write, that is banned,—it will not pay," he wrote to Hawthorne. "Yet, altogether, write the other way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches." What little recognition Melville did receive was for his earliest and most commercial works, those "botches"—*Typee* (1846), *Omoo* (1847), and *Redburn* (1849), for example—which he aimed in a calculated fashion at particular market tastes. "I have come to regard this matter of Fame as the most transparent of all vanities," he wrote to Hawthorne in the spring of 1851 while still absorbing the shock of the harsh critical response to *Moby-Dick*. And a December 20, 1885, letter to his English correspondent James Billson calls attention to the distrust of fame characteristic of Melville's late thinking: "the further our civilization advances upon its present lines so much the cheaper sort of thing does 'fame' become, especially of the literary sort."

Despite such compelling evidence, of both an internal and external nature, documenting Melville's fascination with the theme of literary anonymity, as well as his preoccupation with the Shakespeare question more specifically, Melville scholars have been slow to acknowledge that this theme of literary oblivion—the fate of the anonymous author—may well receive its most elaborate and sublimated treatment in Melville's "last will and testament," and that *Billy Budd* may be best approached by comprehending the emphatic presence in this work of such themes as art, authorship, and anonymity (or fame)—themes which might seem to be rather distant from seamanship or legal studies *per se* and might therefore justify further inquiry. Such a reading is commensurate with the mainstream tradition of critical study of Melville's elaborate methods of indirection. Laura Robertson-Lorant has defined Melville's method in *Benito Cereno* as the composition of a "cryptic, multi-layered story to express an allegiance" to principles "that would have horrified" his close associates, friends and family members[70]: "not wanting to risk an open rift . . . [Melville] expressed his dissent allegorically instead of openly."[71] To Lawrance Thompson, Melville "took wry and sly pleasure in the irony of disguising his riddle-answers behind

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69 Cited in William B. Dillingham, *Melville and His Circle: The Last Years*, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996, 76. The annotated book is Schopenhauer's *The Wisdom of Life*, 1891, Sealts checklist #447.

70 Robertson-Lorant, *Melville*, 354.

71 Robertson-Lorant, *Melville*, 352. Although Robertson-Lorant is concerned with the potential for a disastrous rift between Melville and his father-in-law, Judge Shaw, whose technical judgment in the May 1854 case of the fugitive slave Robert Burns aroused the outrage of many abolitionists including, most likely, Melville himself, the pattern of literary sublimation that she identifies forms a plausible model for the psychogenesis of *Billy Budd*.

the self-protective riddle-masks of his ingenious art; behind various subterfuges of rhetoric and symbol."[72] William B. Dillingham, R. Bruce Bickley, and Marvin Fisher, among other prominent scholars, agree that Melville regularly and insistently practiced "the fine art of concealment."[73]

Billy Budd is highly formal and particularly well-crafted exercise in that "fine art of concealment." It has a very definite and unmistakable "climax" in the classic Aristotelian sense. The narrative leaves little room to doubt either the intensely particular or the looming unspecified significance of the scene depicted:

> At the penultimate moment, his words, his only ones, words wholly unobstructed in the utterance were these: "God Bless Captain Vere!". . . syllables too delivered in the clear melody of a singing bird on the point of launching from twig. . . .

"God Bless Captain Vere"?

Once described as "the most famous single sentence in *Billy Budd*,"[74] this utterance has become—ironically—one of the most widely discussed but least understood expressions in American letters.[75] The beautiful sailor with the speech impediment, so inarticulate in the face of Claggart's innuendo that his unutterable words manifest themselves as a single unchecked blow, here speaks "words wholly unobstructed in the utterance." Could Melville have been more obvious? And yet, the literary critic tempted to detect some concealed significance in Budd's words has been preempted by Melville's narrator, who laconically observes that Budd's utterance is simply a "conventional felon's benediction." This, we submit, is another literary feint. The alert reader has been forewarned: Budd, "like the illiterate nightingale, was sometimes the composer of his own song." By Vere's own testimony, "forms, measured forms, are everything; and that is the import couched in the story of Orpheus with his lyre spellbinding the wild denizens of the wood." Budd's utterance is what the modern linguist would call "performative"—not merely a word, but also an act: it does what it says, just as the bardic nightingale always means more than we can understand.

Melville's completed thought irrevocably undermines the narrator's cover story about the "conventionality" of the phrase: Budd's unimpeded utterance is "directed aft"—a phrase that translates the physical coordinates of the ship into a temporal measure—"towards the quarters of honor"—not only, in other words, *physically* towards the Captain's cabin, but also *temporally*, towards the honored Elizabethan antecedents of modern Anglo-American literature. Budd's vocalization invites an Orphic moment in Melville's narrative: the condemned

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72 Cited in Merton M. Sealts, *Pursuing Melville: 1940–1980*, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982, 241.

