

### Devilish Principles: the Dual Authority of Dark Ahab

In the vast open Atlantic ocean, a whaling crew of Christians and cannibals knows that they are shipped for a perilous three-year voyage around the world, where they will make battle against that monster of the sea with the profitable skin, the Sperm Whale. But in “The Quarterdeck,” their cabin-closeted inscrutable Captain Ahab raises the stakes of the voyage with an imposing oratorical performance. Nailing a doubloon to the mast, he promises the piece of Spanish gold to the first man who spots a *particular* whale against whom he seeks revenge for his missing leg: a great White Whale, called Moby Dick. Some cheer for glory and conquest in “Midnight, Forecastle”: “Blood! but that old man’s a grand old cove! We are the lads to hunt him up his whale!”, one sailor declares, to which a chorus responds “Aye! aye!” In contrast, cabin-boy Pip apostrophes as his crewmates shout their enthusiasm, “white whale, shirr! shirr! ... it makes me jingle all over like my tambourine... Oh, thou big white God aloft there somewhere in yon darkness... Preserve [me] from all men who have no bowels to feel fear!” First-mate Starbuck as well objects to “revenge on a dumb brute”, especially since “it will not fetch thee much on our Nantucket market”. Soon after, our narrator Ishmael points out that “having impulsively... and perhaps somewhat prematurely revealed the prime but private purpose of the Pequod’s voyage, Ahab... had... laid himself open to the unanswerable charge of usurpation; and with perfect impunity, both moral and legal... his crew... could refuse all further obedience to him” (Melville 133), which raises a key question lingering over this narrative: if Ahab prioritizes a private revenge over a notoriously dangerous sperm whale that won’t yield a profit for the crew... why then does the crew not mutiny?

Ahab’s offering of the Spanish gold doubloon seems an obvious first explanation. Ishmael relates the crew’s response to Ahab’s initial offering of the gold: “‘Huzza! huzza!’ cried the seamen, as with swinging tarpaulins they hailed the act of nailing the gold to the mast” (Melville 102). Later in “The Doubloon,” Ishmael relates that sailors on the night-watch would talk over it, “wondering whose it was to be at last, and whether he would ever live to spend it” (Melville 273).

But the Jereboam's story suggests that a crew will renounce material quest if they perceive divine opposition. On the ship Jereboam, a sailor raised in a Shaker community announced that he was the archangel Gabriel, and made disciples of the entire crew by sprouting threats of plague and scripture in equal measure. When a lookout spotted Moby Dick, the Jereboam's chief mate Macey lowered a boat with five men to pursue, despite the archangel's "denunciations and forewarnings" (Melville 199). During that hunt the archangel, "ascend[ed] to the main-royal mast-head, was tossing one arm in frantic gestures, and hurling forth prophecies of speedy doom to the sacrilegious assailants of his divinity" (Melville 200). Accordingly, "a broad white shadow rose from the sea", and then "the luckless mate, so full of furious life, was smitten bodily into the air, and making a long arc in his descent, fell into the sea at a distance of about fifty yards" (Melville 200). Most notably, after his general prophecy of doom came true for Macey, the "terror-stricken crew" obeyed his command not to hunt the White Whale further. This outcome raises the question of why the Pequod's crew does not do the same. After all it is second-mate Stubb himself that so excitedly identifies the fanatic in the flesh: "'That's he! that's he!—the long-togged scaramouch the Town-Ho's company told us of!'" (Melville 198). Knowing what doom befell another mate who pursued the whale, why does Stubb not desist upon hearing this tale? Firstly he doesn't recognize any genuine divine authority in Gabriel, whom he calls a "scaramouch"—an archaic epithet for a coward.

But more importantly there is a greater divine authority on board the Pequod already; Melville's use of diabolical symbolism to describe Ahab in appearance and deed indicates that, in short, Ahab rules the Pequod not by material offering but via the devilish air of his dark authority. In "The First Lowering," Ahab surrounds himself with a special rowing crew of "phantoms" which Ishmael describes as being of a certain Far-Eastern race "notorious for a certain diabolism...", supposed by some Christian sailors to be "paid spies and secret confidential agents on the water of the devil, their lord" That some white sailors, perhaps Ishmael himself not included, perceive Ahab's rowing crew as being servants of the devil at least hints as a devilish bent to Ahab's authority. More convincing is Ishmael's specification that when Ahab gives commands, the lead phantom, Fedallah, "half-hissed" in reply. Since Ishmael makes reference to the orchard thieves in "Loomings," we understand that the hissing of snakes connects through straightforward metaphor to the snake-devil of the Garden. But still, dark Ahab's authority isn't quite yet the devil's authority.

Ahab's very appearance as well as his deeds in leadership further suggests his association with the devil. For comparison, observe John Milton's description of the rebelling archangel Satan in *Paradise Lost*:

But his face  
Deep scars of thunder had intrenched, and care  
Sat on his faded cheek, but under brows  
Of dauntless courage, and considerate pride,  
Waiting revenge...

Each key devilish adjective in our excerpt—underlined by yours truly—from Milton is similarly used by Melville to describe dark devilish Ahab. Satan has “brows / Of dauntless courage...” Ahab's brow is similarly noted to elaborate his character: “clouds piled layer upon layer, as ever all clouds choose the loftiest peaks to pile themselves upon...” And what do these peaks indicate? In one of his token monologic confessions, Ahab himself points out in “The Doubloon” that high mountains ever reflect his pride: “There's something ever egotistical in mountain-tops and towers, and all other grand and lofty things; look here,—three peaks as proud as Lucifer. The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too, is Ahab; all are Ahab” (Melville 273). Beyond mere suggestive symbolism, Ahab's directly associating himself with three peaks—each prouder than the devil by name(!)—confirms by confession what already was suggested by Ahab's quarterdeck proclamations such as “I would strike the sun if it insulted me!”; i.e. Ahab is, categorically, Melville's symbolic stand-in for Milton's pale vengeful devil leading a crew against “thou big white God”.

Certainly the Pequod is no ordinary whaling vessel for having not suffered a mutiny after Ahab's declaration of his selfish purpose. One might think that Ahab's offering of great wealth could motivate the crew to follow him against the “subtle demonisms of life and thought” that he sees “practically assailable” (Melville 115) in *Moby Dick*. The wrath of a perceived agent of the God of Israel may deter some as it did the crew of the Jereboam, as well as Pip and Starbuck. But why do Pip and Starbuck and presumably others not rise against dark Ahab? Well, Ahab is the devil-captain, categorically, ruling the fallen with gold and the righteous with fear: “Preserve [me] from all men who have no bowels to feel fear!” wee Pip cries (Melville 111). “Stand by me, hold me, bind me, O ye blessed influences!” humane Starbuck prays, lamenting that his crewmates must have been “Whelped somewhere by the sharkish sea” (Melville 107).

In accordance with his ruler in hell, Ahab accomplishes this not with gold alone but with iron too, for “naught’s an angle to the iron way.” Whether he is correct, the entire crew shall all soon find out.

Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick (Dover Thrift Editions)* Dover Publications. Kindle Edition.