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# Faltering in the Fight: *Pierre* and *Hamlet*

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Melville's 1852 novel *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* foregrounds its intertextual link to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. This essay focuses on several subjects: incest, framed as an all-encompassing allegory for the problems within and posed by the family; sexual ambivalence, which both the tragedy and the novel thematize in the hero's horror at the thought of adult genitality; and an episode that links *Hamlet* to *Pierre* and combines concerns with authorship and dismemberment, the reference to the myth of the amputated Giant Enceladus. Pierre is notable for being the most sustained depiction of female sexuality in Melville's work. The titular hero's possible half-sister Isabel can be considered a version of Shakespeare's Ophelia, just as the character of Mary Glendinning, Pierre's mother, revises Hamlet's mother Gertrude. Melville's transformation of Shakespeare's female portraits is fascinatingly problematic. He uses the precursor text to imagine forms of subversive female power but also reifies images of the woman as, respectively, narcissistic and siren-like, a doom to men. At the same time, Melville reimagines Milton's Eve, specifically the moment where she ponders her own reflection in a pool. The novel's most resistant element is its *Hamlet*-like depiction of masculinity as "faltering in the fight" compromised and embattled. Melville's Shakespearean and ekphrastic uses of the Enceladus myth allow him to develop an allegorical register for his mutually illuminating explorations of the failure of the artist and the failure of American masculinity.

**Keywords:** Melville, Milton, Female sexuality, Masculinity, Narcissism, Incest

Herman Melville's work reflects the centrality of Shakespeare's influence, rivalled only by Milton's, for American Romanticism. As Jonathan Arac notes: "During the romantic period the most consequential writers of the various Western national cultures found Shakespeare an indispensable means of defining their own

innovations" (Arac 2011, 6)[1]. Melville's novel *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, published in 1852, passionately evinces this Shakespearean indispensability in its intertextual relationship with *Hamlet*. "Shakespeare saturated" the writing of *Pierre*, Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker note in *Reading Melville's "Pierre; or, The Ambiguities"* (Higgins and Parker 2006, 21). They buttress their claim that no writer of fiction before Melville had so closely attended to "the complex workings of the psyche" by crediting Shakespeare as the author to whom Melville was "deeply indebted" for this achievement (23). Consultation with digitized Melville's copy of *Hamlet* at the website *Melville's Marginalia Online*, a digital archive of books Melville owned, borrowed, and consulted, confirms Melville's deep engagement with the text, which contains many markings in pencil and also an annotation written in the margins: "Here is forcibly shown the great Montaignism of Hamlet" (Shakespeare 1837, 7:297)[2].

*Pierre*'s strong incestuous overtones echo *Hamlet* and synthesize the centrality of incest discourse in nineteenth-century America[3]. Incest gave Romantic writers a capacious metaphor for

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1 In the Romantic era, Shakespeare assumed the God-like power of the Bible; his works and the Bible were both seen "as the expression of an incomparable inner power requiring endless exegesis" (Arac 2011, 15).

2 Melville rediscovered Shakespeare in 1849 and read him avidly, comprehensively, and intensely, the occasion being Melville's acquisition of the 1837 American edition of the Hilliard, Gray *Dramatic Works of William Shakespeare*. This seven-volume set, in which Melville marked thirty-one plays, is digitized at *Melville's Marginalia Online*. *Melville's Marginalia Online* allows readers to search these volumes for Melville's markings, annotations, and so forth, several of them newly recovered through digital technology. As Christopher Ohge et al. elucidate: "Computational approaches to [Melville's] marginalia allow readers to complement assessments of word counts and frequencies, word variety, topic clusterings, and sentiment associations, with informed acts of close reading and source elucidation that reveal Melville constructing new paths in his own writing from his experiences of reading Shakespeare" (Ohge et al. 2018, 65).

3 For an analysis of the thoroughgoing importance of incest to literary production and social arrangements in the early republic and the antebellum period, see Connolly 2014. Connolly draws on Butler's theory of the "melancholia of gender identification", noting that the incest prohibition, rooted in the prior ban on homosexual desire for the same-sex parent,

the artist's relationship to the world, their own creativity, and sexuality. In *Pierre*, the Shakespearean incest theme centered in the mother-son relationship is expanded to include the titular protagonist's improbable, increasingly intense relationship to a woman who identifies herself as his half-sister Isabel Banford. Incest complexly provides the logic of human relationships generally here, as Cindy Weinstein has argued, linking Pierre Glendinning's relationships not only with his mother and Isabel but also with his deceased father, claimed by Isabel to be her father as well (Weinstein 2004). Melville's reworking of *Hamlet*'s incest themes allows him to reflect on the gender politics of authorship, creativity, and literary influence.

## *Hamlet,* Incest, and Fratricide

Before turning to *Pierre*, I want to highlight aspects of Shakespeare's tragedy salient for the novel. Hamlet's understanding of Claudius as "more than kin, and less than kind" (Shakespeare 2016, I.ii.65) and his nausea over his mother's second marriage clarify that he associates family with overbearing intimacy and a potential for cruelty. Yet this disposition includes a fixation on his biological parents' sexual relationship, his mother's sexuality, and his father's sexual magnetism. Implicitly, Hamlet idealizes parental sexuality as wholesome and satisfying, everything that Gertrude's and Claudius's could never be. Yet his sexual disgust, noted by critics from Freud and Ernest Jones forward, especially vivid in his interactions with Ophelia and Gertrude, exceeds the parameters of his justifiable anger. Before the Ghost conscripts his son into a revenge plot, Hamlet expresses contemptuous feelings towards Claudius and his mother and seems particularly horrified by the thought of their sexual

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establishes heteronormativity as norm. As he notes, however pervasive incest discourse was, it remained silent on the subject of same-sex incest. "Every iteration of incest in nineteenth-century America presumed, and in doing so produced, heterosexual subjects" (Connolly 2014, 17). For a related discussion, see Jackson 2014, 70-71.

intimacy. One could argue that it is disgust at the thought of his own parents' sexual relationship that Hamlet displaces onto the "shadow-couple", in Raymond Bellour's phrase (Bellour 2000, 254), of Gertrude and Claudius, who both fail to live up to his idealized standards. Hamlet's revulsion from sexuality, in its intensity, suggests underlying grief and anger.

