

**Play Me Ishmael:  
“Springs and Motives” Behind *Moby-Dick's* Theatrical Body**

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Extract:

Though I cannot tell why it was exactly that those stage managers, the Fates, put me down for this shabby part of a whaling voyage, when others were set down for magnificent parts in high tragedies, and short and easy parts in genteel comedies ... I think I can see a little into the springs and motives which being cunningly presented to me under various disguises, induced me to set about performing the part I did ...

-*Moby-Dick*, Ch. 1, “Loomings”

*Moby-Dick* is an unequivocally idiosyncratic work. It assumes many modes of narrative and metamorphoses through a menagerie of textual forms. Stage directions, soliloquys reminiscent of Shakespeare, and even a chapter written in the style of scripted dialogue stand out as features whose purpose and origins are not immediately clear, nor immediately contiguous with neighboring chapters of cetology and typical narration. The surface structures in this textual mode lend the book a dramatic sensibility, but drama runs more deeply in the novel than merely its formal elements. A valuable context for the body of *Moby-Dick* is the performative culture in Herman Melville's historical environment, as well as the author's own dramatic and theatrical passions. 'Drama' here refers to the theory and ethos of drama as a literary genre, a topic pursued in the goals and subject matter of Aristotle's *Poetics*, for example. Simply put, drama is the textual form and content of any given theatrical performance, commonly contributed by a playwright. 'Theatricality' is drama's realization and consequence in 'stage business' and people: actors, audiences, technicians, critics, stages, costumes, and other practical and experiential elements associated with performance. 'Performativity,' while it may artistically employ both

drama and theatricality, – though sometimes strictly neither – is the human performative impetus itself. Richard Schechner, a prominent theorist in performance studies, discusses the scope of performative behavior in *Future of Ritual*:

And what is performance? Behavior heightened, if ever so slightly, and publicly displayed; twice-behaved behavior. Even in con games, spies, and stings where performances are cunningly masked and folded into the expected, these are enjoyed by a secret audience, the producers of the deceptions. And no matter how sinister and destructive the deception, when it's made public people get a special kick out of learning all about it. Gordon Liddy of Watergate harvested fat fees lecturing at colleges about his crimes. Performances can be celebratory; performances can terrorize. Many trials and public executions are both. The night the Rosenbergs were electrocuted some people wept, others were enraged, and still others danced in the streets. Performance is amoral, as useful to tyrants as to those who practice guerrilla theatre. This amorality comes from performance's subject, transformation: the startling ability of human beings to create themselves, to change, to become— for worse or better— what they ordinarily are not.

(Schechner 1)

Schechner goes on to note the performative nature inherent in the use of public space for political and social demonstrations, citing the example of gatherings in Tiananmen Square. Public demonstrations were a frequent occurrence in Melville's contemporary New York, with no shortage of riots that found fuel and spark in theatrical performances. The tumultuous spirit of

these mid-century New York performances themselves played no small role in their reception. Walt Whitman, reflecting in 1846 on the famed Edwin Forrest's performance as Spartacus in *The Gladiator* (the role he would play on the fateful night of the Astor Place Riots), describes this “American style of acting” as a “loud mouthed ranting style – the tearing of every thing to shivers,” even calling out the drama for intentional provocativeness: “this Gladiator, [is] calculated to make the hearts of the masses swell responsively to all those nobler manlier aspirations in behalf of mortal freedom!” (Whitman 45). The wild cries and gesticulations of Forrest were typical of the American stage, and were especially appealing to the groundlings and 'Bowery B'hoys' who stood for populism and nativism, often shouting back at the actors. Whitman finishes his review with an exhortation: “If some bold man ... some *American* it must be ... should take high ground, revolutionize the drama ... look above merely the gratification of the vulgar, ... our belief is he would do the republic service, and himself too, in the long round” (47). Five years later, after plenty more rioting, *Moby-Dick* was published.

Performativity runs as lifeblood through *Moby-Dick*, informing its presentation from the macro-plot level to Ishmael's finely tuned unreliable narration. Shakespeare, both as a nineteenth-century cultural icon and as a dramatist, is perhaps chief among the dramatic influences. Parallel to the literary influence of drama runs the contemporary social and theatrical milieu of audience sovereignty, widespread rioting, and divisive performances of race and class. Even ships themselves have a significant anatomy and vocabulary in common with stages. Melville certainly did well for himself in Whitman's “long round,” prompting many modern adaptations for film and stage. One iteration of *Moby-Dick*'s adaptation to the stage, *Moby Dick – Rehearsed*, by Orson Welles, situates the drama and theatricality of Melville's novel within the

frame of a dramatized theatre company rehearsing to perform a production of it. Figuring *Moby-Dick* onstage, onstage, as it were, provides a unique interpretative refinement of the story's performativity, and reflects back on the novel to better reveal its theatrics at work.

Theatre culture is generally built of the social and physical relationships of presence and attention. The theater is a space constructed specifically with sensory information in mind, meant to optimize the performance of one group before another. By virtue of performance as a medium, though, the two groups are hardly isolated from one another – rather, the opposite is true. The transformative effect of performance that Schechner describes involves an experiential relay between performer and audience, creating a loop of feedback. Audiences for some media may seem to be passive consumers in theory, but the expressiveness of performative audiences recreates the nature of performance in its own image. Largely polarized by economic status and by race, American theatre attendance in Melville's day was volatile. Violent street battles raged when Shakespearean actors became proxies for nativist tensions, and African-American theatre troupes were repeatedly attacked while the Jim Crow character rose to popularity (Dillon 219-224). Bodies of all kinds found themselves caught in a fiercely performative space at the New York theatre – a space of presentation and representation where audiences played for each other as much as the actors played. Audience members frequently wandered onstage mid-show, disturbing props, intermingling with actors, and even once flooding on en-masse to dance together after Junius Brutus Booth's Richard III was killed (Dillon 215). The physical divide between stage and audience mattered little, which speaks to the importance of interpersonal performance in any space arrangement, apart from a theatrically-based set of roles.

