

“DWARFING DOWN”:  
MALE DESIRE AND DEFEAT IN MELVILLE’S *MARDI*

**H**erman Melville is an early instance of the nineteenth-century line of European and American writers who traveled to the Asian Pacific and fell under the spell of Orientalist fantasies of domination and gratification. In *Mardi, and a Voyage Thither* (1849) Melville’s white male sailor-narrator (eventually to be called Taji) escapes from economic captivity aboard an industrialized whaling ship. Shortly afterward, in a violent act of colonial expropriation he abducts a white-skinned Pacific Island princess named Yillah, whose exoticism incites him to kill to possess her. This violent episode distills the lure of the tropics, a torrid zone of Western male aggression where labor can be renounced, punishment averted, inhibitions shed, and resources looted—including indigenous female bodies. The young narrator (now impersonating the demigod Taji) takes up “married” life with Yillah on the uncharted fringe of Polynesia. However, his princess-bride soon vanishes, and her disappearance becomes the mainspring of the plot of *Mardi*. Taji searches for her through the newly discovered archipelago of Mardi, located in a blank space on the maps of the *Mer du Sud*, the South Pacific. What he finds at the end of his panicky quest is terrifying and demoralizing, suggesting that his acquisitive and sensualist fantasies have backfired. In particular “Taji” discovers something fundamentally threatening (to him) about women’s erotic power and the limitations of his own response. At the end of the novel he becomes an abject deserter again, in flight as he had been at the beginning. He sails away from the feminized Mardian lagoon on a suicidal solo voyage that anticipates the fatal pursuits of Captain Ahab and other despairing male searchers in Melville’s fiction.

Melville’s encounter with Polynesia in the early 1840s launched his career as a professional writer. In *Typee, a Peep at Polynesian Life*, and its sequel *Omoo, a Narrative of Adventure in the South Seas* (1846 and 1847) Melville drew upon the conventions of the travelogue and captivity narrative. These fact-based novels grew from Melville’s sole voyage as a whaler, when he shipped out of Massachusetts in 1841 as a 21-year-old. They trace his outbound travels as far as French Polynesia and purport to record his adventures as a deserter from two different whaling ships during 1842 and 1843. In addition

to presenting the story of young sailors both on the run and in captivity, these books contain many comic embellishments, linguistic inventions, sexual innuendoes, and social critiques. In their serious moments *Typee* and *Omoo* audaciously criticize the invasion of “civilized” Western culture into the “primitive” paradise of Polynesia, an encounter that proves catastrophic for Oceanic peoples. Melville condemns the presence of warships and missionaries; the former are agents of oppressive Western governments, and the latter are carriers of a repressive creed. Furthermore, Melville’s tropical project opens an inward dimension as he pushes beyond jaunty travel narrative to delve “into the symbolic exposition of a spiritual autobiography” (Martin 75). Melville’s artistic approach turns from loosely rendered realism to complex symbolism. Indeed, *Mardi* takes this inward exploration to a remarkable psychological depth, showing a new confidence on Melville’s part that literary symbols might reveal hidden truth. Less impressively, Melville’s Polynesian fiction advances a paternalistic version of Pacific cultures. Indigenous people are depicted as free from Euro-American social and bodily restraints but lacking in initiative or discipline. Melville’s tropical spectacle highlights both female sexuality and male idleness—on view in casual nakedness, routine promiscuity, and universal torpor.

Melville began *Mardi* in the late spring of 1847 and described the early part of the manuscript as a continuation in the fictionalized mode of his early Pacific works, a sequel to *Omoo* (Delbanco 91). Again in his new novel, a young sailor would desert from his whaling ship in search of tropical ease. But barely a quarter of the way through *Mardi*, Melville veered away from the autobiographical-adventure style. Travelogue gives way to a seaborne exploration of ideas in a region entirely off the charts as Melville pursued the European and British genre of the fabulous voyage. When Melville’s third novel sails into a fantasy archipelago called Mardi—made up of “innumerable islands” (Melville, Chapt 52, 143) in a South Pacific water-world—it abandons the known cartographies of the 1840s and becomes a self-consciously experimental and “literary” production. Melville creates his own imperialist Pacific map: “he renders the cultural geography of the area as a tabula rasa that literally gives him a blank space in which to exercise his imagination” (Phillips 131). He now was proclaiming himself to be “a romancer— in the broad sense, a novelist, a fabulist, a fiction writer” (Sten 66). *Mardi* thus marks a turning away from the frontier world of the Pacific beach, which Melville had been one of the first novelists to limn for Western readers—the Polynesian word *omo’o* is identified with the English word beachcomber (Christopoulos 104). In *Mardi* Melville penetrates beyond the beach into the feminized “virgin” territory of South Sea Island

idyll, as viewed through Western male eyes. As a compulsive exploration of this inner psychosexual terrain, *Mardi* is "inarguably the pivotal work in Melville's career" (Person, Jr., 50).

In the opening of the novel the young narrator is toiling on the whaling ship *Arcturion*, when the autocratic captain-father proclaims his intention to sail to the far North Pacific in search of prey. For the narrator this order is a horror (similar situations occur in *Typee* and *Omoo*). Exchanging "the mild equatorial breeze" south of Hawai'i for "cold, fierce squalls" (Chapt 1, 20) near the Arctic Circle is a hideous prospect. The narrator descries his "utter helplessness" (Chapt 2, 21) aboard ship, where he feels like a prisoner. In such confinement he lacks stature, freedom, and power— all key concepts in *Mardi*. The southwestern Pacific islands to which he is drawn offer an escape from the mechanized nightmare of Western capitalism, represented by floating factories like the *Arcturion*, in which whales and men alike are dismembered. In a stolen whaleboat with no maps, the narrator sets off to follow the trade winds in search of "all the charms of dream-land" (Chapt 1, 20). The paradise he seeks displays a coded Orientalized skyline of "airy arches, domes, and minarets"— in short, the architecture of the harem.

His plan is based on his knowledge of contemporary maps of the South Pacific, which have fired his imagination with tantalizing images of the sun-drenched tropics. The Victorian colonial map was an instrument both of male intrusion and indulgence. As an image of Western science, a map signifies the advance of power and authority. At the same time a map indicates the limits of Western dominance, with figures like mermaids and sea-monsters prefiguring the unknown and uncanny that lie beyond. These fantasy realms, especially in equatorial regions, often were adorned with naked and inviting women. Such provocative images shape what Anne McClintock, a scholar of the southern hemisphere colonial regime, calls the "porno-tropics" of the Western literary imagination (25). From the perspective of sexual mapping, Pacific shores teem with fantasy women, unrestrained by Western morality. The islands occupy a hot zone of heterosexual hedonism, where white male inhibitions can be cast off. Thus, the colonial journey is portrayed as a bold step forward into an unknown but alluring geographical space, inhabited by mysterious females (alluring but perhaps monstrous). However, it is also a step "backward in historical time, to what is encoded as a prehistoric zone of racial and gender difference" (30), a primal realm of physicality. The narrator and his fellow runaway Jarl drift westward for 16 days, covering about 700 miles (Davis 116n1). It is plain that at the beginning of the manuscript Melville "intended that his narrator should return from the

voyage to the western Pacific and recount the tale of his adventures" (Branch 318), much as in Melville's first two books. However, Melville was becoming a different writer from the one who had started *Mardi*. He was steering his third novel in a far more experimental direction. In particular, *Mardi* takes up a psychological exploration of physical desire, sexual possession, the female body, male anxiety, and psychological collapse.