That Claudius is a substitute for his father allows Hamlet to have the Oedipus complex without guilt – he can kill the father's image *in* Claudius rather than the father himself, kill it because it so poorly reproduces the father. The sense of Claudius as an inadequate substitute for his father deepens in the closet scene where Hamlet terrorizes Gertrude. Holding up two images before her eyes, one of his father, the other of Claudius, "[t]he counterfeit presentment of two brothers" (Shakespeare 2016, III.iv.52), Hamlet explicitly commands that she look at them and implicitly that she draw the same conclusions that he does[4]. Claudius is a poor imitation of "[s]o excellent a king", Hamlet says of his father, who was "Hyperion" to Claudius's "satyr" (I.ii.139-40). Hyperion was one of the Titans who overthrew their devouring father Cronos; I will discuss the intertextual significance of Titans and Giants, often confused with one another in the reception of classical mythology, as Melville typifies when he categorizes the Giant Enceladus (a figure central to our discussion) as a Titan.

One of Hamlet's ingenious maneuvers is to force Claudius to relive his homoerotic fratricide by forcing him to watch the play-within-the-play that reenacts this episode. Melville takes this homoerotic-incest theme and embroiders it, envisioning both brother-sister incest and a homoerotic bond between male cousins as metaphors for the unspeakable topic of homosexuality, as James Creech forcefully argues in his book on *Pierre*, *Closet Writing/Gay Reading* (1993).

Dying into freedom, as Harold Bloom evocatively puts it, Hamlet finds a way to resolve his conflicts over his own wayward masculinity and his attitudes towards parental heterosexuality by

[4] In the Globe's original production of *Hamlet*, "it is likely that miniature portraits would have been used" (Wilder 2010, 124).

destroying nearly all the participants in this sexual pageant (Bloom 1998, 517). But his beloved friend Horatio survives, the witness to this endless scene of sexual crime. That the loving friend, who regards Hamlet as a "sweet Prince" (Shakespeare 2016, V.ii.343), remains standing is a suggestive touch. Horatio takes over Hamlet's witnessing role. Such an ardent testimonial to male friendship will be one of the most savagely overturned elements of Melville's reworking of *Hamlet* in *Pierre*, where, unlike in *Moby-Dick*, Melville cannot imagine either survival or ardent male ties.

## Pierre *and the Law of the Mother*

*Moby-Dick* had not done well, partly due to the disastrous first publication of the novel in England that failed to include the final chapter revealing Ishmael's survival. *Pierre* was an outright disaster, sparking the New York *Day Book*'s infamous headline, "HERMAN MELVILLE CRAZY", on 8 September 1852 (Parker 2002, 632). Melville parodied the sentimental novel and Gothic fiction in this tale of a once-prosperous young man's descent into madness when he meets a woman who claims to be his half-sister and decides to be her salvation.

Nineteen years old and handsome in the manner of Billy Budd, Pierre Glendinning, named after his father, enjoys an idyllic, unassuming life in Saddle Meadows (upstate New York). His flirtatious relations with his mother, Mary, fill even the relatively tranquil earlier chapters with unease. The son and mother's tensely cheerful interactions verge on the incestuous: he calls his attractive mother "Sister Mary", and she calls him "Brother"; Pierre plans to marry the appealing, blonde Lucy Tartan, who emerges from the tradition of the romance, a union that his controlling mother supports[5]. But when Pierre meets the enigmatic, dark-haired young woman Isabel Banford, haunted

[5] Higgins and Parker note that the romance tradition frequently depicts "golden-haired, blue-eyed heroines as so rarefied or almost disembodied in their beauty that they seem angelic" (Higgins and Parker 2006, 46).

and haunting, he becomes entranced by her and her story. She claims that her mother was a European refugee, and, it is insinuated, also a victim of the French terror, and that she and Pierre share a father.

Isabel's remarkable dreamlike, sustained narrative of her life before she met Pierre is one of the novel's high points. Drawn to Isabel in a manner that nearly explicates the palpable but unspoken incest theme, Pierre decides on a radical plan to solve the dilemma Isabel endures and poses. He breaks off his engagement to Lucy and marries Isabel, the marriage ostensibly a platonic one. Isabel evokes the Victorian *femme fatale* whose appearance radically alters the male protagonist's life when he becomes hopelessly infatuated with her. Isabel, however, is a deeply melancholy siren who seems to be lured by her own death song. She is associated with music, her emblem the guitar that speaks for her: "Now listen to the guitar; and the guitar shall sing to thee the sequel of my story; for not in words can it be spoken. So listen to the guitar" (Melville 1971, 126).

Determined to ensure that Isabel receives her fair share of their father's money but too frightened by his mother's wrath to tell her the truth, Pierre tells Mary that he has secretly married someone else and broken off his engagement with Lucy. In a fury at his decisions, Mary disowns him. Pierre and Isabel, joined by a socially ostracized young woman named Delly Ulver, the disgraced victim of a rake, move to New York City, where Pierre's cousin, Glendinning Stanley, resides. Pierre believes that Glen will be his sanctuary, but, far from helping, Glen rejects and shuns him. Glen's behavior stuns and wounds Pierre because he and his cousin were extremely close in youth; their shattered relationship reflects Melville's consistent depiction of male relations as fractious, prone to betrayal. When Mary dies, she vindictively leaves all her money and property to Glen, who further vanquishes Pierre's legacy by becoming engaged to Lucy Tartan. Lucy, however, remains tethered to Pierre and, in a surprising move, joins him and the other women at a boardinghouse known as the Church of the Apostles. Glen and Lucy's elder brother Frederic violently tussle with Pierre, but cannot prevent Lucy from entering his abode. Finally, overcome by financial difficulties