The theater with its attention-guiding anatomy (however often disregarded) was hardly the only place for performance. Non-theatrical performance as a social behavior took place in spaces not traditionally reserved for performance, or for anything at all. “The vitality of liminal spaces confounds the view of an antebellum 'authorized culture' as hegemonic (highbrow, bourgeois, white, gendered) except as a representative space manifesting a historically locatable desire to dominate” (Bank 6). Liminal spaces provide a sense of place for identities and performances that are themselves liminal, not conforming to the dominating influence. The *Pequod* especially is a liminal space, and certainly a Foucauldian 'Heterotopia': a type of space Michel Foucault describes in six principles as sanctified, purposeful, internally juxtapositional, temporally unconventional, secluded, and microcosmically foregrounded against the space that contains it (Foucault 4-8). Heterotopias contain a blend of culture and ideology while not being bound to any real geographic or economic foundation:

... if we think, after all, that the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea ... you will understand why the boat has not only been for our civilization ... the great instrument of economic development ... but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination. The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates. (9)

The *Pequod* is an iconic blend of economic goals tempered by passionate imagination, and it fully meets Foucault's criteria: Father Mapple's sermon, among other rituals, sanctifies whaling vessels at large; the ship has a clear economic purpose, overlaid with Ahab's vengeful purpose; many contrasting spaces fall against each other onboard; time at sea dilates and contracts with rising and falling action; the *Pequod* is largely inaccessible, and the process of Ishmael's registration is difficult, both bureaucratically and when impeded by Elijah; and finally the ship's seclusion as a totally unique performative space contrasts sharply with the domestic land-bound social world it leaves behind. The book's forays into cetological science, etymology, and literary history also lend the narrative performance the character of a Crystal Palace exhibition (another heterotopia), brimming with “authentic” and grandiose curiosities curated for observation. The sailors and Ahab perform their work and perform their sociocultural exhibits for themselves and each other, creating and filling roles on the unbound stage of obsession. In expounding his third heterotopic principle, juxtaposition, Foucault also mentions theaters:

The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. Thus it is that the theatre brings onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another. (6)

Between its identity as a Foucauldian heterotopia and a socially critical liminal space, the ship-stage in *Moby-Dick* is uniquely suited to unconventional social performance. The authenticity of hegemonic social structures imposed through historical interpretation, as Rosemarie Bank claims

in *Theatre Culture in America, 1825-1860*, is hardly convention; rather, a “compelling deception” (Bank 8). In turn, the very *performance* of liminal social culture is its own self-realizing and self-legitimizing stroke.

Behavioral norms in the theatre were once vastly different from the sobriety and solemnity that would come to replace them. “Audience Sovereignty” reigned. According to Dillon, the audience rush on *Richard III* featured a central rogue performer who led the dancing: T.D. Rice portraying Jim Crow, a character which he originated, and the namesake of the infamous American segregation laws (Dillon 215). Dillon's book, *New World Drama*, puts this character in representational perspective by contrast with other characters of color in drama, including a character contemporary with Jim Crow, Oroonoko. Both characters were originally performed by white actors in blackface for chiefly white audiences. *Oroonoko*, a romantic tragedy centering on a sympathetic black princely hero, met an unfavorable reception with its audiences in the Bowery, while simultaneously Jim Crow's popularity, built on representing the African-American character as inferior, soared. The historical and political consequences of these conflicting representations are enormous:

Placing Jim Crow in a performance lineage with Oroonoko [a much older story] ... underscores the way in which Jim Crow's performance of U.S. national blackness circumscribes and overwrites an earlier Atlantic diasporic history in which blackness has a more extensive geography and lineage – and far more multivalent cultural meanings – than it would come to have in the racialized landscape of the mid-nineteenth-century

United States. The performance of Jim Crow accrues its meaning not just in antic dance and display, but in the act of erasure it simultaneously performs. (220)

Melville's Pip, a "Poor Alabama boy," may perhaps be read superficially as an analogue to Jim Crow, though ultimately he occupies a more liminal performative role (Melville 107). He dances, sings, and plays his tambourine during "Midnight, Forecastle," and he is made out to be both fool and prophet once he loses his mind to the sea. Only after that incident – during which he repeatedly jumps out of the boat: c.f. "Jump, Jim Crow" – Ahab befriends Pip and thinks him a philosophical equal. Queequeg as a character of color, on the other hand, though he speaks a contrived and stereotyped dialect, seems entirely conscious of his own performance of race and the ignorance of those who take it all for granted, including Ishmael. Queequeg tells Ishmael tales of his home island, Kokovoko, and of Queequeg's own past experiences, all of which illustrate cultural differences he sees, and all of which carry subversive criticisms of American culture and Christianity. Queequeg assumes the powerful performative role of storyteller, controlling his self-presentation and knowing Ishmael is taking him entirely at face value. Queequeg as an immigrant Pacific islander and Pip as an African-American have essentially nothing in common culturally, though they both engage in performances of race taken for granted by the white characters around them. The content of each representation is anticipated by the contemporary surrounding culture of white nationalism, but the act of performing seems more outwardly intentional for Queequeg. Still, however caricatured, Pip is even a more complicated presence for Melville than just his racial performance. Wyn Kelley, in "Lying in Various Attitudes,' Staging Melville's Pip in Digital Media," struggles with the representation of



Pip in *Moby-Dick*, and the possibility of representing him in adaptations of the novel, emphasizing Pip's multivalence:

Melville seems to position Pip somewhere between the stereotype of the cowering slave and the voice of reflection and conscience for the book .... As a boy in the liminal space of adolescence, Pip is free to utter the men's fears and to challenge the great white God above. (Kelley 344-345)

As Jim Crow-like as his performances may appear, he also seems fully in control of his unique position on the ship. Pip's presence (or lack thereof) in Welles' *Rehearsed* is a vexing issue, perhaps driven by this liminality. Does Pip's association with Jim Crow erase the complete self-consciousness of the performance by princely Queequeg, or does their coexistence in *Moby-Dick* speak to an acknowledgment of complex contemporary racial performance from Melville qua Ishmael? Such could be the topic for an entirely new paper, but considering it here sheds light on a certain synthesis of nineteenth-century social performativity in *Moby-Dick*. "People in liminal spaces create and are created by alternative cultures in the threshold areas they occupy. ... liminality becomes a declaration of place, a betweenness that takes definition from from what it is not, as does the self-selection of its seeming opposite" (Bank 6). Both onstage and in liminal spaces, constructed sociocultural performance preoccupied the times.

