

## Melville's Shakespearean Masquerade of Evil: The Confidence-Man

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This essay explores the influence of Shakespeare on Melville's conception of evil, from the oscillation between innocence and corruption in *Typee*, through the tragic grandeur of *Moby-Dick*, to the satirical skepticism of *The Confidence-Man*. Melville's lifelong engagement with Shakespeare, evident in his marginalia and in the ongoing dialogue with the playwright, sets his work in a tradition that both ridicules and admires villainy while exposing its paradoxical ties to truth. *The Confidence-Man*, the most overtly Shakespearean of Melville's novels, stages a "masquerade of evil" through its shapeshifting, devil-like protagonist, who recalls Shylock and Autolycus yet unsettles the role of villain by pretending to reject Timon's misanthropy. *Timon of Athens* thus emerges as a key intertext, alongside *The Winter's Tale*, whose shifts from tragedy to comedy offer a striking contrast: where Shakespeare turns tragedy into redemption, Melville drives his masquerade toward indeterminacy and overarching obscurity.

**Keywords:** Melville, *The Confidence-Man*, evil, comedy, skepticism

Forse il compito di chi ama gli uomini  
è di far ridere della verità, fare ridere la verità,  
perché l'unica verità è imparare a liberarci  
dalla passione insana per la verità<sup>1</sup>.  
Umberto Eco, *Il nome della rosa*

The corresponding question as to what,  
if any, is the availability of theological-metaphysical  
inference to comedy, seems to me one  
of the most difficult and least explored.  
George Steiner, *Absolute Tragedy*

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<sup>1</sup> "Perhaps the mission of those who love mankind is to make people laugh at the truth, to make truth laugh, because the only truth lies in learning to free ourselves from insane passion for the truth". Transl. by William Weaver.

In 1882, Herman Melville signed a collector's notebook with a quotation from Shakespeare's *I Henry IV*, inscribing above his name (with his characteristic misspelling) the proverbial phrase: "Tell Truth & shame the Devel" [sic]<sup>2</sup>. As trivial as this anecdote may seem, it condenses several key aspects of Melville's artistic and philosophical mind. Among other things, it points to Shakespeare as an enduring source of inspiration, not just an artistic model: Melville famously referred to the English playwright as the master of "the great art of telling the Truth" (*PT* 244)<sup>3</sup> but also, implicitly, as an alter-ego of sorts, an artist who opposes his dramatic and uncomfortable 'truth' to the devil's cunning.

Intriguingly, in one of his late prose pieces, a very brief fragment titled simply "Shakespeare", the playwright is aligned with a 'sincere' devil:

A profound intelligence, with wisdom wiser than the Serpent's yet without his guile; genial, child-like in sincerity; and, what is phenomenal in a modern – for in vital matters Shakespeare was so advanced a modern that not yet have we come up to him – utterly without secular superstition or secular cant. (*BB* 242)

This and other passages from Melville's works reveal his conception of Shakespeare as an ambivalent, devil-like writer who employs a challenging way of truth-telling. For Melville, the devil symbolizes more than evil and hybris: he also represents – in Milton's terms – a rebellious artist who twists and transforms truth into something at once unsettling and enlightening. Over time, Melville's idea of evil evolved into a sophisticated notion of a "comedy of evil" – a paradoxical blend of malice and sincerity that reshaped his engagement with moral and existential issues as well as the structure of his writings.

From the outset, Melville grappled with the ambiguity between truth and fiction, striving to convince readers and publishers that

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2 The expression, proverbial in Anglo-Saxon countries and best known for its Shakespearean quotation, is attested as a common saying as early as 1555 in Hugh Latimer's *Twenty-Seven Sermons*.

3 For brevity, the titles of Melville's editions quoted in the essay are shortened as follows: *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (*T*), *Mardi: and a Voyage Thither* (*M*), *Redburn: His First Voyage* (*R*), *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (*P*), *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (*CM*), *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces* (*PT*), *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* (*MD*), *Correspondence* (*C*), *Billy Budd, Sailor, and Other Uncompleted Writings* (*BB*).

his travel narratives were 'true' accounts of his South Sea journeys – though they were only partially so. Gradually, this pragmatic concern deepened into a philosophical exploration of skepticism, influenced by his engagement with thinkers like Montaigne, Bayle, and Browne. By the 1850s, Melville's reflections on the rhetorical power of language to shape reality had become intertwined with Shakespeare's plays, as evident in letters to his friend Evert Duyckinck and several textual allusions.

Melville's villains<sup>4</sup> often overthrow conventional morality through persuasive eloquence, challenging both a rigid Christian ethos rooted in Manichean dualism and the traditional split between philosophy and literature, truth-telling and imaginative writing. By disrupting the boundaries between artistic imagination and metaphysical inquiry, these satanic provocateurs probe the limits of reason by demonstrating fiction's transformative power to grapple with existential truths beyond rational clarity. Shakespeare and Satan – the artist and the mystifier – are thus bound by their mutual engagement with the fluidity of truth.

This commitment to language and its dangerous allure drives *Moby-Dick, or, The Whale* (1851), where Ahab's fiery quarter-deck speech steers the crew toward ruin, and informs *Pierre, or the Ambiguities* (1852), whose protagonist's obsessive quest for truth raises the unsettling question of whether his efforts would lead to a benevolent or malicious universe. However, the search reaches its fullest expression in *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857), Melville's last completed and most enigmatic novel. The book marks the culmination of a decade of intense creative effort, as well as the writer's deepest exploration of skepticism.

Shortly after the novel's completion and immediately before Melville's journey to the Holy Land, Nathaniel Hawthorne captured his friend's inner turmoil in the most striking terms: "He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other" (Hawthorne 1962, 432). Jonathan Cook similarly characterizes Melville as "a divided soul: a skeptic by temperament but a believer at heart" (Cook 1996, 9), and considers *The Confidence-Man* "a literary theodicy dramatizing the author's obsession with the problem of evil, the existence of God,

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4 Besides Ahab, one could consider Jackson in *Redburn* and Claggart in *Billy Budd*.

and man's limited capacity to know God or comprehend the truths that would justify the ways of God to man" (10). However, the novel ultimately transcends theological debate, presenting instead a Shakespearean (tragi)comic meditation on the human condition, the limits of fiction, and the complex relationship between language and truth.

This essay examines *The Confidence-Man* in terms of Melville's Shakespearean masquerade of evil – a nuanced dialogue with the English playwright on the comic ambiguity of evil, marking both the climax of Melville's lifelong head-to-head with Shakespeare<sup>5</sup> and the endpoint of his novelistic career before turning to poetry. Early notes scribbled in Melville's edition of Shakespeare's works, outlining a possibly comic story about a devil disguised as a Quaker seeking converts, may have served as an initial inspiration for *The Confidence-Man*. In fact, the novel's protagonist is an enigmatic Shakespearean figure, a demonic wanderer or pseudo-villain who shifts between multiple personae, or a misbegotten Messiah whose unsettling truths simultaneously challenge, shame, and perhaps even redeem humanity.

