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Melville and Shakespeare

By RAYMOND G. HUGHES

A CURSORY reading of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* convinces me that it shadows Shakespeare's tragedies in thought, imagery, dialogue, grammar, idioms, and philosophy, implied and expressed. This agreement may exist only in my imagination, for the evidence is not conclusive. Yet a compilation of parallels and similarities reasonably pertinent is not difficult to arrange, and that is exactly what has been done in this paper.

Even the most exacting scholar will admit points of contact between them, but it is a trifle difficult, even hazardous, to say definitely that this point or that bit of philosophy in Melville sprung from Shakespeare. A kinship has been suggested often, but its true character has never been made plain. Of course, intermediary sources would account for similarities, but even when all these have been considered there are still some concurrences that deserve study.

Two years before beginning *Moby Dick,* according to his own statement, Melville secured a new insight into Shakespeare: "Dolt and ass that I am," he exclaimed, "I have lived more than twenty-nine years, and until a few days ago never made acquaintance with the divine William. Ah, he's full of sermons-on-the-mount, and gentle age, almost as Jesus. I take such men to be inspired. If another Messiah ever comes, he will be in the likeness of Shakespeare."[1] Although his biographers believe that he read Shakespeare as a youth, his own statement leads one to think that he never fully appreciated and understood him until shortly before writing *Moby Dick* in 1850. Because of this, if for no other reason, one would expect many evidences of the Bard of Avon in the story.

His father "had a fastidious and decorous library,"[2] and it is only natural to believe that it contained Shakespeare's works as well as the rest of the Elizabethan dramatists. Mumford declares that "Melville was always a wide and desultory reader, more and more interested—after the manner of Sir Thomas Browne—in remote and curious illusions, wrecks of forgotten fables, antediluvian computations, obsolete and unfamiliar problems, riddles that no living Edipus would care to solve."[3] Of course, *Moby Dick* smacks of Carlyle and Emerson, and, like Hawthorne's stories, deals with the problem of evil and the tormented soul, but yet the careful reader, looking for evidence of Shake-

[1] Raymond M. Weaver's *Herman Melville, Mariner and Mystic,* page 121.

[2] Ibid, page 121.

[3] Lewis Mumford, "The Writing of *Moby Dick*" in the "American Mercury," December, 1918.

speare, will find it in abundance, and even the casual reader will see it, unconsciously perhaps.

Then, too, in view of the vogue of Shakespeare's plays on the New York stage for fifteen or twenty years before Melville began *Moby Dick,* during the period that he was much in the city, it is reasonable to suppose that he saw many of them. The tragedies were especially popular, and were repeated time after time between 1835 and 1850 in the Bowery, The Park, The Broadway, and the Chatham Square theatres.

There are many shadows of the tragedies in *Moby Dick,* so many, in fact, that in a paper of this length most of them can be little more than mentioned. *Moby Dick* deals with the problem of evil, and, like *Hamlet* and *Othello,* has a single gradually developing plot which ends with the death of the hero on a note of peace. Ahab never talks as an ordinary sailor or even a captain, but like a Hamlet or a Macbeth. Long digressions, monstrous irregularities, remote and curious allusions are as common in Meville's story as in Shakespeare's plays.

Most of the elevated passages and heavy soliloquies are poetry, or, at least, poetic prose. The style is a trifle artificial; vowels are repeated, alliteration is noticeable, and phrase is balanced against phrase. Many parts of the book could be scanned as easily as is Shakespeare's blank verse.

Although one might dwell at length on the verse of Melville's prose, I shall pass it over, just as I shall pass over Shakespearean tendencies in construction and style. The dialogues are reminiscent of Shakespeare: they are bombastic, inflated and tasteless. Long and tiresome soliloquies, such as never were spoken by mortal man, delay the action and retard the movement.

Compare the tempo and tone of the following with the soliloquies of Macbeth or Hamlet.

> "My soul is more than matched; she's overmanned; and by a madman; insufferable sting that sanity should ground arms on such a field; but he drilled deep down and blasted all my reason out of me. I think I see his impious end; but feel that I must help him to it. Will I, nill I,

> the ineffable thing has tied me to him; tied me with a cable that I have no knife to cut—I would up heart, were it not like lead. But my whole clock's run down; my heart, the all-controlling weight, I have no key to life it again."

