ATLANTIS XVII 1-2, MAY-NOVEMBER 1995 (115-126)

INDICE

THE PRESENCE-ABSENCE OF WOMEN IN THE WORK OF HERMAN MELVILLE

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This paper discusses critical views of women, including their assumed absence, and sexuality in the work of Herman Melville. Although the prevalence of maritime settings may explain, for some, the scarcity of female characters, many literary critics consider women and sexuality vexed issues in Melville's fiction and usually impute those difficulties to personal factors, especially the author's problematic relationship with his mother. But, such accounts fail to heed Melville's sympathetic awareness of the female reality, a sensitivity particularly evident in certain short stories. Furthermore, in spite of the rare appearance of women, the feminine is often present in the writings of Herman Melville where important male protagonists embody features allowed only to the female in nineteenth-century America. This paper also assumes what is latent, implicit, or even absent, highly significant; such "silence" partly determines what is actually present.

The relative absence of women is frequently considered a peculiar trait in Herman Melville's work and that presumed feature has attracted critical attention for some time. As early as 1926, John Freeman points out the rare female presence as well as Melville's complete silence concerning sex (1983, 116). He, like many subsequent critics, finds explanations in the author's biography, for example, a Puritan heritage that determined a reluctance to speak about natural instincts and sex. For Newton Arvin, in 1950, "physical sexuality was charged through and through for Melville with guilt and anxiety", causing him to avoid women (1962, 22).

Lewis Mumford, in "Amor Threatening" (1929), links a limited view of sex to the author's domestic circumstances. A writer for whom "Sex meant marriage; marriage meant a household and a tired wife and children and debts" was unable, in Mumford's opinion, to bring to his work

the mature experiences of a lover, husband, father (1983, 138-39). A Jungian study of *Moby Dick* by Edward F. Edinger considers Melville's attitude toward women a consequence of his family setting in which a strong, central mother figure existed and masculine authority was placed on a maternal uncle (1978, 8).

A different angle emerges when Leslie Fiedler describes *Moby Dick* as "a love story . . . in the peculiar American form of innocent sexuality" full of phallic allusions which permit a recognition of the homosexual quality that the marriage between Ishmael and Queequeg illustrates (1982, 370). But Fiedler actually coincides with previous critics when he, too, turns to Melville's negative relationship with his mother to explain what thwarted, in Fiedler's opinion, the writer's ability to represent a satisfactory heterosexual relationship —a failure manifest in Melville's novel *Pierre*. In *American Literature: The Makers and the Making*, Melville's "strong attraction to men" actually serves to account for the writer's vexed relation to women, while offering the lack of parental love, among others (marital and filial), as possible causes (Brooks *et al.* 1973, 816 and 812).

Critics who mention female characters sometimes comment on the negative aspects of sex in Melville's production. Leonard Pops sees Yillah, the innocent maiden in *Mardi*, as a victim of sex and Taji's rejection of Hautia's sexual attraction as reflecting an inability to develop a mature sexuality. Pops does not add anything new save for the fact that he distinguishes three female groups in Melville's writings: passive victims, good mothers, and parodies of stepmothers (1970, 234). Judith Fryer's study *The Faces of Eve: Women in the Nineteenth-Century American Novel* analyses *Pierre* in which, in her opinion, the female protagonists are just "images of women" (1976, 23).

Robert S. Kellner's fuller study, "Toads and Scorpions: Women and Sex in the Writings of Herman Melville" (1977), agrees with previous commentaries. Melville, according to Kellner, portrays women in two ways: either as unwitting sirens, whose soft allurements led men to destruction, or as shrews, brutal and uncompromising in their attitudes towards men. The failure of love constitutes, in Kellner's opinion, a recurrent theme in Melville. This critic, however, adds a new perspective when he claims women "are the primum movile". Melville's heroes, male characters, depend upon "the essential and determining role" of women.

Although Kellner believes that "to Melville's way of thinking", women constitue "an emasculating and nihilistic force", we have here an important suggestion: the study of women allows us to understand and newly interpret male roles. And Bruce E. Mitchell, in "Women and the Male Quester in Herman Melville's *Typee*, *Mardi*, and *Pierre*" (1979), explicitly defends the need to analysis the female in relation to the male heroes. In his opinion, "the protagonists grow through the perceptions they gain from their experiences with women" who provide different sorts of knowledge.