It is no coincidence that John Booth – son of the aforementioned Junius Brutus of the *Richard III* stage rush, who was named, uncannily, after Caesar's assassin – chose to assassinate Abraham Lincoln in a theater. Seconds after the shot rang out, Booth proceeded to deliver an

appropriately theatrical (nigh Shakespearean) “Sic Semper Tyrannis,” and then leapt to the stage (Bogar 2). The assassination took place in Lincoln's audience box, and while this was surely a strategic act by Booth to ensure the President's vulnerability, the tradition of political performances using theaters as proxies is extensive. Lincoln's assassination is merely the most famous example in a long-running performative conversation across the Nineteenth Century about what theaters are capable of meaning. John Ford himself had strong convictions against abolitionism – and corresponded with Edwin Forrest, who shared his views – leading the backstage environment of his theater to become highly politically volatile (13). There is hardly any more fundamental topic in which to ask what it is to inhabit a human body than in the question of slavery. One must keep in mind that the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment would not pass until fourteen years after *Moby-Dick* was written, and then only after five years of a civil war that began with a dispute over the right to own other human beings. Possibly some of *Moby-Dick*'s (admittedly limited) contemporary readership owned slaves. It is not unreasonable to speculate that a certain amount of Melville's contemplation in *Moby-Dick* on inhabiting and controlling the human body owed to contemporaneous discussions of abolition. Between ubiquitous developing performances of American blackness onstage and offstage, and the reactionary performances of white nativism, the performativity of the human body was rarely far from view.

The question of who performs for whom is critical to an understanding of nineteenth-century American theatrical culture, though the answer is concise: everybody performed. The official performances themselves were of essentially equal value (if not greater) sociopolitically than artistically. The Astor Place Riot, admittedly a belabored example in the realm of nineteenth-century theatre, was a single symptomatic event stemming from the violently

performative populism at the cultural core. In summary, the riot represented a violent climax in socioeconomic tension, using two actors' rivalry as a proxy to express it: "At the time the event was both understood and clearly projected by the participants as a class conflict of a distinctly cultural nature" (Ackerman 98). William Charles Macready, an acclaimed tragedian from London, and the aforementioned Edwin Forrest, from Philadelphia, had sparked the conflict long before with a seemingly playful rivalry over who was the superior actor, but this ultimately escalated, implicating Macready's fans, the upper class patrons, and Forrest's, the rowdy "Bowery B'hoys" in a bloody battle outside the Astor Place Theatre (Cliff 220). Based on Melville's signature appearing on a supportive note from a group of New York intellectuals, some sources say *Moby-Dick's* author took the side of William Macready, whose British citizenship and subtler style ran counter to U.S. populist and nativist ideals, even though Melville was a proponent of American authors (Cliff xx). More realistically, however, Melville was ambivalent about fervent support of either actor, and his signature on the letter ought not to be mistaken for his whole opinion on Shakespearean performance: "Whatever Melville's emotional engagement with Forrest or Ahab, his use of the dramatic hero in his prose indicates an intense and complex struggle between the ruthless democrat and the cultured elitist" (Ackerman 117). The nuance of Melville's relationship to Shakespeare is only reinforced by the author's place in the actors' conflict, which in turn informs both the melodramatic and the subtly Shakespearean in *Moby-Dick*.

Certainly the major dramatic preoccupation in nineteenth-century America was with Shakespeare, and Melville's creative ardor found its fuel in the artistic culture of his day. F. O. Matthiessen, in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, comprehensively shows how stylistically the very

words of *Moby-Dick* seem cast from the molds of Shakespeare (Matthiessen). It seems that Melville possessed a Shakespearean momentum which carried allusively into his characters' diction, perhaps even in an unconscious mode of creation (285). According to Matthiessen, "The most important effect of Shakespeare's use of language was to give Melville a range of vocabulary for expressing passion far beyond any that he had previously possessed" (287). The mode of Shakespeare appears infectious, lending a new powerful palette of dramatic expression to an otherwise already dramatic work. Ahab's dark soliloquys mimic The Bard's tragic heroes, and minor characters become his fools, gravediggers, and watchmen.

The burgeoning theatrical communities in the American "New World" had lovingly adopted the Elizabethan plays, claiming equal (or better) entitlement with England:

Shakespeare had become American. America had not become Shakespearean: that would be a claim too far .... James Fenimore Cooper called him the great author of America .... Some went further: the New World, they insisted, embodied the Bard's spirit better than his own country. America itself, many came to believe, was the ark in which the true Shakespeare would be saved. (Cliff 18)

Not only were the plays wildly popular among American audiences, but their essential spirit and the spirit of their creator apparently found a theatrical promised land, per-se, where the great tragedies could finally come into their own. Incorporating these tragedies into the creation of *Moby-Dick*, the analytical scope of Charles Olson's *Call me Ishmael* is vast, providing historical, political, and economic genealogies for M-D, also regarding the American whaling industry and

Democracy. Olson, in his deft and poetic dissection of *Moby-Dick's* genesis and inner workings – practically literary cetology in itself – does an enormous amount of legwork in teasing out the Shakespearean in Melville's novel. The literary influences on the creation of the text itself are concretely traceable for Olson, who examines Melville's own handwritten notes in the margins of the account of the whaleship *Essex*, and in copies of Shakespeare's works. A full concordance of *Moby-Dick* with the works of Shakespeare is well beyond the scope of this paper, but Olson emphasizes that the major influential plays were *Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Timon of Athens*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*, with smaller elements or character influences from *Troilus and Cressida*, *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, *The Tempest*, and *Othello*, plus Marlowe's & Goethe's *Fausts* (Olson 42-58). Almost in answer to Whitman's call for a revolutionary American dramatist, Olson canonizes Melville to an unquestionably American mythological sphere, conjuring his influences and legacy into a tragic theological and political storm with *Moby-Dick* at the eye.