The essay's first part briefly addresses Melville's early engagement with Shakespeare before examining the extensive notes and marginalia in his seven-volume edition of the playwright's works<sup>6</sup>. Melville's

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5 The relationship between Melville's fiction and Shakespeare's drama has been analyzed by the earliest critics of the American writer, following the path opened by F. O. Matthiessen in *American Renaissance* (1941) and Charles Olson in *Call Me Ishmael* (1947), who stated: "As the strongest literary force Shakespeare caused Melville to approach tragedy in terms of the drama. As the strongest social force America caused him to approach tragedy in terms of democracy" (Olson 1997, 69). However, the majority of the studies focused quite exclusively on *Moby-Dick* or on general Shakespearean themes and characters. Then, in the new millennium, this topic appears to have gradually faded from Melville's criticism, with the notable exception of the attention given to his marginalia (see *infra*).

6 Melville's seven-volume set of *The Dramatic Works of William Shakespeare* (Boston: Hilliard, Gray, 1837) lacks both his signature and a date of acquisition. Although it has traditionally been identified with the "edition in glorious great type" mentioned in his February 24, 1849 letter, the editors of the Northwestern-Newberry edition of *Moby-Dick* state that this identification is not entirely certain. All quotations from Shakespeare are taken from the Arden editions listed in the bibliography, not from the copies owned and annotated by Melville. Melville's annotations can be consulted in "Melville's Marginalia Online" edited by Steven Olsen-Smith and Peter Norberg. <https://melvillemarginalia.org/>.

remarks primarily highlight passages where truth and evil intersect, focusing especially on villains who boldly present themselves as truth-tellers – whether for personal gain or out of a distorted sense of honor. The second part of the essay explores Melville's nuanced portrayal of the devil and his connection to comedy, emphasizing how the confidence man's ambivalent avatars draw upon Shakespeare's theatrical tradition. Charlotte Spivack's concept of the playwright's comic treatment of evil, arising from "the established union between comedy and iniquity" (Spivack 1978, 9), provides a valuable framework for analyzing Melville's novel as an ongoing conversation with Shakespeare.

Melville's elusive confidence man embodies a broad spectrum of morality, and his speeches weave together truths, half-truths, and outright lies, leaving his identity and ultimate purposes shrouded in mystery. No wonder that among Melville's works, *The Confidence-Man* – based almost entirely on dialogue and adhering closely to the Aristotelian dramatic unities – stands out as one of the most densely Shakespearean in its construction and allusions. Throughout the plot, characters mention or allude to *Cymbeline*, *Hamlet*, *As You Like It*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Timon of Athens*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Twelfth Night*, with subtler echoes of *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *II Henry VI*, *Othello*, and *Measure for Measure*.

Scholars have long discussed these Shakespearean reverberations. Cook, for example, notes the multifaceted roles played by the cosmopolitan<sup>7</sup>, the confidence man's ultimate impersonation, who ironically presents himself under the name of Frank Goodman:

As a figure in motley, the cosmopolitan plays the fool like Touchstone and Feste; as a Prospero-figure, he casts a spell over Charlie Noble; as a Hamlet-figure, his tale of Charlemont functions as a moral "mousetrap" for Noble. In the cosmopolitan's encounter with Egbert, moreover, the two enact a play within a play like that found in *As You Like It*. (Cook 1996, 22)

The sheer complexity and depth of these intertextual connections could easily justify a full monograph, given how intricately Melville wove Shakespeare's threads into his narrative fabric. For the sake of focus,

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<sup>7</sup> Following Melville's usage in the text, the word "cosmopolitan" appears in lowercase when indicating this enigmatic character, reflecting both his designation in the novel and his fluid, boundary-crossing nature, like a mask in the *Commedia dell'Arte*.

however, the essay's final section centers on two Shakespearean plays that, to my mind, are most crucial in shaping Melville's dark comedy of evil: *The Winter's Tale* and *Timon of Athens* – the latter for its nihilistic meditation on misanthropy, the former through its depiction of the relationship “between artistry and criminal deception” (Watterson 1993, 536) embodied by Autolycus. These Shakespearean echoes amplify Melville's distinctive approach to skepticism, dramatizing the paradoxical and often comical nature of evil throughout his works and characters.

*Melville's Shakespeare: “Wisdom wiser than the Serpent’s”*

Intelligence is a basic component of evil. The more  
stupid you are the less capable you are of doing harm.

[...] Diabolical on the other hand is all but  
synonymous with ingenious. What Satan had  
for sale in the garden was knowledge.

Cormac McCarthy, *Stella Maris*

According to John Bryant's still-in-progress biography, “previous to 1849 Melville's exposures to Shakespeare had been random: in classroom recitations, in theatricals, and at home exchanging familiar lines” (Bryant 2021, 271) with his siblings. Melville's father, a failed importer of luxury goods from Europe, held a particular fondness for *The Merchant of Venice* and frequently quoted it in his letters. His untimely death in 1832, when Herman was only thirteen, possibly enhanced the youth's early connection to Shakespeare. By 12 December 1838, as the Lansingburgh Academy staged scenes from *The Merchant of Venice* for the Fall term program, 19-year-old Melville took on the role of Shylock. A reviewer praised “the young gentleman who personated ‘Shylock’ the Jew”, claiming that he “seemed to catch the spirit of the author” through intuitive and reflective observation (quoted in Bryant 2021, 427). During the performance, Melville was likely captivated by Shylock's exchange with Antonio, where the latter declares:

The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose. / An evil soul producing holy  
witness / Is like a villain with a smiling cheek, / A goodly apple, rotten  
at the heart. / O, what a goodly outside falsehood hath! (*The Merchant of  
Venice*, I.iii.93-98)

Bryant suggests that playing Shylock gave the young Melville an “awareness of theatrical villainy to the point that he could both revile the villain

and find sympathy for him" (Bryant 2021, 426). This duality reflects an emerging complexity in Melville's artistic vision and an eagerness to engage with Shakespeare's plays that would later shape his fiction.

Charlotte Spivack aptly remarks that "whether the role of Shylock is actually funny or whether its comic counterpoint is beyond laughter is a moot question", though the character exudes a "palpable strand of absurdly comic perversion" (Spivack 1978, 165). Clearly enough, the Jewish merchant "reverses the value of Christian charity that informs the action of the play" (164), and thus, like Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale*, foreshadows *The Confidence-Man's* disquieting ambiguity. From his early years, Melville's life bore traces of such ambivalence. In a rhetorical juvenile skirmish published in a local newspaper, he was dubbed "Hermanus Melvillian, a moral Ethiopian", accused of lacking principles and shifting with the wind, and he was even branded a "child of the devil, full of all subtility and mischief" (Olsen-Smith 2015, 12; 20; italics in the original). These caricatures of Melville's character underscore a reputation for unpredictability and complexity that parallels his literary engagement with characters defying easy moral categorization, like Shylock, Timon, Autolycus.

This early awareness of the ambiguity of evil shaped Melville's literary career, beginning with *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846). In the semi-autobiographical narrative, Tommo and his companion Toby jump ship and flee into a Marquesan valley inhabited by natives. The two sailors are initially consumed by "frightful anticipations of evil" (T 65) but soon marvel at the place's heavenly beauty, since money, "that 'root of all evil,' was not to be found in the valley" (T 126). Tommo finds out that evil emerges as a construct uniquely tied to civilization, especially when he reflects on how missionaries introduced "the worst vices and evils of civilized life" (T 182) amongst the indigenous peoples. Even when assuming the missionaries' good intentions, Tommo recognizes that their actions "may nevertheless be productive of evil" (T 197). This critique of civilization's corrupting effects resonates in Melville's subsequent work, *Omoo* (1847), where he further explores the wicked agency of colonialism<sup>8</sup>.