Another insight is developed by George B. Hutchinson in his article "The Conflict of Patriarchy and Balanced Sexual Principles in *Billy Budd*", where he discusses the importance of paternal and maternal relations not only on an individual but on a social level as well. Following earlier discussions of Melville, he attends to Melville's dependence on his mother and gives weight to the search-for-the-father theme in this writer's production. However, Hutchinson claims that Melville's eternal struggle against the feminine disappears in *Billy Budd,* where the writer finally overcomes "the Calvinistic subordination of the feminine", in the equilibrium between the feminine and the masculine found in the figure of Billy Budd (1981, 389).

Feminist criticism has also dealt with this issue. Gene Patterson-Black, in "On Herman Melville", appreciates a change in Melville's literary production. In the beginning Melville's lack of interest in women as individuals was reflected in his relationship with them as "an I/it rather than I/thou", and in the fact that his female characters comprised a catalogue with no voice since Melville's real interest was "in the mystery of brotherhood and kinship" (1982, 108 and 124). But the impossibility of achieving an ideal relationship among equals and his endless search for a father figure in his encounters with other males —frequently interpreted as homosexual— led Melville to frustration and self-hate, as well as to misanthropy; an attitude that was modified after his trip to the Middle East in 1856-7. Patterson-Black believes Melville's acceptance of feminine sexuality is highly evident in his poem "After the Pleasure Party".

A new, different insight is provided by Wilma Garcia's *Mothers and Others: Myths of the Female in the Works of Melville, Twain, and Hemingway*. On the one hand, Melville is seen as a male writer working within a patriarchal mythological tradition which tended to reduce women

characters to their sexual and maternal roles. On the other hand, she relates the frustrated "quests" of most Melvillean heroes to their incapacity to emancipate themselves from their mothers. The unique exception would be Ishmael, the only character who does not reject the feminine, having even been a *bride* (1984, 97).

A recent analysis of Melville's treatment of women is offered by Neal L. Tolchin. The female characters who appear in Melville's work, as well as his rejection of sex, reflect, in Tolchin's view, not only Melville's relationship with his mother but also the social prejudices of his age. In this sense, the fact that sex was deadly could be explained by a tendency, in Melville, to identify all women with the mother, thus incest. Besides, Tolchin states, it has to be borne in mind that in Jackson's America: "Mother became both a necessary moral force and a source of contempt". Furthermore, he adds, "it was not permissible to express anger towards the idealized mother of the antebellum era. Yet Jacksonians were also fearful of being dominated by women" (1988, 177). Tolchin does not intend to blame Melville's mother for her son's depressions, but tries, instead, to place mother and son in a wider context in which both were victims of social circumstances.

The aforesaid critical opinions about Melville's treatment of women could be inserted within the following three frames: ideological, psychological or social. The first includes those who analyze women as symbols of a religious or moral scheme in which fair women represent purity, innocence or spirituality, that is, traditional virtues, whereas dark female figures stand for sin, guilt, temptation, passion, sex, pride, vanity, in other words, vices. The second frame can refer to those who affirm that the former embody repression while the latter incarnate dark instincts and the unconscious. For the third, women are considered depositories of traditional customs and, therefore, propagators of conservative views. According to this last group, Melville's work reflects the patriarchal mentality of his time, an age in which men were afraid of women's sexual power, a negative quality carried into the marital state. Therefore, sexual appetite had to be repressed.

It is also worth observing that several of these analyses tend to associate Melville's treatment of women with his marriage, as Charles J. Habberstroth does in *Melville and Male Identity*:

> Melville always conspicuously praised the bachelor life and denigrated marriage, a cynicism about domestic institutions that seems traceable in large part to powerful uncertainties about his ability, or even desire, to be the head of a household. (1980, 21-22)

Although the majority of Melville's male characters are bachelors, that does not necessarily mean, as Habberstroth seems to affirm, Melville thought their lives superior. In fact, as his short tale "The Paradise of Bachelors" shows, bachelor life could, in many ways, be regarded as sterile. Besides, some of his bachelor protagonists, such as Redburn or Jimmy Rose, do not choose that state as a preferable one but for other reasons.