What drew Melville to Shakespeare was in some part personal sympathy borne on a deep fascination with the plays. As one author to another, Melville felt for the sense of the playwright's overflowing expression withheld in eloquent subtleties, as he wrote to publisher Evert Duyckink (quoted by Olson) two years before *Moby-Dick's* publication:

I would to God Shakespeare had lived later . . . . the muzzle which all men wore on their souls in the Elizabethan day, might not have intercepted Shakespeare's free 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? (Olson 41-42)

The Shakespearean in *Moby-Dick*, from soliloquys and their diction to the tragic dramatic arc, may to an extent be addressed in sympathetic homage to the Bard's "muzzled" truths, additionally providing Melville an opportunity to offer himself up as a vicarious outlet for all the unspoken frank ideas he saw behind the withholding Shakespeare. In this way, Melville may have envisioned himself, earnestly and perhaps even humbly, as a spiritual successor to Shakespeare, though to say so in public would have been a kind of literary blasphemy. In *Hawthorne's Mosses*, Melville specifies that his fascination is indeed chiefly with what Shakespeare "refrained from doing," which according to Olson manifested in *Moby-Dick* as a "fight ... to give truth dramatic location" (42-43). This hearkens to Ahab's stirring speech on the quarter-deck, responding to Starbuck's accusation of blasphemy in his mission:

Hark ye yet again, – the little lower layer. All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event – in the living act, the undoubted deed – there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. ... That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me. For could the sun do that, then could I do the other; since there is ever a sort of fair play herein, jealousy presiding over all creations. (Melville 140)

Though Ahab's cause is destructive, and Melville's, creative, they are both possessed of a keen awareness that the perceptible surface of any performance is merely a mask for the greater thing acting from behind it. Ishmael's similar ponderings on "springs and motives" echo the question of an ultimate motivator, of the God behind the man behind the actor behind the character behind the mask, an idea that has tenacious purchase throughout *Moby-Dick*.

Ahab is the most prolific voice for questions of corporeality and motivation, and he revisits this issue at great length in several monologues. Two are most notable, the first being a contemplation of corporeal existence addressed to the carpenter, as Ahab is being fitted for a new leg:

Hist then. How dost thou know that some entire, living, thinking thing may not be invisibly and uninterpenetratingly standing precisely where thou now standest; aye, and standing there in thy spite? In thy most solitary hours, then, dost thou not fear eavesdroppers? Hold, don't speak! And if I still feel the smart of my crushed leg, though it be now so long dissolved; then, why mayst not thou, carpenter, feel the fiery pains of hell for ever, and without a body? ... By heavens! I'll get a crucible, and into it, and dissolve myself down to one small, compendious vertebra. So. (360)

If Ahab could choose any singular piece of the human body to inhabit, naturally he would insist on maintaining his backbone. Ahab exhibits a strong belief in the divide between body and 'being,' a thought which is reinforced by the phantom pains from his lost leg. His being thus is

already divided between the earthly and the unearthly – Ahab has “one foot beyond the grave,” so to speak. Only partly bound to the physical world in which the other foot stands, Ahab's otherworldly sensations lead to a philosophical problem: how much of a human being must exist in the physical world for him still to qualify as a human being? Take all the body parts away, and an “entire, living thinking thing” must, in Ahab's philosophy, still remain. This raises a parallel question: how much of an actor must be present onstage for his character to also be present? Take as an example the character of Ariel in *The Tempest*, noted occasionally in the stage directions as delivering lines while invisible (Shakespeare 34); or Banquo's ghost in *Macbeth*, which certain productions choose to portray by Macbeth addressing an eerily empty chair (Gold). After all, Ishmael is practically “eavesdropping” on this scene from an unknown and perhaps disembodied location. Moby Dick is a similarly absent presence throughout the entire novel, lurking always beneath the ocean on which the text floats – becoming almost “invisibly and uninterpenetratingly” a part of that ocean – though the eponymous whale only enters the stage in the last few chapters. Through this principle, the corporeal presence of physical beings becomes a fundamentally theatrical existence, and in turn theatricality is permitted a “little lower layer” of incorporeal and ineffable direction. The character is not a part of the mask on the actor's body, but rather vice versa. The body was only ever a mask; only ever a poor player the character's being inhabited for its fretful hour upon the stage.

The second of Ahab's major contemplations on existence takes place in an uncommon period of peace and natural harmony in chapter 132, “The Symphony.” The chapter begins with images of the creatures of the water and air in perfect unity, with the sea as a sleeping Samson, evoking untapped strength (and perhaps ultimate vulnerability) in the seemingly infinite waters



carrying the *Pequod* (404). Ahab, likened to a burned ruin, gazes out over the scene and sheds a tear: “nor did all the Pacific contain such wealth as that one wee drop” (405). Ahab’s body appears uninhabited but for the fiery glow in his eyes, and the sudden wetness of the tear suggests emotional machinations to which Ishmael is not privy. The evaluation of the scene is curious, especially because its speaker is uncertain. Ahab, Starbuck, and Fedallah remain the only “onstage” characters, which necessitates some re-reading of the preceding description: because this is one of many scenes in *Moby-Dick* implicitly narrated by Ishmael without any explicable possibility of *how* Ishmael could be narrating, perhaps the description should be linked to Melville, or even to Ahab. On one hand, Ishmael's consistent narration might at first glance need to be read as more of a formal conceit than as actual evidence of his consistent presence, but the novel's overall dubiousness about physical embodiment stands as a compelling counter-argument. If Ishmael's body need not be present onstage for him to observe and narrate, his being may easily act as a relay for observations and thoughts which his physical body could not experience. Whose thoughts are Ishmael's thoughts? Perhaps even readers are complicit in this relay, too – so who, then, is performing for whom? Ishmael will be specifically pursued later, but Ahab's preceding monologue asks appropriately similar questions about his own existence:

What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper, natural heart, I durst not so

much as dare? Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm? But if the great sun move not of himself; but is as an errand-boy in heaven; nor one single star can revolve, but by some invisible power; how then can this one small heart beat; this one small brain think thoughts; unless God does that beating, does that thinking, does that living, and not I. By heaven, man, we are turned round and round in this world, like yonder windlass, and Fate is the handspike. And all the time, lo! That smiling sky, and this unsounded sea! Look! See yon Albicore! Who put it into him to chase and fang that flying-fish? Where do murderers go, man! Who's to doom, when the judge himself is dragged to the bar? But it is a mild, mild wind, and a mild looking sky; and the air smells now, as if it blew from a far-away meadow; they have been making hay somewhere under the slopes of the Andes, Starbuck, and the mowers are sleeping among the new-mown hay. Sleeping? Are, toil we how we may, we all sleep at last on the field. Sleep? Aye, and rust amid greenness; as last year's scythes flung down, and left in the half-cut swaths – Starbuck!”

(406-407)

Though often rhetorical, Ahab is rarely so interrogative or self-effacing. He delivers this speech after waxing nostalgic about his early whaling days, lamenting his age and weariness, and finding painfully fraught solace imagining he sees his wife and child when he looks into Starbuck's eye (406). The questions voice uncertainty about Ahab's own internal consistency and motivations; an uncertainty that is distinctly and uncharacteristically candid. Even the obsession of literature's most infamously unshakeable obsessive is tempered by some regret, doubt, and existential dread. Even just before the first day of the chase, the entire set of “springs and

motives” behind the part Ahab is playing is questionable in origin. The phrase, “Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm?” is ambiguous: either Ahab is addressing God, asking “I, or who?”, or he is listing God as one of the potential movers. Though previously Ahab practically threatened to strike the sun, now when meditating on his own age and mortality he is disturbed by the disparity between the movements of stars and the movement of a beating heart, because the implication that God moves both denies Ahab free will. In the narrative sense, this passage may directed at the meta-mover of Melville, expressing authorial agnosticism. Though Ahab believes firmly that behind his body exists a self that will persist, the self may have a higher governing influence limiting its will, and that governor a higher governor, and so on. The only recourse for him is to find an existential certainty of meaning in death, and necessarily a death on stable land, where the body can pass into unity with the earth, rather than a death at sea where the body might be lost, even more than just a leg. With the stage of the *Pequod* drawing nearer to its final curtain, Ahab senses the end of his part is at hand.

All in all, Melville's cast seems well-suited to play their revenge tragedy, but the question of Ishmael's narration, as mentioned previously, complicates the purpose of drama in the book. A play is not a mediated artefact like a narrative, but then (it must be clearly said as Olson said it), *Moby-Dick* is not a play. The characters playing out *Moby-Dick* are simply inextricable from their capacity for performance. Movements and voices are governed textually by dramatic devices: stage directions and bare dialogue can usurp the novel's form. The narrator's assumption of a singular specific name is comparable to the assumption of a certain character by an actor onstage – the name is a costume necessary to complete the performance. The word “Ishmael” appears only 20 times in the entire text of *Moby-Dick*. Only three of those appearances are

spoken aloud, and only two of the three are spoken by a character who is not Ishmael. Those two appear in the same utterance by Captain Peleg when assigning Ishmael his lay of the ship's profits: "Now then, my young man, Ishmael's thy name, didn't ye say? Well then, down ye go here, Ishmael, for the three hundredth lay" (77). This "didn't ye say" refers to an introduction that never actually appears in the narrative, unless we are to assume our narrator unspokenly always introduces himself as at the start of Chapter 1. Owing to this discontinuity, it seems unreasonable to assume that anyone onboard the *Pequod* actually would have referred to *Moby-Dick's* narrator by the name he gives in the book's first line. The example from Peleg may even be an error in Ishmael's mediation of what happened – because there was no opportunity for Ishmael to give his name, there is no way Peleg could have known it – revealing unreliability in Ishmael's self-description. In a work whose first words demand a name, Ishmael's identity signified by use of his name is conspicuously limited. His physical presence in the events of the novel is barely more certain, despite the assumption that his personal experience is allegedly the basis for the narrative's existence. That is, unless the story is merely a performance.

Theatre is not solitary. The public character of the theatre experience resides in *Moby-Dick*, though the text claims territory in the solitary intake of literature. This problematizes the identity of the book artistically, especially in narration – Melville has given himself access to elements of populism, interactiveness, and the communally performative from within a form of isolation and ponderousness. If Melville had actually thought it more appropriate to write a play instead, surely he would have. He proves himself capable of drama within the text, in a somewhat fraught and mediated way, suggesting that drama is more than a mere stylistic gimmick: "Midnight, Forecastle" is a unique choice, standing as an effective deconstruction of

the novel's textual body (145). Ishmael neither speaks nor narrates any lines in this chapter, casting him as a likely audience member, but immediately afterward he says “I, Ishmael, was one of that crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest” (152). Setting the audience and players familiarly in closed opposing groups prompts the question of whether it is better to conceive of Melville as this chapter's playwright, or Ishmael? Further, how does this tease apart the identities of playwright, narrator, and audience member? Ishmael's precise narrative curation of the story of the *Pequod*, certainly evident in his choice to include a comprehensive epigraph block of extracts, and chapters on cetology and blubber processing, permits “Midnight, Forecastle” to betray Ishmael's own dramatic sensibility as narrator. In turn, Melville's authorship is what imbued Ishmael with a dramatic authorial impulse.

