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Gender and Writing in Melville's Erased Marginalia to Shakespeare

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Abstract

This poster presentation explores Herman Melville's erased marginalia in his set of Shakespeare's *The Dramatic Works* and his attention as a reader to the ironies and paradoxes of human experiences, relationships, and social and gender identities and roles. Previously unaddressed in scholarship, the erasures range in character from attention to rhetorical style to themes of human nature, cynical views of marriage, misogynistic representations of women, and hostility toward messengers. Examination of extant marginalia in relation to erased reveals thematically parallel content and inconsistent targeting of marginalia for erasure, provoking questions as to whether the erasures are due to self-consciousness or backtracking on Melville's part or to the embarrassment of family members due to some of the marked passages' offensive content. Given Melville's exploration of society, gender, and identity in his writing, his attention to offensive language in *The Dramatic Works* may not entail agreement with the ideas presented so much as a fascination with Shakespeare's subtle subversions of social norms and creation of characters in whom gendered qualities paradoxically coexist. Parallel themes in his first novel, *Typee*, and his 1850 essay, "Hawthorne and His Mosses", indicate a potential similarity between women and writers based on a shared experience of vilification, censorship, and the resulting necessity of strategies for self-expression, suggesting his preoccupation with the importance of social criticism in literature. The erasures in the Shakespeare set contribute to understanding of Melville's development as a writer who alternately reflected and challenged social perspectives of his day. The poster includes filtered imaging to illustrate erased evidence as well as visualizations of XML-encoded text to quantify erased and extant marginalia.



Melville Reading & Writing Social Criticism

Herman Melville’s erased marginalia in his copy of Shakespeare’s *The Dramatic Works* include passages on fallen human nature, negative representations of women, cynical views of marriage, and hostility toward messengers. Little to no scholarship has examined the erasures in detail, although the markings related to female characters have been described as “misogynous” (Cowen xix). Evidence of Melville’s portrayals of women in his writing, his frequently gendered outlook on the human condition, and filtered imaging of and thematic parallels among his erased and extant marginalia indicate his critical thinking as a writer who alternately reflected and challenged social perspectives of his day. Melville’s debut book, *Typee*, his 1850 essay, “Hawthorne and His Mosses”, and excerpts from his correspondence reflect his interest in society’s censorship and vilification of writers.

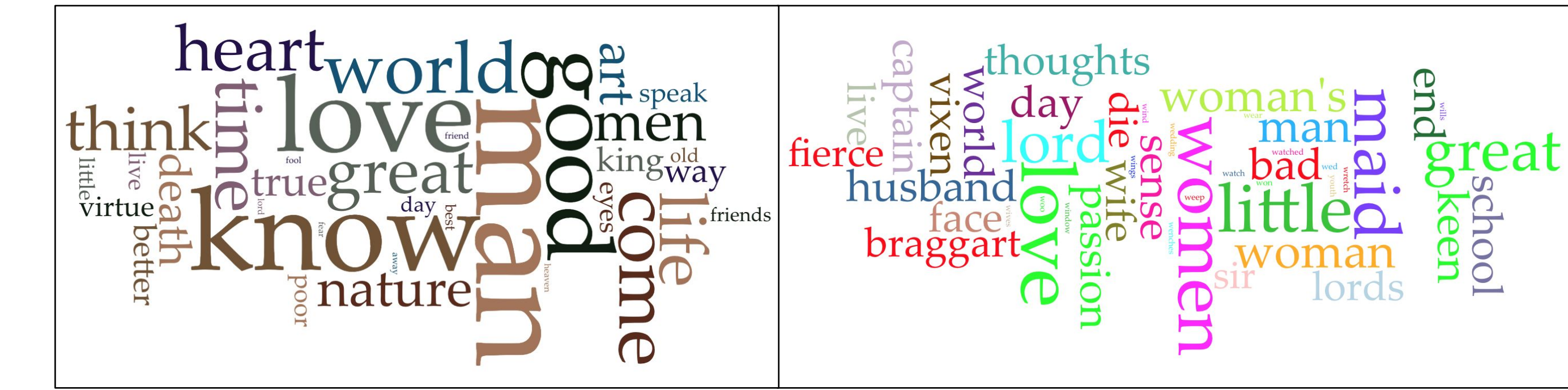
Ambiguous Motives Behind Erasure

- | | |
|----------------------|--|
| Melville? | Or Family Members? |
| ❖ Self-consciousness | ❖ Family reputation |
| ❖ Reinterpretation | ❖ Controversial representations of women, human nature, relationships, and society |
| ❖ Re-categorization | |