There are many words scattered through *Moby Dick* that remind one of Shakespeare; "ergo" "wight" (used always to mean "person"); "mended," "unhorse," "anon," "nonce" (meaning at that particular time); "underling," "ere," "methinks," "orisons," "quit" (meaning to leave); and "waxes." Of course, that is not an exhaustive list of words common to both writers, nor is it claimed that the American got them direct from the great dramatist, but it is more plausible than impossible.

The simple practice of having characters repeat words for effect during times of great emotion and tension is followed by both Mellville and Shakespeare. Of course, this is frequently done in all literature, but certainly not to the extent that they do it. "Come, deal justly with me; come, come," said Hamlet, and again "I humbly thank you, well, well, well." Listen now to Ahab: "Come, Ahab's compliments to ye; come and see if ye can swerve me? ye cannot swerve me, else ye swerve yourself:" or again, "so, so, so, then;—softly, softly!"

And again Melville follows Shakespeare in his use of puns. They are about as frequent and usually quite as atrocious in his work as they were in Shakespeare. The following is a good example: "In the Isle of Man, hey? Well, the other way, it's good, Here's a man from Man, a man born in once independent Man, and now unmanned of Man" (chapter 125). Compare the above with Hamlet's, "A little more than kin and less than kind," or "Is thy union here? Follow my mother."

A summary of the actual identifiable references and undisputable quotations totals but half a dozen, and these are very short. However, to me they indicate a mind rich in Shakespearean lore. There is but one formal quotation, and that is the famous "Et Tu Brute" (chapter 75). His reference to Tamburlaine (chapter 50) indicates a familiarity with the Elizabethan dramatists in general. About midway in the story he mentions Marc Anthony and his exploits on the Nile. As evidence of his admiration for Shakespeare, he includes his name in a list of "mighty ones" (chapter 79). At another time he compares the flight of the whales to the flight of "Cleopatra's barges from

Actium." Late in the story he has Ahab remind the carpenter that "the grave digger in the play sings spade in hand."

Although absolute evidence may be limited, there is an abundance of paraphrases or modifications of the words of Shakespeare which, after all, are indefinitely more valuable as proof that Melville was saturated with his works. Here are a few specimens flavored by Hamlet: "My tables—meet it is I set it down.": "Ahab has that's bloody on his mind," a variant of "My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth"; or again "here he comes, or it's somebody else," suggesting Hamlet's answer to Horatio, "There's ne'er a villain dwelling in all Denmark, but he's an arrant knave."

There is an infinite number of such echoes and my count will eventually be greatly enlarged and revised, for I am much better acquainted with some of the plays than with others, and because I do not carry in my mind a complete Shakespearean concordance.

Both men were careful to avoid any trace of a working theology. Just as Macbeth thinks to become king he would "jump the life to come," so Ahab thinks to kill the white whale would be infinitely finer than to save his soul.

Even the pseudo-scholar knows that Shakespeare never surprises his readers with a tragic end, so Melville filled his greatest book with omens, premonitions and prophecies. Horatio told the guards, as they awaited the appearance of the ghost, "fierce events are harbingers of the fates," so the opening phrase of *Moby Dick,* "Call me Ishmael," predicts tragedy. The Pequod, named after a tribe of extinct Indians; Ahab, carrying the same name as the Biblical king who met a bloody end; and the prophecy of Elijah, together with more than a score of similar events, all hint at tragedy.

Hamlet and *Macbeth* are woven around the murder of a king, *Lear* on ingratitude, and *Moby Dick* on a quest for vengence. The tragic character is no ordinary person; Hamlet is a young prince, Lear is a king, and Ahab is a ship-captain. The catastrophe is not brought about by forces outside the tragic character, but rather by his own deeds; Macbeth was driven by ambition, Othello by jealousy, and Ahab by a craving for revenge. Shakespeare's tragic characters were possessed by an abnormal mental condition: hallucinations, insanity, and somnambulism; Hamlet was at least "mad in craft." Lear's mind was tottering, and Ahab was a monomniac, "mad for revenge."