Rather than Melville creating his own play, he created a play's creator, flouting the preconceived notions of strict narrative form, and making that form capable of more than it seems. With that in mind, the problem of Ishmael's embodiment raised in “The Symphony” and many other non-Ishmael chapters gains another layer. The disembodied being of Ishmael as an ethereal character – who hardly even has a reliable name – exists chiefly in the weaving of the text when he is not 'onstage,' so the cession of formal control by Melville to his invisible narrator casts Melville as the handspike to Ishmael's windlass. Though this may seem to be a trivial assertion – that an author determines the action of his characters – the theatrical hierarchy of “springs and motives” now gains a level beyond the characters who play within the actors' bodies and behind their masks. Let this paper stand in respectful disagreement with Alan L. Ackerman Jr., in *The Portable Theater*:

In *Moby-Dick* drama, or the dramatic, often represents that which narrative cannot express. [...] *Moby-Dick* represents, then, a basic conflict not only between the dramatic and novelistic character, but also, implicitly, between the dramatic and novelistic storyteller, for Ishmael functions both as interdiegetic author and audience. (91-124)

The incorporeal character of Ishmael always inhabits and manipulates Melville's textual mask, whether or not his body is onstage. Ishmael's written narrative *becomes* precisely the essence and embodiment of drama, and its capabilities are hardly limited by prescriptive categorizations of novelistic writing. With curatorial agency in Ishmael's domain, the formal elements of this “traditional narrative” are really as changeable as the expressions on an actor's face.

As a rich counterpoint to Melville's novel in its dramatic-narrative mode, in 1965 Orson Welles created an unconventional translation of *Moby-Dick* to the stage in the play, *Moby Dick – Rehearsed*. The conceit is familiar, even Shakespearean – a play acting as a diegetic framework for another play – but a doubly-dramatized *Moby-Dick* has important implications in light of the novel's inherent theatricality. Ishmael certainly continues to serve a narrative role in *Rehearsed*, but the story does not begin with him in earnest. Instead, Welles' play opens on a mundane crowd of stagehands and actors, not all of them cohesive with one another nor with the idea of putting on *Moby-Dick*. The agency for the creation of the drama in *Rehearsed* does not come from a single narrating character who feels he must tell and curate his story, but rather from the “Governor” or director of the show, who later plays the role of Ahab. The means of the play's creation are also dispersed: while in *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael's strange narrative is the substance, in *Rehearsed*, there is a Stage Manager to provide the sound of thunder; an actress plays the organ

and the disembodied voice of Pip; stage directions are read aloud from offstage. Welles' piece helps reflect back onto *Moby-Dick* as an interpretation of, among other features, the distinctions between playwright, narrator, and audience member.

Before the opening soliloquy, which mimics Ishmael's first pieces in "Loomings," the text of the play begins with directions for setting the scene. All is kept quite pointedly bare-bones, the intentionality of which casts a different light on the source material:

SCENE: An American theatre at the end of the last century .... No stage properties are used. Harpoons, oars, lances, gold-pieces, prayer-books, charts and telescopes, are all to be indicated in gesture and mime. For easier reading only a minimum of stage directions are given in the text. The chase in the whale-boat, for example, is referred to briefly as a literal action, with no attempt to describe the means by which the actors will suggest this performance. It would not be true to say that there is no scenery. The stage is not bare; it is interestingly and even romantically dressed with all the lumber of an old-fashioned theatre. (Welles 5)

In a certain way this setting direction might be read as a knowing critique of *Moby-Dick's* theatrical mode of being. The novel's dramatic narrative comes into its own by way of the complex questions of embodiment in its characters, who make their action on a stage that is not quite empty, yet simply "dressed" in the romantic and idiosyncratic asceticism of older performances. As characters within their actors (behind their masks) struggle for personal performances of self, presence, and will, the activities of the bodies onstage in *Moby-Dick* are

simply referred to by their “literal action” whose end is to “suggest a performance” rather than to complete those activities in earnest. For performative bodies, all action is, as Schechner says, “twice-behaved behavior.” The soliloquy following does indeed begin, “Call me Ishmael . . . .,” and various other actors enter as if they are governed by the narration, but a sudden thunderclap interrupts “The Young Actor” in the midst of his meditation on water. According to the stage direction, “The Actors pay no attention to this, some lighting cigars or cigarettes, and one relaxing with a newspaper” (6-7). The shocking intrusion of the thunderclap brings the outer diegesis (meaning the diegesis of the rehearsing company) into sharp focus: the actors were never governed by this narration at all, but merely happened to show up to the rehearsal as the Young Actor was practicing. In explanation of the thunderclap, a Stage Manager appears to check that his execution of an effect in the inner diegesis (the diegesis within the company's play) was suitable. The Stage Manager continues to oversee and execute these inner diegetic environmental elements, such as thunder, wind, and, once the play begins, stage directions read aloud. He even tries multiple means of thunder, one with drums and one with a thunder sheet (7). The Stage Manager serves a purpose for which there is no explicit analogue in *Moby-Dick*, as the technical upkeep of the novel's diegetic environment is almost synonymous with the existence of the narrative in the first place. Melville employed no extra literary stagehand to ensure that the book's environment behaved properly and on time; the governance of the novel's universe is subsumed within Ishmael's narrative, but that hardly stops Melville's characters from wondering how it works. The text of Welles' play may claim not to have many stage directions, but perhaps this is not true of the play that Welles' characters are performing. That is, unless it is in fact the same play, and the performance is recursive. The same might be said of *Moby-Dick*, for all its



dramatic strangeness – it is so difficult to pin Ishmael down that perhaps he is merely writing down the story of *Moby-Dick* as he is reading it, allowing his mind to move in and out of scenes as the characters in *Rehearsed* move in and out of the inner diegesis of their play.

The Cynical Actor, complaining about the lack of general “sanity” in the play, has a slip of consciousness when telling the Young Actor he finds “that one-legged old Captain in your book” entirely insane. The Young Actor responds, “Don't call it *my* book,” and the Cynical Actor retorts, “Well, I can't call it anybody's *play*; and the Governor is *your* Governor, laddie. You're the only one who could have talked him into this, –*whatever* it is” (8). The critical piece of information here is that the Young Actor will later play Ishmael when the inner diegesis begins. The body Ishmael will inhabit is, in Welles' opinion, resisting responsibility for the drama. He is more than willing to play it out, but the Governor is ultimately the one who will shoulder all the blame for the formal “*whatever*.” The Governor's role in the inner diegesis is Ahab, which is a fascinating correspondence if the parallel Welles means to draw is between the Governor and Melville. In that case, *Moby-Dick's* Ishmael is following *Melville* along on the fateful mission, and it makes sense that he is the only one to survive, as he is the only one who exists within the immortality of the text. The Young Actress' next line includes an apropos pun on *Moby-Dick's* collision of drama and novel (my emphasis): As I understand it, this is to be a sort of *reading* – or rather a dress rehearsal without costumes or scenery” (8).

