

BILLY AS LILY: A FEMINIST READING OF *BILLY BUDD*

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ABSTRACT

Melville's *Billy Budd* has been the center of much critical attention for a myriad of reasons ranging from ethical to biographical. This article approaches Melville's final work from a previously unexplored angle: a feminist focus. In the process, the protagonist, Billy, and his plight are viewed as microcosms of larger issues of gender, identity, and nationalism. As such, both reveal unsuspected facets which, once perceived, are difficult not only to ignore but also to accept.

On April 19, 1891, Herman Melville briefly noted in his diary that his novel *Billy Budd*, begun in 1888, was finished, a vast oversimplification. The three hundred fifty-one pages of original manuscript, eventually published in 1924, proved to be merely a starting point for the realms of literary criticism since directed not only at the manuscripts themselves, but also, of course, at their content. Inspired to heightened critical efforts because of the book's being not only Melville's last but also posthumously published, serious and prolonged attempts have been made to apotheosize it as Melville's final answer to questions raised in his earlier writing, especially in *Moby Dick*. Indeed, the impulse to postulate the novel as a conclusion rather than a mere ending to the author's literary canon is tempting, but inevitably errs in its tidiness. The bulk of traditional criticism tends to see the novel as allegory, often using its structure to support the symbolism of the three main characters. Those critics less inclined toward a religious perspective broaden the novel's significance to human drama, whether in terms of classic tragedy or in terms of mythic reality.¹ The quantity and spirited divergence of critical views on *Billy Budd* are testament to its intrinsic worth, as well as to its author's genius. Melville's traditional status as foremost American author in itself suggests a wealth of untapped significance in his writing.

For Melville to be considered not only representative but also fundamental to the development of American fiction, it is necessary to define the unique and characteristic elements of our fiction. All great literature aspires to universal truths - a truism which cannot be ignored; to define a given literature by its nationality as well implies identifying its perception of and attitudes and responses to historical reality. The United States originated in the flight from Old World civilization in search of a pristine opportunity to redefine self, unencumbered by past failures. Historian David Noble perceives the ultimate American experience, as reflected in our literature, as a promethean attempt to escape the sinfulness and corruption of civilization by transcending both time and space in the New World Garden.² To accomplish this escape, our heroes, both historical and fictional, emulate the prototype of the rugged individual, whose strength, prowess, ingenuity, and, above all, independence promulgated the American Dream of innocence and redemption, both personal and national. R. W. B. Lewis' analysis of nineteenth century American authors also reveals how this primary perception of the American Adam shapes both our mentality and our literature.³ Leslie Fiedler goes further in asserting that the typical American protagonist flees not only civilization, but

also confrontation and entanglement with women, who personify the restriction of his freedom.⁴ From Rip Van Winkle and Natty Bumppo to Frederic Henry and Rabbit, our fiction defines the American experience in terms of flight and rejection, a desperate attempt to avoid the contamination of self by others. The only non-threatening relationship, according to Fiedler, is that formed by two males, which constitutes an extension of self rather than an imposition on self. Thus, both our national heritage and our national literature are built upon the premise that freedom is equivalent to flight, and it is Adam, not Eve, who is fleeing. In this light, Melville's fiction both captures and reflects the American mentality, in setting and plot as well as in character and theme.

If American literature is written by, for, and about the New World Adam, our Eve is left in a literary limbo. Not only is the primal American experience expounded as masculine; it also does its utmost to eliminate women both as participants and readers. As the feminist movement took shape in the 1970's, a concomitant realization took place among female readers and critics that the difficulty they experience in identifying with the literature which theoretically defines their place in American life quite simply is consequence of the lack and denial of valid female models in that literature.⁵ The designation of literature, as well as its elucidation, is determined by what Stanley Fish calls the "interpretive community,"⁶ the normative majority of a society. The American literary "interpretive community" is adamantly male:

Only experiences encountered by male characters are called "universal" or basic to "the human condition." The "female experience" is peripheral to the central concern of literature -which is man's struggle with nature, God, fate, himself, and, not infrequently, woman. Woman is always "the Other."⁷