and his failure as a writer, Pierre murders Glen, shooting him in the street, and (like Bartleby in Melville's most famous short story) is sent to the prison known as The Tombs. When Isabel and Lucy visit him there, Lucy hears Isabel referring to Pierre as her brother and dies of shock. Pierre drinks from the vial of poison that hangs from Isabel's neck. When Frederic bursts into the prison cell in search of Lucy, he discovers her and Pierre's corpses. Recalling fond times when they were younger, he expresses penitent regret. Rebuking Frederic, Isabel then drinks from the same poison vial and dies: "her whole form sloped sideways, and she fell upon Pierre's heart, and her long hair ran over him, and arbored him in ebon vines" (Melville 1971, 362).

While there is an almost inexhaustible amount of material to explore in *Pierre*, in terms of its revision of *Hamlet* I will focus on three major dynamics: Melville's depiction of femininity, especially Mary and her role in the central mother-son relationship, contrasted with Pierre's idealized father; the incest theme, which ultimately unites Pierre and Hamlet in a shared refusal of normative heterosexual desire; and the use of the Enceladus myth, which effectively links Shakespeare's and Melville's protagonists as defeated would-be giants.

Pierre's mother represents one of the most formidable female characters in nineteenth-century American fiction (Higgins and Parker link her to Shakespeare's Volumnia, Coriolanus's fearsome, militaristic mother [Higgins and Parker 2006, 22]). With Shakespearean notes echoing throughout his language, Pierre contemplates his relationship with Mary as well as his own fate.

> She loveth me, ay – but why? Had I been cast in a cripple's mold, how then? Now, do I remember that in her most caressing love, there ever gleamed some scaly, glittering folds of pride. Me she loveth with pride's love; in me she thinks she seeth her own curled and haughty beauty; before my glass she stands – pride's priestess – and to her mirrored image, not to me, she offers up her offerings of kisses. Oh, small thanks I owe thee, Favorable Goddess, that didst clothe this form with all the beauty of a man, that so thou mightest hide from me all the truth of a man. Now I see that in his beauty a man is snared, and made stone-blind, as the worm within its silk. (Melville 1971, 90)

Pierre's own thoughts, this passage offers an analysis of woman's desire for power and the role that male beauty plays in women's efforts to achieve and exert power. Most tellingly of all, it represents a male's fantasy of these female fantasies, Pierre's as well as Melville's. The question of Melville's treatment of femininity generally is a vexed one; *Pierre* contains his most extensive exploration of femininity even if one thoroughly mediated through male eyes.

In the closet scene, often performed as if an explicit rendering of mother-son incest, Hamlet tells Gertrude, increasingly frantic in the face of her son's volatility: "Come, come, and sit you down. You shall not budge. / You go not till I set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you" (Shakespeare 2016, III.iv.17-19). Hamlet wants to force Gertrude to confront her "inmost part", a conscription into self-recognition, as if visible perusal will produce interior reckoning. Adding the considerable arsenal of misogynistic associations between vain woman and reflective surfaces to his assault against his mother's character, Hamlet imposes the longstanding cultural narrative of narcissistic female vanity. Pierre follows suit. Melville reveals his hero's interiority through free indirect discourse, giving us access to his private thoughts in all their contours. While, from dialogue alone, we have considerable evidence of Mary's questionable character, our immersion in Pierre's private musings gains us a sense, *his* sense, of his mother's self-love and frustrated desires for power and the son's instrumental and frustrating role in these tangled aspirations. If Pierre does not treat Mary with the relentless rhetorical (and possibly physical) violence that informs Hamlet's treatment of his mother, he treats maternal authority as a rule to be opposed and overturned while idealizing the dead father. Melville's depiction of Mary as, arguably, the chief villain in the novel, certainly as the most powerful persona, accords with psychoanalytic theory's "law of the mother", which Juliet Mitchell describes as the ban against parthenogenesis (Mitchell 2000, 343-44). Mary wields an authority that she believes to be absolute, and Pierre's defiance of her shatters this fantasy. Her comeuppance is a necessary component in Pierre's fierce scheme to reorder the world and to remake his own identity. In effect, he refashions

himself as parentless, ultimately rejecting Mary as she rejected him but also destroying his father's "chair-portrait" (Melville 1971, 74), the emblem of his idealized love for his father.

The official drawing room portrait of Pierre Glendinning, Senior contrasts starkly with the chair portrait of him as a young man, which was painted in secret by his cousin, Ralph Winwood. The contrast between the official and the chair portraits has attracted scholarly attention over the years, including James Creech's extensive analysis of the queer implications of this contrast. These analyses have not frequently included a consideration of Melville's intertextual uses of Shakespeare and *Hamlet*'s relevance to the paternal portraits' significance[6]. In *Closet Writing/Gay Reading*, Creech offers a heroically unflinching and intensive account of the "winking" rhetoric whereby Melville conveyed a coded but excavatable queer sensibility (Creech 1993). My argument here focuses on a dimension of the work that is not Creech's focus, Melville's intertextual relationship with Shakespeare, though I share Creech's premise that *Pierre* is a richly and disturbingly significant homoerotic text.