73 Dillingham's phrase, cited in Sealts, *Pursuing*, 244, with commentary on other critics.

74 Newton Arvin, "A Note on the Background of *Billy Budd*," *American Literature*, XX (March 1948), 55.

75 For a useful summary of the views published before 1962, see Hayford and Sealts, 190–191.

man's melody, likened to the force of nature in the voice of the songbird (earlier identified as Philomela, the nightingale), is echoed by a chorus of "wild denizens" of the sea: "as if . . . by the vehicles of some vocal current electric, with one voice from alow and aloft" the crew replies in a "resonant sympathetic echo—'God Bless Captain Vere!'"

Is this "piercing irony," anticipating that the reader will "gag"[76]—as some have—at the compounding of gross injustice with institutionalized piety? The response may be understandable in light of the narrator's studied effort to maximize our sympathies for the innocent Budd, but a sense of simple revulsion is challenged by the tonal cues of Melville's text and the careful preparation of Vere's otherwise highly sympathetic character. A deeper, almost hieratic impulse would seem to be at play. Attentive to the resonances of the language that figures here, Robert Midler calls our attention to the manner in which Melville's revisions to Chapter 22—recording the drumhead court deliberations and revealing Vere's character through his comments in court to his fellow officers—are "in contrast to the general movement towards irony and authorial distance" characteristic of the late revisions as a whole. Instead, these late revisions "work to solemnify the scene by cultivating a language, religious in mood but not in literal content, commensurate with [Melville's] feeling of admiration toward the human."[77]

This "solemnification" is extended in the revisions to Chapter 26, which introduce for the first time the debate between the purser and the surgeon over the former's proposition that Budd's execution was "a species of euthanasia." The surgeon rejects this theory because "Euthanasia . . . is something like your will power: I doubt its authenticity as a scientific term . . . it is at once imaginative and metaphysical—in short, Greek." Leonard Casper contends that the purser is using the term in the Greek sense of "willful sacrifice of one's self for one's country."[78] The purser's observation connects at once the disparate threads of the present investigation. Considered as a work of fiction, Melville's novella may be seen not only as a historical reflection on the costs of human freedom, but also as a literary hypothesis in allegorical form. In these terms, if his *Indomitable* is the ship of letters ("the world's a ship on its passage out"), and its captain "Starry Vere," Melville may be engaged in exploring the possibility proposed by Delia Bacon's brother, setting forth the Shakespeare authorship question in the hypothetical voice of fiction. Had someone like Vere made the ultimate sacrifice of giving up his name for the common good, suffering his works to be published under another name rather than insisting on public fame for his literary accomplishments, instead choosing anonymous "annihilation"—in short, *euthanasia*? An "inside narrative" conceived in such terms would help to explain the narrator's insistent emphasis on confidentiality, including the observation

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76 Joseph Schiffman, "Melville's Final Stage, Irony: A Re-examination of *Billy Budd* Criticism," *American Literature* XXII (May, 1950), 133.

77 Robert Milder, "Old Man Melville: The Rose and Cross," Yanella, 105.

78 Leonard Casper, "The Case Against Captain Vere," *Perspective*, V (Summer 1952): 146–152.

that with respect to the Budd affair Vere himself "deemed it advisable, in view of all the circumstances, to guard as much as possible against publicity."[79]

Like the Old Testament prophets—or for that matter, "Shakespeare"—both Vere and Budd were, to Melville, "phenomenal men,"[80] figures belonging to that species of appearances, in the words of Melville's scientific surgeon, "the cause of which is not to be immediately ascertained." Melville anticipated the perplexities of his critics in his own ruminations in the "Daniel Orme" fragment, sometimes identified as a postscript to *Billy Budd*, in which the problem of a man's character is likened to that presented by a meteor which has landed in a country cornfield:

> We try to ascertain from somebody the career and experience of the man, or may seek to obtain the information from himself. But what we hear from others may prove but unreliable gossip, and he himself, if approached, proves uncommunicative. In short, in most instances, he turns out to be like a meteoric stone in a field. There it lies. The neighbors have their say about it, and an odd enough say it may prove. But what is it? Whence did it come? In what imaginable sphere did it get that strange, igneous look?[81]

These were of course the very sorts of questions around which nineteenth- and now twentieth- and twenty-first-century Shakespearean biographies have developed an industry, but in the end, like Melville's Nord, the object of their inquiry remains "locked up like the specie vaults of New England."

