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Billy Budd on a *Phallos* Ship: Melville's Challenge to the Dominant Order

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Near the end of our class session, my students and I were discussing *Billy Budd* within an historical context when James spoke up, saying he had read Jeffrey Weeks on the formation of homosexuality and that he was aware of the anachronism of his adjective, but was Billy Budd gay?

"Based on your readings, what do *you* think?" I asked.

"All those feminine comparisons — it kinda seems he was. But Melville also compares him to Hercules, so maybe not."

"Hercules had a male lover," I replied. "Hylas."

Even as James's jaw dropped, Maria offered a challenge: "But what would be the point? I mean, what would be Melville's purpose in making Billy, well, homosexual?"

An excellent question, I said. But it was not one to which we found an answer at the time.

Because of this session, my own interest was piqued. Delving into the subject first from the historical perspective on which the course was focused, I came across Elizabeth Renker's article in which she writes of a family secret, a "terrible issue" (130) that other Melville scholars had broached and that she alleges to be wife abuse. Edwin Miller's 1975 biography of Melville makes that abuse quite clear; however, that seems scarcely a dark unmentionable for, as Renker demonstrates, persons outside the immediate family were aware of Melville's behavior. No, the deeper secret might be that Melville was what today we call homosexual.

In some of his letters and elsewhere, Melville chafes at not being permitted to express what he

longs to. On March 3, 1849 he wrote a letter to Evert A. Duyckinck, his editor, stating that he believed even Shakespeare was not entirely forthcoming on certain topics (Davis and Gilman 80); and in December he wrote another letter to Duyckinck declaring, "What a madness & anguish it is, that an author can never — under no conceivable circumstances — be at all frank with his readers" (96). A year and a half later, in June of 1851, he wrote to Hawthorne: "Try to get a living by the Truth — and go to the Soup Societies" (127) and "What I feel most moved to write, that is banned" (128). In short, Melville had something to say that, were he to write of it, he could communicate only in disguise. To write by indirection, by allusion, was his way to reclaim his own life, a life not fully lived as he desired, a creative way to circumvent "culturally and politically enforced unspeakability" (Creech 14). Given the rarity of women in his work, wife abuse can hardly have been the unrevealed truth in his writings. At the same time, the frustration of playing the heterosexual, patriarchal role may, however, explain his wife abuse. In fact, Melville may have abused his wife both because he felt sexually and emotionally trapped and because he loathed the bourgeois, patriarchal, and familial order that she represented for him. Unspeakable, such feelings could be sublimated in his work. The verbal disguise, the oblique contextualization, the frequent indirect and elusive descriptions in *Billy Budd* can indeed be interpreted as references to sexual friendships. But even if the Victorian mode of prose and morality had allowed for utter frankness about the unspeakable, would Melville have had the language for what he longed to express?

I am reminded of myself as a child: as a boy I was aware of both sex and gender. The games I played more often than not involved the genitalia. From the age of at least five, I had been strongly attracted to men — mostly my uncles — attracted to both the face and the groin of men. I took to wearing aprons, dresses, skirts at age six, playing in barnyard and backyard the opposite sex lusted after by farmer, cowboy, Indian brave. These childhood games continued until age eleven when I discovered another boy's warm hand on my crotch as I and other pupils were seated around a classroom table. The hand caressed. A thunderbolt of realization struck me: I did not have to be female to be sexually attractive to boys. Masculinity was not — is not — only heterosexual. I didn't have the words for this experience, this intuitive recognition, but, later, I resolved someday to write of it. I am not saying that Melville was such a child, but I am suggesting that he had such a recognition and understanding. Let me put it another way.

In another era, what do you do when you don't have the words for a concept in which you ardently believe, a concept that were it clearly articulated might brand you a *persona non grata*, a concept that society would likely find too radical, too disturbing, too much against the American public ethos, in short, too dangerous? You perceive that femininity and masculinity are not the separate and compartmentalized domains that your society has assumed; you see, as do many of your fellow "avant-garde of male artists, sexual radicals, and intellectuals" of the latter years of the nineteenth century (Showalter 11), that patriarchal hegemony is too limiting. It's why Melville has Billy jump to his feet in the rowboat, "a breach of naval decorum" (Melville 7): here is a young man outside the rules, outside the norm. You also cannot divorce your notions of

friendship from sexuality (Martin 15). How do you articulate these conceptions when words such as *patriarchy*, *sexuality*, and even *homosexuality* have not been coined or are not in the common parlance? If you are Herman Melville, you out your own direction by careful design and indirection; you write a novel and entitle it *Billy Budd*.

