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The *Essex* Disaster, Nantucket Quakerism, and *Moby-Dick*

In August of 1819, the American whaling ship *Essex* launched off the coast of Nantucket, Massachusetts under the command of Captain George Pollard Jr. On November 20th, 1820, the *Essex* was “stove by a whale” in the North Pacific Ocean near the Marquesas Islands. Over the next three months, the crew of the *Essex* would embark on a harrowing journey to shore before they were saved in February of 1821. In 1851, after reading the first mate, Owen Chase’s narrative of the shipwreck, Herman Melville would publish his best-known novel, *Moby-Dick*, having been inspired by Chase’s account of the attack. The *Essex* Disaster is considered so tragic because of the ensuing months that occurred after the attack in which the surviving crew members of the ship became lost at sea and starved, eventually resorting to cannibalizing their deceased crewmates. Despite the tragedy of the *Essex* merely beginning with the vengeful whale attack, Melville chooses to focus on the months that occurred before the sinking of the ship in *Moby-Dick*. The novel ends with the *Pequod* sinking, and Ishmael is shown to be the only survivor. However, there is no narrative of his time alone on Queequeg’s coffin, floating in open water and at the mercy of the currents. This reveals how Melville understood the *Essex* Disaster and what he considered to be the important parts of the narrative. The narrative of *Moby-Dick* focuses on the events that lead to the sinking of the ship rather than the consequences of the ship

sinking, showing that Melville was more interested in the question of *why* the *Essex* sank. *Moby-Dick* is, therefore, an exercise in answering this question and unpacking the events that lead up to the whale attack. When speaking of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, there is oftentimes an understanding that the cultural backlash of Nantucket Quakerism serves as a setting for the tragic tale, but rarely is there a discussion of how Quakerism plays a role in the story of the *Pequod*. While Captain Ahab's ship is often understood as a microcosm of the United States during Melville's time, I argue it is more accurate to look at it from the perspective of Melville's attempt at creating an authentic Nantucket whaling community. With this understanding, the intricacies and the sheer abundance of the Nantucket culture become highlighted within the tale of *Moby-Dick*. I argue that *Moby-Dick* ought to be understood within the context of the 1850 Quaker culture of Nantucket, Massachusetts, and read as a meditation on the effects of Quakerism on the *Essex* Disaster and the downfall of Nantucket as the whaling capital of the world.

In the story of the *Essex*, the appearance of omens takes the principal stage within the narrative. Several times, before and after the ship leaves the shore, omens appear, foreshadowing the trouble that the ship and her crew will soon encounter. Notably, "earlier that July, as the *Essex* was being repaired and outfitted, a comet appeared in the night sky," (Philbrick, 3). A comet also appears in one of Melville's short poems he wrote in 1859 titled "The Portent." In "The Portent," Melville describes John Brown's beard as "the meteor of the war," using comet imagery to make a commentary on how John Brown's hanging foreshadowed the coming violence of the Civil War. This is because, "from earliest times, the appearance of a comet was interpreted as a sign that something unusual was about to happen," (Philbrick, 4). When the

comet struck across the sky that July, Nantucketers would have known that something bad was about to happen. Unfortunately, the crew persists despite these omens and meets their doom anyway. Omens and superstitions appear on the *Pequod* as well. The most notable omen is likely Fedallah's prophecy for Captain Ahab, which he reveals in Chapter CXVII, "The Whale Watch." Fedallah's prophecy outlines the events, much like eschatological Christian works, leading up to Ahab's death and the circumstances under which it will occur. Though Captain Ahab dismisses and laughs at it when Fedallah first tells him, in the final chapter of the novel, "The Chase— Third Day," the cryptic prophecy is fulfilled, and both Fedallah and Ahab perish at the hands of Moby Dick. "Aye, Parsee!" Ahab exclaims when Fedallah's corpse is seen, gorey and attached to the white whale. "I see thee again... *this* then is the hearse that thou didst promise," (Melville, 327). For Nantucket Quakers, omens are extremely important. In *In the Heart of the Sea*, Nathaniel Philbrick theorizes that Nantucketers are so superstitious because "their lives were governed by a force of terrifying unpredictability— the sea" (Philbrick, 4). However, this fear of unbridled nature is by no means unheard of for other human cultures. In antiquity, Hellenic beliefs assigned the deity *Poseidon* (Greek) or *Neptune* (Roman) to the sea. The way that the sea was perceived can be understood through the iconography associated with Poseidon— earthquakes and wild horses, both symbols of unrestrained and unstoppable forces of nature. Furthermore, Poseidon was described "as the eldest or strongest next to Zeus, he represents the nucleus of the rivalry and material opposition to Zeus," (Walters, 14). As a rival to Zeus, the King of the Gods, and associated with law, order, and justice, Poseidon further represents a fear of chaos not only within nature but within human society, politics, and organized law. When Nantucketers engage with ideas of superstition and omens, it reveals an important part of the Nantucket psyche that