In the first adventure of the deserters' voyage, they encounter a drifting vessel, the *Parki*, which was raided by "Cholos," Melville's term for Spanish-speaking *mestizo* pirates. Only two people on board the *Parki* survived the attack, a Polynesian married couple. While the husband Samoa is characterized as brave and loyal, his wife Annatoo is portrayed as wanton and predatory. After the two white men commandeer the ragged vessel, they learn that Annatoo has stolen or smashed all its instruments, further evidence of her destructive irrationality. Therefore, the narrator and Jarl allow the winds to drive them along their westward course. After several days the *Parki* runs into a gale, the ship comes apart, and Annatoo drowns. The narrator, Jarl, and Samoa cast off in the whaleboat as the *Parki* sinks.

At first glance the *Parki* episode seems detachable, like the Town-Ho story in *Moby-Dick*. However, it shows an important thematic bond to Melville's early work. Portrayed as disordered, looted, and helpless, the *Parki* seems to be Melville's metaphor for the shattered world of colonized Polynesia, reeling from Western domination. Repeatedly associated with theft, the *Parki* becomes an emblem of colonial kleptocracy. This incident also begins as a captivity narrative and thus serves as an important narrative link to the "non-fiction" world of Polynesia rendered in *Typee* and *Omoo*. Further, it looks forward to the Yillah plot in *Mardi*, another captivity narrative. As portrayed by Samoa and Annatoo, marriage is a gloomy constriction or captivity, a hostile and damaging co-dependency. Annatoo is dangerous and sexually manipulative, abusing her husband by day yet drawing him to her body by night. She uses an axe to amputate his infected arm, literally "disarming" him in a simulation of castration. Castration imagery occurs throughout *Mardi* and serves as an index of worsening male anxiety. Although a minor character in *Mardi*, Samoa resembles other male Melville characters who suffer an Oedipal wound. He illustrates both a bad desire for a domineering mother-figure (incest) and a need for punishment (emasculatation). This cycle of feminine erotic power and masculine mutilation leads to male feelings of impotence, remorse, resentment, and shame. Indeed, the narrator views Samoa's marriage as a form of suicide (Chapt 22, 68), which anticipates the despondent ending of *Mardi*. However, it is Annatoo who meets violent

death when a loose block knocks her overboard to be "swallowed up in the whirlpool" (Chapt 36, 109). Her lethal fate prefigures Yillah's apparent drowning "in the deepest eddies" of a subterranean Mardian lake much later in the novel (Chapt 195, 541). These watery vortices in *Mardi* link women's sexuality with death.

An autobiographical point to be made is that *Mardi* is the first novel Melville completed after his wedding in 1847 to Elizabeth Knapp Shaw. Unlike the protagonists of Melville's first two books, who could not obtain a bride, the narrator in *Mardi* is successful in his bride quest— if only for a brief time. Melville's own bride quest did not take him far from home. The Melville and Shaw families had ties of friendship in Boston, where Elizabeth's father Lemuel Shaw (as a young lawyer) had been in love with Nancy Melville, sister of Allan Melville, Herman's merchant father (who went bankrupt in 1830). Nancy died before Shaw could marry her. However, aware of his role as Allan's almost brother-in-law, Judge Shaw took on the role of advisor and benefactor to Herman's mother Maria after Allan's bankruptcy and his death in Albany in 1832. Elizabeth Shaw, whose mother Elizabeth Knapp died giving birth to her, became part of this Melville-Shaw connection. Elizabeth was a close friend of Herman's older sister Helen, who had visited Lizzie in Boston while Herman was at sea. Elizabeth also had stayed on numerous occasions at the Melville home in Lansingburgh, N.Y. (a river settlement near Troy), where Melville's four sisters and mother Maria resided. Elizabeth visited there in 1846, when Herman was at home enjoying the reviews of *Typee* (published in April). By the end of 1846 it was obvious to the family that Melville "was getting serious about Miss Shaw," who was so often in the house (Robertson-Lorant 153). However, her father was a prominent man— the Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court in Boston— and skeptical about permitting his privileged daughter to marry a writer. Even so, Herman's modest success as the author of two South Seas adventure books enabled him to court Lizzie in Boston in the spring of 1847— although the topics of cannibalism and sexual promiscuity in *Typee* gave Melville a notoriety not wanted by Justice Shaw. In truth, Herman was still financially and socially insecure; marrying Lizzie Shaw would be a very advantageous match. On the one hand Herman looked to Justice Shaw for material support. On the other he felt pressure from his mother Maria Melville, who was encouraging the marriage (Robertson-Lorant 158). When the wedding took place on August 4, 1847 in Boston at the elegant Shaw home, Herman had just turned 28 (and was still living in his mother's house); Elizabeth was three years younger.

Because Melville and his sisters regarded Lizzie as a sister, from the start there were incestuous undertones in the union. In marrying Elizabeth, Herman could have felt an underlying “sense of guilt in the commitment of an incestuous sin. For if Lemuel Shaw acted like a father, Elizabeth must at times have seemed a sister” (Miller, Jr., xiii). Put more forcefully, for Herman, marriage to Elizabeth Shaw “constituted no movement beyond established relationships” with female kin (Haberstroh 54). The marriage also formalized Herman’s status as a “son” of Justice Shaw, his benefactor and now father-in-law. After a honeymoon in Quebec the couple returned to Melville’s mother’s home for a few weeks before moving to Manhattan in October 1847 to take up married life. During their first winter together, Herman and Elizabeth lived with his mother (a dominant figure), his four sisters, and his brother Allan and his wife Sophia in a brownstone row house on Fourth Avenue (Judge Shaw had advanced Herman’s share of the purchase price). To Melville these crowded lodgings became “a web of strangling femaleness” spun by his mother and her daughters (Warren 143). Even the “motherless” Lizzie accepted her role as one of Maria Melville’s daughters. These congested quarters reinforced the incestuous dynamics of Herman’s and Elizabeth’s cohabitation.