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8 It is not surprising that Miranda's naïve exclamation in *The Tempest* about peoples unknown to her – "O! wonder! / How many goodly creatures are there here! / How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world, / That has such people

By 1849, Melville's engagement with Shakespeare reached further intensity when he acquired an "edition in glorious great type" (C 119) of the plays that did not strain his eyes. Writing to Duyckinck, he confessed regret for his earlier disregard of "the divine William", to the point of comparing Shakespeare with Jesus, imagining him in heaven "with Gabriel Raphael and Michael". He declared triumphantly: "If another Messiah ever comes twill be in Shakspeare's [sic] person" (119).

Soon after, however, Melville's views became more nuanced. He complained that the playwright had been constrained by the mores of his time:

I would to God Shakspeare [sic] had lived later, & promenaded in Broadway [...]; that the muzzle which all men wore on their souls in the Elizabethan day, might not have intercepted Shakspeare's [sic] full articulations. For I hold it a verity, that even Shakspeare [sic] was not a frank man to the uttermost. And, indeed, who in this intolerant Universe is, or can be? (C 122)

To "tell truth and shame the devil", Shakespeare had to devise an ambiguous language for his characters, one that Melville tried to imitate and reshape in his writings. He later expanded on Shakespeare's genius in his essay "Hawthorne and His Mosses" (1850), admiring "those occasional flashings-forth of the intuitive Truth in him" (*PT* 244) and praising Shakespeare's tragic characters for voicing "things which we feel to be so terrifically true, that it were all but madness for any good man [...] to utter, or even hint of them" (244). In this evolving perspective, Melville shifted from comparing Shakespeare to Christ to envisioning him as a dark angel – a rebellious artist con-

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in't!" (Vi.181-83) – struck the author of *Typee* and *Omoo* with profound unease. Melville marked the passage with a line and a cross, then circled Prospero's retort: "'Tis new to thee" (Vi.184). In the upper margin, Melville wrote a revealing note: "Consider the character of the persons concerning whom Miranda says this – then Prospero's quiet words in comment – how terrible! In 'Timon' itself there is nothing like it". This annotation underscores Melville's perception of a dark irony in the contrast between Miranda's excitement and Prospero's disillusioned comment. While *Timon of Athens* presents a protagonist who vehemently despises humanity, Prospero's remark suggests an even grimmer outlook – not born of Timon's overt hatred, fueled by ingratitude, but rather a resigned, disenchanting awareness of human nature, stripping away any illusions about noble savagery.

strained by society's restrictions but capable of revealing terrible truths obliquely, mostly through his villains.

Unsurprisingly, Melville famously described Hawthorne as the American Shakespeare, praising his "power of blackness" as a defining feature of his literary genius. In an April 1851 letter, he linked Hawthorne's soul and art to "the intense feeling of the visable [*sic*] truth" (C 186) – a truth achieved by confronting the harshest reality with unflinching honesty. For Melville, only those who, like Hawthorne and Shakespeare – and by implication, Melville himself – were willing to devote their artistic faculties to the relentless pursuit of truth could aspire to literary greatness. His later depiction of Shakespeare as an antithesis to "the Serpent" reflects this belief. Unlike the devil who deceives by twisting the truth, Shakespeare – and Melville – manage to convey truth through the shades of fiction.

Melville's ambivalent reflections on evil often unfold through a dialogue with Shakespeare and Milton. As *Redburn's* young narrator observes, "Milton's Satan dilutes our abhorrence with admiration [...] because he is not a genuine being, but something altered from a genuine original" (R 276). A similar meditation emerges in *The Confidence-Man*, when the cosmopolitan discusses Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale*:

When disturbed by the character and career of one thus wicked and thus happy, my sole consolation is in the fact that no such creature ever existed, except in the powerful imagination which evoked him. And yet a creature, a living creature, he is, though only a poet was his maker. It may be, that in that paper-and-ink investiture of his, Autolycus acts more effectively upon mankind that he would in a flesh-and-blood one. Can his influence be salutary? (CM 172)

The cosmopolitan identifies the danger precisely in Autolycus's fictitiousness: as a literary invention, he escapes moral accountability while exerting a subtle and lasting influence. Shakespeare's villains, he implies, are seductive agents of uncertainty – creatures of ink and imagination that unsettle ethical certainties rather than reinforce them. In this sense, *The Confidence-Man* suggests Shakespeare himself might be viewed as a trickster – a master of guises whose rhetorical ingenuity, "wiser than the serpent", embodies the very ambiguity his characters enact.

This connection between fiction and ethical ambiguity emerges elsewhere in *The Confidence-Man*, notably through a provocative analogy drawn from the American wilderness. At one point, a character provocatively asks: “Is a rattle-snake accountable? [...] while to man it is forbidden to kill, without judicial cause, his fellow, yet the rattle-snake has an implied permit of unaccountability to murder any creature” (CM 191-92). The unresolved question resonates with Melville’s broader inquiry into theodicy, an undercurrent in his work: to what extent can evil be justified, and who – man, devil, or God – bears the responsibility? Melville engages these theological dilemmas chiefly through Shakespeare and Milton, whose works consistently informed his evolving meditation on evil. Milton’s Satan – “Majestic though in ruins” (II.305) – clearly informs Ahab’s inseparable union of grandeur and ruin<sup>9</sup>.

However, Melville’s engagement with the figure of the devil is not confined to Milton’s tragic vision. Alongside the majestic rebel of *Paradise Lost*, Melville develops a comic treatment of evil, already evident in *Mardi, and a Voyage Thither* (1849), where the devil appears as an ironic, mocking teacher. Here, the philosopher Babbalanja outlines a “devilish doctrine” in which all men are possessed by devils, yet the devils themselves are imprisoned within humans as punishment (M 317). Babbalanja remarks that “Devils are divers” – a term suggesting both variety and depth, echoing Melville’s praise of Emerson and Shakespeare as writers willing to “dive” into the deep (C 121). However, his playful catalog – “strong devils, and weak devils; knowing devils, and silly devils; mad devils, and mild devils; devils,

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9 Melville’s skepticism toward Milton’s theology (Grey 2004, xxiii) did not diminish his fascination with the poet’s Satan as an archetype of charismatic rebellion, as evident from his marginalia in *Paradise Lost*. In a much-quoted letter to Hawthorne written during the composition of *Moby-Dick*, Melville describes being driven to exhaustion by the “malicious Devil [...] forever grinning in upon [him], holding the door ajar” (C 191). While this remark ostensibly refers to the printer’s devil – the errand boy tasked with delivering manuscripts – it also hints at a deeper, sinister inspiration behind *Moby-Dick*. The shadow of Milton’s Satan looms over the act of creation, mirroring the sacrilegious baptismal formula quoted in chapter 113 of the novel, which is again, albeit partially, referenced in a later letter to Hawthorne: “‘Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli!’ deliriously howled [by] Ahab, as the malignant iron scorchingly devoured the baptismal blood” (MD 489).

merely devils; devils, themselves bedeviled; devils, doubly bedeviled" (M 317) – ultimately reduces the devil to a caricature of human behavior, stripped of any metaphysical feature.