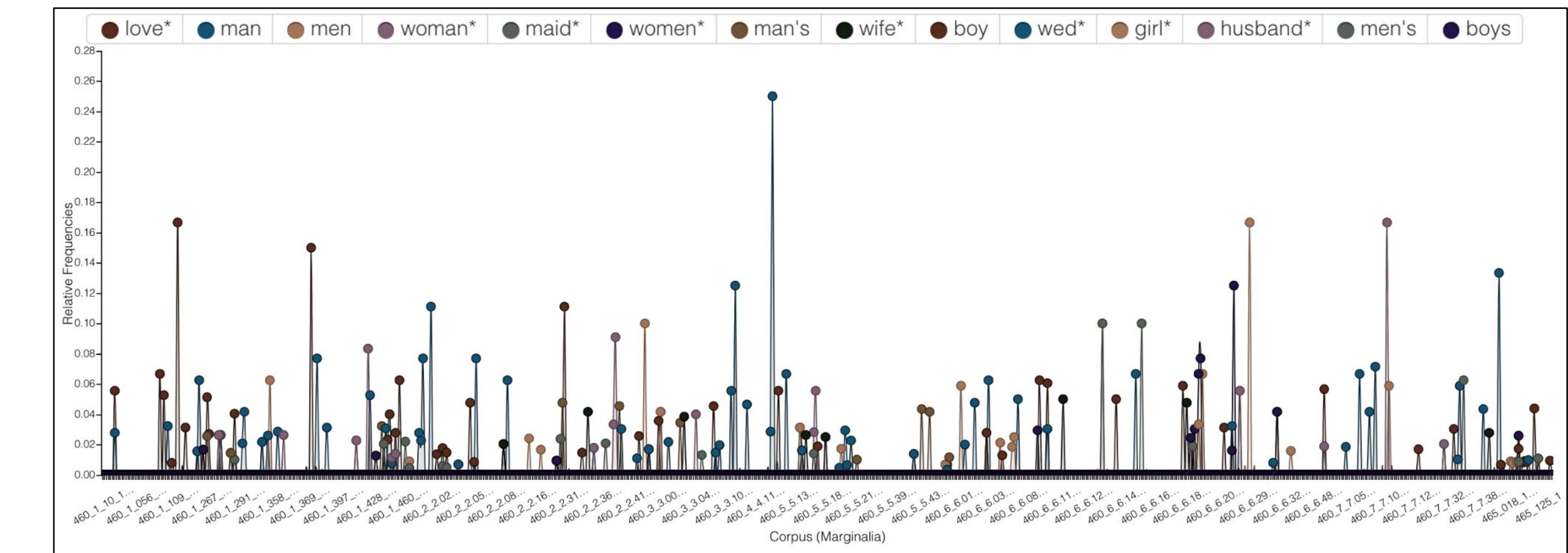
Melville Reading Shakespeare

Visualizations of high-frequency terms show a disparity in subject matter between erased and extant content:

- ❖ Emphasis on human condition vs. women & marriage
- ❖ Lesser quantity of erased marginalia: approximately 33 instances



Shakespeare’s plays frequently center on gender and relationships. The trends graph visualization of marginalia regarding gender and male-female relationships (featured below) includes Melville’s copy of the *Sonnets* and reflects his consistent attention to Shakespeare’s extensive interest in the topics.