What Melville presents in *Billy Budd* is indeed a "radical critique" (Martin 8), but one written in part of a subject that his own subject would not have comprehended; that is, while Billy is not able "to deal in double meanings and insinuations of any sort" (Melville 7), Melville clearly is and does. Only through his indirect and allusive style can he accomplish his goal of exploring the contact zones and boundaries of male sexuality in a homosocial world.

As early as 1933 in his critique of *Billy Budd*, E. L. Grant Watson stated that the book hints at "shadows of primal, sexual simplicities" (14). Primal and sexual, yes, but simplicities? Hardly. Complexities rather. Indeed, to overlook the more subtle sexual implications of the novella is, it seems to me, to be unaware of authorial intention. *Billy Budd* was more or less completed in 1891; Melville could not have been unaware of "the preoccupation with male sexuality" (Weeks 106) during the industrial and social changes of his day, especially during the last twenty years of the nineteenth century, when legal regulations and social stigmas against "perverted persons" or inverts, that is, those who came to be called homosexual men, were in England to culminate in the famous Oscar Wilde trial of 1895, and in the United States to endorse increased criminalization and medical "colonialization" as well as the reportage of same-sex scandals. The terms *sexual perversion*, *mental disorder*, *abnormality*, *pathology* were current explanations or definitions of homosexual love and relations in Melville's later years (D'Emilio and Freedman 122-4, 129-30; Katz 139-67; Weeks 114). In fact, Robert K. Martin asserts, "Melville was aware, from his earliest writings, of the possibility of homosexual relations between men" (7). And I have no doubt, but also no proof — only my own homosexual sensibility and my intuitive reader response, "intuition itself being not a method but an event" (Berthoff 13) making sense of experience, or, as James Creech put it, my "identificatory, erotic response" that he terms "camp reading" (37) — that Melville experienced a sexual relationship with a man (or men), perhaps aboard ship, perhaps in the Marquesas or Tahiti where homosexuality was not uncommon, perhaps in San Francisco, perhaps elsewhere. What theorist Jeffrey Weeks writes of John Addington Symonds, an English contemporary of Melville and like the latter a husband and father, applies equally to Melville: he "was striving to articulate a way of life quite distinct from those which had gone before" (112); but whereas Symonds first did so in his *A Problem in Greek Ethics*, exploring ancient Greek same-sex sexuality as an acceptable way of life (111), Melville did so in *Billy Budd*, exploring homosexuality as an ideal possibility personified in the eponymous youth of the novella.

Too few critics and theorists have delved into the sexual implications of the novel beyond those relevant to Claggart. Why is this? Because homosexuality can be broached, critiqued, theorized only if it is divorced from what is socially acceptable or nominally good?¹ Or because homosexuality as a sustained topic of discussion in literature has been either an embarrassment or anathema?

Or because it has been incomprehensible, at least as a positive but radical normality? From F. O. Matthiessen through W. H. Auden, Leslie Fiedler, Robert K. Martin, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to Kathy J. Phillips, the repressed sexuality of Claggart has been discussed and analyzed. Claggart's is the contorted love-hatred of homophobia, a homosexuality deformed by fear, by moral and legal repression brought about by fear. While his desire for Billy is a natural desire, it is a depraved natural desire, which, Melville is telling us, means that the desire of one man for another is natural but its depravity or lack thereof is dependent upon the man and, I would add, upon the type of sexuality the man lives out. The subtext of those sexualities, of which different homosexualities are a part, grounds this essay; Claggart is not the only homosexual man on the ship.

My thesis, then, goes beyond that of Kathy Phillips, whose anti-homophobic stance is founded on stereotypical perceptions of homosexuality, that is, that the numerous comparisons of Billy to females and traits feminine suggest homosexuality; and it goes beyond the readings of other critics (but is similar to Creech's reading of *Pierre*) who have perceived the novella as homoerotic. I suggest Melville wrote an intentionally codified but retrievable text, positing a broad comprehension of masculine sexuality, one that incorporated the homoerotic and homosexual as heroic and valiant and irreproachable.

In this allusive and codified style, Melville posits not one essentialized homosexuality but at least three homosexualities, three modes or practices and views of homosexuality, a different one embodied in each of the three men most minutely described in *Billy Budd*: one homophobic (Claggart), one closeted and passing as straight (Vere), and one unadulterated (Billy). Because much has been discussed elsewhere concerning the first, I will focus on the last two men. Suggesting Captain Vere is a closeted homosexual man and Billy most likely a practicing rather than a latent or potential homosexual youth, Melville expands conventional understandings of male-male sexuality. Further, in demonstrating the dangers and injustices caused by defensive homophobia and the closeted life, Melville not only champions a possible sexuality defined by men who are neither fearful nor ashamed of their homoeroticism and homosexuality but also, in doing so, attempts to redeem his own closeted life.