By June 1848 Elizabeth was pregnant; her sister-in-law Sophia (under the same roof) became pregnant a few weeks later. Melville sharply changed direction in *Mardi*, guiding it towards an escapist “new world” (Chapt 169, 459) of male privilege. Elizabeth listened to and copied out Herman’s growing manuscript (along with Herman’s sisters Helen and Augusta). Perhaps Lizzie acted as an unwanted female censor. However, the copying of Herman’s manuscript also was onerous to Elizabeth and led her to complain of exhaustion (Renker 64). Did she offer any resistance to Herman’s increasingly misogynistic novel? Was she stung by its sexist caricatures of marriage? Certainly, as a former *omo’o* who had lounged on palmy beaches with bare-breasted Polynesian women, Melville “was bound to have trouble adjusting to a conventional marriage” to a repressed New England woman who was practically part of the Melville family (Robertson-Lorant 191). Barely two weeks after Herman finished proofreading *Mardi*, Elizabeth gave birth to their first child in February 1849. As it turned out, their marriage would endure for 44 years, until his death in 1891— although Melville would leave his wife and children for extended periods. These travels abroad were financed by Judge Shaw, who was worried about his son-in-law’s health. Herman increasingly exhibited signs of hypochondria, seemed preoccupied with old age and death, occasionally suffered from nervous

attacks, had chronic eye and back problems, at times drank heavily, and may have physically abused Elizabeth in their home. During a marital crisis in May 1867 Elizabeth consulted with her pastor about a separation (when she and Herman were in their mid forties). Her stepbrothers believed Elizabeth and her children needed protection from Herman's rages. Elizabeth chose not to leave her husband (or allow herself and her children to be taken off to Boston), although she did seem afraid for the future (Renker 50). Four months later (in September 1867) her fears came true when the oldest of their four children, Malcolm (then 18 years old), fatally shot himself in the head in the Melville household. His apparent suicide is an indication that the Melville home was a site of strife. Perhaps Mackey's death led to a marital reconciliation, brought on by grief. Melville's biographer Laurie Robertson-Lorant suggests that after "their near-divorce the Melvilles had apparently mellowed toward each other" (531). Elizabeth survived Herman by 15 years and died in 1906, protective of her husband's reputation to the end.

However, Herman and Elizabeth also may have been incompatible from the beginning. Melville's biographer Hershel Parker suggests that Elizabeth was always a big "part of the problem" in Melville's disgruntled and restless adult life (2:795). Did Herman make Elizabeth the scapegoat for his various discontents as a way of evading self-examination and justifying his absences from home? There is a biographical argument regarding the Melvilles' marital issues and their influence on Herman's writing that has a long history in Melville studies. In an early psychoanalytic reading of *Mardi*, Frederick Rosenheim concluded in 1940 that the unhappy presentation of marital relations in *Mardi* shows the newlywed Herman Melville in the act of revealing just "how unpleasant his marriage was, a source, not of pleasure, but of anxiety" (9). A decade later Newton Arvin stated in an eloquent Freudian reading that sexual relations with Elizabeth from the start were "charged through and through for Melville with guilt and anxiety" (96). Perhaps Herman's Oedipal problems of desire and guilt (centering on Elizabeth's body) led to a psychological impasse that prevented him from attaining sexual fulfillment and blaming his wife for his failure.

It seems fair to conclude that the first year and a half of the Melvilles' marriage formed the basis in *Mardi* for the Yillah-Hautia plot, which explores marital constriction, sexual impersonation, anxiety, and alienation. The narrator in *Mardi* laments the suffocating closeness of marriage, "the perpetual contact of the parties concerned," and their loss of independence (Chapt 26, 80). Certainly, Melville's experience of being a young husband and prospective father had an effect on this drifting narrative. In his persuasive recreation

of the composition of the novel, Watson Branch argues (318) that the entire melancholy story of the lost maiden-wife Yillah (the central if shadowy plot of the published novel) was awkwardly retrofitted into the *Mardi* manuscript during the final stage of composition in late 1848. At this point near the end of Elizabeth's first pregnancy, Melville was not only still widening his thematic explorations of male-female relations but also drawing them toward an increasingly discouraged conclusion. Indeed, Arvin concluded in 1950 that writing *Mardi* was Melville's "act of symbolic suicide" (95).

*Mardi* portrays several female characters and is ultimately structured by an obsessive search for one of them. These women range from the promiscuous, castrating wife Annatoo to the submissive virgin-princess Yillah to the seductive witch-queen Hautia. None is a fully-rounded female character, and all may express aspects of the traditional goddess-temptress archetype of fair virgin and dark seductress (as viewed through a distorting male lens). Taji's inability to integrate these feminine fragments leads to his psychological collapse, "and this failure finally accounts for the unsuccessful termination of his quest" at the end of *Mardi* (Johnson 226).

There is an uneasy ambivalence about women that suggests that Melville was deeply dissatisfied by marriage and Elizabeth. As Christopher Sten concludes, "*Mardi* is a young man's book, and, at least tangentially, a young woman's too" (91). During 1848-49, was Melville running away from his pregnant wife to (re)claim a dazzling fantasy maiden in a South Pacific sailor-fantasy novel about paradise lost? Social science research shows that young husbands often find unwelcome reminders of mortality in encountering their wives' biological associations with reproduction— menstruation, pregnancy, and lactation (Landau et al. 132). Such close encounters with the female body raise men's awareness of their own corporeality and can lead young husbands to disown their original desire. Rather than assuming responsibility for their initial feelings of sexual excitement, men may reactively blame the women who aroused them. Thus, feminine sexuality can become a reminder not of the optimistic affirmation of life but of the pessimistic "specter of death" (Landau et al. 144) residing in all flesh— to men, a potentially emasculating awareness. Shortly after his wedding Melville began to manifest the signature masculine "grief-rage which made its first appearance in *Mardi*" (Murray 17). In the early stages of his career Melville had been full of zest, mirth, and vitality. However, after this early burst of exuberance, his brightness and optimism were "submerged by a tide of negative affects" (Murray 14). Dr. Murray's analysis is that Melville underwent a mental crisis during the composition of *Mardi*, when he was



29 years old and Elizabeth was expecting their first child. Dr. Murray left unfinished at his death in 1988 a biography of Herman Melville, in which he described the Melvilles' marriage as psychologically "disastrous" for the novelist (qtd by Renker 54).

Melville's shocked response to marital intimacy traced a descending arc of physical attraction, domination, aversion, and withdrawal. This pattern of early erotic fantasy followed by castration anxiety and anger undergirds *Mardi*. Negative portrayals of marriage pervade the novel. For example on the fictional island of Mondoldo, Taji witnesses a Mardian wedding in which the public festivity masks an imprisonment. It is the custom on Mondoldo to bind the bride by the hands and neck with a strong cord (or "gyves") cleverly concealed by flowers. Similarly, the groom is trussed by a festive waistband, "but attached thereto was a great stone . . . so every way disguised that a person not knowing what it was and lifting it would be greatly amazed at its weight" (Chapt 99, 255). While others sing and dance, the hapless newlyweds stand stunned and immobilized, "the one being so bound by the hands, and the other sorely weighed down by his stone." However, if Melville portrays marriage in *Mardi* as a form of bondage and women "as entrappers" (Warren 285n2), he portrays sexuality itself as a form of madness. In a psychoanalytic reading of *Mardi*, Charles Haberstroh, Jr., argues that Melville's deepening anxiety over his recent marriage to Elizabeth and worry about female entrapment darkened the composition of the novel. Melville portrays the sex drive as frightening, capable of inciting "aberrant and dangerous behavior" in both sexes (69). Haberstroh identifies Taji with Melville (71) and asserts that Taji's initial sexual excitement with Yillah leads him only to male imposture, apprehension, and self-violence. Indeed, it seems accurate to conclude that Taji becomes the "personification of self-destruction" in *Mardi* (Christodoulous 24). Melville's message seems to be that sexual attraction and marriage are snares of desire and disappointment to catch young adults.