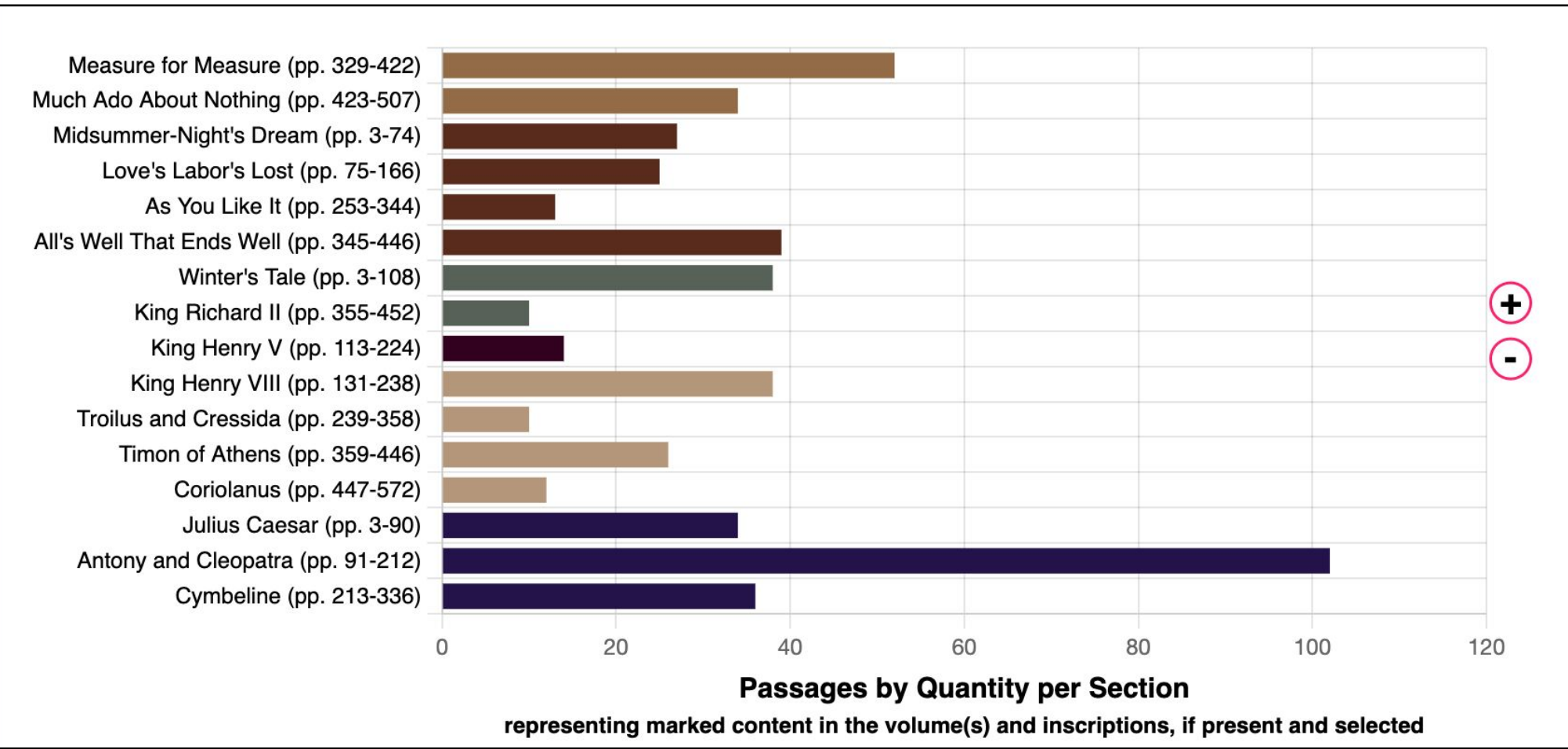


Shakespeare Muzzled

- Melville viewed Shakespeare as a messianic figure (Correspondence 119) who, as an Elizabethan man, wore a “muzzle...on [his] soul” (122).
- ❖ Admired Shakespeare’s covert social criticism (“Hawthorne and His Mosses” 523)
 - ❖ Described his writing as “short, quick probings at the very axis of reality” (522)
 - Melville’s attention to gender role conflicts in the plays suggests possible interest in Shakespeare’s experience as a writer during Queen Elizabeth I’s reign.
 - ❖ Religious and political censorship
 - ❖ Possible sense of shared experience with Shakespeare