As Creech observes: "The bourgeois, heterosexual paterfamilias, flower of homosocial culture, is represented by a large oil painting which hangs prominently over the mantlepiece in the drawing room" (Creech 1993, 130). In sharp contrast to this depiction is "the small oil of Pierre senior as a young bachelor", which Pierre reverences and keeps in "a small chamber next to his bedroom. Melville consistently terms this space a 'closet'. A closet in this nineteenth-century usage was not the small wardrobe that

[6] Readings of the paternal portraits in *Pierre* include Creech 1993, 130-52; Brown 1990, 153-54, 162; Higgins and Parker 2006, 68-69; Lukasik 2011, 186-230; Dinius 2012, 86-125. None of these treatments, however, sharp as they are, explore *Hamlet* as intertext for *Pierre*, with the exception of Higgins and Parker, who discuss *Pierre*'s overlaps in other contexts with *Hamlet* and other Shakespeare works. Sacvan Bercovitch, who makes surprisingly cursory note of valences between both texts in *The Rites of Assent*, observes that Pierre consists of characteristics of "a variety of Shakespearean heroes, most notably (and self-consciously) Hamlet, but also Macbeth, Romeo, Coriolanus, and even for a moment (in the dialogue with Isabel) King Lear and his Fool" (Bercovitch 1993, 263).

it is today, but rather a more intimate chamber than the adjoining bedroom" (130). Creech reminds us that "autobiographical links" between Melville and his protagonist include the fact that these paintings "correspond point for point with extant portraits of Melville's father Allan who died when Herman was twelve years old" (131), a most tragic end mired in bankruptcy and madness for a once larger-than-life father.

Pierre's spinster aunt Dorothea contends that the chair portrait records Pierre's father's affair with a young French woman. According to Dorothea, cousin Ralph intended to capture Pierre Senior's pining desire in portrait form. In stark contrast to Pierre and his aunt's devotion to the chair portrait, Mary loathes it, claiming that it in no way resembles Pierre's father. Instead, she reverences the comparatively paunchy middle-aged official portrait of her husband that hangs in the drawing-room. The strong implication is that Mary knows the truth of her husband's youthful affair and that of Isabel's existence as well, hence her ire.

Nancy Fredricks considers *Hamlet*'s relevance here, incisively observing in *Melville's Art of Democracy* that

> For Hamlet and Pierre, the crisis of representation centers primarily around the world of the father and the patriarchal social structure that seeks to perpetuate itself through words and images. Both texts focus on imagery of portraiture as both heroes probe beneath the deceptive surfaces of appearance. Hamlet asks Laertes, "was your father dear to you? Or are you like the painting of a sorrow, A face without a heart" (4.7.106). Pierre reads his copy of *Hamlet*, "The time is out of joint, / Oh cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right" (235). Melville appears to be drawing on the imagery of framing in *Hamlet* to denote Pierre's crisis of representation. (Fredricks 1995, 96)

Fredricks remarks that the two portraits that Hamlet aggressively holds up to Gertrude – his noble "Hyperion" father and degenerate "Satyr" uncle – "illustrate for Hamlet a political and moral disjuncture" (96). While Pierre makes a similar discovery, "Melville avoids the melodramatic personifications of good and evil" when Pierre locates both Hyperion and Satyr in one man, his father (96).

Reflecting its sustained incest theme, *Pierre* focuses on the varieties of incest. Pierre's relationships with Mary and his half-sister Isabel are shocking enough in their openly erotic character, but Melville adds to this Pierre's homoerotic desire for his handsome young father as captured in the chair portrait and for his cousin Glen. Indeed, the chapter on Pierre and Glen's relationship, "The Cousins", is the most thorough analysis of homoerotic male relations in antebellum American literature. It implies that Glen's rejection of Pierre has a basis in their sexual relationship as adolescents, one that must be repudiated in adulthood.

Hamlet's fraught relationship with other men dominates the play: his egregious murder of Ophelia's father, Polonius, takes his contempt for the dithering old man to a grotesquely excessive level; his acid attitude to her brother Laertes as he grieves over his sister outrageously ignores Hamlet's culpability in Ophelia's death and the fact that he murdered Laertes' father; and if Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, his friends from university, betray him, Hamlet nevertheless seems to delight in vengefully securing their deaths. This leaves Claudius, certainly worthy of Hamlet's ire but less clearly the intensity of his disgust. In other words, had King Hamlet simply died and Claudius replaced him in terms of both crown and marriage bed, it is likely that his angry nephew would feel much the same animus toward him, minus the urgency of the revenge plot.

*The Meanings of Incest*

*Hamlet* provides a foundation for *Pierre*'s foregrounding not only of the paternal image but of the paternal *as* image. Most relevantly, it establishes the horror of incest as a screen for its hero's fantasies of and revulsion against adult genitality. Analogously, Pierre, while in seeming thrall to an inescapable incestuous passion, takes a course of action that ensures his sexual

inviolability[7]. It cannot be overlooked that Pierre devises his outlandish plan to marry Isabel just when he is about to embark on a legal, socially affirmed marriage to Lucy Tartan. While some have argued the opposite, the novel makes no clear indication that, however erotically charged their relationship, Pierre and Isabel have sexual relations[8].

If Isabel recalls the Victorian figure of the *femme fatale*, Lucy Tartan embodies her foil, the *femme fragile*, who models delicacy and innocence and always verges on being deathly ill; Lucy and Isabel typify the Victorian tendency toward female doubles (Braun 2012, 62-63). Isabel's backstory brims with dire specificities but always remains obscure, an index of femininity's traditional associations with the enigmatic and unknowable. Wendy Stallard Flory, in a key reading, likens Isabel to Romantic poetry's mythic images of woman as Muse, imagination, and symbol of artistic creativity (Flory 2006). Clear parallels exist between Isabel and Coleridge's "damsel with a dulcimer" in his fragment-poem

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[7] Pierre is yet another representation of a recurring antebellum figure, the sexually inviolate male, volitionally cut off from heterosexuality and male homosociality. For a study of the inviolate male in antebellum American fiction, see Greven 2005.