After the shipwreck of the *Parki* the narrator and his two male companions encounter a double-hulled canoe in an empty sea. This Polynesian craft is carrying a sealed tent and is crewed by a family of males who are guarding a prisoner-princess named Yillah— she is "the central captive" in a novel about confinement (Berthold 17). She is meant to be a virgin-sacrifice to the pagan god Apo. Hers will be a ceremonial drowning in a whirlpool (as we have seen, a metaphor in *Mardi* for female sexuality) on the coast of a fictional island called Tedaidee (Chapt 50, 141). Yillah is a blonde, blue-eyed flower-child whose name may be an "anagram for 'lily'" (Davis 137),

or a version of Arabic words for divinity (Finkelstein 204), or a reworking of the Polynesian word for virgin (Christoloulou 48). Given Melville's habitual wordplay, it may be all of these, emphasizing Yillah's youth and sexual inexperience. Indeed, Yillah seems to be nothing more than a beautiful female body, quickly arousing desire in the narrator.

Yillah is laced inside an arched tent; her passivity within this cocoon-like shell is so extreme that she even seems "unaware that she is a woman" (Thorne 65). In the story of Yillah's capture and abduction Melville is making a sexually "explicit statement about the ultimate link between mobility and power" (Suzuki 364), with immobility conveying helplessness and physical vulnerability. Yillah's female stasis and dependency excite the roving narrator, even before he looks upon her. Although Yillah is not yet eroticized, sight-unseen she causes the outbreak of desire and aggression. In a sudden Oedipal scuffle on the canoe the narrator fatally stabs Aleema, the Polynesian captain-priest. Aleema, Yillah's guardian, is perhaps a displacement for Lemuel Shaw (Aleema=Lemuel), Elizabeth's father, the Boston patriarch who reluctantly released Elizabeth to marry Herman. The narrator seems obliged to enact a rigid archetype of masculinity defined by swordplay. He justifies his aggression by asserting that he is "rescuing a captive from thrall" and saving Yillah from human sacrifice at the hands of her cruel "father" (Chapt 42, 123). Indeed, this may be the underlying meaning of the Yillah plot: Yillah is "the hidden maiden meant for sacrifice" (Dixon 179) on the altar of male exchange. In an imperial act of encounter that anticipates his role as the discoverer of the "virgin" land of *Mardi*, the narrator liberates (or steals) Yillah from her patriarchal "family." However, his rivalry with Aleema leads him to become a father-killer.

The narrator prefigures his impulsive sexual union with Yillah and her loss of virginity by thrusting his cutlass (cut-lass) into the opening of her tent. He identifies himself with phallic steel and proclaims "Your sword is your life" (Chapt 42, 122). His uses his steeliness to slice through the tent's laces in a "patently sexual" assault (Johnson 227). He gazes on Yillah's cringing body, adorned only with a rose-colored pearl on her breast and draped with a "gauzelike robe" (Chapt 43, 124). This transparent veil enhances rather than conceals her nudity; it turns the narrator's passion from rage to lust. The rosy pearl becomes an emblem for the rosy-cheeked princess; both are prizes to be extracted from tropical waters. The narrator carries Yillah off—tent, veil, and all, his Pacific trophy bride. These strong-arm tactics express the eroticizing of Euro-American intrusions into the East, whereby Asian or "Arab women were to be 'civilized' by being undressed (unveiled)" by white

male force (McClintock 31). Similarly, in the Mardian islands true feminine beauty must stand forever "unrobed" before the relentless male gaze (Chapt 137, 363). The violent scene on the outrigger situates *Mardi* within Melville's darkening Pacific project and anticipates the phallic fury that propels the patriarchal quest-narrative of *Moby-Dick*. The narrator in *Mardi* surprises himself with the ferocity of his passions in the bloody skirmish over Yillah, the idealized "immaculate virgin" (363) who must be beheld naked— then possessed. He now changes course literally and psychologically to outrun his parricidal guilt, embodied by Aleema's three enraged sons, who give pursuit.

In a common Western trope the narrator seeks out a timeless world apart with Yillah, where he can monopolize her body. He extols her as a lush new colony to rule, "My meadow, my mead, my soft, shady vine, and my arbor" (Chapt 46, 131). Here Melville uses conventional poetic imagery to show how, to the male imagination, lush meadows and hidden recesses evoke the sexual anatomy of a woman (see also Chapt 156, 421). Thus, in *Mardi* Taji values Yillah's sexuality like a precious raw material to be extracted and colonized. As for Yillah, she is given no identity apart from the erotic value men place on her blue eyes, blonde hair, and white body— rare plunder in the tropics to be looted and hoarded. She was a captive of her domineering "father" Aleema, who kept her incarcerated and dutiful; now she is a captive of her covetous "husband" who keeps her within the same cocoon-like tent. As the stolen "prize" on the whaleboat, Yillah is as much the "sacrifice" she had been on the Polynesian canoe. Does she understand that her body has put her in danger? Does she gain insight into the acquisitive nature of men, her own unease with constriction, the limits of patriarchal marriage, or her own need to grow as a woman? If she does, she does not impart her insights to the narrator, or perhaps he is too self-absorbed to hear them. Yillah's subjective experience is excluded from *Mardi*, so she is effectively silenced. The narrator seems to regard her only in terms of male gain (or loss), never of co-existence. There is little sense of relations between equals and certainly no assurance of sexual partnership. Melville links white male aggression to institutionalized Western marriage, whereby possession of a bride is a competitive "first step in the development of a system of private property and of the defense of that property by force if necessary" (Martin 75). Ownership of a woman is central to the portrayal of marriage in *Mardi*. True authority and freedom, we are told in a Mardian parchment, are to be found only in "a man's own individual getting and holding" (Chapt 161, 437), including possession of a bride. Thus, in *Mardi* Melville seeks to portray the idealized Western "conjunction of the proprietary and the imperial" (Dimrock 48).

To elevate himself above the disreputable status of a father-killer, the narrator conceals from Yillah the death of Aleema, which she did not witness. He speaks to her in English and Polynesian and identifies himself as a “gentle demigod” from a magical South Sea land called Oroolia, the Island of Delights (Chapt 44, 127). This process of self-revaluation is a common feature in the early stages of men’s sexual attraction: “Exhilarated by women’s sexual allure, men celebrate their virility, wantonly pursue mating opportunities, and exalt distinctly captivating women to divine status” (Landau et al. 129). The narrator even weaves for Yillah a skein of false “recovered” memories (much as Aleema did), inserting himself into her mythology and convincing her they shared an idyllic past as symbolic siblings. This fable conveys fantasies of consensual incest (as in the sibling incest of Adam and Eve); it also resembles Pierre’s ecstatic longing to join with his sister Isabel. It contains explicit suggestions of adolescent or prepubescent sexuality: “Shook we not the palm-trees together, and chased we not the rolling nuts down the glen? Did we not dive into the grotto on the seashore and come up together in the cool cavern in the hill?” (Chapt 45, 129). Such allusions to sexualized water play foreshadow the narrator’s encounters with Hautia in the Mardian Islands.

To woo his sister-bride Yillah, the narrator believes he must disown his coarse identity as a runaway American sailor— much as Melville wanted to be taken seriously as a literary man in *Mardi* and discard his reputation as the man who had lived among cannibals and witnessed shocking sexual practices. That is, because of male inadequacy, the narrator feels he must adopt a brilliant disguise to make himself worthy of the idealized maiden he claims. Indeed, in his free-flowing Oriental garments (stolen from the oft-robbed *Parki*) and full *maquillage*, the narrator remakes himself into an Islamicized “emir”— root of the English word “admiral”— in command of a royal party barge. Melville’s narrator thus seeks to create an unrepressed “image of Muslim paradise as a renegade realm of love that allowed everlasting access to beautiful females” (Marr 236). He even goes so far as to drape the whaleboat in folds of Eastern silk and nankeen cloth (Chapt 39, 116). Thus, Yillah’s introduction to sexual experience takes place within the narrator’s tented harem, a specifically Orientalized site of female subjection and male conquest.