Even as "the Other," women have only two options to choose from: the evil temptress or the ethereal virgin. Although Fiedler emphasizes the latent homosexuality implicit in male America's fictional vision, he recognizes and defines the basic female stereotypes it prefers:

There are only two sets of expectations and a single imperfect woman caught between them: only actual incomplete females, looking in vain for a satisfactory definition of their

role in a land of artists who insist on treating them as goddesses or bitches. The dream role and the nightmare role alike deny the humanity of women....⁸

Unwilling to accept either label, inevitably frustrated in their attempts to validate misogynic models, female critics initiated a determined effort directed toward developing consciousness of the consequences for women in our patriarchal system and positing an authentic feminine identity. Adrienne Rich defines the essential task as "re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction."⁹ An analysis of *Billy Budd* from this perspective verifies the bleakness of the female panorama in American life and literature and significantly contributes to our comprehension of the moral and human issues in the novel as well as Melville's stature as an author. The sensitized reader ineluctably recognizes that Billy, who is simply the Fair Maiden transformed in sex,¹⁰ is doomed to be the victim; in his role as scapegoat, he redeems neither innocence nor virtue, but rather propagates the American Misogynic Myth.

The setting of *Billy Budd* is nothing less than idyllic in terms of the male imagination. If water is the symbol of the barrier between Paradise and the world of women, as Fiedler suggests, the open sea is the epitome of escape. The traditional mythic significance of water as a purifying and regenerating element has additional dimensions in the American myth; it is a means of escape as well as acknowledged male territory. Huck flees down the river, Gatsby inhabits a peninsula, Frederic Henry crosses an entire ocean. Out of reach and out of earshot, safe from the pernicious demands of women, the all-male crew stakes out and establishes its territory, further gratified by its holy mission of defending the might and right of a nation. Within that male enclave, order and justice prevail, safeguarded by reason, hierarchy, and noble causes. Insubordination is instantly quelled, rightful authority ultimately unquestioned and revered: man's in his heaven, all's right with the world. However, even Melville cannot conceive of such a paradise as eternal. When Billy is conscripted from the *Rights-of-Man* into the service of the *Indomitable*, Melville offers the first hint that even among men right may be

superceded by might. Force is the ultimate weapon, whether physical or psychological, the last resort for manipulation of a means toward an end, even when the end is merely a manifestation of power. Billy is twenty-one; he must be initiated into adult reality, the reality of male supremacy and dominance. While the irony of his farewell to his former ship has often been noted, the irony of his cheerfulness can only be understood in terms of his innocence. Unconsciously and unsuspectingly, both Melville and Billy prepare for Billy's role as female surrogate in an all-male world.

Billy Budd, as both the childlike nickname and the botanical implication of the surname suggest, is unadulterated in his innocence, purity, and good looks. Melville invokes the "Handsome Sailor" in an attempt to describe the impact of his physical charm; Billy is compared to Apollo, Hercules, a Tahitian (with its concomitant implications for Melville), and Adam (before the Fall, of course). The Lieutenant of the *Rights-of-Man* calls him "the flower of the flock" and "my Beauty." More significantly, Melville describes his visage as "all but feminine in purity of natural complexion," a contrast to his fellow sailors "something analogous to that of a rustic beauty transplanted from the provinces and roughed into competition with the high-born dames of the courts."¹¹ Most revealing of all, Billy is characterized by "something in the mobile expression, and every chance attitude and movement, something suggestive of a mother eminently favoured by Love and the Graces" (p. 206). Old Dansker does not see beyond Billy's innocence and dubs him "Baby." Fiedler exploits Billy's androgyny as the embodiment of the homosexual secret omnipresent in our fiction, but Melville himself unconsciously comes closest to Billy's true significance in calling him "all but feminine." Billy is female in all but his sex, a transmutation of virginal beauty, a Fair Maiden complete with rosy cheeks, dimples, and yellow curls.