First, however, a matter of definition. Any definitions not predicated on universals (whatever they might be) but on cultural or social foundations are bound to be unstable. Thus, it is important to avoid "the deadening pretended knowingness by which the chisel of modern homo-heterosexual definitional crisis tends, in public discourse, to be hammered most fatally home" (Sedgwick 12). Given the anachronism of the term *homosexual* before the latter part of the nineteenth century, this essay will use it to refer to European and Euro-American men who bond sexually or who desire, wittingly or unwittingly, to practice such a sexual bond.

Vere's sexuality, while it may be clear to him, is less transparent to the reader. Captain Edward Vere complicates the story. If Claggart represents evil or natural depravity, Vere represents compromised goodness, which, finally, is not really goodness. And if virtue is understood as a continuum between Billy the Good and Claggart the Evil, Vere would be found, perhaps, somewhere in the

middle. But even Billy is not, in the last analysis, utterly innocent. We all are tainted. Life itself compromises who and what we might have been. It is not that homosexuality is evil or good, but — this is Melville's indirect question — in whose lives does it make a difference? Does it make a difference in the lives of most of the crew aboard the *Bellipotent*? I think not. To Billy? Certainly not. Only to Claggart and Vere, whose differing homosexualities converge in paranoia and a self-defeating mask of respectability that crumbles into dust. Dust unto dust. But unlike Claggart, "the man through whom a minority definition becomes visible" (Sedgwick 127), Vere, it would seem, struggles with his — in Melville's cryptic phrase — "knowledge of the world" (29), a knowledge most gay readers in my experience have for decades interpreted to mean homosexual desire.

In suggesting Vere's homosexuality, Melville begins with the name: Edward Vere. The Marvell quatrain he quotes, while it does support Vere's rigid discipline, is somewhat of a red herring in the significance it seems to attach to Vere's given and family names. The captain's name has definite homosexual implications: during the reign of Elizabeth I, the earl of Oxford at different times was accused of sodomy and of pederasty; he may even have had a love affair with the younger earl of Southampton (Rodi 37). This nobleman — and we recall that Vere was "allied to the higher nobility" (Melville 16) — was named Edward de Vere (Bray 41). Such an accusation had political implications, stigmatizing de Vere as an enemy of both church and society, and it certainly would have been the same for Captain Vere; it is just such a possible accusation that concerns him. But not because he feels conflicted about his sexuality. Surely not any more conflicted than Lord Nelson felt.

In the comparison of Vere to Lord Nelson, we locate another suggestion of, if not homosexuality, at least homoeroticism. The detailed description Melville gives us when Vere is wounded corresponds to the details given by several historians of Admiral Nelson's last hours during the battle of Trafalgar: the "act of putting his ship alongside the enemy," the lethal wound "by a musket ball from a porthole of the enemy's main cabin," the man's fall "to the deck" and being "carried below," a senior officer's taking charge, and so on (75-6). No great leap is required to suppose the last moments also correspond. I am referring, of course, to those well-known words that Nelson, as he lay dying, addressed to his captain, "Kiss me, Hardy," upon which Captain Hardy stooped and gave Lord Nelson the famous parting embrace and kiss. Given the detail Melville relates regarding the battle of Trafalgar itself, he cannot have been ignorant of that historic kiss. It is certainly possible that Nelson's request for a final kiss from his captain could suggest "a queer streak," by which I mean not necessarily any stereotypical homosexuality but another view of masculinity that can include homoerotic love for another man. Vere too has "a queer streak" (Melville 19). Granted the phrase occurs in a fuller context of "a queer streak of the pedantic," but Melville as author may have meant in his usual *double entendre* more than the sailors on board mean, to wit, a pedantic homosexual streak, one which, perhaps, even instructs his cabin boy Albert in the mysteries: *pedant* does, after all, derive from *pedagogue*, and *ped* refers to boy — a queer streak for boys?