[8] I am joined by critics Paula Miner-Quinn, in her essay "Pierre's Sexuality", Michael Paul Rogin, in *Subversive Genealogy*, and the great Newton Arvin, in his 1950 study *Herman Melville*, in viewing Pierre and Isabel's marriage as platonic. As Rogin outlines, Pierre's decision to marry Isabel expresses a desire to destroy the romantic image of the father and to replace him. But the taboo on incest prevents him from sexually consummating the relationship; "he can only masquerade as the romantic father. His father's romance, outside of marriage, produced a child. Pierre, masquerading as a husband, is celibate". In keeping with the Medusa motif in the novel, "Pierre is encased in stone" since "he can neither possess Isabel, nor free himself from her" (Rogin 1983, 171). R. Scott Kellner, in his essay "Sex, Toads, and Scorpions", argues that Pierre and Isabel do sexually consummate their marriage but that for Melville "[s]ex is man's downfall": "Man 'stoops' to sex. Pierre insists 'I do not stoop to thee, nor thou to me; but we both reach up alike to a glorious ideal!' (p. 192). This is a vision he is not able to maintain. In the end, the chivalrous knight Pierre wishes both Lucy and Isabel dead. 'For ye two, my most undiluted prayer is now, that from your here unseen and frozen; chairs ye may never stir alive' (p. 358). He has been ruined by his conflicting feelings about sex and women" (Kellner 1975, 19).

"Kubla Khan": "In a vision once I saw: / It was an Abyssinian maid / And on her dulcimer she played, / Singing of Mount Abora" (lines 37-41). Like this oneiric female figure, Isabel plays a musical instrument, her guitar, that puts the male in a state of exaltation and dread. Nothing about Isabel connotes a realistic attempt at portraying a female character; she recalls Poe's dark-haired siren-Muse Ligeia, similarly galvanizing and destructive.

I regard *Pierre* as a radical novel on two crucial levels: Melville's at times excruciating, often daring manipulations of language, typified by his transformation of one kind of word to another, such as verbs into adverbs (Pierre contemplates Isabel's journey across the sea in her mother's secret tow: "she had probably first unconsciously and *smuggledly* crossed it hidden beneath her sorrowing mother's heart" [Melville 1971, 137, emphasis mine]) and his sustained immersion in heightened rhetorical registers; and his depiction of a protagonist who eschews, indeed defies, traditional codes of masculinity. But the novel's depiction of Isabel as unreadable, unknowable, 'mysterious' – literally noted in the song that emanates from Isabel's guitar ("Mystery of Isabel!" and "Isabel and Mystery!" [126]) – circumscribes the woman as irrational other, anticipating Freud's infamous description of femininity as "the dark continent". A hazy, muffled, blurry presence, Isabel enters narrative as a decorporealized figure: a mesmerizing face, a series of incantatory utterances. Her ghostly quality throughout, alleviated only by her humanly jealous rivalry with Lucy Tartan, makes it possible to imagine that Isabel is an object of desire without that desire necessarily translating into sexual consummation.

Incest functions as a screen for sexual as well as social relations in *Pierre*. Its tantalizing/horrifying possibility allegorizes the longing and the antipathy that defines the novel's major relationships. Given incest's longstanding metaphorical uses as coded homosexuality, male-female incest here also stands in for same-sex desire. Registered with thoroughgoing dread in *Hamlet*, incestuous sexuality signifies more complicatedly in *Pierre*, suggesting at once utopian oneness transcending difference and the dread of intimacy. *Pierre* foregrounds the sense that all

sexuality is incestuous[9]. Family members – his mother, cousin, possible half-sister – constitute the hero's major relationships, all of which are erotically tinged; while his relationship with Lucy is a non-biological tie, she effectively becomes a family member by joining his small sorority at the Church of the Apostles.

As we have noted, the question of Gertrude and Claudius' shared perfidy sparks not only Hamlet's rage but also his sexual revulsion. The famous play-within-the-play scene, relevant in many ways for *Pierre*, collapses adultery, incest, and homoeroticism, as evinced by the prosy stage directions:

> *Enter* [Players *as*] *a king and a queen, the queen embracing him and he her. He takes her up and declines his head upon her neck. He lies him down upon a bank of flowers. She seeing him asleep leaves him. Anon come in* [*a* Players *as*] *another man, takes off his crown, kisses it, pours poison in the sleeper's ears and leaves him. The queen returns, finds the king dead, makes passionate action. The poisoner with some three or four* [Players] *come in again, seem to condole with her. The dead body is carried away. The poisoner woos the queen with gifts. She seems harsh awhile but in the end accepts love*. (Shakespeare 2016, III.ii.128)

Claudius and Gertrude are forced to witness a scene that serves as a grotesque mirror for the crime undergirding their union. But it is a mirror for Hamlet as well; tellingly, it is the vulnerable, wronged Ophelia – in every respect Hamlet's chief victim, unconscionably

[9] Many scholars have located the basis for the idea that all sexuality is incestuous in Michel Foucault's argument that, given the centrality, at once, of the family and sexuality to modernity, incest "occupies a central place; it is constantly being solicited and refused; it is an object of obsession and attraction, a dreadful secret and an indispensable pivot" (Foucault 1978, 109). But the thematization of incest in works such as *Hamlet*, *Paradise Lost*, *The House of the Seven Gables*, and *Pierre* hardly make such expedient use of the trope. The undermining of traditional concepts of the family, sexuality, and the couple in these works, complexly and diversely coordinated, refuses any stable deployment of incest themes even if they constitute a through line in these works. Which is to say, incest works specifically in each work while also adding to each work's resistant treatment of sexuality. Why Foucault's tightly rigid schemas have proven so indispensable a pivot for contemporary scholarship is fodder for a different discussion.

abused by him even as he has felt himself abused – whom he sits beside during this mock-performance. Just as Gertrude fails to honor Old Hamlet's memory in Hamlet's eyes, so too does Hamlet fail to honor his past intimacy with Ophelia, which the play suggests was sexually tinged[10]. The play-within-the-play's action rebukes Hamlet no less than the criminal adulterers he wishes to shame and expose.