Babbalanja's "very confidential devil", (M 419) Azzageddi (likely a play on "as you get it"), recalls the imagined tormentors of Edgar in *King Lear*, while also functioning as a comic version of the Socratic *daimon*, the inner voice that guided the philosopher. In his copy of *Paradise Lost*, Melville double-marked the passage about Satan's temptation of men (IX.701-05) and scribbled in the margin: "This is one of the many profound atheistic hits of Milton. A greater than Lucretius, since he always teaches under a masque, and makes the Devil himself a Teacher & Messiah"<sup>10</sup>. Azzageddi plays a similar role in *Mardi*, guiding through mock torment and irony, and prefigures, in satirical form, the darker figure of *The Confidence-Man* – a more disquieting and demonic "Teacher & Messiah" for a credulous humanity.

Melville's concern with truth broadened into a systematic exploration when he started reading Shakespeare seriously. An analysis of the marginalia left in his edition of Shakespeare's dramatic works reveals that Melville was particularly interested in those passages where truth is pursued and upheld, often at great personal cost, even by villains. In Melville's view, even morally compromised characters gain a shade of dignity and respect for their commitment to truth. For instance, in *King Lear*, Melville marked with a vertical line in the margin and a check mark the passage where Edmund declares:

What in the world he is / That names me traitor, villain-like he lies. / Call  
by thy trumpet; he that dares approach, / On him, on you – who not? – I will  
maintain / My truth and honour firmly. (V.iii.98-102)

Melville seems to admire Edmund's unwavering declaration, particularly the villain's insistence on upholding "truth and honour" to the end. In the margin, Melville jotted the remark: "The infernal nature has a valor often denied to innocence". This observation echoes once again his view of Milton's Satan, the fallen angel who retains great dignity

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10 Melville owned and annotated the two-volume edition *The Poetical Works of John Milton. A New Edition, with Notes, and a Life of the Author* (Boston: Hilliard, Gray, 1836). This copy, signed and marked by Melville at different stages of his life, is fully accessible at Melville's Marginalia Online, <https://melvillemarginalia.org/>.

in doing evil. Melville also marked passages that reject falsehoods, expressing skepticism towards supernatural phenomena and moral judgments. He notably referred to “the great Montaignism [*sic*] of Hamlet”, as he writes in the margins of Hamlet’s famous statement: “For there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so” (II. ii)<sup>11</sup>.

Thus, Melville’s 1882 signature after his quotation from *Henry IV* gains sharper significance when viewed in light of his philosophical development. In the play, Hotspur’s line is a skeptical response to Glendower’s boast of commanding spirits. When Glendower offers to teach him the dark arts – “Why, I can teach you, cousin, to command the devil” – Hotspur retorts sharply: “And I can teach thee, coz, to shame the devil: / By telling truth” (III.i.55-57), and reiterates shortly after: “O, while you live, ‘Tell truth, and shame the devil’” (III.i.60). Common sense, sincerity, and honesty, alongside logic and scientific reasoning, are summoned to challenge hypocrisy, cruelty, superstition. Most importantly, Hotspur – and Shakespeare through him – employs irony to disarm villainy, subverting Glendower’s grand claims with sharp wit. Melville’s own call to “shame the devil” echoes this strategy, reflecting his evolving view of evil – not as an external adversary to be vanquished but as an inner, shifting ambiguity to be exposed through irony and truth-telling. By the time of *The Confidence-Man*, the devil is a protean figure who teaches, deceives, and challenges human rationality from within. Melville’s lifelong engagement with the devil – from Milton’s tragic rebel to the comic demons of *Mardi* – finds a fitting culmination in his mature embrace of Shakespearean irony as a weapon against deception.

A recent computational analysis of Melville’s Shakespearean marginalia<sup>12</sup> shows that he “marked more words in the comedies than

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11 Montaigne was another important source of inspiration for Melville, at least since January 1848, when he purchased “I Montagne” [*sic*], likely an edition of the philosopher’s works. Melville’s personal copy of Montaigne’s works has not been located, but according to Aretta J. Stevens, it is likely that he owned the edition edited by William Hazlitt the Younger, son of the famous romantic essayist, translated by Charles Cotton and reprinted by Wiley & Putnam in 1845. While visiting the British Museum in London, Melville was intrigued by the purported signature of Shakespeare in John Florio’s translation of Montaigne’s *Essays*.

12 Conducted by Christopher Ohge, Steven Olsen-Smith, and Elisa Barney Smith with Adam Brimhall, Bridget Howley, Lisa Shanks, and Lexy Smith.

in the histories and tragedy combined" (Ohge 2018, 40). Notably, he "marked many negative sentiments in plays traditionally grouped under the label of comedy" (39). This tendency aligns Melville's vision with Dmitri Nikulin's view that "comedy accomplishes with dramatic action what philosophy does with arguments" and that "comedy is born out of the spirit of philosophy" (Nikulin 2014, xi). In this light, Melville foresees Nikulin's claim that "Dialectic is comedy philosophically disguised, and comedy is a dramatization of philosophical dialectical reasoning" (50). The novel, as the quintessential dialogical and dialectical form, becomes the ideal medium for Melville to explore the intricate relationship between evil and comedy.

Soon after purchasing his Shakespeare volumes, Melville began jotting cryptic notes on the flyleaf of volume VII<sup>13</sup>, staging an imaginary conversation between characters. One such note mimics a formal reply: "Yes, Madam, Cain was a godless froward [*sic*] boy, & Reuben (Gen: 49) & Absalom". After referencing these wicked biblical figures, Melville adds dryly: "Many pious men have impious children", before concluding with a sardonic twist: "(Devil as a Quaker)" (MD 969). This comic image – the devil disguised as a meek Quaker addressing a devout lady – appears to trigger a more developed narrative. The devil, still in disguise, persuades a man to sign "A formal compact", laced with mock-legalese: "Imprimis – First – Second. The aforesaid soul, said soul &c – Duplicates" (969). The parody anticipates the legal jargon of the lawyer in "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853) and the rhetorical flourishes of the confidence man's avatars.

Melville's marginal dialogue continues with a reference to Satan's third temptation in Matthew, where the devil offers Christ dominion in exchange for worship. An imagined question – "'How was it about the temptation on the hill?' &c." – leads to a wry scene of gentlemanly banter on biblical themes. The devil proposes that his interlocutor join "a 'Society of D's", a satirical reimagining of the Faustian pact as club membership. The final quip – "Would you not rather be below with kings than above with fools?" (MD 969) – echoes Miltonic grandeur twisted into parody. Although what the devil gains from this pact remains ambiguous, the notes already foreshadow *The Confidence-Man's*

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13 The volume includes the tragedies: *King Lear*; *Romeo and Juliet*; *Hamlet*, *Prince of Denmark*; *Othello Moor of Venice*.

dialogic structure. A “Doctor”, likely an atheist, stops his coach to scoff: “Do you beleive [sic] all that stuff? nonsense [sic] – the world was never made”. Melville replies to himself with a “But”, followed by the ironic counter: “Is not this mentioned here – in the scriptures?” (969, underlined in the text)<sup>14</sup>. The Bible becomes both subject and tool in a game of belief, doubt, and persuasion – central themes in *The Confidence-Man*.