Certainly it was not by mere accident that Melville pictured Ahab living under a cloud of insanity. Hamlet was his great prototype; both were driven by an unbounded desire for revenge, which in itself was cause sufficient for insanity. Ahab declares that he is "madness maddened," that he is "impatient of all misery in others that is not mad." Hamlet, in his conference with his mother, says "Not your trespass but my madness speaks."

The oath-taking episode in *Moby Dick* (chapter 36) sprung from a similar event in *Hamlet.* Both scenes are permeated by a strange, uncanny, and mystical atmosphere. Ahab's sailors swore vengence on their crossed lances, and Hamlet's friends swore secrecy on his sword. "Drink, ye harpooners," said Ahab, "drink and swear, ye men that man the deathful whaleboats—Obow, death to Moby Dick." "Swear by my sword," said Hamlet, "never to make known what you have heard."

Melville followed Shakespeare closely in allowing an appreciable influence to incipient and misty supernaturalism. The memory of guilt in Macbeth, the sense of failure in Brutus, are analogous to the constant and persistent pursuit of the whale by Ahab. Carl Van Doren has termed Ahab "the yankee Faust."[4] The element of chance enters early in *Moby Dick.* The fact that Ishmael selected the Pequod as the ship upon which to sail was accident in the same sense that Romeo never got the Friar's letter or that Desdemona dropped her handkerchief. The tragic characters of both writers are marked by a one-sidedness, a driving almost diabolic tendency in one direction.

There is much in *Moby Dick* that reminds one of *Macbeth.* It is impossible to read the description of the picture on the wall in the Spouter Inn without remembering the haunts and habits of the witches; "It is a mass of shades and shadows which seem to delineate chaos betwitched.—It's the unnatural combat of the primal elements—it's the blasted heath."

Late in the story (chapter 117) the prophecy of the Parisee about Ahab's death reiterates what the witches told Macbeth about the coming of Birnam wood to Dunsinane and his never dying at the hands of man born of woman. Ahab had again dreamed of the hearse. "But I said, 'Old Man,' said the Parisee, "that ere thou couldst die on this voyage two hearses must verily be

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[4] Carl Van Doren, "Lucifer from Nantucket"; *The Century,* August, 1925.

seen by thee on the sea; the first not made by mortal hands; and the visible wood of the last one must be grown in America."

Ahab, like Macbeth, was annoyed by troubled dreams, and spent the nights wrestling with demons of his imagination. Melville's description of his cry for sleep is but a variant of Macbeth's famous sleep soliloquy:

> "Often when forced from his hammock by exhausting and intolerable dreams of the night, which, resuming his own intense thought through the day, carried them on amid a clashing of phrensies, and whirled them round and round in his blazing brain, till the very throbbing of his life spot became insufferable anguish; and when, as was sometimes the case, these spiritual throes in him heaved his being up from its base, and a chasm seemed opening in him, from which forked flames and lightnings shot up, and accursed fiends beckoned him to leap down among them; when this hell in himself yawned beneath him, a wild cry would be heard from the ship; and with glaring eyes Ahab would burst from the stateroom, as though escaping from a bed that was on fire."

The death of the Parisee caused Ahab to cry out in despair, just as did Macbeth when told of his wife's death. "My wife, my life! Gone? Gone?" cried Ahab, "What means that little word? What death-knell rings in it, that old Ahab shakes as if he were the belfry?" Obviously this outburst had its foreground in Macbeth's

> "To-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
> To the last syllable of recorded time,
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death."

This paper, suggested by an assignment at Columbia University during the summer of 1930, attempts to do two things; first, to show that Melville was literally saturated with Shakespeare's tragedies; second, that he allowed the language, as well as much of the philosophy, to carry over into his greatest story. While the foregoing paragraphs have been more or less subjective, the section following will be more tangible and will produce its own effect.

Echoes of Shakespeare's Tragedies in *Moby Dick*[5].

Chapter I

"Who steals my purse steals trash; tis something, nothing;
"and a purse is but a rag unless you have something in it."