Melville stunningly reworks this Shakespearean tableau. Pierre's marriage to Isabel reconceives marriage as parodic assault on compulsory sexual norms. A transgressive and volatile union, Pierre and Isabel's marriage threatens to bring ruin. Even the disgraced Delly Ulver, wronged and rejected, fears that their marriage will result in her greater perdition: "If I stay, then – for stay I must – and they be not married – then pity, pity, pity, pity, pity!" (Melville 1971, 321). Isabel's hostility toward Lucy when she joins them insinuates Isabel's more-than-sisterly tie with Pierre (especially since Isabel feels protective toward rather than competitive with the non-rival Delly). This theme of "sororophobia", to use Helena Michie's term (Michie 1992), is one indication among many that, far from signifying a utopian alternative to institutionalized heterosexual marriage, the sham marriage between Pierre and Isabel creates as many social divides as it transcends them.

Pierre's fantasy of male heroism – that he can somehow singlehandedly rescue not only Isabel and Delly but also Lucy – results ultimately in the deaths of Isabel and Lucy as well as himself. (It is not clear what fate befalls Delly, left alone in their quarters at the Apostles, but that it is a less grim one is unlikely). Melville here offers his own version of Hamlet's questionable behavior toward his mother and dishonorable treatment of Ophelia while combining Hamlet's bifurcated attitudes toward male relationships; Pierre's friendship-turned-enmity with Glen combines a Horatio-like love with a Laertes-like poisonous

[10] If Hamlet and Ophelia had a sexual relationship, it was perhaps not conducted in the soft-core porn manner that Kenneth Branagh depicts in flashback in his 1996 film version of the play, in which he cast himself in the titular role.

rivalry. The collapse of male friendship and love into murderous hate further signifies a dark side to Pierre's attempts to break free of social strictures. This is not to suggest that Pierre's utopian impulses are themselves wrong. Rather, Melville cannot imagine a utopian effort at transcendent unities, heterosexual or homosexual, that escapes wreck and ruin. Pierre is earnest but also vaingloriously rash and foolish, ensuring the destruction of those he vows to protect and rendering the vulnerable even more vulnerable with him than without him. *Pierre* transforms *Hamlet*'s elaborate climax involving poisoned lances and cups and a mass death scene into the prison cell's barren, desolate tableau in which the bodies of dead women festoon dead Pierre.

*Fallen Giants*

*Pierre* explicitly mentions incest six times; five of those times occur in the paragraph on Enceladus, one of the Giants who battled the Olympian gods in Greek mythology. The sixth mention of the term incest comes later, in Book 26, during a discussion of the portrait of Beatrice Cenci, at the time attributed to Guido Reni[11].

Of its many significant dimensions, *Pierre*'s reference to Enceladus intriguingly nods to *Hamlet*'s implicit one at the site of Ophelia's grave. Grief-stricken over her suicide by drowning and furious at the priest who balks at giving her a proper funeral service for this reason, Laertes leaps into Ophelia's grave. He then frames himself as a giant of grief by evoking the Giants who battled the Olympians: "Now pile your dust upon the quick and dead / Till of this flat a mountain you have made / T'o'ertop old

[11] This portrait beloved in the nineteenth century also figures prominently in Hawthorne's last published novel *The Marble Faun* (1860). Beatrice Cenci, whose mild expression in the portrait was interpreted by nineteenth-century artists as indicative of great reserves of grief and violation, killed her father, who forced her to have incestuous relations with him. Her fair complexion has a seraphic quality, a blondeness "vailed by funereally jetty hair", which materializes the symbolic "black crape of the two most horrible crimes (of one of which she is the object, and of the other the agent) possible to civilized humanity – incest and parricide" (Melville 1971, 351). For a discussion of the influence of Shelley's closet drama *The Cenci* on Melville, see Mathews 1984.

Pelion or the skyish head / Of blue Olympus" (Shakespeare 2016, V.i.240-43). The war between the Giants and the gods was retold by Ovid in Book 1 of *Metamorphoses*, which Shakespeare could have read in the original and in the translation of Arthur Golding (Findlay 1978, 985)[12]. In order to reach heaven, the Giants piled mountains atop one another, heaping Ossa and Olympus on Pelion, or Pelion and Ossa on Olympus, hence the proverbial phrase "to pile Pelion on Ossa", meaning "to make a bad situation worse". Not to be outdone, Hamlet provocatively taunts Laertes, extending his rival's allusion and associating himself with the Giant Enceladus: "Dost come here to whine, / To outface me with leaping in her grave? / Be buried quick with her, and so will I. / And if thou prate of mountains let them throw / Millions of acres on us till our ground, / Singeing his pate against the burning zone, / Make Ossa like a wart" (Shakespeare 2016, V.i.266-72). J. Anthony Burton notes that *Hamlet*'s several references to the Giants' rebellion inform the play's power dynamics. The Elizabethan audience would have understood that the Giants "were the polar opposites of the divine Olympians. Variously described as impious, foolhardy, impetuous, treasonous, indiscreet, inglorious, beastlike, dangerous, vile, and tyrannous, their cause was always reprehensible" (Burton 1984, 6). So neither Laertes nor Hamlet cover themselves in glory when likening their affect or cause to that of the Giants.

As he tries and disastrously fails to become a writer, Pierre's mythological avatars emerge as Hamlet, Dante, and the Giant Enceladus, mistakenly identified as a Titan here, which underscores the frequent interchangeability of the two in the myth's reception. Nancy Fredricks observes:

[12] Jonathan Bate notes, in *Shakespeare and Ovid*, the millennium-long tradition of suppressing the erotic character of Ovid's works in favor of reading them allegorically, morally, and didactically, and this has relevance to the story of the Giants' battle against the gods: "Allegorical and biblical interpretations were set beside moral ones; thus the revolt of the giants against the Olympian gods was made to represent the building of the tower of Babel, but also the pride of any worldly human who rebels against the authority of God" (Bate 1993, 25-26).