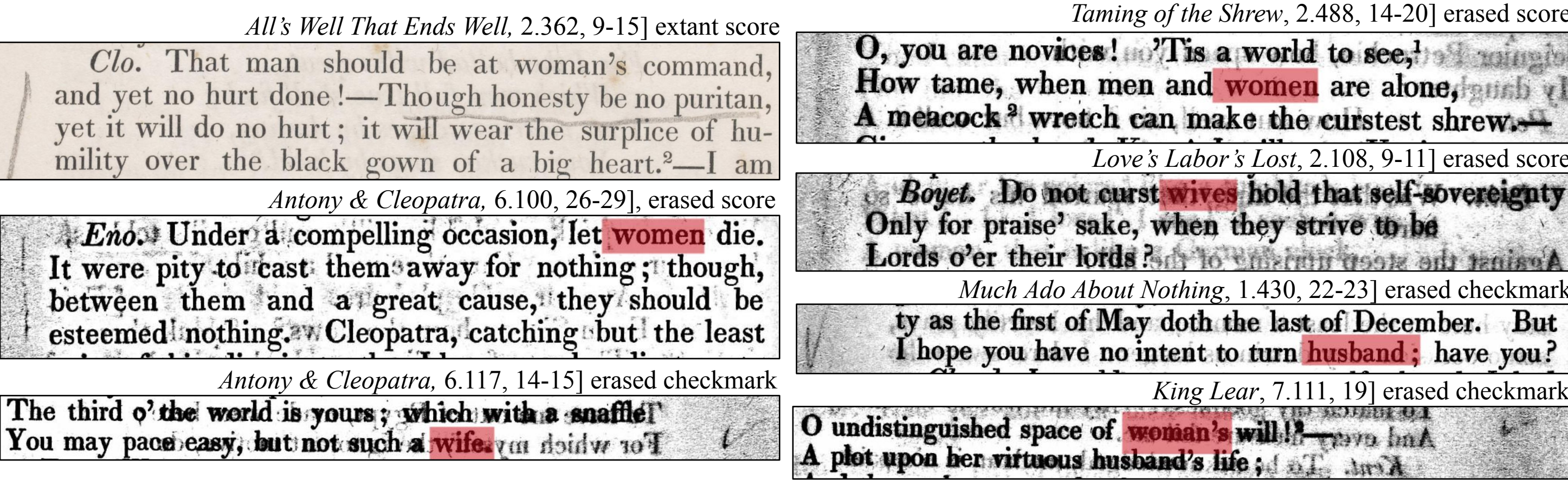
Elizabethan Gender Conventions

- ❖ Shakespeare’s female characters reflect qualities of Queen Elizabeth I who challenged gender conventions (Oh 369)
 - ❖ Leadership as masculine
 - ❖ Silence as feminine – signifying “chastity and obedience” (353)
 - ❖ Silence as a gender-specific strategy in a patriarchal system (369)
 - ❖ Elizabeth I used silence to avoid making final decisions on marriage (353)
- ❖ Melville’s marginalia on gender suggests his interest in Shakespeare’s alternate reflection and subversion of gender conventions.



A bar graph visualization of erased and extant marginalia in *The Dramatic Works*, excluding plays that feature less than ten marked passages, shows that Melville paid particular attention to *Antony and Cleopatra*. Believed to have been written after Elizabeth I’s death (*Dramatic Works* 6.091), the play features political and romantic conflicts between an ill-fated, unmarried female sovereign and male rulers.

“At woman’s command”: Melville’s Attention to Conflict of Wills



Erased and extant markings indicate a pattern of attention to hostility between men and women.