Melville’s Shakespearean reading clearly shapes these reflections. In *Othello*, Iago invokes the “Divinity of hell!” (II.iii.345), his villainy masked by supposed honesty. Cassio blames drink for giving way to wrath, describing it as the devil’s accomplice (II.iii.291-92). Lady Macbeth’s exhortation to her husband to “look like the innocent flower, / But be the serpent under’t” (*Macbeth*, I.v.61-64) is undercut by the Porter’s crude wit about wine and lust. In *Measure for Measure*, a passage Melville marked captures the theme of deceptive virtue: “O, what may man within him hide, / Though angel on the outward side?” (III.i.527-28). Fittingly, the duplicitous figure is named Angelo.

As Elizabeth Foster aptly observed, “the tone of comedy, the method of parody, and the idea of the Devil disguised as a Quaker were an adumbration of *The Confidence-Man*” (Foster 1954, 296). In Melville’s later notes, however, the focus shifts. He revisits the sacrilegious baptismal formula later echoed by Ahab in *Moby-Dick* and reflects on fanaticism as the antithesis of Christian ethos. This transition signals an evolution of themes and characters that will be more fully explored in *Moby-Dick*. Yet the “comedy of evil” continues to thread its way through Ishmael’s narration, embodied, perhaps, in the grotesque figure of the enigmatic Fedallah, and resurfaces in *Pierre*, particularly in the protagonist’s melodramatic struggles and the cryptic musings of the philosopher Plotinus Plinlimmon<sup>15</sup>. Ultimately, it is in *The Confidence-Man* that Melville’s comic treatment of evil finds its fullest and most explicit expression.

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14 Melville’s notes on this page may be drawn from essays in Leigh Hunt’s *The Indicator* (Sealts No. 290.1) and from “Doctor Faustus” in Thomas Roscoe’s *The German Novelists* (Sealts No. 428b.1).

15 Plinlimmon’s mock-philosophical pamphlet on “Chronometricals and Horologicals” mentioned in the novel underscores the impossibility of the Christian ethos in the modern world, leading Pierre to conclude that “so far as practical results are concerned – regarded in a purely earthly light – the only great original moral doctrine of Christianity [...] has proved entirely impracticable” (P 215).

*Laughing at Nothing: Melville's comedy of evil*

It is better to laugh & not sin than to weep & be wicked<sup>16</sup>.

Herman Melville, pencil inscription on  
his copy of Shakespeare's *Dramatic Works*

In early Christian thought, evil is understood as non-being – an absence of good. Such an interpretation by theologians like Origen, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas deeply shaped medieval art and literature. According to Charlotte Spivack, laughter arises at the paradoxical perception of such privative evil:

To the medieval Christian who simply followed the definition of evil as Non-Being through to its logical conclusion, laughter was actually inevitable. Taught that evil is not what it seems to be, [...] medieval man could not do otherwise than laugh at the fundamental absurdity of evil. (Spivack 1978, 26)

To laugh at evil is not to trivialize it, but rather to dissect its nature and reveal it for what it is: "A nothing masquerading as something" (26). Over time, this view led to "a venerable convention of the English stage: the established union between comedy and iniquity" (9). Shakespeare and his contemporaries inherited and adapted this tradition, turning evil into "a subject for mocking laughter" (172). By exposing evil's absurdity through humor, Shakespeare diminished its power and aligned himself with a long-standing tradition in English drama.

This view resonates with recent Shakespearean criticism. Rhodri Lewis (2024) argues that irony lies at the heart of Shakespeare's tragic vision, understood in a deeper existential and epistemological sense rather than as sarcasm or a mere plot device. Drawing on Kierkegaard and Bernard Williams, Lewis presents irony as a form of truthfulness: the recognition that our efforts to define ourselves and our world constantly clash with the instability of human life. Far from nihilistic, Shakespeare's irony allows for ethical clarity without the consolation of Aristotelian catharsis or Christian redemption, stripping away illusions instead. In Shakespeare's tragedies, evil is never fully

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<sup>16</sup> Melville's notes in this page may be drawn from "Howleglass, the Merry Jester" in Thomas Roscoe's *The German Novelists* (Sealts No. 428b.1) and from Francis Palgrave's "Superstition and Knowledge" (Sealts No. 395a).

explained or resolved and is experienced as part of a world lacking stable meanings or moral certainties.

The idea of mocking evil contrasts sharply with the horror of sin in seventeenth-century New England, where Puritan doctrine portrayed the devil as an invasive, internal threat. As Andrew Delbanco observes, “the Puritans imagined a prideful Satan who, rather than anticipating what they might become, mocked them with an image of what they already were” (Delbanco 1995, 43). Satan, often depicted as an outsider or mysterious wanderer – as in Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” – emerges as “an unmoored symbol” that “never becomes a fixed image, no more in the popular imagination than in formal theology” (53). Soon enough, the Puritan devil, with his ability to inspire reckless confidence, took on the traits of a pragmatic businessman: versatile, persuasive, and skilled at tailoring his speech to any audience. This contradictory figure, both terrifying and intimately familiar, profoundly shaped early American religious thought.

On a different theoretical plane, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s transcendental philosophy laughed away the theological concerns about evil. In his “Divinity School Address” (1838), he famously dismissed the notion of absolute evil, in the light of the scholastic notion that “Good is positive. Evil is merely privative, not absolute: it is like cold, which is the privation of heat. All evil is so much death or non entity” (Emerson 1983a, 77). For Emerson, metaphysical dilemmas like original sin, the nature of evil, and theodicy were little more than nuisances – “the soul’s mumps, and measles, and whooping-coughs”. Such concerns, he claimed in “Spiritual Laws”, “never presented a practical difficulty to any man, – never darkened across any man’s road, who did not go out of his way to seek them” (Emerson 1983b, 305). To Emerson, evil was not a substantial force but a conceptual hurdle that the soul should outgrow, subsumed by the moral order of the universe.

Melville offered a more disquieting, anti-Emersonian vision. In “Spiritual Laws”, Emerson wrote: “The good, compared to the evil which [man] sees, is as his own good to his own evil” (314). In his own copy of Emerson’s *Essays: First Series* (1847), Melville commented on this passage by jotting: “A perfectly good being therefore would see no evil. – But what did Christ see?”. This may well be another of the germs that led to *The Confidence-Man*, where Melville presents an ultimately insubstantial figure – a “nothing” in multiple masks – who

pretends not to see, or rather laughs away, the idea of evil through rhetorical ambiguity. The confidence man urges humanity to believe that evil does not exist, encouraging people to trust one another and act accordingly. Is he a benevolent trickster exposing human folly, a satanic deceiver, or something more unsettling? Could he, paradoxically, harm while intending to do good – or the other way around?

The witches' cryptic statement in *Macbeth* – "Fair is foul and foul is fair" (I.i.9) – finds an unsettling echo in the confidence man's dealings, as does Macbeth's later realization that "the fiend [...] lies like truth" (V.v.50). The masquerade emphasizes this ambiguity<sup>17</sup>, as the term evokes a witches' sabbath, or a performance that blends amusement with transgression and deception – motifs woven throughout Melville's novel and introduced in its subtitle. On several levels, the masquerade becomes a fitting metaphor for the confidence man's theatricals, where appearances deceive and the edge between good and evil is disturbingly thin.