On the other hand, the pedantic is clearly related to Vere's love of reading. He preferred "unconventional writers like Montaigne" (18), those who used their common sense, free from theory and idle intellectuality. Significantly, Montaigne states in an essay using the same phrase as its title that "our affections carry themselves beyond us," that fear and desire propel us into future acts — as Vere's affections, fear, and desire do (16). In the same essay, Montaigne writes of the Athenians' "inhuman injustice" for condemning to death Diomedon and other naval captains who left behind their dead after a sea victory. Upon being sentenced Diomedon in essence blessed the Athenian judges before he and the other captains went to their deaths. Shades of Billy Budd himself! Diomedon's trial — another source of the plot? We know that Melville was familiar with the works of Montaigne, which include the essay "Of Friendship," a piece that admires those who were "more friends than citizens" (133) and hence subtly condemns Vere. In this essay Montaigne also expresses his belief that two "truly perfect" friends are "one soul in two bodies" (134-5), quite likely having in mind himself and Etienne de la Boetie, with whom he enjoyed a "classical" friendship. According to Jeff Masten, in that essay Montaigne "centers on a relationship that is demonstrably homoerotic" (280). It is no coincidence that Melville uses Montaigne as Vere's preferred author, Vere who finds in that essayist "confirmation of his own more reserved thoughts" (Melville 18). Thoughts of male friendship? Vere, unmarried at forty, is given at times to "a certain dreaminess of mood," and sometimes "absently gaze[s] off at the blank sea" (17). Starry Vere, dreamy, starry-eyed Vere. Lost in thought. Reveries of more than male friendship? Of sexual friendship? And is Melville here further alluding to the nineteenth-century belief that such reveries and dreamy absorptions were the kind that led to masturbation (Martin 16)? Starry-eyed Vere, scopophilic Vere, homosexual but closeted Vere, studying the body of Billy Budd, imagining it naked, dreaming of that body as he masturbates?

When Vere states that "[w]ith mankind forms, measured forms, are everything" (74), he may well mean, beyond the obvious forms of legalities and custom, the forms of the human body. He has measured Billy's form with his eyes, seen him as young Adam in the nude (46). The body *is* everything. It is the form that houses intellect, spirit, sexuality; pain, grief, desire, pleasure. The body *informs* us that we live, that we are alive. That form is only partly living, as exemplified in Claggart, which limits what it can experience. And Vere, who worships the form of Billy Budd, cannot do so openly, honestly. He lives in a closet.

Contrary to Sedgwick, I insist that Billy is more than a Platonic object in the scopophilia of Vere (108-9): Vere rationalizes his feelings, at least before his peers, into a fatherly kindness, sublimating his desire for the youth, only to act upon it later, between the time of Billy's sentence and Billy's death. The erectness he has sublimated, he reveals upon Claggart's death. *Vis-à-vis* Billy, both men are hard, apparently straight, erect without being upright, feeling the force that through the pink fuse throbs. In Melville's phallic imagery, Claggart is "tilted from erectness" upon Billy's death blow, but Vere *regains* erectness (50) and retains it into, through, and beyond Billy's consummation, the hanging at which he stands "erectly rigid" (71) as though on an S & M rack.

Was this erectness also Vere's erection, consummated with Billy while closeted in the stateroom? The meaning of *closet* in the nineteenth century, Creech reminds us, refers to a small but intimate room wherein privacy could be assured (130). What did occur in this private place? What occurred when no Claggart, no other officer, no other sailor, with perhaps one exception, was in the presence of Billy and Vere? To answer that question, we must turn our attention to the eponymous character of the novel.

However, to ask the question, "Is Billy Budd homosexual?" misses Melville's point regarding homosociality and homoeroticism among men. The question is, "Why is there not a place for homoeroticism among men, a place that may or may not include sexual intimacy?" In *Billy Budd*, Melville offers such a place, advocating a broader understanding and a wider practice of virility — rather, a wider range of performance of who and what men are — than is traditionally accepted or assumed.

The sensibility of the entire book is clearly homoerotic. Sedgwick's statement that "every impulse of every person in this book that could at all be called desire could be called homosexual desire, being directed by men exclusively toward men" (92) coincides with this perception. Furthermore, congruent with the French critic Georges-Michel Sarrote's understanding of the merchant vessel *The Rights of Man* as "a homoerotic paradise that is predominantly virile" (79) is Sedgwick's view that the story's section on *The Rights of Man* constitutes a fantasy (presumably Melville's) of a homosexual life prior to the social creation of "a distinct homosexual identity" (93). It follows that Billy is at one with that homoerotic, homosexual life; that is, he lives as a homosexual aboard that ship. "The buggery of sailors is taken for granted everywhere," claims Leslie Fiedler, and historical records and narratives support his claim, but this type of sexual relation "is thought of usually as an inversion forced on men by their isolation from women; though the opposite case may well be true: the isolation sought more or less consciously as an occasion for male encounters" ("Come Back" 149). A fantasy and a paradise indeed, for male-male desires. But Billy is cast from this paradise.