- ❖ Shared themes among marked passages
 - ❖ Conflict of wills
 - ❖ Women as inferior
 - ❖ Women’s speech, autonomy, & required submission
 - ❖ speech as a strategy for self-sovereignty
 - ❖ intelligence evidenced in speech – vilification as a consequence
- ❖ Marriage
 - ❖ Resentment of women
 - ❖ Taming of women

Defining Masculinity & Femininity

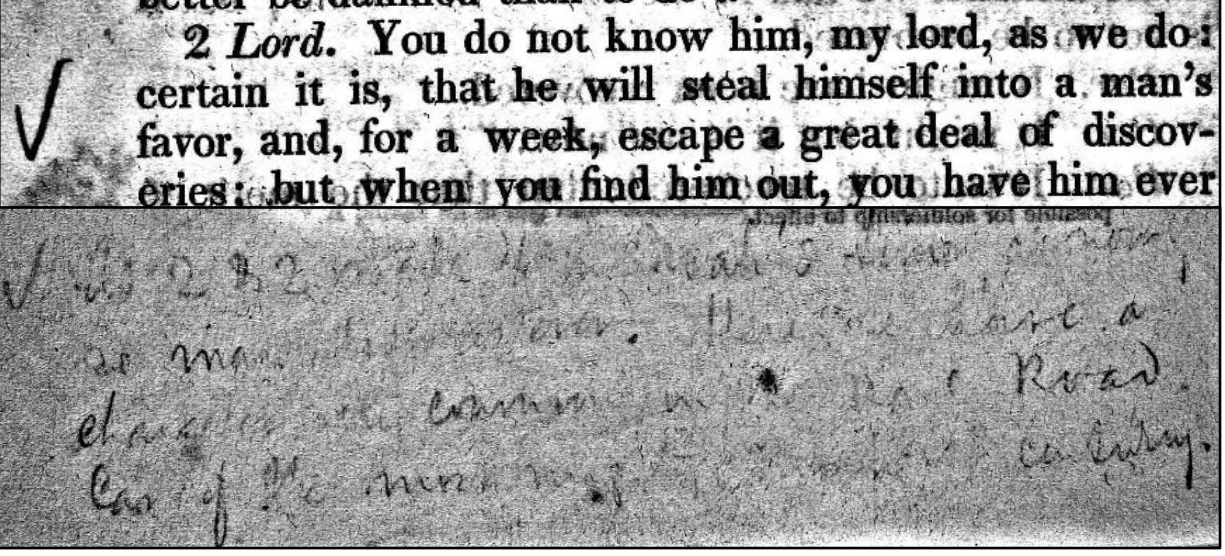
- ❖ Attention to gendered characteristics
 - ❖ Characters’ strategies for denying accountability and silencing women
 - ❖ Evidence of masculine & feminine qualities interdependent/coexistent in individuals
 - ❖ Extant markings indicate some attention to generalizations regarding men

Gender & the Human Condition

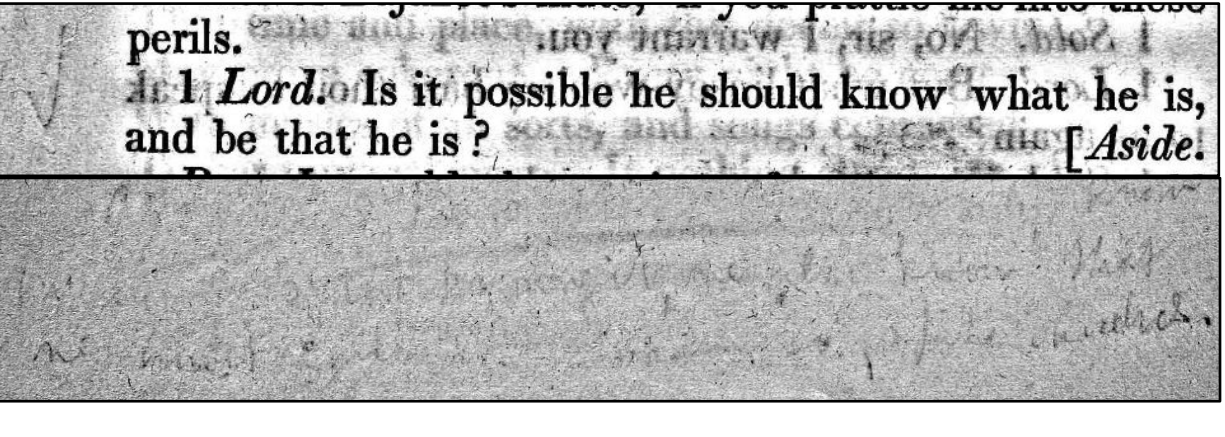
Attention to Parolles of *All's Well That Ends Well*