All these critics make, in my opinion, the mistake of linking woman with marriage and/or with sex when, in contrast, Melville actually manages to keep woman separate from those issues. Melville's real aim is not to criticize marriage, and thus woman, but to expose the evils, important ones in his age, of that social institution and certain cultural attitudes.[1]

In Melville's time, the masculine and the feminine did, indeed, form two parallel, even hostile, worlds. An Englishwoman visiting the United States in 1830 observed with wonder how Americans distinguished between masculine and feminine virtues (Habberger 1982, 23). Men had to be ambitious and aggressive in their struggle for power and position while women, on the contrary, adopted either the role of the Victorian lady ("idle, intellectually stagnant and totally dependent") or that of the dominant mother and wife (Habberger 1982, 31). Although the norm, marriage was not the most perfect civil state and sexual relations were mostly negative. Repressive attitudes towards sex and corporal functions, which had appeared at the end of the eighteenth century, increased throughout the nineteenth, reviving the old polarization of woman as mother and sexual object. And the widespread belief that passion thwarted economic success caused additional restraint; the only permitted passion was the love of money.

Popular novels of the time reflected such attitudes. They depicted feminine sexuality as a threat and defended chastity as the most important virtue

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[1] Certainly, the function of marriage in nineteenth-century America was that of maintaining the social order. Marital sex was for procreation since women lacked, convention held, sexual appetites. Marriage placed man and woman in specific, emotionally limited social roles: father and mother.

in a woman, thus enhancing the moral code of middle-class maidens and wives (Smith 1970, 60, 72, and 74). If we also take into account the fact that home was "a dreary place, ugly constructed, improperly ventilated" (Smith 1970, 208), there is nothing strange about women anxious to get out of it and men seldom there. Many novels were written by women about women between 1820 and 1870, fiction which was by far the most popular literature of its time, and "on the strength of that popularity, authorship was established as a woman's profession, and reading as a woman's avocation" (Baym 1978, 11). Teresa Kiniewicz makes similar claims:

> In the highly polarized society a male writer was often placed socially in an uncomfortable 'in-between' position. By sex he belonged to the enterprising, competitive, acquisitive world of men and business in which intellectual pursuits and literary interests enjoyed little prestige. Writing was hardly a masculine occupation . . . classed with clergymen. Both seemed to belong to a separate species of slightly feminized character. (1982, 138-39)

In such circumstances, many male authors, not surprizingly, resented this popular fiction. To successfully compete they would be forced to submit to the expectations of women readers. As an alternative, they tried to distinguish themselves from female writers and sought, intentionally, a male audience. Male writers chose themes and characters closely tied to a masculine world, thus differentiating their writings from those of women authors in order to, hopefully, attract a male reading public. Such an option led to their being called "misogynists".

Although Melville seems to have shared that search for a male audience, he did not, as is well-known, triumph. His lack of success could be attributed to the insignificant social status of his male characters, perhaps unattractive protagonists for most male readers. More likely and ironically, the very presence of women in much of his fiction foiled literary victory.

The first story he wrote with a woman as the main figure, "The Agatha Story", took, as Melville's letters divulge, almost a year to create even though it was never published. Agatha's story emerged from conversation between Melville and a lawyer from New Bedford about "the great patience, and endurance and resignedness of the women of the island in submitting so uncomplainingly to the long, long absences of their sailor husbands" (Leyda 1952, 563). Melville wanted to narrate the hardships Agatha had to endure, first when living with her father in a solitary lighthouse and later, the

incessant waiting for her husband, a sailor whose life she had saved before their marriage. He does not return but she keeps watch. In Melville's words she would represent "the weary, faithful waiting" (Leyda 1952, 465) of so many women; a female perseverance that is depicted in "Norfolk Isle and the Chola Widow" and in "The Piazza".

"Norfolk Isle and the Chola Widow", is the eighth of the ten sketches that make up "The Encantadas". Norfolk Isle (Santa Cruz or "La Indefatigable") is also called, in English, the Indefatigable Island, a term suggesting the character of the main protagonist, Hunilla, a half-Indian and half-Spanish woman. She is left alone on that island after witnessing the drowning of her husband and brother just after they had joyfully pushed off to go fishing. Contrary to the male characters who appear in the other sketches, outcasts all of them, she is an honest and brave woman whose capacities for faith and endurance in such stark solitude will save her from death. Two other elements make this story stand out. On the one hand, Hunilla's relationship with her husband is an example of mutual love and perfect union. Even in death the open position of her husband's dead arms seems to proffer one last embrace. On the other hand, this is the first time Melville portrays woman as the embodiment of a more universal order: "Humanity . . . I worship thee, not in the laurelled victor, but in this vanquished one" (Melville 1984, 765). Woman, like man, is the victim of a hard, difficult world. Furthermore, her qualities —strength, courage, and the will to survive— are not essentially feminine but human ones.