According to early critics such as Charles N. Watson and Lewis Mumford, after *Moby-Dick* Melville "found a metaphor for his disillusionment in the theme of Timonism [...] which implies a betrayal and desertion by one's friends" (Watson 1972, 399). At this juncture, Melville's career had reached a dead end. Abandoned by readers and publishers, his prospects as a novelist were shattered. This profound sense of betrayal and isolation deepened his fascination with themes of disappointment and misanthropy, along with a growing inclination toward what might be called sympathy for the devil. As Watson observed, the embittered writer faced two alternatives: "to withdraw, like Timon, into misanthropic solitude; or to engage the public on its own terms, taking on the protective coloring of an artistic confidence man, playing with a grim humor on the egotism and gullibility of his audience" (399). This pattern persists throughout Melville's writings of the 1850s, from *Pierre* to "The Encantadas" (1853), through "Bartleby the Scrivener", "Jimmy Rose" (1855)<sup>18</sup>, and *Israel Potter* (1855),

17 Noah Webster's 1828 dictionary defines "masquerade" as "a nocturnal assembly of persons wearing masks, and amusing themselves with dancing, conversation and other diversions". See Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language*, <https://webstersdictionary1828.com/>.

18 Melville's "Jimmy Rose" has been described as a "detailed repetition of the theme and action of Shakespeare's *Timon*" (Watson 1972, 404).

until “the disillusioned Timon stands at last as a symbol of the disillusioned author, whose highest ambitions and greatest work now appeared headed for oblivion” (Watson 1972, 413).

Such a purely biographical reading oversimplifies the matter. The striking parallels between *Timon of Athens* and *The Confidence-Man* reveal deeper structural connections, particularly an engagement with the issue of skepticism. George Steiner’s argument that “tragedy is a questioning and an enacted testing of theodicy” (1990, 137) provides a lens for Melville’s stylistic evolution. Beginning with *Moby-Dick*, his prose became increasingly theatrical, assuming a tragic tone that mirrored the intensifying urgency of his philosophical and theological inquiries. Hawthorne, who gained privileged insight into Melville’s mind during their brief meeting in Liverpool in 1856, observed that “his writing, for a long while past, have indicated a morbid state of mind” (Hawthorne 1962, 432). Yet morbidity did not stem only from concerns about his literary career. During the same meeting, Melville confided that he had “pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated” (432). This stark admission brings out the deep existential struggles at the core of his engagement with Shakespeare, echoing the tragic intensity of *Timon*.

Steiner further observes that among Shakespeare’s tragedies, “only that inexhaustibly perplexing, erratic bloc, *Timon of Athens*, seems [...] ‘black on black’”, presenting “the one and only time that William Shakespeare would terminate language knowing [...] that it was the axis and defining instrument of our humanity, of our place in the world” (Steiner 1990, 132-33). Similarly, after *The Confidence-Man* – Melville’s bleakest novel – the author turned from prose to poetry. Like Shakespeare’s *Timon*, Melville had reached a point where prose could no longer sustain the weight of his disenchantment. Poetry offered a more elastic medium to grapple with the metaphysical concerns that increasingly preoccupied him.

Giorgio Melchiori describes the tale of the wealthy and generous Athenian gentleman turned misanthrope as the most enigmatic of Shakespeare’s plays (1994, 545). For Harold Bloom, it is “the graveyard of Shakespeare’s tragic art [...], its final mausoleum [...], the resting place of the first great European tragedies since ancient Athens” (1998, 590-91). Frank Kermode argues that “a strong sense of its oddity has deflected critical interest” toward the play, since it “sur-

vives in an unfinished state" (2000, 231). Similarly, Anthony B. Dawson and Gretchen E. Minton emphasize the play's "ineluctably mixed nature" (2008, 27), which shifts seamlessly between tragedy, satire, and allegory. The Arden editors argue that Shakespeare's intention was "to produce a hybrid piece, challenging in both its subject matter and its form" (29). This perplexing and seemingly unfinished structure finds a striking counterpart in *The Confidence-Man*, which was ruthlessly rejected by contemporary reviewers: "A novel it is not, unless a novel means forty-five conversations held on board a steamer, conducted by personages who might pass for the errata of creation, [...] nonsensical people talking nonsense" (Branch 1974, 373).

Building on Muriel Bradbrook's theory, Melchiori suggests that *Timon of Athens* was conceived as a pageant, a spectacle combining allegorical and moral elements. Indeed, the play, like Melville's novel, is a moral fable, with characters representing archetypal roles. In this light, Lloyd C. Sears's commentary resonates with critical interpretations linking *The Confidence-Man* to *Moby-Dick*:

[*Timon of Athens*] stands like an unfinished ruin almost too vast and rugged in its conception for symmetrical completion. As a philosophical indictment of the world it held possibilities greater than those of *Hamlet*, because the theme has a broader perspective and greater variety in points of view, but perhaps partly on this very account it lacks the emotional intensity of *Hamlet*, and thus, fails to carry the same conviction. (1974, 161-62)

Like *Timon*, Melville's elusive novel offers a broader and more provocative philosophical exploration than *Moby-Dick*, but at the cost of narrative cohesion and emotional engagement. The same dynamics that, according to Sears, limit the dramatic success of *Timon* also help explain the different reception of *The Confidence-Man* compared to *Moby-Dick*.

References to *Timon* are scattered through *The Confidence-Man*, where the characters refer to his misanthropy to criticize the corrosive effects of cynicism. Early in the novel, suspicion about the honesty of a seemingly harmless African American beggar sparks a discussion on the destructive power of distrust. A Methodist preacher warns an embittered Missourian that skepticism leads to isolation and insanity, and this cautionary message is punctuated by someone who whispers: "Might deter Timon" (CM 16). Later, the cosmopolitan refers to the "injudicious gentleman, Lord Timon" (CM 137) in order to per-

suade the misanthrope, Pitch, to strive for mutual understanding: in fact, the cosmopolitan himself is a fraud, exploiting Pitch's trust for his own profit. In another conversation, he pities Timon as a "poor old crazy man" (CM 177) and contrasts him with the figure of a "genial misanthrope" – someone who cloaks cynicism beneath a façade of cheerfulness and affability. However, this "new kind of monster" (CM 176) seems a thinly veiled self-portrait of the cosmopolitan, suggesting that his affable demeanor is itself a masquerade<sup>19</sup>.

Another parallel between the play and the novel lies in their shared emphasis on banquets that, as Kermode notes, implicitly "contrast with the heavenly banquet, the Eucharist" (Kermode 2000, 237). Just as Timon, consumed by rage, suddenly hurls water and the dishes at his guests, in *The Confidence-Man*, when the cosmopolitan's con game is exposed by his "boon companion", he is forced to perform what amounts to a satanic ritual to placate his accuser. After "a metamorphosis more surprising than any in Ovid" (as the title of Chapter XXI ironically states), the cosmopolitan rises from the table and

taking ten half-eagles from his pocket, stooped down, and laid them, one by one, in a circle round him; and, retiring a pace, waved his long tasselled pipe with the air of a necromancer, an air heightened by his costume, accompanying each wave with a solemn murmur of cabalistical words. (CM 180)

The irony, as the narrator wryly alludes, lies in the suggestion that it is money, not the ritual, that holds attention<sup>20</sup>.