Much has been made in at least one anti-homophobic study of Melville's comparisons of Billy to the opposite sex: he is a "flower" (Melville 6), "a rustic beauty" (8), "like the beautiful woman" in a Hawthorne story (10), with a "feminine" complexion (8) like that of "the more beautiful English girls" (68), and so on (see Phillips 904-5). Though the study does not define Billy as homosexual, the problem here is that it encourages the homosexual stereotype, that linkage of homosexuality to femininity or femaleness. And while it is Melville's intention to suggest Billy's homosexuality, the use of these feminine attributes in conjunction with their opposites — "an able seaman" (7), an "athletic frame" (25), "a horse fresh from the pasture" (36), not to mention his physical strength — suggest both Billy's androgyny and (to be fair to the aforementioned study) his ease and acceptance of "the feminine in man" (60). But Billy is also compared to various heroes, all of a pre-Christian order and era. Why, we might ask? And why these particular signifiers, these heroes or gods: Alexander, Apollo, Hercules, Achilles? Why not Odysseus, Hector, Jason, Ajax? It is when androgynous Billy is compared to those particular personages, historical

or mythical, that Melville can allude to and signify Billy Budd as the estimable homosexual — the homosexual without cognition of phobia or guilt. And certainly Melville's allusions to this homosexual literary tradition are as intentional and valid as any biblical allusions so purported and prized by Melville's straight critics.

It would not be enough, of course, merely to uncover what any signifier signifies; such a stylized posture leads only to the question, "so what?" Something significant remains absent when all we've done is to say a certain symbol or archetype means this or that. To close the gap, which Ann Berthoff says deconstructionists and poststructuralists reductively leave open, in this account of making sense of Melville's allusive work, I will interpret my own interpretation. Among other effects, it is a way of "reclaiming the imagination" (Berthoff 11) and thus honoring both authorial intentions and the potential of literature to deepen our lives.

When Melville writes of Billy's "curled flaxen locks" (68), are we to recall the author's "life-long memory of the relief sculpture of Antinoüs" (Fiedler, *Love and Death* 348) that he had viewed in Italy during his 1856-57 European sojourn, a sculpture that he described as having a "head like moss-rose with curls and buds — rest all simplicity" (quoted in Fiedler 348)? And are we to recall that Antinoüs was the beautiful youth and constant companion of the Emperor Hadrian? Is Billy, as Fiedler contends, "Jack Chase recast in the image of Antinoüs" (362)? Most assuredly, yes. Were this indirect reference to antiquity as well as to homosexuality the only one, we could — had we noticed it at all — with ease and without compunction shrug it off. But such is not the case. Just as, in William H. Shurr's words, the "parallels between Christ and Billy are too numerous to be dismissed as only minimally relevant" (256), so Melville's references to famous persons who practiced homosexuality are too numerous to dismiss. Clearly, Melville has an objective in his selection of the renowned heroes to whom Billy is compared throughout the book.

The first such comparison occurs when the Handsome Sailor in general is conflated with Billy and compared to Alexander the Great (Melville 2). Alexander's great love was his courtier Hephaestion. When the latter died quite suddenly, Alexander's grief was, as Hadrian's for Antinoüs would later be, so extravagant that he commissioned temples and statues to be erected in his lover's honor. (Hadrian was even more elaborate in that he established a city, Antinoöpolis, in memory of his favorite.) Billy is a Handsome Sailor, and as such he is Alexander the Great, a hero, a lover, a lover of males.

Billy is more directly compared to Apollo (6). Apollo, Ovid informs us in Book 10 of *The Metamorphoses*, loved the youth Hyacinthus and "went ranging after boyish pleasures," finding "distraction near his lover's home" where "the lovers, naked, sleeked themselves with oil / And stood at discus throw" (10.279). Just as Billy, by throwing his fist, unintentionally kills the man who but for his self-loathing could have been Billy's lover, so Apollo, by throwing the discus, unintentionally kills his lover. In his grief he metamorphoses the youth into the purple hyacinth. True, Apollo made love to mortal females, but he also made love to males.

Billy is also compared to Hercules who, on the voyage of the *Argo*, lost his young lover Hylas. Unknown to the hero, water nymphs had pulled the youth

into their underwater grotto. Here Billy seems a conflation of Hercules and Hylas, for he too was to find an underwater grave. Additionally, Hercules took as lovers his charioteer Iolaus and Nestor, son of King Neleus of Pylus.

Achilles is another comparison. Like Achilles, Billy bears a single flaw. But it is the famous Homeric tale of the hero's grief and vengeance for Patroclus, his slain comrade-in-arms, that offers another vital similarity, though the tale need not be retold here. Should we doubt the *Iliad's* sexual implications regarding the two warriors, we need only look at the fragments we have of Aeschylus's *Achilleis*, in which Achilles is clearly the sexual lover of Patroclus; or look at Plato's *Symposium*, in which Phaedrus insistently turns the tables and says that Patroclus is the lover of Achilles (Halperin 86). Hierarchy — who's on top — mattered as much to those Greeks as it did to the English and their navies in 1797 and as it does to contemporary patriarchy. However, because we tend to forget or ignore that classical Greece assumed sexual love between partnered companions in war, Melville is "reclaiming the place and eros of Homeric heroes" (Sedgwick 42) to whom Billy is frequently and deliberately compared.