American writers require more of their maidens than an appearance of chaste good looks, and Billy meets their expectations in temperament and intellect as well. According to Mary Ellmann in *Thinking about Women*, among the traits that literature commonly prescribes to its lilies are passivity, spirituality,

and compliancy. Rarely articulated but nonetheless acknowledged, they are also projected as functionally but never obviously intelligent. In spite of being "in many respects... little more than a sort of upright barbarian," Billy did possess "a certain degree of intelligence," which contrasts with Vere's "superior mind of superior order" and even Claggart's "superior capacity" and "peculiar genius." Billy is lauded for his "unconventional rectitude," considered no less a virtue for its being untried -that of "one to whom not yet has been proffered the questionable apple of knowledge" (p.206). Billy's naivete and goodness are the very qualities which have the effect of "a Catholic priest striking peace in an Irish shindy" and ironically give him the reputation of peacemaker. They are also the qualities which men first project onto and then revere in their lilies. Billy is esteemed for his "uncomplaining acquiescence, all but cheerful" (p. 200); if ever found remiss by commission or omission, his response is renewed determination to please others by conforming to their wills. On his second day of duty on the new ship, Billy witnesses a whipping which serves as a warning of the precariousness of his state of grace; appropriately horrified, "he resolved that never through remissness would he make himself liable to such a visitation, or do or omit aught that might merit even verbal reproof" (p.222). In the politics of power, women are not only "doomed to yield to men; they are doomed to find their fulfillment and their happiness in so yielding."¹² Compliance is essential, a touchstone of feminine virtue. Billy, like female characters throughout our fiction, complies with the expectations -indeed, the demands- of the American tradition of female submissiveness and male-defined virtue.

The only apotheosis to which women can aspire in our fiction is idealization; yet even in this, they are doomed to failure by the masculine projection of the innate culpability of their sex, that tragic flaw. Billy, the "young Achilles," also has a tragic flaw: "like the beautiful woman in one of Hawthorne's minor tales, there was just one thing amiss in him" (p.208). Unlike Georgiana, whose birthmark, like her sex, is visible, Billy's speech defect is an occasional rather than constant reminder of marred perfection. Aylmer, Georgiana's scientist

husband, becomes so obsessed with the need to rectify nature's mistake that he ultimately kills her in achieving his goal. The symbolism of the birthmark is a classic example of the impossibly ironic position of women in a male world: "the slightest flaw will have an immense effect, for it serves as a reminder of the reality that produces the continual need to cast Eve... in the molds of idealization."¹³ At the same time, it renders it impossible for her to meet male standards of perfection. It is not chance that Georgiana's defect is congenital; rather, it is a logical consequence of male vision. Inherently harmful, women cannot be paragons of virtue. Like Billy, they are indeed "fated" to be victimized to prevent them from victimizing the vulnerable males around them.

Within every Lily lurks a potential Rose; by virtue of her sex, no female is above suspicion. When Captain Vere expresses incredulity upon hearing Claggart's accusation, Claggart warns him: "You have but noted his fair cheek. A mantrap may be under his ruddy-tipped daisies" (p. 246). At twenty-one, Billy is barely of age; full maturity may expose more than expected, as his surname suggests. Budding manhood may be sheltering covert womanhood and all that state implies. Claggart is playing the devil's advocate in more ways than one; while insinuating that Billy's pristine appearance may be merely facade, he is revealing his own true colors. Billy is the "untampered-with flavour like that of berries" while Claggart is the "questionable smack as of a compounded wine" (p.207). Claggart is the Rose to Billy's Lily: he embodies the very thing he fears. His is "a depravity according to nature," a "wantonness of malignity" which is "born with him and innate." Billy's threat is potential; Claggart's is real. Billy's flaw is intermittent and invisible, but Claggart's is omnipresent. Except for his chin, Claggart has classic Greek features. That chin, ominously, is beardless. His "silken jet curls" are but another indication of his evil nature. At thirty-five, Claggart is well-initiated into the ways of the world; his murky past gives rise to uneasy rumblings among the rest of the crew, who are unable to prove his guilt but nevertheless are convinced of it. Claggart is both aware of and wary of Billy's appeal. In fact, he "could even have loved Billy but for fate and ban" (p.240).

Such a love cannot be: as evil temptress, he is too knowledgeable to accept Billy's appearance at face value, while as a man, he knows Billy is intrinsically guilty by default. Claggart's androgyny generates both his projection and fear of rosiness in Billy.