- ❖ Themes of cowardice, hypocrisy, deception
- ❖ Possible projection of Parolles’ qualities onto religious institutions
- ❖ Subterfuge needed to expose deceptive individuals

All's Well That Ends Well, 2.406, 7-8] erased checkmark; Bottom margin] erased checkmark and annotation: “As 2 & 2 made 4 in Noah’s time, as now, so man [?figure]s ever. Here we have a character very common in the Rail Road Car of the [most] [mighty] [?nineteenth] century.”



2.410, 18-19] erased checkmark; Bottom margin] erased checkmark & annotation: “[5-7 unrecovered words] know [6-9 unrecovered words] that [?he must] [5-7 unrecovered words] [?churches].”



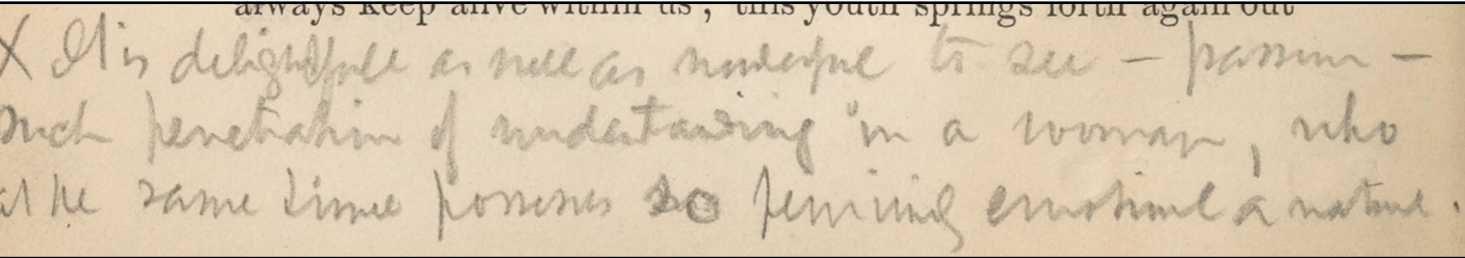
Writing Women

- ❖ *The Paradise of Bachelors and The Tartarus of Maids*, 1855
- ❖ Working women’s lives contrasted with London bachelors’ luxury (2365)
- ❖ Girls compared to blank page (2371)
- ❖ *The Confidence-Man*, 1857
 - ❖ Goneril – “her husband, no adept in the female nature, had tried to use reason with her, instead of something far more persuasive.” (71)

Reading Women

- Annotation to Germaine de Staël’s comments on Goethe in *Germany*
- ❖ “It is delightful as well as wonderful to see – passim – such penetration of understanding in a woman, who at the same time possesses so feminine & emotional a nature.”