Melville also indirectly compares Billy to Orpheus (74). The obvious reasons are that Billy has charmed nearly all the crew and that he can sing like an "illiterate nightingale" (9), like Orpheus. According to myth, Orpheus is also the first same-sex-loving mortal; in fact, it is he who, after the loss of Eurydice, introduced pederasty to Thrace:

Meanwhile he taught the men of Thrace the art
Of making love to boys and showed them that
Such love affairs renewed their early vigor,
The innocence of youth, the flowers of spring.
(Ovid 10.276)

Like Orpheus, David of the Old Testament too sang and played the harp. Melville compares Billy to "the comely young David" (31), an historical figure who deeply mourned the loss of his friend Jonathan in this famous lamentation: "Very pleasant hast thou been unto me: thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women" (2 Sam. 1:26). There is perhaps no way we can know whether or not this male bond was sexual, but the David and Jonathan relation has long been an archetype for homosexual men, the phrase "passing [sometimes *surpassing*] the love of women" a part of their vocabulary. In David, as in the other heroes of homosexual literary tradition, Melville no doubt saw a man "who could respond adequately to his desire for a love that was at once ideal and physical" (Martin 7).

Lord Nelson is another historical analogue to both Billy and Vere. In that both Billy and Nelson have their fall, that is, are killed, at sea, they are obviously comparable. More significantly, young Budd also can be equated to Nelson in that he too is kissed by a seafaring man shortly before his death. That suggested equation is as intentional as any intimation of Judas and Christ might be.

In short, then, these allusions to heroes provide an epistemology of homoeroticism. Because Melville sensed that physical same-sex love could "survive

only in the obliquity of a symbol" (Fiedler, "Come Back" 146), he consciously chose these archetypes to suggest a homosexual status or positioning of his main character, one that in no way detracts from Billy's innocence but ennobles his very sexuality.

Billy is a younger but Anglo Queequeg who exudes and probably lives out, in Fiedler's words, an "innocent homosexuality" (*Love and Death* 348). "The root of Billy's innocence, then," observes Shurr, "is his freedom from the universally inherited effects of the sin of Adam" (256). Precisely. He is free from the effects of shame, remorse, guilt, "remaining unsophisticated by . . . moral obliquities" (Melville 10). Just as he has no use for religious dogma as death approaches, Billy has no use for and would be baffled by any guilt-inducing sexual morality. Auden acknowledges that Billy "may have done things which in a conscious person would be sin . . . but he feels no guilt" ("Passion" 86). It is this freedom from guilt within Billy that Claggart hates. He knows only a homosexuality sullied by legal and religious bans; Billy practices one untouched by either. Even as Claggart's homophobic homosexuality is naturally depraved, so Billy's homophilic homosexuality is naturally Edenic, irreproachable — though not necessarily chaste. Let me illustrate: growing up naive in a sparsely settled rural community where men shared beds and embraces that were erotic though not necessarily homosexual, I followed without stricture my own bent. Had someone told me that the sex acts that I enjoyed as an adolescent were transgressions, I doubt I would have understood. I understood the body as a site of pleasure, of affirmation. It spoke to me more truly than any Sunday sermon. What did I know? What did I know of shame or fear or hatred's austere offices? Later I was thrown into temporary confusion when told that homosexuality was wrong, sinful. And though for a short time I wrestled with a morality imposed on a body exposed, that is, with an exterior morality versus an interior law of the body, I knew who and what my body loved and I refused to deny it, refused to deny my own economy of masculinity and sexuality, my ontology. Claggart's denial, his diluted personhood, misshapes his sexuality into a vindictive homophobia. Billy's character suggests that we all are less than or other than ourselves when we lack the virtue of pagan goodness and guiltlessness, that homoeroticism could have a place in our world if the bans based on fear and power were not in place. Religious and moral dogma hiding behind the law, and the esteem we seek from others out of our insecurity, bespeak the compromised life, destroy the uncompromised nature, that rarest of natures unadulterated by acculturation. In the subtext of the novella, Melville asserts — as no other writer had done heretofore — the complexities of the Euro-American male as revealed in different homosexualities; further, although society won't have it so, he subtly and carefully creates in the text — and by implication in the world at large — a site of possibility, that is, a site for healthy homosexuality. More importantly, *Billy Budd* is the text through which Melville reclaimed his own half-lived life.

