Gender and Writing in Melville's Erased Marginalia to Shakespeare

Netanya Hitchcock  
*Boise State University*

Steven Olsen-Smith  
*Boise State University*

Elisa Barney Smith  
*Boise State University*
Gender and Writing in Melville's Erased Marginalia to Shakespeare

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.

This student presentation is available at ScholarWorks: https://scholarworks.boisestate.edu/under_showcase_2023/
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” (Coxen xiv). Evidence of Melville’s portrayal 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.

**Writing Women**

- 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 but containing 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.

---

**Silence & Censorship: Women & Writers**

- 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, and required submission
  - Speech as a strategy for self-sovereignty
  - Intelligence evidenced in speech—verification 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**

- Attraction to Paroles of All’s Well That Ends Well
  - Themes of cowardice, hypocrisy, deception
  - Possible projection of Paroles’ qualities onto religious institutions
  - Subtext needed to excuse deceptive individuals

---

**Works Consulted**

- Clarel, 1876
  - “She did but feel, true woman’s way.” (86)
  - “A man betrayed the yearning god; / A man, yet with a woman’s kiss.”
- *Twan human, that unanimous cry, / ’crucify!’” (144-5)
- *After the Pleasure Party*, 1891
  - Barren imagery describes female scientist (312)
- *Billy Budd* manuscript, 1891
  - “He heart her [is] sometimes the feminine in man” (Melville Leaf 631)
- *Lost* unproduced *The Isle of the Cross*
  - Wife’s integrity contrasted with husband’s unfairness (Correspondence 233-4)

---

**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.

**Announcement 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*