Yillah is sometimes identified in Melville commentary as an asexual or “bloodless” image of the sacred (Arvin 95), or even “an idea, not a woman” (Warren 117). Quite the contrary, Melville vividly portrays “her

attractiveness as a woman rather than a vague ideal," especially in the poems in *Mardi* (Short 106). Nor should it be overlooked that the narrator begins a sexual relationship with her. As a tropical "bride" Yillah believes in her own fairylike semi-divinity. She clings to a false story of her miraculous birth on Oroolia, in which it was said (by Aleema) that she condensed from a flower bud's "rosy mist in the air" and blossomed into a fragrant white body (Chapt 43, 125). As her first lover (himself claiming semi-divinity), the narrator thrills to Yillah's "wild beauty" (Chapter 49, 137). Their sexual consummation is foretold in the story of Yillah's maiden years in the lush valley called Ardair on the island of Amma. There she dwelt within a "quivering" arbor and bathed in an "eddy" pool (Chapt 50, 139), images of sexual expectation. At night she embraced a divine dream-lover named Apo. By day she gazed on a handsome nature-youth who filled her from afar with "wild yearnings" of arousal (140). This set of references in *Mardi* "conjures images out of the Garden of Eden and Eve's fatal sin of eating fruit from the Tree of Knowledge" (Wing 106). The narrator senses Yillah's sexual readiness and foresees his immanent plunge into sexual experience with her. Later in the novel the minstrel Yoomy will sing of "Yillah's bosom, the soft, heaving lake" in reference to her erotic awakening with Taji (Chapt 170, 462).

In the following chapter the narrator and Yillah join physically: "We lived and we loved" (Chapt 51, 143), he boasts. The meaning is clear that "the lovers live together unwed, as man and mistress" (Pops 42). The narrator further relates how after moments of physical ecstasy, Yillah tenderly "gazed into my eyes, rested her ear against my heart, and listened to its beatings" (Chapt 51, 142). She is the sailor's adolescent wish-fulfillment, the distillation of all his fantasies of Polynesia. He has unveiled her and (as described in another of Yoomy's songs) examined her body "o'er slope and fell" down below the waist to where the "soft, soft meadow becomes the dell" (Chapt 156, 421). Further, their sexual embraces violate no Victorian moral sanction because Yillah, although blonde and blue-eyed, is believed by the narrator to be a fair-skinned Pacific Islander, perhaps an "albino" Polynesian (Chapt 49, 137). Thus, in a colonial register Yillah is not the narrator's racial equal; the blessing of Western marriage is not required for sexual union. Put another way, unregulated interracial sex for white males is always an available privilege in the South Seas. The narrator sighs in contentment, "life and love were united; in gladness glided our days" (Chapt 51, 143). After his recent experience aboard the *Parki*, he regards Yillah as the seaborne consort who is "all that Annatoo is not— beautiful, angelic, passive, gentle, and virtually silent[. . .] fantasy figure, who must be revered and protected" (Warren 116).

Yillah offers him a sexual fountain of youth.

However, in an ominous moment of reflection after Yillah and he become lovers, the narrator senses that he has somehow slipped, aged, and fallen: "I perceived myself thus dwarfing down to a mortal" (142), he laments. He feels an urgent need "to prop my falling divinity, though it was I myself who had undermined it" (Chapt 51, 142) by engaging in physical relations with Yillah. In a post-coital depression he fears that carnal experience has narrowed rather than enlarged his life. Already the narrator dreads the loss of male self-sufficiency brought on by sexual intercourse. He tries to mask his vulnerability behind a show of power, even despotism, as he styles himself the lord of his erotic emirate. However, this show of superiority does not cancel out his discovery of non-omnipotence. This perception of self-contraction (the opposite of self-aggrandizement) is pivotal to the novel. His anxiety over loss of self-esteem will be made specific at the end of the novel, when he encounters Queen Hautia (who may be Princess Yillah's grown-up double). Because of his growing doubts about his masculinity, the narrator changes course for "the vague land of song, sun, and vine, the fabled South" (Chapt 46, 131). In other words he longs for an off-the-grid realm of sensory gratification where he can stop time. He envisions a paradise free from threat where he can rehabilitate his sexual fantasies. Here his lover will be "the fairy child who will give him all and ask nothing in return" (Pinnegar 159).

Within a few days he sights a spray of islands, but these are not any known group on the Pacific map. They are *terra incognita*, a chain the inhabitants call Mardi. Although suggestions have been made about the origin of the name and title *Mardi* (Davis, 77n; Rogers, 23; Parker I: 515), Melville's derivation remains uncertain. However, the Mardian archipelago suggests an Arabian Nights diorama of hanging gardens and harem girls (Finkelstein 206), signifiers of liberated sexuality. Although Mardi is presented as a new world, its antecedents clearly lie in Asia, known by the Mardians as "Orienda" (Chapt 168, 455). At the same time the archipelago is a "new constellation in the sea" on the periphery of Oceania (Chapt 52, 144). Indeed, *Mer du Sud* (= *Mardi*?) is an antique French term for the South Pacific and consistent with Melville's description of his novel as "a romance of Polynesian adventure" (Preface).

Clearly, the Mardians are Pacific people who have had no contact with Westerners. Much as Hawai'i Islanders identified their "discoverer" Captain James Cook in 1779 with their white rain-god Lono, the Mardians on the island of Odo identify the narrator as "white Taji" (146), their returning sun-

god (Christodoulou 4). The narrator usurps the title of this solar deity and introduces Yillah as his consort, a semi-divine "seraph from the sun" (Chapt 54, 148). This false mythology reinforces the mutual self-awareness of Taji and Yillah that they are involved in an idealized "incestuous relationship" (Miller 146). Taji readily accepts his new identity as the sun god since it confers on him "an immortal essence independent of the body," thus deflecting male anxieties of corporeality awakened by sexual relations (Landau et al. 131). At the same time Taji continues to be nagged by worries of "dwarfing down" (first felt on the whaleboat). He notices that Odo seems crowded with robust demigods, beside whom "my divinity shrank into nothing" (Chapt 57, 155). He also notes the presence of "broken-down demigods" who have gone slack. These perceptions of downwardness confirm that, to the jittery male imagination, "women are universally seen to reduce a man's stature, and to sap his strength," since intercourse ends in symbolic "castration for the man" (Lederer 51). Worried about his masculinity, Taji retreats with Yillah to a private islet, where time seems to stop. He hopes to fulfill an adolescent male wish "to keep female will in live captivity" (Dinnerstein 169), always subservient to his own. Their island solitude temporarily quells Taji's fear of losing male potency and dominance. His anxiety, of course, is inseparably linked to his fear that Yillah will reject female subjugation and declare erotic independence from him. In this state of tenuous bliss Taji boasts possessively that "my Yillah did daily dawn" to brighten his endless summer of sexual indulgence (Chapt 58, 158). In his limited view Yillah's only function on this fantasy island is to gratify his lust— while subordinating her own.