Captain Vere really has no choice in dealing with Billy's misdeed. When Claggart is killed - a just demise for a prickly Rose- Vere exclaims, "Struck dead by an angel of God. Yet the angel must hang" (p.252). Whatever Billy's motivation and intention in striking out at Claggart, the consequence clearly demands punishment. Manmade justice must rule and condemn. Claggart's earlier words to Billy prove prophetic: "Handsome is as handsome does." Appearances deceive; in Billy's case, actions literally speak louder than words. Homily after homily reinforces the perennial lesson that he who is not constantly on guard against insidious treachery will rue his weakness. As Captain Vere reminds his tribunal, "The heart is the feminine in man, and hard though it be, she must here be ruled out" (p. 261). Claggart, because he is consciously, thoroughly evil, necessarily receives the first and swiftest retribution. Billy's case requires more complicated rationalization, although the outcome is just as inevitable. The look on Billy's face, "like that of a condemned vestal priestess in the moment of being buried alive" (p. 250), could not be more appropriate; he is preordained to be the scapegoat, the sacrificial victim of male phobia. His white sailor top and trousers, "each more or less soiled," now reveal his flawed perfection, the stained reality behind the virginal facade. Just as Claggart's wickedness is "natural," it is natural for Captain Vere to adhere to the camp which claims his greatest allegiance even as he acknowledges its arbitrary and merciless nature. Ironically, Captain Vere is no more a free agent than Billy or Claggart; his fate is predetermined by the same misogynic assumptions which condemn Billy and Claggart.

Melville's rendition of the American tragedy does not -indeed, cannot- end with Billy's death. The Lily must be placed back on the pedestal. If, as Fetterley suggests, loftiness in women is equivalent to the willingness with which they not only yield, but also die at the hands of men, then Billy classically redeems

himself with his final blessing of Captain Vere. Having thus fulfilled his earthly purpose, Billy ascends and takes his rightful place as a flawless abstraction that can be revered in death as he could not be in life. Safe from further danger of disillusionment, Vere's dying words are an invocation of the idol. The spar from which Billy was suspended becomes a sacred relic; Billy is immortalized in song. Whatever vicarious satisfaction the female reader or critic of *Billy Budd* may derive from identifying with the predicament of the protagonists is perforce spurious. Ultimately, as Virginia Woolf affirms in *A Room of One's Own*, whatever importance a woman achieves in fiction simply serves to underscore the contrast to her position in the real world.¹⁴ Billy and Claggart are not simply allegorical representations of goodness and evil; they are symbolic heiresses. The fact that traditional criticism has been unwilling or unable to identify their true meaning is but another manifestation of the masculine mentality which both created and determined their significance.

Notes

1. For a comprehensive overview of representative critical views of the novel, see *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Billy Budd*, ed. Howard P. Vincent (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971), particularly E.L. Grant Watson, "Melville's Testament of Acceptance"; John Seelye, "Final Balance: The Prose Fragments and *Billy Budd*," and William York Tindall, "The Ceremony of Innocence."
2. David W. Noble, *The Eternal Adam and the New World Garden* (New York: George Braziller, 1968).
3. R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).
4. Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, rev. ed. (New York: Stein and Day, 1966).
5. For basic ideology and critical theory, see Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970); Mary Ellmann, *Thinking About Women* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), and *Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory*, ed. Josephine Donovan (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1975). For applied feminist criticism, an enlightening representative work is Judith Fetterley's *The Resisting Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

6. Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 10-16.
7. Cheri Register, "American Feminist Literary Criticism: A Bibliographical Introduction" in *Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Josephine Donovan, p.10.
8. Fiedler, p. 314.
9. Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," *College English* 34 (1972), 18.
10. Fiedler, p. 365.
11. Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Foretopman*, in *Herman Melville: Four Short Novels* (n.p.: John Lehmann, 1946; New York: Bantam, 1959), p. 205. All further references from this source are indicated within the text by page number only.
12. Fetterley, p. 150.
13. Fetterley, p. 27.
14. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1929), pp. 45-46.

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