Marianna, the young female protagonist of "The Piazza" is forced to spend most of her time alone, in a solitary and remote place. Her sole companion is a brother who is always working and only comes home to sleep. Her daily routine, she affirms, consists in

> knowing nothing, hearing nothing ... never reading, seldom speaking, yet ever wakeful. This is what gives me my strange thoughts ... mine is mostly dull woman's work ... sitting, sitting, restless sitting ... thinking, thinking ... A wheel I cannot stop. (Melville 1984, 633)

Melville also understood the hardships of nineteenth-century women, as workers and as child-bearers. His short tale "The Tartarus of Maids" reveals the hellish character of a paper-mill factory. The girls must remain single if they want to keep their jobs. A nine-minute paper-making process, repeated incessantly, not only mocks their barren condition but suggests a

perennial female toil, nine-month pregnancies. Furthermore, both bear deadly consequences. In nineteenth-century America female factory workers die, victims of inhuman working conditions, inadequate housing, and malnutrition just as women often lose their lives in childbirth. Women are slaves to both processes, paper production and child-bearing.

The above examples suggest an empathetic awareness of the female reality and an effort, on Melville's part, to expose contemporary prejudices about women. His portraits of female inhabitants of the South-Pacific islands in *Typee* and *Omoo* disclose what American women were denied: a natural spontaneity and a natural attitude towards sex. In *Mardi*, a romance in which the two female protagonists are said to represent major, contrasting images (Yillah, the pure maiden/ideal bride and Hautia, the sexually dangerous seducer), Melville actually critiques the failure of the male protagonist, Taji, to overcome such stereotypes. He registers a complaint against the adherence to such mistaken images in spite of challenging behavioral evidence to the contrary.

Women are often victims, like Handsome Mary who has to take charge of the family business while her husband spends time enjoying himself. Others female characters are unkowingly married to bigamists. One can also, of course, find denouncements of woman and Melville leaves us without the configuration of his own model. He could, at times, depict good wives (*White Jacket*) and does recognize the bonds, even if distressful ones, uniting men and women, for example, poverty in *Redburn*. Female descriptions in *Moby Dick* do fall into stereotypes —good and suffering women as mothers and/or wives— but they also bear some resemblance to those women who played an active role as reformers in temperance societies. Where, in *Pierre*, the portrait of females is fuller, women are blamed for the male protagonist's failures but the latter, Pierre, is found guilty as well. Like most men of Melville's time, Pierre maintains what is a false idealization of women.

Although the descriptions of females in most of his novels can be considered stereotypes and even though he refuses, intentionally perhaps, to provide an explicitly suitable model, Melville is clear about what he does reject: upholding woman as a moral guardian. That mistaken standard is repressive; woman as potential paragon spells annihilation; women themselves feel obligated to suffocate self-expression. Melville's major aim was a critique of society's evils; a world in which both men and women were victims and victimizers.

Furthermore, Melville rejected the duality man-spirit/woman-body and vindicated, instead, body and spirit. He claimed in *Pierre* that both warranted equal care:

> Feed all things with food convenient for them ... The food of thy soul is light and space; feed it then on light and space. But the food of thy body is champagne and oysters; feed it then with champagne and oysters; and so shall it merit a joyful resurrection, if there is any to be ... to think that by starving thy body, thou shalt fatten thy soul! (Melville 1962, 352-53)