The eroticized tropical setting has become such a staple of South Sea fables and movies we may forget that Melville was its literary inventor. He was the first major Western novelist who lived in the South Seas and wrote with authority about Oceania. Melville was well versed in the geography, language, and culture of the Marquesas, Tahiti, and Hawai'i; and he created "lasting archetypes of South Sea existence" (Day 58). *Typee*, *Omoo*, and *Mardi* are also the first American novels about empire in the Pacific. They establish the pattern for the sexualized representation of dominated Polynesian cultures and people. Taji's lagoon on Odo is an imperial male paradise of power and control, where he is granted unlimited access to his own captivating (and captive) "Native girl." However, this self-enclosed idyll soon comes undone. Taji overhears in the nearby taro fields "dismal cries and voices" from the laborers, cursing their abjection (Chapt 63, 168). In other words Taji's adolescent dream of timeless seclusion from the world is strained by the weight of adult labor, servitude, and deprivation.

This unstable condition indicates the psychological weight on Taji's one-sided relationship with Yillah, in which sexual autonomy is his alone. The honeymoon is over when they both start having bad dreams. Yillah foresees herself drowned in a whirlpool like the one in which Aleema had meant to sacrifice her—a gloomy vision that “prefigured her fate” (Chapt 51, 143). In a parallel nightmare Taji sees Yillah in the mossy green arms of Aleema, who is dragging down “pale Yillah as she sunk in the sea.” Death and burial at sea are subjects that haunted Melville in *Mardi* and other works (Wright 99). Even in her secluded bridal bower Yillah has wrenching nightmares of drowning and sinking: “The whirlpool,” she cries in a panic (Chapt 62, 166). Soon the fairy-like Yillah becomes a gone girl, vanishing completely and leaving Taji bewildered and angry. His idyll of having unlimited access to a beautiful female body is over. Only a cryptic explanation of Yillah's disappearance appears many chapters later in this sprawling novel, which drifts into a profusion of topical discussions, allusive techniques, and satiric thrusts. However, along the way the poet Yoomy sings enigmatic lyrics that portray a mysterious maiden who has gone down into the sea. These verses “prefigure [Yillah's] end and the consequent failure of Taji's search” (Short 102), but Taji cannot connect the meaning of these songs to the looming failure of his quest.

In a Jungian analysis of *Mardi*, Martin Pops argues that Yillah disappears after her “defloration” (41) by the narrator. Thus, the Yillah story expresses the most intimate theme in *Mardi*. In psychosexual terms her vanishing seems clear: Once she loses her virginity and becomes a wife, Yillah is no longer an exotic water-sprite from a magical island. In her new role as bedmate and domestic partner, Yillah's idealized femininity vanishes (or drowns). The fairy princess distilled from a flower has become a homemaker and relinquished her enchanted past in which she was a resplendent symbol of springtime. As her seducer, Taji is at a loss to explain her disappearance; as her husband, he is determined to recover her as she was. Taji seems unable to merge these two aspects of his dissociated masculinity. Driven by deprivation distress, he sets off on an erratic quest to find what he once “owned” and has lost. As Melville's first biographer recognized nearly a century ago, Yillah is to be equated with Lizzie Shaw, the “lost” bride of 1847. Yillah becomes the “symbol of this faded ecstasy” (Weaver 279), a cipher of Herman's disappointment over Elizabeth's transition from bride to wife (to expectant mother).

On the one hand Taji's island-hopping, aquatic pursuit of Yillah introduces



the device of the quest— chasing the white bride in *Mardi* anticipates Ahab's pursuit of the white whale in *Moby-Dick*. On the other the quest in *Mardi* is a flimsy chase that begins in Chapter 65 of a novel with 195 chapters. The Yillah plot nearly fades out, obscured by chapter after chapter of drifting travelogue, political commentary, and social criticism— as Melville shows off his reading and philosophical ambitions in his second-longest novel. Indeed, it may be that *Mardi* spun entirely out of control while Melville enlarged it, perhaps reflecting his growing psychological distress. During Taji's voyage of more than half a year through the islands of Mardi, Melville's protagonist slips to the margins of the text and has but a few lines to speak as gusty discussions swirl around him (Davis 148). Scraps of information about Yillah occasionally are discovered. Taji learns that Yillah is not an enchanted albino princess from a magical island. She is a European orphan, born of white immigrant parents who were slain by aboriginal people in a shoreline battle on Amma. The sole Euro-survivor of this clash, the infant (renamed Yillah), was raised by "dusky" Polynesians who kept her ignorant of her biological origins. She was told falsely that her native brown skin was miraculously lightened by magic waters, which also turned her hair blonde and eyes blue. So in reality Yillah is "a brainwashed Anglo castaway" (Marr 243), an indoctrinated victim who wears her own brilliant disguise. Her true identity as a Western survivor of colonial Pacific warfare is concealed within a captivity narrative about a flower princess from an island fairyland.

In searching for her Taji and his sailing companions touch at 16 islands and sail past others. He ultimately concludes that she has been kidnapped (perhaps drowned) by the "witch" Queen Hautia (Chapt 183, 509). She is a mystical night goddess who exercises great power in the Mardian world and rules the feminized island Flozella-a-Nina, the last the searchers encounter. Hints are given that Yillah has been held in thrall (as she was before Taji encountered her) or transformed into one of Hautia's eroticized, black-tressed "sirens" (Chapt 190, 532). Like the blonde, angelic Lucy Tartan of *Pierre*, Yillah seems to fade out. What is certain is that Yillah's absence leaves an empty space that Hautia, the lunar deity of the hot "equatorial night" (Chapt 193, 537), steps forward to fill. This situation repeats itself in *Pierre*, as the bewitching Isabel replaces the blue-eyed Lucy. For Melville "the moon is clearly a negative symbol when [he] uses it in conjunction with Hautia" to summon up dark associations with uninhibited female desire and fertility rites (Zimmerman, 60). Taji likens Hautia to "the moon when most it works its evil influences" (Chapt 192, 536). He views Hautia's enchanted island as a eroticized "hanging garden" (Chapt 192, 534), suspended between sky and sea and linked by mysterious whirlpools; vortices already have been

established in *Mardi* as a sign of female sexuality. Hautia invites Taji to join her in a sensual maelstrom of wine, song, dancing, bathing, and nakedness. The whirlpool, of course, is Hautia herself, the feminized “vortex that draws all in” (Chapt 90, 539)— an image that (in Taji’s mind) associates female desire with male annihilation. Queen Hautia’s message is clear: she has exchanged earthly feminine vulnerability for lunar power. The imitation sun god Taji pales in comparison.