However, as in Shakespeare's play, Melville's scene raises the deeper question of where good and evil truly lie in each exchange. Both characters are con men, each attempting to outwit the other, yet they present themselves as gentlemen, advocating charity and camaraderie. Even the ostensibly sinister "satanic ritual" described by the narrator serves to restore peace – albeit superficially – and

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19 A final reference to Timon comes towards the end of the novel, when the cosmopolitan exhorts his new victim, the barber, to take down "Timon's sign" (CM 234) on the door – "No trust" – because "it is misanthropical; much the same sign that Timon traced with charcoal on the forehead of a skull stuck over his cave" (CM 230).

20 The cosmopolitan's spell comes across as an almost ironic reversal of Ahab's own rituals to entice the crew, involving grog, oaths, and the prized doubloon.

further complicates the moral dynamics of the scene. As Dawson and Minton argue, *Timon of Athens* raises a similar question: "From what superior moral vantage point does satire speak?" This issue, in turn, "points to the general problem of the corrective value of art". Shakespeare's play is "a self-reflexive attempt to highlight the ethics of satire", and it exposes the playwright's "discomfort [...] with the ambiguous, moral stance of satire" (2008, 36-37). Ultimately, by presenting characters who are both satirists and the targets of satire, Shakespeare and Melville challenge the audience to confront the uneasy intersections of morality, art, and deception, leaving unsolved the question of whether satire can ever claim a truly ethical foundation or is just another empty con game.

The conflation of tragedy and comedy in *The Confidence-Man* suggests a more striking comparison with *The Winter's Tale*, where Shakespeare explored a different approach to the hybridity of genres and the double vision of evil. As John Pitcher observes in the introduction to the play's Arden edition, *The Winter's Tale* bridges the divide between high and low, a feature that has led to ongoing Polonius-style critical debates about whether the play should be best classified as "romance, late comedy, tragicomedy, romantic or pastoral tragicomedy" (2010, 16). This tension is vividly embodied in the play's notorious Bear – a presence that is at once terrifying and absurdly funny – culminating in the iconic stage direction: "Exit, pursued by a bear" (III.iii.57). According to Pitcher, the play's first three acts form "a mini-tragedy that concludes, in neatly Aristotelian terms, with death and recognition [...] followed by an unusual kind of two-act comedy" (2010, 17).

A similar structural duality shapes *The Confidence-Man*. The novel can be roughly divided into two parts: the first twenty-three chapters feature various incarnations of the confidence man as agents of deceit, characterized by a satirical, comedic tone, while their schemes unfold with mischievous energy. From chapter XXIV onward, however, the focus shifts to the cosmopolitan, the amorally ambiguous figure who dominates the second half of the narrative. Unlike the early avatars, the cosmopolitan presents himself as an advocate of universal goodness, attempting to earn the trust of others who are often as duplicitous as he is. This inversion blurs the boundaries between right and wrong, transitioning from overt deception to subtler,

more insidious manipulation. Interestingly, while *The Winter's Tale* moves from tragedy to a happy ending, *The Confidence-Man* reverses the sequence. Its first part, marked by a humorous tone and mocking deceptions, gradually gives way to increasingly bitter satire. The tonal shift becomes explicit in Chapter XLV, "The Cosmopolitan Increases in Seriousness", where the narrative darkens, adopting a nihilistic edge that reveals a bitter critique of human folly and despair.

Another significant connection between Melville's novel and Shakespeare's romance lies in their exploration of skepticism. Stanley Cavell argues:

If *The Winter's Tale* is understandable as a study of skepticism – that is, as a response to what skepticism is a response to – then its second half must be understandable as a study of its search for recovery [...]. Skepticism's own sense of what recovery would consist in dictates efforts to refute it; yet refutation can only extend it. (2003, 198)

Cavell considers the play in terms of a competition between drama and non-theatrical forms, ultimately claiming the superiority of theater (199). In this arena, the characters grapple with harassing epistemological questions about existence, including the reality of the external world and the ontological existence of other minds (203). Leontes cannot accept his son as truly his own nor that his wife is faithful, insisting that "all's true that is mistrusted" (*The Winter's Tale*, II.i.48). As Pitcher observes, Leontes "must doubt everything, and believe that the truth is the opposite of common sense" (2010, 39).

A similar dilemma unfolds in *The Confidence-Man*, where characters and readers, baffled by the elusive identity of others, tend to attribute evil motives or intentions to virtually everyone. However, unlike *The Winter's Tale*, Melville's novel reverses the structure: instead of moving toward recovery, it descends further into ambiguity and distrust. The absence of any redemptive resolution suggests that for Melville, skepticism cannot be overcome – only deepened. By reversing the trajectory of Shakespeare's romance, *The Confidence-Man* denies even the philosophical possibility of restoring trust once it has been lost.

Non-commitment is equally impossible. Leontes accuses his loyal prince Camillo of being "a hovering temporizer, that / Canst with thine eyes at once see good and evil, / Inclining to them both" (I.ii.300-02). Yet Leontes himself arbitrarily chooses to see evil where

none exists. This indictment of moral ambiguity, echoing the journalistic caricature young Melville had resented, revolves around conflicting interpretations of reality: one grounded in sensory evidence, the other in unfounded and intangible suspicion. Leontes “rules out the value of the testimony of anyone else, as if testifying that he must know for himself” (Cavell 2003, 203). For him, the emergence of evil – whether within himself, his family, or his court – stems from an overly skeptical interpretation of reality, one that distorts perception and fuels mistrust<sup>21</sup>.

If it is easy for an audience to dismiss Leontes’s paranoid vision as mere insanity, the same cannot be done with Shakespeare’s (and Melville’s) more complex and morally ambiguous characters. This uncertainty is directly addressed in Chapter XXX of *The Confidence-Man*, where the cosmopolitan and Charlie Noble, another con man, engage in a conversation that metafictionally reflects on Melville’s interpretation of Shakespeare’s characters, particularly those whose moral ambiguity challenges straightforward readings. Noble dismisses Polonius’s recommendations to Laertes in *Hamlet* (I.iii.57-80) as sanctimonious and harmful – a guidance that should be avoided rather than followed. The cosmopolitan, however, adopts a more measured stance. He admits to a habitual inclination to trust Polonius’s words, despite their dubious nature, but also acknowledges that Noble’s critique has “unsettled” him: “I don’t exactly see how Shakespeare meant the words he put in Polonius’ mouth” (CM 171). Here, the focus of skepticism shifts to the *intention auctoris*, transforming the cosmopolitan into a perplexed reader, as he himself states:

To confess, in reading Shakespeare in my closet, struck by some passage, I have laid down the volume, and said: “This Shakespeare is a queer man.” At times seeming irresponsible, he does not always seem reliable. There appears to be a certain – what shall I call it? – hidden sun, say, about him, at once enlightening and mystifying (171).

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21 For a keen analysis of *Othello*’s skepticism in Cavell’s philosophy, see Alessandra Marzola’s essay “Shaping Scepticism, Arousing Belief”, which deals extensively with “the textual and cultural reasons for the contradiction between the shapes of skepticism moulded in *Othello* and the extreme emotional responses of audiences”, following “the simultaneous inducing and thwarting of the suspension of disbelief on which this play so heavily relies” (Marzola 2014, 134).

The cosmopolitan compares Shakespeare to an eclipse of the sun by evoking the apocalyptic imagery from the Revelation of St. John, where, after the opening of the sixth seal, “the sun became black as a sackcloth of hair” (6.12). This metaphor captures the dual nature of Shakespeare’s art, shedding light on humanity while cloaking it in shadow.