While women account for considerable protagonism in the aforementioned tales, they are, as flesh and blood characters, barely present in the novels and totally absent in *Billy Budd.* But these evident absences actually unveil contemporary voids. If we reflect on women and sex in a larger perspective, as part of a wider reality where love can be perceived as self-acceptance/self-realization and mutual understanding —seeing love as a human potentiality, as an art to be developed within many contexts—, we could affirm that Melville's obvious awareness of his society's shortcomings speaks silently for just such a broader vision of human existence. He tried, in his earlier works, to rekindle human sexuality, a major tabu in his age. Thus, in *Typee*, he defended spontaneous sexual relations against his own society's limitations and in *Omoo* he tried to extend the arena with the presentation of a married couple to illustrate mutual respect among institutionalized partners while insisting still that love can only develop where liberty prevails. In *Mardi*, Melville unravels the human costs of false values. Taji represents men who idealize love and repress natural instincts; the young protagonist's fear of feminine sexuality leads to his suicide. Western commercial society itself, in *Redburn*, dehumanizes; economic crises leave men and women bereft of love; mere charity cannot compensate the loss of the human. *White Jacket* denounces selfishness, especially the lack of solidarity for those who suffer. With *Moby-Dick*, Melville offered resolutions. Along with the critique of American individualism —its obsessive, self-absorbing pursuit— he urges self-acceptance and the figure of Ishmael stands for a life-giving love in all its aspects. But the tyranny of social prejudices remained a major concern in *Pierre*, a domestic world inhabited with human beings incapable of communication. Many of the most relevant characters in Melville's work —Bartleby, Hunilla, Benito Cereno, Billy

Budd— find it difficult to express themselves. Where generosity existed it was confined to individuals or small groups.[2] Society itself remains basically indifferent to the worth of human generosity, as in the case of *Israel Potter*. Such pessimism about society emerges again in *Billy Budd*. Individual high-mindedness goes unrewarded and, when against society's interests, even punished.

Although victims, such characters serve to disclose injustices and, concomitantly, condemn what harms. Part of that unveiling includes, even requires, the personal possession of the feminine. Many male characters need, in order to carry out their social critiques, the female. Israel Potter possessed positive feminine values such as solidarity, generosity, and tenderness. Society stands condemned in its indifference towards this man and the qualities he embodied. The gentle Billy Budd is doomed for the female he incarnates. As Captain Vere asserts: "the heart here, sometimes the feminine in man, is as that piteous woman, and hard though it be, she must here be ruled out" (Melville 1984, 1415). Law leaves no place for love, a female attribute.

The absence of women is only apparent. A careful reading of Melville's works allows us to observe his inclusion of woman and the feminine in different ways. Some of the most important male protagonists —Ishmael, Bartleby, Israel Potter, Jimmy Rose, Billy Budd— personify features usually regarded as feminine. Moreover, success or failure could depend, at times, on a capacity to relate with and/or accept the female world. Those who reject women —falsely associating them with misconceived ideas about sex and the body— flounder. They actually fear facing themselves, those aspects of their lives that seem mysterious, irrational. Such repulsion thwarted maturity and the capacity to cope with life's problems successfully.

Ishmael, in spite of parodying female roles, emerges successful from his encounter with the leviathan thanks to his acceptance of the mystery of life. His embodiment of tenderness, generosity, love, intuition, sensibility, compassion and sympathy —feelings of the heart— is an affirmation of the female. Jimmy Rose was able to overcome financial disaster, including a concomitant loss of social status the prevailing value system dictated, with virtues —generous love and good feelings, as his surname

[2] "Cock-A-Doodle-Doo!" is an example of a family capable of exceptional love among all its members.

suggests. Billy Budd has a "rosy heart" also and "rose" appears frequently in reference to his character and physical appearance, for example, the "bonfire in his heart made luminous the rose-tan in his cheek" (Melville 1984, 1384). If we interpret his surname as a bud, it could be easily inferred that Billy was a rose-bud. But a bud plucked away and denied fruition. Feminine qualities were a threat to certain societies; vested interests, power, global domination, etc. seemed in danger. Killing the feminine was much easier than questioning the existing system of of political, economic, and social values.

If we take the term "woman" as more than a female figure in a narrative and broaden it to include the appearance of attributes generally regarded as "feminine" —criticized or praised depending on the interests specific patriarchal societies upheld— we can affirm that Melville tried to lay bare the foolishness of those who failed to recognize the relevance of "woman", frequently illustrating the deadly consequences such rejection entailed. Melville's work is full of riddles, puzzles, hieroglyphics, secrets, etc. and all elements, including silences, served several purposes. One major objective was to divulge the lovelessness of America. Few meaningful promises existed in such a dehumanized society, indifferent to the marginal. Woman seemed absent but she was not. She like man was a victim. Woman —feminine features— was necessary to be human. Her void spelled misery for humanity.

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