Germany, Vol II, Part II, CH. XXVIII, 2.060, Bottom margin] x & annotation

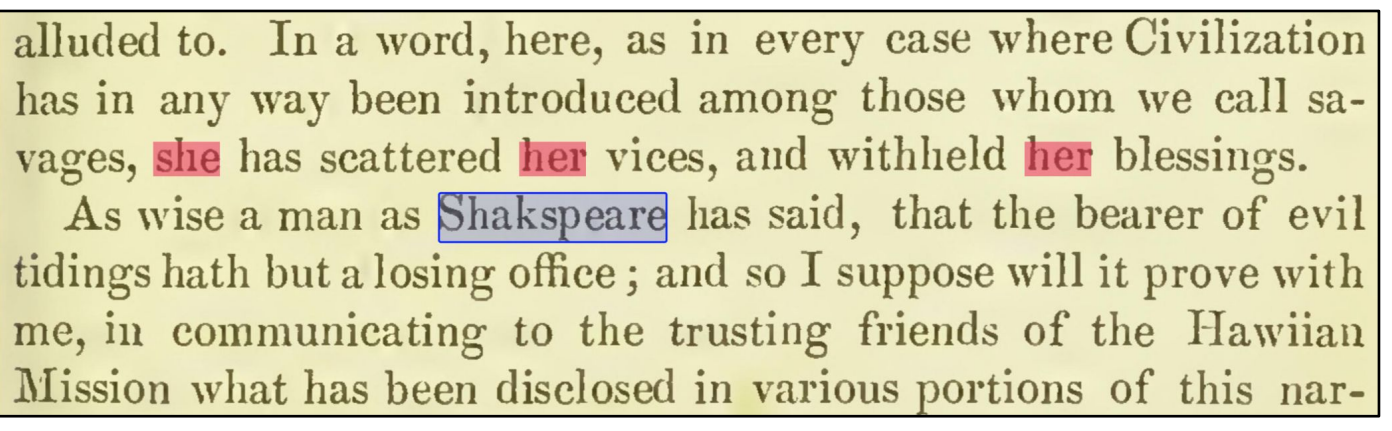


Silence & Censorship: Women & Writers

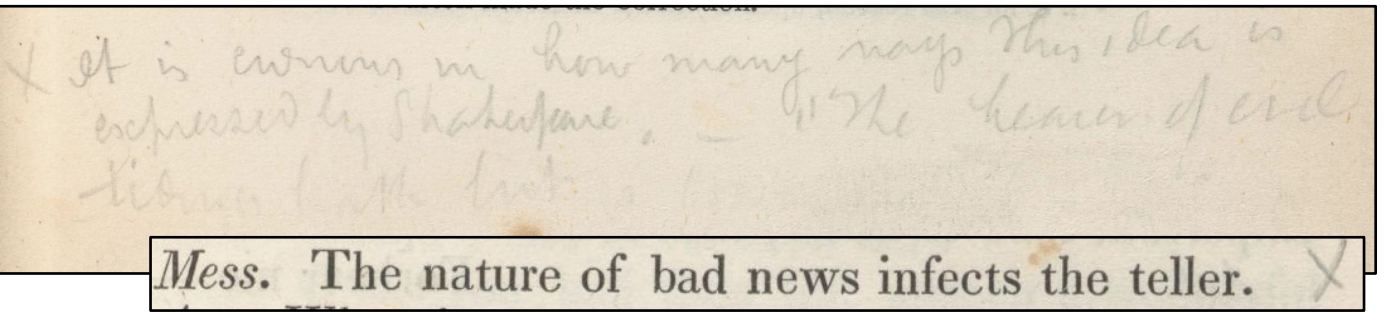
Erased and extant marginalia to themes of bad news infecting messengers reflect Melville’s ongoing interest in the similarity between society’s censorship of writers and messengers.

- ❖ Annotation in *Antony and Cleopatra* reiterates sentiments in 1846 novel, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*
 - ❖ Passage expurgated from 1846 American edition
 - ❖ Anticipated the Church’s negative reaction to criticism
 - ❖ Self-association with Shakespeare
- ❖ Subversion of gender norms represented negatively
- ❖ Shakespeare’s Cleopatra
- ❖ Melville’s Civilization

Typee, Ch. 26



Antony & Cleopatra, 6.099, 9] extant pencil [x; Bottom margin] pencil x and partially erased annotation: “It is curious in how many ways this idea is expressed by Shakespeare.–“The bearer of evil tidings hath but a [losing office.] [two and a half lines of additional unrecovered words].”



Antony and Cleopatra, 6.128, 26] extant pencil checkmark; 36-37] extant pencil score; Bottom margin] erased pencil checkmark and undeciphered annotation of 3-5 words.