[5] The arrangement of this material follows the chapters of *Moby Dick* in chronological order. However, where like references occur in two or more places the later references ar taken up when the first one is used.

'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands." (*Othello,* II. 3, 185.)
"I am Tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote."
"Are much condemned to have an itching palm." (*Julius Caesar,* IV. 3, 10.)

Chapter II
"Yes, these eyes are windows."
"thy eyes' windows fall. (*Romeo and Juliet,* IV, 1, 100.)

Chapter III
"Methinks that what they call shadow here on earth is my true substance."
"Life's but a walking shadow." (*Macbeth,* V. 4, 3.)

Chapter VII
"From thence it is the God of breezes fair or foul."
"Fair is foul, and foul is fair." (*Macbeth,* I. 1, 9.)

Chapter VIII
"In this world, shipmates, sin that pays its way can travel freely, and without a passport; whereas virtue, if a pauper, is stopped at all frontiers."
"Virtue itself scapes not calumnious strokes." (*Hamlet,* I. 3, 38.)
"My heart laments that virtue cannot live
Out of the teeth of emulation." (*Julius Caesar,* II. 3, 13.)

Chapter IX
"For conscience is the wound, and there's naught to staunch it."
"Thus conscience does make cowards of us all." (*Hamlet,* III. 1, 84.)

Chapter XIX
"Look ye; when Captain Ahab is all right, then this left arm of mine will be all right; not before."

Chapter CVIII .....
"Here he comes, or it's somebody else, that's certain."
"There's ne'er a villain dwelling in all Denmark
But he's an arrant knave." (*Hamlet,* I. 5, 124.)

Chapter XXVI
"but man, in the ideal, is so noble and so sparkling, such a grand and glowing creature, that over any ignominious blemish in him all his fellows should run to throw their costliest robes."
"What a piece of work is man; how noble in reason; how infinite in faculty; in form and moving how express and admirable; in action how like an angel; in apprehension how like a God; the beauty of the world; the paragon of animals!" (*Hamlet,* II. ii, 316.)

Chapter XXVII
"It is therefore but meet that in this place we set it down."
"My tables—Meet it is I set it down." (*Hamlet,* I. 5, 107.)

Chapter XXIX
"Old age is always wakeful; as if, the longer linked with life, the less man has to do with aught that looks like death."
"Idle old man,

That still would manage those authorities
That he has given away." (*Lear,* I, 3, 16.)
"For they say an old man is twice a child." (*Hamlet,* II. 2, 104.)

Chapter XXIX
"Am I a cannon-ball, Stubb?" asked Ahab, "that thou wouldst wad me in that fashion?"
"Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me; you would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass; and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ; yet cannot you make it speak. 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe?" (*Hamlet,* III. 2, 378.)

Chapter XXIX
"Damn me, it's worth a fellow's while to be born into this world if only to fall right asleep."
"the innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleave of care,
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath.
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feast—" (*Macbeth,* III. 2, 34.)

Chapter XLIV
"Often, when forced from his hammock by exhaustion and intolerably vivid dreams of the night, which, resuming his own intense thoughts through the day, carried them on amid a clashing of phrensies, and whirled them round and round in his blazing brain, till the very throbbing of his life-spot became insufferable anguish."
"Now o'er the one half world
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
The curtain'd sleep." (*Macbeth,* II. 1, 50.)

Chapter XXXI
"Ahab has that that's bloody on his mind."
"My thoughts be bloody." (*Othello,* III. 3, 297.)

Chapter XXXVI
"So brimming life is gulped and gone."
"And a man's life is no more than to say 'one' ". (*Hamlet,* V. 2, 74.)
"Man's life is but a span." (*Othello,* II. 3, song.)

Chapter XXXVII
"The diver sun—slow dived from moon, goes down; my soul mounts up!"
"My words fly up, my thoughts remain below;
Words without thoughts never to heaven go." (*Hamlet,* III. 3, 97.)

Chapter XL
"Human madness is oftentimes a cunning and most feline thing."
"Though this be madness, yet there is method in't." (*Hamlet,* II. 2, 207.)