And just as the causes of phenomenal acts and personalities are concealed, the reasons that might have explained Budd's "conventional felon's benediction" remain shrouded in the darkness of Captain Vere's stateroom, which encloses the final conference between condemned felon and judicial authority, a scene whose strategic absence from the text Melville's narrator conspicuously flags: "what took place at this interview was never known . . . there is a privacy at the time, inviolable to the survivor; and holy oblivion, the sequel to each diviner magnanimity, providentially covers all at last." Doubtless the conference must have touched on Budd's impending execution—and, interestingly enough, Melville had long associated Shakespeare with the inescapable recognition of death. In this regard, an April 1846 deathbed letter by Melville's ailing elder brother Gansevoort quotes a sixteen-line speech of the convicted Claudio in *Measure for Measure* as he faces his own imminent death sentence:

> Ay, but to die, and go we know not where:

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79 Hayford and Sealts, 103.

80 Hayford and Sealts, 75. For a more complete discussion, see Warner Berthoff, "'Certain Phenomenal Men': The Example of *Billy Budd*," *ELH*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (December 1960), 334–351.

81 In *Billy Budd and Other Prose Pieces* by Melville, ed. Raymond W. Weaver. London: Constable & Company, 1924, 117. Young, in *The Private Melville* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press), shows that this has been the most neglected of any of Melville's short stories, having been omitted both from *A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Herman Melville* (1986) and *A Companion to Melville Studies* (1986).

To lie in cold obstruction, and to rot;
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod . . . .
The weariest and most loathed worldly life
That age, ache, penury and imprisonment
Can lay on nature, is a paradise
To what we fear of death.

(3.1.110–23)

Just as the author of *Measure for Measure* had prepared Herman Melville's brother Gansevoort for death in 1846, Captain Vere, under cover of the "inviolable privacy" of the survivor, now prepares Budd for what awaits everyone, the obscure as well as the famous. Melville had finally repaid the man to whom he owed a debt of gratitude for having instructed his brother how to die . . . by naming him, however indirectly, for readers attuned to instruction.

The "things unfinished" to which he alluded in a December 1889 letter to an inquiring Professor McMechan were at last completed. Like Billy Budd, Melville had himself once been a young rebel, a mutineer who defied arbitrary and unjust authority and had been summoned to provide a defense. At death's door, he wanted one last rebel yell, only this one was an expression of secret devotion to a higher principle, and an homage to a long-departed colleague: "God Bless Captain Vere!" A great truth, of the sort which the author of "Hawthorne and His Mosses" had said it would have been "all but madness for any good man, in his own proper character, to utter, or even hint of," had been anchored in the safe harbor of Melville's final literary testament, and the pages of his manuscript placed in a breadbox for safekeeping. He was dead now; another would speak his mind, aiming the words of recognition "aft," towards the "quarters of honor." His retrospective benediction would survive on the lips of a condemned felon.

The test of a literary theory, like any other theory, lies in its power to dispel confusion and replace arbitrary linguistic cues with a coherent structure of implications regarding the nature of things. "Something exceptional in the moral quality of Captain Vere," declares Melville's narrator, "made him in earnest encounter with a fellow man, a veritable touchstone of that man's essential nature." Was he thinking of Hawthorne's description of Shakespeare in his "recollections" of Delia Bacon? "Whatever you seek in him," Hawthorne had written, "you will surely discover, provided you seek truth."[82] Perhaps, but perhaps not through explicit questioning that anticipates instantly verifiable answers. Regarding all human achievements, Melville himself had long meditated on the metaphor of the touchstone—at least since "Hawthorne and His Mosses" in 1851: "You cannot come to know greatness by inspecting it; there is no glimpse to be caught of it, except by intuition; you need not ring it, you but touch it, and you find that it is gold."

Here, at last, was "man's final lore"—a transcendent mind that sacrificed its name in order to make its presence felt over the centuries. In the "Daniel

82 "Recollections," 106.

Orme" fragment, Melville put pen to paper one last time before following the eponymous sailor into the universal deeps; here is the postscript, reduced to its essentials, in a footnote that preserves no trace of any diminution of the author's powers of ironic understatement: "a sailor's name, as it appears on a crew's list, is not always his real name."[83]

The authors would like to thank John Bryant and Scott Norsworthy for reading and commenting on earlier versions of this essay.

83 Weaver, *Billy Budd*, 117. On the Orme fragment's complicated relationship to the remainder of the *Budd* manuscript, see F. Barron Freeman, "The Enigma of Melville's 'Daniel Orme,'" *American Literature*, 16.3 (November 1944), 208–211.