> Like Hamlet, who evokes the myth of Enceladus when he becomes disgusted by Laertes' feeble attempts to "outface" him at the grave of Ophelia, Pierre, in launching his attack on the world of seeming, imagines himself the Titan, Enceladus, the offspring of the incestuous marriage of two worlds, heaven and earth, forever beaten down by the Olympians who bury him alive. (Fredricks 1995, 96)

In an ekphrastic tour-de-force, Melville reads the sculptor Gaspard Marsy's work *The Enceladus Fountain*, sculpted in lead between 1675 and 1677 and prominently displayed in the Groves of Versailles, as an allegorical figure for the artist defying his oppressors. Shorn of limbs yet intransigent in the face of certain defeat, he "turn[s] his vast trunk into a battering-ram" (Melville 1971, 346). Even vanquished, the Giant transforms his dismembered body into a weapon against his enemies. Pierre, having a dream that could be called a nightmare, cries out in his sleep. "Enceladus! it is Enceladus!" (346). And the Giant faces him, though from that moment "Pierre saw Enceladus no more; but on the Titan's armless trunk, his own duplicate face and features magnifiedly gleamed upon him with prophetic discomfiture and woe"; the "ideal horror" of his dream transmutes into "all his actual grief" (346).

Interestingly, Melville provides the Giant's backstory after this oneiric vision.

> Old Titan's self was the son of incestuous Cœlus and Terra, the son of incestuous Heaven and Earth. And Titan married his mother Terra, another and accumulatively incestuous match. And thereof Enceladus was one issue. So Enceladus was both the son and grandson of an incest; and even thus, there had been born from the organic blended heavenliness and earthliness of Pierre, another mixed, uncertain, heaven-aspiring, but still not wholly earth-emancipated mood; which again, by its terrestrial taint held down to its terrestrial mother, generated there the present doubly incestuous Enceladus within him; so that the present mood of Pierre – that reckless sky-assaulting mood of his, was nevertheless on one side the grandson of the sky. For it is according to eternal fitness, that the precipitated Titan should still seek to regain his paternal birthright even by fierce escalade. Wherefore whoso storms the sky gives best proof he came from

> thither! But whatso crawls contented in the moat before that crystal fort, shows it was born within that slime, and there forever will abide. (347)

Pierre aligns himself with Enceladus and with Hamlet, who did the same. Though not incestuous himself, Enceladus is the progeny of incestuous unions across generations. If all sexuality is incestuous, as the novel appears to claim, Enceladus models the sexual subject. In *Hamlet in His Modern Guises*, Alexander Welsh discusses Enceladus's context within *Pierre*'s incest plot.

> [Pierre's] dare to free himself and Isabel to incestuous desire, or to commit incest if he should so please, has more probably to do with the impossible quest for originality and Promethean heroics. Pierre seeks to make love to his own devoted mirror image and dreams of being the titan Enceladus, "the present doubly incestuous Enceladus within him" […]. Once it becomes clear that Pierre is also a writer, the act of tearing works of Dante and Shakespeare to shreds can be seen as indicative of similar strivings. (Welsh 2001, 150)[13]

I do not see Melville as tearing his literary precursors to shreds but rather as reimagining and extending their ideas for his own purposes. He sparks off the Enceladus-related allusions and energies of *Hamlet* to envision a wayward contemporary version of Shakespeare's protagonist, one less counseled and guided and even more unmoored, whose revenge plan stumbles entirely because so diffuse and inscrutable.

[13] Welsh notes that "Freudian interpreters" eager to maintain "the primacy of the Oedipus complex […] tend to regard the half sister as a displacement of the mother and generally assume that Melville's glances at the 'wisely hidden' significance of *Hamlet* or the 'the hopeless gloom of its interior meaning' confirm some such reading" (Welsh 2001, 150). While Freud's readings of *Oedipus* and *Hamlet* inform my own, I do not view Isabel as a displacement of Mary Glendinning. That would suggest that something subterranean was at work in Melville's depiction of Pierre's relationship with his mother, but the author goes quite far in making the incestuous dimensions of the mother-son relationship palpable and nearly explicit.

*Likeness Visible*

In his essay "On Love", Percy Bysshe Shelley writes:

> *Thou* demandest what is Love. It is that powerful attraction towards all that we conceive, or fear, or hope beyond ourselves when we find within our own thoughts the chasm of an insufficient void and seek to awaken in all things that are, a community with what we experience within ourselves. […] [I]f we feel, we would that another's nerves should vibrate to our own, that the beams of their eyes should kindle at once and mix and melt into our own […]. This is Love. (Shelley 1977, 473)

When we desire, we desire self-likeness. This potentially radical idea gets much less radical when it reifies misogynistic constructions of femininity as reflective surfaces for male self-likeness. Anne K. Mellor critiques "On Love" as reflective of the narcissistic sensibility that she calls "masculine Romanticism". She identifies the "fundamental desire of the romantic lover" as the effort "to find in female form a mirror image of himself", what Shelley calls in "On Love" the "anti-type" (Mellor 1993, 25).

In response to Mellor, Steven Bruhm writes that he has no wish "to deny that such Romantic narcissism effaces and destroys the represented woman" (Bruhm 2001, 21); nevertheless, he points out that the view of narcissism as pathological imposes an anachronistic paradigm on Romanticism and its uses of the Ovidian Narcissus myth. "Romantic male authors purposely exploited the implications of looking at – and looking into – oneself", which has relevance for "the dangerous and volatile field of same-sex relations within the homosocial spectrum" (21-22).