Chapter CXIII
"I am impatient of all misery in others that is not mad."
That drop of blood that's calm proclaims be bastard." (*Hamlet, IV.* 5, 110.)

Chapter XLIX

"There are certain queer times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke, though the wit thereof he but dimly discerns, and more than suspects that the joke is at nobody's expense but his own."

"I do not set my life at a pin's fee." (*Hamlet,* I. 4, 65.)
"My life I never held but as a pawn." (*Lear,* I. 1, 157.)
"There's nothing serious in mortality." (*Macbeth,* II. 3, 97.)

Chapter LX

"Nor can any son of mortal woman."
"The power of man, for none of woman born
Shall harm Macbeth." (*Macbeth,* IV. 1, 80.)

Chapter LXXXIV

" 'Tis July's immortal Fourth; all fountains run wine today!"
"She dreamt to-night she saw my statue,
Which, like a fountain with an hundred spouts,
Did run pure blood." (*Caesar,* II, 2, 76.)
"Even at the base of Pompey's statue,
Which all the while ran blood." (*Caesar,* III. 2, 192.)

Chapter LXXXVII

"For there is no folly of the beasts of the earth which is not infinitely outdone by the madness of men."
"O judgment; thou are fled to brutish beasts." (*Caesar,* III. 2, 108.)

Chapter XCIV

"Let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of human kindness."
"It is too full o' the milk of human kindness." (*Macbeth,* I. 5, 18.)

Chapter CXXIX

"Like cures like."
"Unnatural deeds
Do breed unnatural troubles." (*Macbeth,* V. 1. 79.)
"Wisdom and goodness to the vile seem vile;
Filths savour but themselves." (*Lear,* IV. 2, 37.)
"diseases desperate grown
By desperate appliances are relieved." (*Hamlet,* IV. 3, 10.)

Chapter CVIII

"I would be free as air and I am down in the whole world's books."
"O limed soul, that, struggling to be free, art more engaged." (*Hamlet* III. 3. 68.)

Chapter CVIII

"Take the hint, then, and when thou art dead, never bury thyself under living people's noses."
"But indeed, if you find him not within this month, you shall nose him as you go up the stairs into the lobby." (*Hamlet,* IV. 3, 39.)

Chapter CIX
"but let Ahab beware of Ahab; beware of thyself, old man."
"I cannot tell what you and other men
Think of this life; but, for my single self,
I had as lief not be as live to be
In awe of such a thing as myself." (*Caesar,* 1. 2, 95.)

Chapter CXI
"And meet it is, that over these sea-pastures."
"Meet it is I set it down." (*Hamlet,* I. 5, 107.)

Chapter CXII
"Oh Death, why cannot thou sometimes be timely?"
"Had I but died an hour before this chance
I had lived a blessed time." (*Macbeth,* II, 3, 96.)
"my way of life
Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf." (*Macbeth,* V. 3, 22.)

Chapter CXII
"Death is only a launching into the regions of the strange untried; it is but the first salutation to the possibilities of the immense Remote, the Wild, the Watery, the Unshored."

"To die, to sleep;
To sleep, perchance to dream; ay, there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil." (*Hamlet,* III. 1, 60.)
"The dread of something after death, the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns, puzzles the will." (*Hamlet,* III. 1, 78.)

Chapter CXII
"Can ye smooth out a seam like this?"
"Cans't thou not minster to a mind diseased?" (*Macbeth,* V. 3, 40.)

Chapter CXXXIV
"Gone?—gone? What means that little word?—What death knell rings in it? that old Ahab shakes as if he were the belfry."
"Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death." (*Macbeth, V.* 5, 19.)

Chapter CXXXV
"Some men die at ebb tide; som at law water; some at the full of the flood."
There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life.
Is bound in shallows and in miseries." (*Caesar,* IV. 3, 219.)
"What if it tempt you toward the flood, my Lord?" (*Hamlet,* I. 4, 69.)

Chapter CXXXV
"What breaks in me? Some sinews crack!"
"Now cracks a noble heart." (*Hamlet,* V. 2, 369.)