This eroticized image of Queen Hautia reminds us that imperial maps were gendered to portray siren-women as an engulfing force or “category of nature” (McClintock 24). Hautia pursues sexual fulfillment as insistently as Annatoo but is more physically intoxicating. Hautia proclaims Taji to be the juicy “berry” (Chapt 194, 539) she would like to crush in her mouth, turn into wine, savor, and swallow. To Taji such lyricized orality represents not bliss but emasculation. It is another expression of Melville’s deep anxieties over female consumption of his body and identity (Renker 21). Taji’s preoccupation with amputation also anticipates the stark fear of castration expressed by “the white whale’s oral amputation of [Ahab’s] leg” (Murray 18). It further links Hautia to Euro-American fantasies of Pacific cannibalism and female primitivism. Hautia becomes a manifestation of the primordial urge for fertilization. She is the beautiful but extorting female body, hungry for the impregnating seed or berry that will supplant Taji’s intellectual ambitions and sap his masculinity. Taji feels leached out by Hautia’s siren eyes, which “slowly drank up [his] soul” (Chapt 195, 541), siphoning his vitality and immobilizing him (as Yillah was immobilized). Instead, Taji seeks to imitate the demigod Uhia, ruler of the Mardian Island of Ohonoo, who rejected the castrating embraces of his clinging wives by proclaiming, “They shall sap and mine me no more” as he disbands his harem (Chapt 91, 234). Similarly, Taji now wants a world free from women (the opposite of Flozella). To him, Queen Hautia represents the sexual and procreative appetites that were missing in Yillah. Or perhaps Taji failed to recognize these female appetites in his dreamy princess-bride because he was too absorbed in his preferred narrative of female sexual submission. In *The American Narcissus* Joyce Warren notes incisively that the menacing, entrapping white “woman is always linked with a child; for Melville, the two were almost synonymous” (118). Taji labels Hautia as “beautiful but poisonous” (Branch 327), the opposite of Yillah’s idealized (childless) beauty. Yillah is still the honeymoon wife, a representative of idyllic, pre-motherhood female sexuality. Hautia’s role is maternal; she is a womb teeming with bad seeds (or berries).

Hautia seems to play the part the pre-Oedipal mother, the frankly sexual woman who prevails over male expectations of heterosexual dominance. Madelon Sprengnether argues that the body of the mother (or any sexualized adult woman) "becomes that which is longed for yet cannot be appropriated, a representative of both home and not home, and hence, in Freud's terms, the site of the uncanny" (9). Because her body cannot be owned, her allure provokes a generalized male opposition to sexually mature women and raises fears of male surrender to instinctual femininity. In *Mardi* Taji's rejection of Hautia begins in her royal chamber, a trope of Orientalism in its most seductive form. Hautia's floral gown falls open, and her bare white arms reach out to him while her abundant "bosom ebbd and flowed" (Chapt 194, 539). She is a sexual spectacle, an uncontrollable erotic force. Indeed, Hautia plays the central role of the female *body*—provocative, unleashed, and engulfing. Much mid twentieth-century psychoanalytic criticism of Melville's fiction identified his obsession with dismemberment and cannibalism as core expressions of an "infantile fear of being devoured by the pre-Oedipal mother" (Bergler 388). Such analyses focused on the imposing symbolism of the white whale, but Hautia's majestic white body may be a more personal expression of Melville's anxiety. Hautia embodies the sexual maturity that "not only frustrates the male desire to contain it, even by representation, but also reveals it[s] own power to contain and consume" (Kilgoun 294n106).

Hautia is the desiring woman who displays a sex drive that "dwarfs" Taji's own. She leads him into a spectacularly feminized cavern of "sparkling, coral ledges" and "bubbling" pools (540) illuminated by torchlight. Hautia invites him to plunge into her subterranean "cave of pearls" (Chapt 195, 541), an enclosure that expresses her irresistible sexuality. Yet Hautia offers Taji wisdom as well as flesh; "let me show thee strange things" (540), she promises. She gives assurance that Taji's ecstatic immersion will take him "where thou wilt soon learn to love the living, not the dead" (541). This is not only a frank invitation to forget about Yillah and live again but also sound advice. Yet Taji is unable to idealize Hautia as he did Yillah. Instead, Hautia's sleek, naked form becomes the Victorian era's ominous "cavern of carnal knowledge" (Dijkstra 237), a dangerous feminine abyss that swallows up male yearning and replaces it with physical exhaustion and impotence. Holding out dripping "hands full of pearls" (540), Hautia lures Taji into the water. She assures him that her (pearly) body represents "'the last lost hope of man (540)," his sole point of entry into adult health and happiness. Hautia thus demonstrates that she is able to intellectualize her (pro)creativity. She vibrantly associates herself "with life and the future— and Yillah with

death and the past" (Person, Jr., 69). However, when Taji dives into Hautia's "bottomless" (540) pool, he "uprose empty handed," an indication of male inadequacy. Female sexuality becomes coded in *Mardi* as the *boundless* space that man cannot fill. Hautia embodies the anxiety the narrator was able to suppress in his one-sided union with Yillah—namely, that a woman could take pleasure in sexual relations apart from the pleasure she gives her male companion. Taji fears that he is being crushed ("dwarfed") inside Hautia's pearl palace—his irrational fear of the unsubordinated female body. He dreads enclosure within Hautia's glittering deeps and teeters on the brink of male hysteria. When Taji refuses further "deep diving" into Hautia's bejeweled grotto, he signals his inability to accept mature eroticism and the "independent sexual impulsivity of the female" (Dinnerstein 62).

As F. O. Matthiessen concluded in 1940, Taji's repudiation of Hautia amounts to "a denial of mature passion" (384). Thirty years later Martin Pops went a step farther and contended that "marital sexuality is rejected" (60) by Taji when he refuses Hautia's invitation (twice given) to "join hands" in her magical pool. At basis he seems unable to accept a different power relation between men and women; he longs for the acquiescence of Yillah and feels threatened by Hautia's erotic assertiveness. The queen scorns his feelings of male victimization and foresees that Taji's arrested development will end in breakdown. However, instead of accepting her guidance towards a new adult identity, Taji proclaims his regressive intention to go on searching for Yilla, still hoping to recover the adolescent past. At this point Hautia "shrewdly observes that Taji is bent on a suicide mission of sorts" (Wing 131). She perceives that what matters most to him is evading adult feminine desire, even if it means his own self-destruction. Similarly, the psychoanalyst Christiane Olivier concludes that the male death wish is a regressive, self-destructive expression of misogyny: "If being an adult means passing through the desire of a woman, he'd rather stay a child" (87). Taji refuses a future on Flozella, where Hautia promises him "'thy past shall be forgotten'" (Chapt 194, 541). However, when Taji denies "'all the sweets of the life [Hautia] canst bestow'" (541), he excludes himself from any prospect for masculine growth.

Of course, Hautia poses the novel's essential gendered dilemma: Although Yillah was blonde and Hautia is dark-haired, are the two really the same? Has the trembling princess become the siren-queen? Did Yillah grow tired of sacrificing her own sexual autonomy to the narrator's? Was Yillah's abrupt disappearance caused by her awakening to her own bodily feelings? Was Taji attracted by "innocent" sibling incest with Yillah only to be repelled by

"guilty" maternal union with Hautia? To Taji, "Hautia represents incestuous, and therefore guilt-ridden, sexuality" (Johnson 228n28), a physical attraction that must be renounced. Yet only by having a physical relationship with a mature woman and acknowledging her bodily impulses independent of his own could Taji achieve what Pops terms "'regenerative' incest" (44)— that is, a physical relationship with an adult woman that would erase adolescent anxiety and guilt. Attaining such an adult consummation would be an acknowledgment that he must "learn to recognize and to love the mother in any woman he may love" (Lederer 232)— a constructive transference.