Melville upholds narcissistic desire's centrality to Romantic writing, in part by explicitly naming Narcissus in his work, which he does in *Moby-Dick*. Yet throughout *Pierre*, it is primarily the female characters who see *their* likeness in the male. Mary, if Pierre's interpretation of his mother's desire holds true, sees in him her own idealized likeness as well as her gender-based loss of opportunities. Pierre's aunt Dorothea fetishizes the chair portrait that she brings to Pierre's attention, seeing in it the image of her

brother that she prefers to the one Mary commissioned. Yet Dorothea verges on seeing *herself* in the portrait, as she suggests when explaining to the child Pierre her role in the portrait's creation:

> My child, it was I that chose the stuff for that neckcloth; yes, and hemmed it for him, and worked P. G. in one corner; but that aint in the picture. It is an excellent likeness, my child, neckcloth and all; as he looked at that time. Why, little Pierre, sometimes I sit here all alone by myself, gazing, and gazing, and gazing at that face, till I begin to think your father is looking at me, and smiling at me, and nodding at me, and saying – Dorothea! Dorothea! (Melville 1971, 79)

Dating from the late eighteenth century, a cultural investment in the face as the visible manifestation of truth and authenticity became a preoccupation of American life, as Christopher J. Lukasik has shown[14]. The face connotes, at once, identity and non-identity in Melville's (and Hawthorne's) work. Isabel's maddening, mesmerizing face metonymizes her, goading Pierre to seek her once he glimpses it.

But Isabel maintains her own relationship to her face. In a passage that intertextually echoes Milton's Narcissus-like Eve and her narration of her nativity in Book 4 of *Paradise Lost*, Isabel recalls having stared at her reflection in a smooth lake when she was a girl. She then sees that reflected image of herself in the face of the man who speaks the word "Father" to her and that she comes to believe *is* her father (Melville 1971, 124). When Pierre brings Isabel and Lucy into an art gallery and they discover a portrait of a man that recalls the image of Pierre's father, "*A stranger's head, by an unknown hand*", Isabel exclaims: "'My God! see! see!' cried Isabel, under strong excitement, 'only my mirror has ever shown me that look before! See! see!'" (349-50). Eugenia

[14] In the early American republic, one's countenance revealed "a […] permanent, essential, and involuntary sense of character […] that no amount of individual performance could obscure" (Lukasik 2011, 10). A now commonplace maxim from this era began to define American social relations: "there is a face that you put on before the public, and there is a face that the public puts on you" (10).

C. DeLamotte has noted the recurring significance of ancestral portraits in the Gothic, usually for the purpose of authenticating a family's rightful heirs. But throughout *Pierre*, Melville "link[s] the quest for knowledge with the quest to express knowledge in art" (DeLamotte 1990, 87). Enceladus captures this idea, as a figure of the writer reaching for heaven "but trapped in the 'imprisoning earth'" (87). The art gallery holds "the walls of the world" amply filled with paintings, but these paintings are failures, miserably empty. The desire to know and the desire to express knowledge through art fail at once; seeing the portrait of the stranger's head by an unknown hand leads Pierre to question Isabel's blood-relation to him and whether art matters at all (87). As Wyn Kelley observes, Enceladus, "the product and victim of monstrously bad parenting", figures Pierre's domestic difficulties (Kelley 1998, 109). "Heroically resisting his progenitors' destructive family patterns in a spirit no less defiant than that of such female rebels as Fanny Fern's Ruth Hall or E. D. E. N. Southworth's Capitola, Pierre adopts a 'reckless sky-assaulting mood'" (109). "Like these female protagonists", Pierre tries "to escape the sins of his demonic fathers and grandfathers by resisting male authority [and establishing] a nonpatriarchal household" (109).

If Enceladus provides the Ur-image of the castrated artist, this artist is buried in the earth, immobile, immured along with his defiance. As Isabel's self-apprehension-as-paternal-image allegorizes, femininity is frozen in the image; Isabel can only recognize herself in the image of the male, unable to move beyond this spectatorial position even if knowledge of her own situation and desires emerges from it. Hamlet's forcing Gertrude to stare at the two different portraits, one of his father and the other of his hated uncle, provides an especially sadistic intertext in light of this Melvillean theorization of women's relationship to the image. In forcing Gertrude to acknowledge the inadequacy of the one and the "Hyperion"-like superiority of the other, Hamlet entombs his mother in a conceptualization of the gaze that always already leads to the recognition of male superiority. Melville takes this idea further and challenges it, but only to a certain extent. Pierre's ruminations on Mary's experience when seeing herself reflected in her comely young son's form offer fascinating insights into male

psychology, mother-son relationships, and the narcissistic self-regard that links Pierre to his mother. Yet the passage where Pierre contemplates his mother's fixation on him is a phobic one, evoking Mary's icy character but also rebuking the autonomous and forthright woman's desire. Isabel's apprehension of being reflected in the image of her ostensible father and in the "stranger's head" portrait leads to her further entrapment in the idealized male image. It also loosens Pierre's faith that they are related and deepens his suicidal futility that includes an increasing belief in the impossibility of both knowledge and art[15].

Pierre ruminates on his relationship to his precursor.

> Hamlet taunted him with faltering in the fight. Now he began to curse anew his fate, for now he began to see that after all he had been finely juggling with himself, and postponing with himself, and in meditative sentimentalities wasting the moments consecrated to instant action. (Melville 1971, 170)

*Hamlet* taunts both Pierre and Melville, and in tribute to this prior text Melville envisions a hero forever "faltering in the fight". Pierre's ceaseless faltering grimly revises *Hamlet*: Hamlet's qualified triumph at the play's climax, compared to Pierre's nihilistic achievement, seems comparatively optimistic. Melville concludes with faltering, his hero's Pyrrhic victory a testament to Melville's own intransigence in the face of literary giants.

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[15] Wai Chee Dimock argues that the quest for knowledge conducted by so many in the novel is ultimately a fruitless one, the enterprise revealing its own futility. The quest for knowledge reflects the nineteenth century's investments in individualism: "the obsessed drama that emerges from the book – the drama of wanting to know and the plight of being known – ultimately registers a historical phenomenon: the emergence, organization, and deployment of knowledge as a technology of control, a technology at once consonant with and intrinsic to the institution of individualism" (Dimock 1989, 157).

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