

Chapter 3: Moby-Dick

"I would to God Shakespeare had lived later, & promenaded in Broadway. Not that I might have had the pleasure of leaving my card for him at the Astor, or made merry with him over a bowl of the fine Duyckinck punch; but that the muzzle which all men wore on their souls in the Elizabethan day, might not have intercepted Shakespeare's full articulations. For I hold it a verity, that even Shakespeare, was not a frank man to the uttermost. And, indeed, who in this intolerant Universe is, or can be? But the Declaration of Independence makes a difference."

– Herman Melville

In its deep, enveloping darkness, *Moby-Dick* is a vast, black-velvet mosaic, cradling fragments of Shakespeare's most powerful lines, themes, and imagery. Those pages shimmer with the Bard's influence in a thousand subtle ways. And yet, surprisingly little thought has been given to how *The Merchant of Venice* might have shaped Melville's vision as he wove his own tale of a maritime power—that empire aboard the *Pequod*.

In terms of rhetoric, F. O. Matthiessen suggests that Melville's description of the silvery jet of a whale spout lit up by the moon "on such a silent night" in 'The Spirit-Spout' echoes a phrase used in *Merchant*'s fifth act, where Jessica and Lorenzo, in moonlit Belmont, trade odes to lovers Troilus and Cressida, Pyramus and Thisbe, and Dido and Aeneas. In terms of characterization, many critics and commentators have, in passing, observed a general parallel between Captain Ahab, in his obsession with the white whale, and Shylock, in his relentless pursuit of vengeance and a pound of flesh. However, analysis of this impression has not been carried far beyond a stating of the likeness, leaving much to expand on. There is a wealth of evidence, both in the text of *Moby-Dick* and the author's own life, to suggest that *Merchant* played a much meatier role in the writing of the 'Whale'—as Melville referred to his most famous work in letters to his friend and confidant, Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Melville Takes the Stage

"A whale-ship was my Yale College and my Harvard," Ishmael says, perhaps speaking for his author—but Melville, at least, attended one term at the Lansingburgh Academy near Troy, New York, in late 1838 and early 1839. He was 20 years old at the time and intended to study surveying and engineering. In December of his only term, Melville performed Shylock in scenes from *The Merchant of Venice*, earning praise in the *Democratic Press and Lansingburgh Advertiser* in a review dated December 15, 1838:

LANSEINGBURGH ACADEMY.—On Wednesday evening last, pursuant to a public notice, we attended amid a large concourse of people, an Evening Exhibition of the students of Lansingburgh Academy.... The exercises concluded with the performance of several parts from Shakespear's "Merchant of Venice," in which all the characters were well sustained and in a manner entirely beyond expectation. Although it might appear inappropriate to particularize any or several of the performers, we cannot refrain from the gratification of advertizing to the young gentleman who personated "Shylock" the Jew, as we conceive it a very difficult part, and the more so in one who never saw its representation, but from intuitive and reflective observation seemed to catch the spirit of the author, and in every act of attitude, gesture, expression, and intonation of voice, rivit the fixed attention of every member of the audience. Should a similar occasion again occur among the anniversary exercises of this institution we should hail the appearance of "Shylock" with increased pleasure, and exclaim in Shakespeare's own words: "His worth is warrant for his welcome here."

Melville is the only performer the reviewer chooses to "particularize" with praise of the production. This "young gentleman," it seems, demonstrated a keen grasp of the role, playing Shylock in a way that, in the reviewer's opinion, captured the spirit Shakespeare intended for the character. Unfortunately for us, the reviewer leaves the nature of that spirit a mystery. For all the praise, we are no clearer on the type of Shylock that was performed on Wednesday the Twelfth of December, 1838, at the Lansingburgh Academy.

But it seems reasonable to suggest that, over 20 years after Edmund Kean transformed the London theatre scene with an internationally celebrated, dignifying and humanizing portrayal of Shylock, Melville's performance would have been recognized in the spirit of Kean's example. (Not that Melville himself would have been aware of the international theatre scene—he was, after all, just a young college student!) The reviewer notes that Melville's portrayal required “intuitive and reflective observation”—hallmarks of a more psychological take on the role, in which “every act of attitude, gesture, expression, and intonation of voice” becomes crucial in creating a character that feels human. A “very difficult part” indeed—and it is hard to imagine the comic pantomime of Thomas Doggett or the villainous satire of Charles Macklin garnering praise for the above qualities. In short, it seems likelier that Melville would have enacted Nicholas Rowe's sense of *Merchant* as a play “design'd Tragically by the Author,” lending the Jew a dramatic weight worthy of sparring with the Lady of Belmont.

It is this idea of Shylock—tragic and sympathetic but far from innocent—that we will hold to as we consider his possible imprint on Melville's whale tale.

The Muses Invert

Storm clouds gather over London's “wooden O” as Melville raises Shakespeare's round, open-air theatre from the banks of the River Thames to the docks of Nantucket—and then, the open sea. The stage deck of the old Globe becomes the quarter-deck of the *Pequod*, where Ahab, in his “ivory stride,” prowls the wooden planks, his audience of whalemens below him. A tempest stirs; the mood grows dark... Melville's magnum opus is more Hebraic grief than Hellenic cheer. If, as Heine observes, the frame of *The Merchant of Venice* is a “composition of laughing masks and sunny faces, satyr forms and amoretts”—a comedy that contains tragedy—then *Moby-Dick* flips that script. Melville writes a tragedy that contains comedy. In the words of his mouthpiece Ishmael, “That mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him, that mortal man cannot be true—not true, or undeveloped.”

Heine's "after-blossoming of Greek spirit"—that classical blend of form, color, and sound, all that is sweet and light—is largely muted in *Moby-Dick*. Stylistically, Melville leans into the tenor of Hebraism, using less structure and ornament than Shakespeare did. A mere "draught of a draught," *Moby-Dick* dispenses with outward perfection and delves ever more deeply into the depths of the soul. In the end, it becomes a truer realization of Portia's lead casket than anything in *The Merchant of Venice*, as Melville takes his audience to inward places that Shakespeare, for all his brilliance, either wouldn't or couldn't venture.

Throughout the novel, John Seelye hears a "certain strange laughter," a sort of "hyena mockery that seems to undermine the heroic quality of the epic." It is this desperado laughter that, in Ishmael's words, makes things once "most momentous, now [seem] a part of the general joke." This cackling at the classical is yet another way Melville blunts the sharp edges of Hellenic form, drawing us out from certainty's safe shores and into the vortex of chaos, where the fleet-footed endure—and those with too rigid a stride may stumble.

Shadings of Shakespeare

The Bard's impact on Melville has been immense. Previous scholarship has traced echoes from *Moby-Dick* to *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, *The Tempest*, and *Measure for Measure*, among others. But this is hardly surprising. In February 1849—just 12 months before he began writing *Moby-Dick*—Melville purchased the Hilliard and Gray 1837 edition of *The Dramatic Works of William Shakspeare*, a seven-volume collection of 36 Shakespeare plays. He penned notes throughout each volume, though some plays received fewer markings and less commentary than others. That difference may well account for the uneven success in tracing Melville's inspiration back to specific Shakespearean works. His copy of *Merchant* is relatively unmarked compared to some of the other plays, with only four pages scribbled upon (and without commentary by him). Of interest to us is the ink mark in *Merchant* 1.1, in the second volume of Melville's seven-book set.