Accordingly, the claim that Billy goes to his death "the ever-virgin undefiled by orgasm," as Camille Paglia has put it (595), assumes a Judeo-Christian and heterosexual ideology. First, orgasm does not necessarily defile. Second, Billy, I have argued, could and likely did enjoy sexual relations with the same

sex without compunction. Third, what occurs during that "interview" between Vere and Billy in the closet is open to interpretation, one being that the interview suggests the homosexuality of both men. An *interview* is a view shared between two persons, even a view into another (French *entrevue*), and such a view might be sexual. While it is true that this private meeting of two bodies more than two minds is "disappointingly offstage" (Tindall 36), it is narrated with as much discretion as respect. Repressive Victorian society demanded as much. The love that dare not speak its name does not speak it. Yet such discretion does not mean that the "consummation devoutly to be wished" did not occur. We do know that Vere "may in the end have caught young Billy to his heart" (Melville 63), that is, caught him to "the feminine"² within him that he had insisted must be eliminated (60), and we know that the two men "radically" exchanged the "rarer qualities" of their nature (63), an exchange that I take to mean that the love that dared not speak its name may have been consummated. Such a sharing is, of course — as Melville avers — "all but incredible to average minds however much cultivated" (63). We're also told that Vere was "old enough to have been Billy's father" (62), but that too may be an oblique reference to homosexual Daddy-and-Boy love, the terminology for which, though not the conception, had yet to be coined. I myself in response to a male student's proposition, have used the cliché, "I'm old enough to be your father." Perhaps indicative of a passion latent in one who protests too much? Creech makes a convincing case for Melville's "homosexual, incestuous desire" and his masturbatory fantasies about his own father (140-45). *Billy Budd* may be, then, Melville's final acknowledgement and redemption of that desire. Vere, however, is less representative of a father and more of a lover. With Billy he has indeed "developed the passion sometimes latent under an exterior stoical or indifferent" (Melville 63), has quite likely lived out that passion, experienced it sexually, man to man. And Billy, passive and submissive, a pagan innocent of sin and unadulterated by Christianity, feels blessed in being loved to death. His final death had been prepared for in his little death with Captain Vere.³

Vere does not feel that confidence in anyone else. Aware of his reading audience, Melville uses to his advantage the homosexual paranoia rampant at the end of his own century. In a homosocial atmosphere as that aboard the *Bel-lipotent*, contextualized by dogmatic heterosexuality where some men doubtlessly have not openly acknowledged, let alone embraced, their homoerotic psyche, many men fear homosexuality, the result of which often creates a defensive and dangerous homophobia. This we see in Claggart. Yet, as Sedgwick illustrates, it is unpoliced desire among males that may foment the fear of mutiny (101), a fear that is really paranoia of a collective secret being too open lest it lead to subversive activity. Create an erotic bond among men and the hegemonic bonds of patriarchy unravel. Order becomes disorder; predictability becomes chaos. Such hypotheses (founded on fear) derive, of course, from a sex-negative point of view. But the fact is that other orders of ontology than the dominant anti-sex order of the Judeo-Christian tradition have always existed, usually as subcultures, usually proscribed, many subsuming same-sex rites or love. Openly deployed and acknowledged homosexuality of the modern era, in whatever form, challenges the dominant order of things. No doubt Vere sur-

mised that were same-sex love the order of the day on his ship, the disciplined life at sea might anchor in lust — order would become orgy. But his panic at the prospect of mutiny is also a homosexual panic, the panic of being found out, of being named, defined, and then dismissed if not disposed of.

When a love is anathematized, condemned, silenced, only harm can emerge from that silence, a silence that equals death. Consider “the space opened up by [Billy’s] stutter” which is, according to Barbara Johnson, “the pivot on which the entire story turns” (94). The space acknowledges the forces of hatred and injustice in ascendancy of power. The love that dared not speak its name in *Billy Budd* stutters. It cannot articulate. But because he dares to taint — no, defile — that love by his jealousy and lies, by his evil nature, Claggart must die. He would twist a homoerotic love into something base, but Billy — and Melville — will not have it so. Love must conquer evil, and for a brief moment it does.

The fury unleashed in Billy by such misuse of power substitutes a fist for the love neither Claggart nor Billy could name. The blow “that does not mean to mean” death (Johnson 86), means death. Because silence is equated with death, what does not mean (intend) death for Claggart means death for Billy.