Taji's inability to perceive the essential oneness of Yillah-Hautia at different phases of feminine development is his fundamental male error in the novel. His failure to integrate the Hautia-Yillah binary leads to the blockage of his bride quest. To Taji's tormented mind Hautia becomes "the maternal dominatrix" (Dixon 185), who mocks Taji's impotence and lost "steeliness" by taunting him with Yillah's rose-colored pearl. Does this mean that Queen Hautia has subsumed Yillah's identity, if only Taji could recognize it and clasp "her" pearl? Are beguiling young women only "Yillahs who have not [yet] developed such darker natures" (Thorne 69)? Before he reached Flozella, Taji was "wildly dreaming to find [the two women] together" (Chapt 191, 534). Indeed, his companion Mohi (an historian) told him "'the maidens of Hautia are all Yillahs'" (Chapt 193, 537). However, now Taji refuses to accept that queen and maiden are one. He splits off grown up Hautia and denounces her as a grotesque "'shining monster,'" a deceptive "'vipress'" (Chapt 195, 541). To Taji, Hautia is quintessentially monstrous because of her appetite for devouring men (like *Moby-Dick*). This outburst of misogyny reveals Taji's inability to achieve an integrated vision of femininity. Instead, Taji expresses his core fear that unsuppressed female sexuality amounts to writhing, ravenous "monstrosity." Cursing Hautia as a viper woman (a disordered projection of male castration anxiety) is the psychological turning point of the novel and leads directly to Taji's self-destruction.

Taji's refusal to fulfill Hautia's physical desires (as well as his own) is frustrating to them both. Male anxiety drives him from the hated "paradise" of Flozella— to him a hothouse of heavy flowers, bursting fruits, bosomy hills, and moist dells that signal the alarming entrapment of women. Like its Queen, Flozella is a spectacle of rampant femaleness. Taji reels into a second vaginal chasm, which opens onto a river rushing through subterranean arches toward the sea. In the swift current he observes a swirling form, "white, and vaguely Yillah" (Chapt 195, 541). When he plunges in to reach her, a strong eddy sucks him away, suggesting his repressed desire. He cannot

clutch “the revolving shade” (542) in the dark water and comes up empty-handed again. On this island of many vortices, Yillah disappears down a whirlpool (the sexually annihilating fate she always foresaw) and presumably perishes. Her ending confirms that “sex destroys Yillah” (Pops 42), but it also defeats Taji. He has failed again to provide female fulfillment; the male body is overmatched within the vast female chamber. Taji avoids being swallowed up by the vortex of female need. However, he attains only male void and shrinkage; he washes out of the uterine deep onto a briny, “weedy beach.” When his traveling companions Mohi and Yoomy find him the next morning, he is an abject “specter.” For Taji “the sexual cavern became the sticky pit of Hell” (Lederer 231), an oppressive channel from which he has been expelled. His dispirited and dissociated self is now extraneous to the erotics of Mardi. Descent into the womb of Flozella has led to no fulfillment or rebirth. Instead, the womb-tomb has withered his masculinity down to a living “corpse.” This is the end of Taji’s “dwarfing down” (Chapter 51, 142), the arc of male belittlement he foresaw when he first mated with Yillah. Becoming her lover, he believed, activated the negative power of Eros to minimize him. It does not occur to Taji that he is a small man and that male insecurity has driven him to shrink himself. Taji’s ego-ideal— a phallic sun god (narcissistic projection)— has sunk, carrying his self-esteem down with it. Thus, despite its length *Mardi* is finally a pinched, self-referential work of male terror. Camille Paglia observes that *Moby-Dick* amounts to a panicky ego-assemblage of “fragments shored against male ruin” (584). Similarly, in *Mardi* women’s sexuality is constructed as a murky “bottomless, bottomless sea” (Chapt 99, 257), a maternal pit that turns men into dwarves— Taji’s own panicky and regressive version of male ruin.

In a wild act of terror-management he takes to the sea. Taji’s relationship to Flozella’s landscape has become pathological and anti-feminine, setting him on a seaward retreat to self-destruction. He and his companions withdraw through an ocean strait to their Mardian starting point, the island of Odo, where strife has since erupted— illustrating the havoc caused in aboriginal societies by white invasion. Taji also perceives another danger, the wrathful sons of Aleema (who already have assassinated Jarl and Samoa). Taji thus seems to be caught in a martyred trap of male repetition, fear, and defeat. As Wai-chee Dimrock concludes, “*Mardi*’s chief casualty is (as we might suspect) the narrator himself” (57)

Indeed, Taji has been on a path to self-destruction ever since he left the regulated, all-male life of the *Arcturion*. His thwarted maturity prompts him to run away from those aspects of adulthood “that seem mysterious,

irrational" (Liquete 124)— in a word, feminine. Taji's delusion of grandeur is replaced by a delusion of persecution. His traveling companions cry "madman" and urge him not to commit "the last, last crime" of suicide (Chapt 195, 543). Earlier in the novel Babbalanja (a Mardian philosopher) had warned against the finality of giving in to "man's last despair" (Chapt 88, 228). However, now emptied of sexual desire, Taji has become dead to the world and wishes only "for a permanent cessation of conscious life" (Murray 9). His companions swim for their lives as Taji steers for the open sea; problematically, without them in the boat Melville is left with no one to narrate Taji's Pacific finale. The first-person narrator casts off from the story he is telling, much as Yillah washed out of it. Fear of Hautia thus compels Taji "to go beyond the ending of the story" (Ellis 178) and to detach (or erase) himself from the imploding book he has narrated. In a final act of self-sabotage Taji steers his one-man prow through Mardi's barrier reef, which functions as a seam between life and death. He declares himself to be "the unreturning wanderer" (543) in flight from physicality itself. He is the masochist who forsakes all harbors— particularly the self-sufficient, female haven of Flozella. He becomes a deserter from women and the world.

Taji projects his psychological disarray onto the natural world and describes a last scene of elemental chaos in which the "outer ocean lashed the clouds" (543). Waves smash the sky in an inverted seascape. This apocalyptic image of transgressive nature set upon itself reflects Taji's self-assault. So Melville's novel becomes a text in dissolution. The golden Mardian isles turn out to be contingent, now slipping away. The archipelago dissolves again into a blank space on the map of *Mer du Sud*. At this point Taji anticipates Ahab— another failed husband with no direction home, on another "chartless" voyage (Chapt 169, 459). Taji likewise rushes into isolation. Thus, Captain Ahab's suicidal rage in *Moby-Dick* is prefigured by Taji's suicidal fear. Both disordered male characters choose death by water, sealing them off from the future. The final sentence, narrated by a new third-person narrator, tells us that "pursuers and pursued flew on over an endless sea" (543). United in self-persecution, Aleema's avenging sons follow Taji into the void. Unlike the ending of *Moby-Dick*, in *Mardi* there will be no regenerative motherhood like the *Rachel* to rescue Taji, as Ishmael was saved— just when he was lost in the vortex of "motherless" Captain Ahab's wrecked ship. Unlike Taji, Ishmael apparently is a survivor who learns to survive the descent, resist self-destruction, accept male lack, and live with limitation and dependency.

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