When the actor known as the Old “Pro.” complains of being thirsty, the Stage Manager warns, “Only one beer, gentleman [sic], please – don't forget, we must be out of here in time to give the stagehands a chance to set up for tonight” (8). Again this evokes a dramatic feature whose realization is nowhere to be found in *Moby-Dick*. Granted, early crews of stagehands were

sailors who communicated by bosun's whistle, generating the superstition against whistling in theaters, lest the signals be disrupted. On a ship, the boundary between who is running the workings and who is striding onstage is often blurred. Stagehands may be everywhere, as perhaps their work is a role to play like any other. This exhortation also serves as a reminder that the inner diegetic performance to follow is a rehearsal, and the same thing will be repeated later in the evening – yet what, if anything besides higher technical precision on the actors' part (not including audience presence), is the difference between a rehearsal and a performance? The Stage Manager provides some voices from offstage, but those voices are still speaking. Corporeality in a rehearsal is even more fluid than in an ordinary production. What is more, the actors' being onstage prevents the stagehands from doing their setup work. The work of a stagehand is by definition invisible, so perhaps that explains the overt lack of backstage support for *Moby-Dick's* drama. As long as the performance is in progress, none of the stagehands should be visible.

When it comes to staging the whale, the Cynical Actor lives up to his title, prompting a particularly revelatory exchange. The dialogue exposes some of the dramatic consciousness of *Moby-Dick*, as if picking Melville's unconscious creative mind in the process of designing the drama:

The Young Actress. A white whale?

The Cynical Actor. The title-role, my dear. One might have expected the Governor to be playing Moby Dick himself, but no, I understand he's to be invisible throughout. The whale, that is – not the Governor.

The Old “Pro.” Of course it's invisible. My God, how could you put a thing like that on the stage?

The Actor With The Newspaper. We could try. Uptown in Barnum's Museum there's a stuffed whale does more business on a Monday morning than we get in a week of Shakespeare – including matinees.

The Young Actor. (*Still speaking more to the Young Actress than to anyone else.*) The white whale is like the storm in “Lear” – it's real, but it's more than real; – it's an idea in the mind.

The Cynical Actor. It's an idea in *your* mind, old boy.

The Young Actress. “Lear's” what I was called to rehearse; but if you're doing this “Moby Dick” instead, there aren't any women's parts, so I guess I'm only needed for some music. (8-9)

The company of *Moby-Dick's* players were called to put on *Lear*, and the play seems to have been switched out at the last minute, after all the preparation for *Lear* had been done. The actors are ready to speak in Shakespearean diction, much like the unconscious absorption described by Matthiessen, and the thematic purpose of *Lear's* storm is particularly useful to them as a means of understanding the role of Moby Dick, in line with Olson's assertion that *Lear* is first among Melville's influential Shakespearean plays. Welles is getting at the fundamental structure of *Moby-Dick's* cast of actors – keep in mind, these are nameless actors, not characters – within Melville's mind: their preparedness, their preferences, their attitudes, and their relationship to one

another. The use of the whale as a symbol of financial gain also mirrors the ostensible economic goal of the *Pequod* compared to its eventual tragic ending.

As the actors quibble about musical accompaniment, the Governor enters, clothed ominously in a black inverness cape, and launches almost immediately into dialogue from *Lear*: “How now, Cordelia; mend your speech a little, Lest it may mar your fortunes.’ Three steps down right and bow. (*He makes the transition from Shakespeare to stage directions without a pause for breath*)” (9-10). The last stage direction could handily be an evaluation of Melville. As soon as the Governor enters the room, he also lives up to his title – he governs the other actors, starting with the movement-by-movement direction of the Young Actress as Cordelia. The Governor, in line with the proposed link to Melville, assumes authorship of the company. Once the Old “Pro.” and the Cynical Actor get going again complaining about the intended form of *Moby-Dick*, another exchange takes place that reflects on the sociocultural dramatic aspects of Melville:

The Cynical Actor. Well, at least “King Lear” was meant to be acted. This whale business was intended to be read.

The Young Actor. To be read aloud. There are things that simply have to be heard –

The Cynical Actor. The Governor never should have allowed you to go to University, laddie – God deliver the Theatre from educated actors!

The Serious Actor. Because they're always trying to educate the public, you mean?

Well –

[...]

The Governor. Impertinence! We are the servants of the public! Just that; – servants. My God, gentlemen – how would you like to have to listen to uplifting lectures from your cook? [...] After all, that's our profession; one in which nothing is absolutely required except the actor: – and, of course, he only needs an audience. [...] Boy, they *never* need us! Nobody ever *needed* the Theatre, at all, except the people up on the stage. Did you ever hear of an unemployed audience? (11-12)

Apart from assuaging the hypothesis that Ishmael is an audience member throughout *Moby-Dick*, this dialogue hints at the divide between the appreciation of Shakespeare via educated intellectual analysis versus the enjoyment of melodrama and powerful humor and violence. Even from within the actors putting on the production, the tools at Melville's disposal, there is discord about the proper way to create theater, which fits with the ambivalence Melville felt for Macready and Forrest, and his struggle with an almost personal need to carry on in Shakespeare's stead. The “uplifting lectures from your cook” line is almost certainly a nod to the scenes in chapter 64 of *Moby-Dick* featuring Fleece, the *Pequod's* cook, who delivers a somewhat uplifting sermon to sharks who are eating from Stubb's whale. Fleece and the ship's carpenter each have honest speeches to give, reinforcing the idea of true actors as servants, passing in and out of stagehand-like roles. The problem of the audience's presence enumerates the main difference between a rehearsal and a performance: with nobody for whom to play, there is no potential feedback loop of audience reactions changing the nature of the performance. Through all this pre-rehearsal discussion, Welles' play complicates the idea of playing roles. None of the actors out of character even have names; they are merely types, or even surreal archetypes of actor for

the characters to inhabit. They are the Governor's, and by parallel Melville's, toolbox of theatrical bodies who help to create the dramatic framework of *Moby-Dick*.