Into the space opened by Billy’s stutter steps Captain Vere, who demonstrates a negotiation between naive pagan love and self-loathing. That negotiation is the closet life, the life that plays the game of business-as-usual, the life that will not “rock the boat,” the life that promotes only one kind of order, heterosexual and patriarchal, but a life that becomes a death as well. The social order is not always just. Individuals are often sacrificed to Mars and Hera, god and goddess for whom only one social order pertains — the laws of war, the laws of heterosexual love. Vere, despite his own feelings and desires, has sacrificed himself to the gods of convention. While he leaves the world safe for hegemonic culture and heterosexuality, he leaves it wanting “Billy Budd, Billy Budd.”

What Vere suffers in private after Billy’s sentence is a two-edged and conflicted guilt: the public guilt of a manipulative because paranoid judge, and the private guilt of a lover who has condemned the one he secretly loved. His last words are the wistful words of yearning. For too brief a time he had held to his own body the body of a man he loved. Those last words — “Billy Budd, Billy Budd” — acknowledge within himself his feeling, what he has called the feminine, but too late. After the Fall, one cannot return to Eden. Death at the gate and no going back.

As if to confirm Billy’s sexuality among men, the description of Billy’s death is also sexual. Granted, it includes the phrase “fleece of the Lamb of God seen in a mystical vision” (71), but nowhere in the Bible does the Lamb of God deny or condemn sexuality of any kind; furthermore, various gnostic sects, with which Melville seems to have been familiar (Shurr 164-6), while celebrating the gospel of Jesus, also entertained sexual rites, all of which is to say that sex and religion are not mutually exclusive. The “vapory fleece . . . shot through with a soft glory” (71) upon Billy’s hanging is a positive sexual image of semen, that life fluid. And as he ascends the gibbet and takes “the full rose of the dawn” (71), we are given the metaphor of Billy taking into himself the rosy head of a

phallus, an image spectacular and bright, without shame, without censure, an uplifting image, if you will, religious in the true sense of bonding, a quiet and final glorification of sexuality.

Billy, of course, has to die. From Vere's viewpoint, one questioned by some of his own officers, Billy must die to serve justice. In the social prison of Vere's life, social ambition and convention must win out. Like the US military today, Vere believes that a free-spirited queer will disrupt order and discipline; furthermore, like the US military, Vere secretly will not tolerate a gauntlet tossed before his authority and nominally heterosexual identity. He must forestall his own inclination to indulge in or accept the sexuality to which he is drawn. After all, "desirable masculinity in patriarchal culture . . . can never afford to acknowledge its own erotic economy" (Solomon-Godeau 75). Heterosexism and the closet that condones it insist upon defining the public world. All else must be dismissed or eliminated.

And so Billy dies. But while Billy's death is not a tragedy, it does contain — in Auden's words — "exceptional pathos" ("Greeks" 16): the noblest character of the novel does not survive; he has been made a pawn to preserve the gods of heterosexual supremacy. Yet his death connotes a judgment of that limited view. In fact, his death makes the book a damning critique of a society that condemns and imprisons homoerotic love, including Melville's own. While Claggart may chafe and Vere may panic at their own perceived homosexualities, Melville sides with Billy's natural and unadulterated ontology. The author had come to realize (without our current terminology for it) that heterosexual hegemony functions to destroy any non-heterosexual integrity. Contesting that hegemony, as well as any paradigm of homosexuality that submits to it, he establishes through Billy the site of what it means to be human and utterly alive to every moment. In so doing, Melville redeems — if not heals — himself of the split between his lived and un-lived life. And that, I might have said in answer to my student Maria, is Melville's ultimate purpose in making Billy Budd homosexual. Through Billy — sleek and tawny and blamelessly unchaste, a giver and taker of immediate pleasure, a singer of life, someone who cannot perceive anything transgressive in who and what and how he is, someone who loved purely and fearlessly to the end — Melville advocates a Whitmanian society with latitude and leeway for all healthy sexualities, a future freed from the undemocratic and inhumane confines of a compulsory heterosexuality that rejects a site for the homoerotic bonding of men, a future that ascends and transcends the resistant and repressive present to take "the full rose of the dawn."

Notes

1. Fortunately, Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* in particular and Gay and Lesbian Studies in general go a long way to correct that viewpoint.
2. When Vere forces his predetermined sentence past the three men who are reputedly to decide Billy's fate, he declares, among much else, "But let not warm hearts betray heads that should be cool. . . . The heart here, sometimes the feminine in man, is as that piteous woman, and hard though it be, she must

here be ruled out" (60). "The feminine" here is not sexual but affective — the sentimental or feeling side suppressed in a closeted and divided man, namely Vere. His is the voice of reason, of hegemony, of patriarchy.

3. Even had he been privy to any sexual act between Vere and Billy, Albert, the "Captain's hammock-boy" (Melville 48), who may have shared the captain's hammock, shows a "discretion and fidelity" in which Vere is fully confident.

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