When Noble asks whether he considers Shakespeare “the true light”, the cosmopolitan avoids a direct answer. While he refrains from deifying Shakespeare, he acknowledges the unfathomable nature of his brightness, suggesting that the Bard should remain “in a condition of lasting probation” (CM 172). Not only does the term imply the skeptic’s suspension of definitive judgment but also an ongoing interrogation of Shakespeare’s intent, as if he were simultaneously a god to be revered and a suspect to be cross-examined – much like God in theodicy, a figure glorified yet scrutinized as if perpetually on parole. This stance highlights the impossibility of pinning down Shakespeare’s moral vision. The same applies to interpretations of his characters’ speeches: is Polonius a mouthpiece for Shakespeare’s wisdom or a manifestation of the playwright’s fear of irrelevance? Is he an ironic foil or a smug fool?

The cosmopolitan’s insight deepens as he turns to discuss Autolycus, whose nature defies easy categorization. Describing Autolycus as “a rogue so happy, so lucky, so triumphant, of so almost captivating vicious”, he confesses that the character, like his author, has “always puzzled” him (172). As Collins Watterson suggests, Autolycus might even represent “what Shakespeare could have become in the event of his failure as an artist / shareholder in London” (543). The irony resonates with the cosmopolitan, who, like Autolycus, seems to mirror Melville’s (and Shakespeare’s) craft.

Like Melville’s confidence man, Autolycus takes on different personas throughout the play: first a penniless beggar, then a peddler, later a faux courtier wearing Florizel’s attire, and finally the character he pretends to be while conversing with the three gentlemen at the Sicilian court. Moreover, the cosmopolitan’s harlequin-esque “vesture barred with various hues, that of the cochineal predominating” (CM 131) resembles Autolycus’s “ribbons of all the colours i’th’rainbow” (*The Winter’s Tale*, IV.iv.206). Although they both entertain people and loathe violence, they diverge in their values: Autolycus gleefully mocks trust, faith, and honesty, embracing and even reveling in

his rogue identity, while the cosmopolitan preaches universal trust, denies the existence of evil, and maintains a genial, welcoming demeanor. The cosmopolitan describes Autolycus as “the devil’s drilled recruit [...] joyous as if he wore the livery of heaven” (CM 172). As a “ballad singer and ballad-monger” (Bloom 1998, 651), he knows how to captivate his audience; unlike Polonius, whose seriousness can alienate readers and audiences, Autolycus’s charm and humor make his philosophy not only engaging but also disquieting. In his case, humor, though often viewed as salvific, is deployed as a tool to beguile, to unsettle the very foundations of moral clarity.

However, negative empathy – the charm of evil – belongs unmistakably to Melville’s cosmopolitan, who, at the end of the novel, exerts a “power of persuasive fascination – the power of holding another creature by the button of the eye” (CM 234) – over one of his victims, the barber. The narrator describes this power of persuasion as “sort of magical” but specifies that it operates “in a benign way” (234) as it induces the distrustful barber to trust his fellow men – specifically, to trust the cosmopolitan who eventually cons him. Likewise, the narrator of *Pierre* reflects on the undeniable allure of sin: “What man, who is a man, does not feel livelier and more generous emotions toward the great god of Sin – Satan, – than toward yonder haberdasher, who only is a sinner in the small and entirely honorable way of trade?” (P 177-78). For Melville, sin carries a mysterious sacredness, but only when it rebels against authority or performs acts of truth-telling to unmask human frailty. In this light, humor becomes a counterpoint to holiness, a force that challenges established norms and exposes canonical truths.

Autolycus’s mischief lacks this subversive edge. His antics, though rooted in trickery, lead to involuntary good, suggesting a kind of providential order that governs even the most villainous intentions. This paradox is captured in his own words: “If I thought it were a piece of honesty to acquaint the king withal, I would not do’t. I hold it the more knavery to conceal it, and therein am I constant to my profession” (*The Winter’s Tale*, IV.iv.683-86). Autolycus’s reasoning, as he debates what constitutes “more knavery”, preempts any moral struggle to distinguish good from evil. The division in the structure of *The Winter’s Tale* and its perplexing denouement highlights the debunking of the traditional contraposition between good and evil.

Shakespeare's swerve from tragedy to comedy in *The Winter's Tales* and *Timon of Athens* aligns with Steiner's argument that "the absolutely tragic is [...] not only insupportable to human sensibility: it is false to life" (Steiner 1990, 134). Drama, Steiner contends, gravitates naturally toward "tragi-comedy" (131), a balance Greek tragedians supposedly pursued by complementing the tragic performances with satiric pieces. These farcical epilogues, now mostly lost, "mocked, ironized, held up to caricature and deflation elements of the preceding tragic material", achieving a kind of cathartic "counter-effect" (131). Similarly, *The Confidence-Man* tempers its bleak critique of society with irony and satire. Yet the novel's enigmatic closing line – "Something further may follow of this masquerade" (CM 251) – leaves the narrative suspended in ambiguity, hinting at a potential comic resolution that Melville either withheld or could not bring himself to articulate.

The evolution of Shakespeare's legacy in Melville's imaginary – from Savior and angelic truth-teller capable of shaming the devil to a Miltonic rebel, and finally to a "puzzling" figure on probation and a "sincere" devil – mirrors the transformation of the devil-figures in his corpus. In *Mardi*, devils are reduced to comic caricatures of human folly, exposing evil as a relative and absurd force rather than a metaphysical absolute; Ahab embodies the Shakespearean tragic hero, defying cosmic authority with monomaniacal intensity and blending the grandeur of Milton's Satan with Shakespeare's search for truth; Pierre is a fallen angel ensnared in melodrama, desperately probing the boundaries of truth, while the confidence man is the final blending of Satan and Christ, fallen angel and tricking Messiah. This progression reflects not only Melville's shifting vision of Shakespeare as an artist but also his evolving conception of art's purpose: to embrace, rather than resolve, the ambiguities of existence.

In *The Confidence-Man*, Melville adopts a skeptical and even comical view, akin to Shakespeare's later comedies and problem plays. Autolycus and Timon exemplify the playwright's talent to show evil as both absurd and disarmingly human – ludicrous and yet enticing. Similarly, the title character of *The Confidence-Man* operates as a devil-like shapeshifter, unmasking hypocrisy through rhetorical ambiguity. The novel's truncated ending proves Steiner's assertion that the expression of absolute tragedy inevitably takes on a fragmented

form, and that “[o]nly the fragmentary, whose completeness is expressly that of mutilation, of end-stopping, can be immune to light” (Steiner 1990, 130).

Just as Shakespeare’s “hidden sun” casts light and shadow, so does Melville’s literary masquerade, which resists resolution as comedy – i.e. the closure of a redemptive finale – yet refuses to align fully with tragedy, gesturing instead toward a circularity that eludes the classical arc of rise and fall. Samuel Beckett will take up a similar dialogue with the English playwright, towards an “endgame” where “nothing is funnier than unhappiness” (2006, 104). In this sense, *The Confidence-Man* exemplifies what Goethe meant by “Shakespeare und kein End”: an inexhaustible return to Shakespeare as a horizon of meaning that remains just beyond reach, where drama dismantles certainty by opening a space of perpetual inquiry.

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