Once the inner diegesis of the rehearsed play begins, the names in the script change to the names of characters rather than the actors' titles. Now that the characters are inhabiting the actors' bodies, the bodies have identities and performative momentum: as the Governor says right before the play begins, "We'll run straight through no matter what happens – that is, unless we all break down together" (13). The play proceeds largely as a straightforward abridgement of the novel's plot, with Ishmael delivering the majority of his narrating lines facing the audience. Perhaps this is also a commentary on Melville's style of drama-narrative: the effect of Ishmael narrating as such within a novel is akin to an actor addressing an empty house. Throughout, the Stage Manager continues to give scene setting directions and stage directions, occasionally prompting actors who have not begun their lines. Interestingly, this begins the pronunciation of stage directions in the plot of *Rehearsed's* inner diegesis significantly earlier than they ever appear in *Moby-Dick*. In the novel, the first stage direction appears following the first entrance of Ahab: chapter 29 is titled "Enter Ahab; to him, Stubb," and begins with that direction. This lends form to the stage directions in *Rehearsed*, such as "The owner Mister Peleg discovered. Enter to him Ishmael" (14). Welles piece implies that the stage directions were being enacted all along in *Moby-Dick*, even if the text was not granting them explicit attention. The section corresponding to "Midnight, Forecastle," now potentially an even more mediated piece of drama, is performed simply, with the sailors names occasionally read aloud, as if at last giving the only truly scripted piece of *Moby-Dick* its room to breathe. The attention that *Rehearsed* pays to certain elements is also selective, with a major example being the almost total exclusion of the character of

Queequeg. While in *Moby-Dick* he and Ishmael become friends and walk around Nantucket together before sailing, in *Rehearsed*, Queequeg does not appear at all except for a few minor lines late in the script. Welles speeds through all three harpooners in the same descriptive passage from Ishmael: “Our tiger harpooners: – Queequeg, a tattooed island aboriginal; the blood-skinned Iroquois Tashtego; and great Daggoo, a giant, coal-black African” (27). This does not speak highly of the onstage representation of Melville's characters of color, despite the canniness and intentionality of Queequeg's performances in the novel. Welles' motivation for excising the close friendship between Queequeg and Ishmael may be to heighten the sense of solitude in Ishmael's narration, but it may also be to emphasize the problem of portraying a major character of color among a cast that may be all white. This choice registers with the problematic onstage performances of characters of color by white actors in Melville's day, which also brings up the strangeness of Welles' portrayal of Pip.

In the Stage Manager's words, the company is “failing [to include] a small negro child,” so “Miss Jenkins,” (the only woman in both texts, and the only actor in the company to have a name), is to play the part only by speaking the lines. Pip's body is erased from the stage entirely in Welles' production, which in light of the intentionality of the rest of the play's choices regarding embodiment, is almost certainly not actually a matter of lacking the desired cast member. As previously discussed, Pip is a complicated presence in *Moby-Dick*, as his not-quite-caricature is fraught with personal insight and agency, and he is at an especially liminal age. Welles chooses to include Pip onstage in voice only, yet as a significantly more major character relative to the rest of the play than he was in the novel. Pip is not a character who can inhabit the body of one of Melville's archetype actors, and yet he is a regular presence in *Rehearsed*. This

could potentially be read as an acknowledgment by Welles that Melville may have been recognizing something beyond the scope of his contemporary drama – that Pip as such did not exist yet among Jim Crow and Oroonoko, done by white actors in blackface, and for the moment Pip could only find his light on the heterotopic stage of the *Pequod*. Welles and Melville encourage a second look at those who at first seem not to be present at all.

To consider the similarities in anatomy, vocabulary, and operation between a whaleship and a theatrical stage is a fruitful exercise. Foundationally, both spaces are designed for precision of movement, for collaborative operation, and, most importantly, for a mission of pursuit and exploration. To restate the assertion from Foucault: “The boat has not only been for our civilization ... the great instrument of economic development ... but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination .... In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up” (9). Friends and families famously form an audience as ships sail away, and early settlers on Nantucket could even watch from shore as their sailors hunted nearby pods of whales (Philbrick 7). Sailing is a spectacle for those on land as much as it is a functional operation for those at sea – the former group is stationary, observant, and patient, while the latter group comes and goes with much ado, striding the decks and calling out orders and information, all the while buoyant on an the whims of something vast and unknowable. Ishmael's choice to go to sea is founded in his need for the transformational power of this functionally performative way of life, to save him from a toxic stasis in the known world.

So much of theater is understood to operate invisibly. There is even a proper term for the spaces out of view – “backstage” – whose reality is never in question, but never foregrounded.



Rather, the world backstage is the space whose unseen and largely unacknowledged inhabitants generate a new and unfamiliar kind of reality. The visible portion of the stage is like a shutter left accidentally open; an exception to the rule of the theater's dark annexes that produce and recirculate light, sound, and motion. Performativity feeds on this accidental feeling that two realities, strange and fascinating to one another, are colliding in the same place, making the processes of expression and feedback just as enthralling and unpredictable for those performing as for those who are, if only for the moment, playing the audience. Both Melville and Welles recognized that those who are playing invisibly backstage are a unique group, and it is unreasonable to think that they have no analogous counterparts in life beyond the theater. Stagehands and technicians play the unacknowledged world at work – if, as an audience member, it seems like the surrounding world outside the theater is entirely known, and all its people entirely acknowledged, look again. To look a second time at racial and socioeconomic oppression; to look a second time at marginalized and liminal performances of reality; to look a second time at what it is to feel one's being inhabiting a human body it might not find entirely familiar; thus is the spring and motive of the performative in *Moby-Dick*.

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