connects Quaker religious beliefs with their economic and social outlook: a deep-seated cultural need to *control*. Quaker beliefs largely revolve around a need to suppress thoughts and actions, encouraging pacifism and simplicity. According to the Nantucket Historical Association, “their devotion to simplicity and strict adherence to traditional ways influenced Nantucket’s architecture, home furnishings, clothing, and social behavior.” Philbrick comments that “Friends were expected to conform to rules of behavior determined during yearly meetings, encouraging a sense of community that was as carefully controlled as that of any New England society,” (Philbrick, 9). The inclusion of omens and superstition within common Nantucket practice reinforces the Quaker cultural trait of a need to control everything, even the untamable sea. When Melville uses omens in *Moby-Dick*, he is commenting on the futility of this practice, as despite the omens present in both the story of the *Essex* and the *Pequod*, both ships are doomed. Furthermore, it comments on the inevitable demise of the Nantucket whaling society which had been built by the early Quakers in the late 16th century. The *Essex* Disaster itself seemed to serve as a portent to the eventual decline of the Nantucket way of life. Upon the return of the survivors of the *Essex*, Nantucketers were forced to reckon with an event that revealed all of the deep-seated flaws and hypocrisies within their own culture. “It wasn’t just the fact that the men had resorted to cannibalism,” Philbrick comments. “It was also difficult for Nantucketers to explain why the first four men to be eaten had been African American,” (Philbrick, 218). However, choosing to ignore what the *Essex* revealed about their society would prove to be the wrong decision. While Nantucketers preferred to forget the *Essex* after the survivors’ return in 1821, they would soon have to grapple with their decline as a whaling port in the coming

decades. Despite indications that American industry was moving past whaling, Nantucket was unable to diversify its economy, and the community fell into obscurity because of it.

Through the psychology of Captain Ahab, Melville proposes that the most destructive flaw of Nantucket is its monomania. In a soliloquy, Captain Ahab famously says, “The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run,” (Melville, 93), a moment of salience in which he understands his inability to remove himself from his revenge. There are multiple instances of a clear-minded Captain Ahab, where he momentarily breaks through his insanity and can reflect on the morality of his actions. In Chapter CXXXII, “The Symphony,” Melville describes the last moment of sanity Ahab has before the *Pequod* encounters *Moby-Dick*, and the fate of the ship is sealed. This clarity of mind is caused, notably, by the tranquility of the sea Ahab experiences as he gazes out into the waters, leaning over the side of the ship. (Melville, 313). As explored in the previous paragraph, Nantucketers expressed control over the sea as a way to control not only nature but their own lives and society onshore as well. Ahab can be vulnerable in this moment because rather than having to tame the uncontrollable, the sea is in perfect harmony, creating a “symphony” that is reflected in the title of the chapter. The peace of nature creates a sense of peace within his chaotic mind, the one thing he was never able to gain control over, even as he assumed control of everyone and everything around him in his quest for Moby Dick. In his vulnerability, Ahab tells Starbuck, “Stay on board, on board! –lower not when I do; when branded Ahab gives chase to Moby Dick. That hazard shall not be thine,” (Melville, 314). However, when Starbuck begins to describe returning to shore, Ahab begins to reflect on the possibility of going back to Nantucket without enacting his revenge on Moby Dick. Realizing that he must follow his fate, Ahab loses his last shred of

humanity and loses himself completely to his insanity: “Like a blighted fruit tree he shook, and cast his last, cindered apple to the soil,” (Melville, 314). Ahab’s monomania begins with his initial pursuit of Moby Dick when he was simply a whale and nothing more. While hunting the whale, “Moby Dick had reaped away Ahab’s leg, as a mower a blade of grass in the field,” (Melville, 101). However, Melville emphasizes that his insanity is not born “at the precise time of his bodily dismemberment,” (Melville, 102), but instead during the journey back to shore, wherein he was confined to a hammock “in a strait-jacket,” and “swung to the mad rockings of the gales,” (Melville, 102). In this moment, “all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified and made practically assailable in Moby Dick,” (Melville, 102). Ahab’s backstory is definitively inspired by Owen Chase’s narrative. In the aftermath of the *Essex* attack, while sailing on open water in a small whaleboat, Chase Owen details his own psychological torment akin to Ahab’s obsession with Moby Dick. Unable to come up with an explanation for a whale enacting such violence against man, he suffered insomnia, flashbacks, and obsessive thoughts about the event. “The horrid aspect and revenge of the whale wholly engrossed my reflections,” he says in his narrative of the disaster. “Chase was plagued by what psychologists call a ‘tormenting memory,’” Philbrick says in his analysis of Chase’s obsessive thoughts about the whale, “—a common response to disasters,” (Philbrick, 108). Like Chase, and later Ahab, Nantucket had “an obsession with the whale,” (Philbrick, 13). Though Nantucketers first began hunting right whales in the 1690s, when Captain Hussey discovers sperm whales off the south shore and the lucrative spermaceti they produced in 1712, “Nantucketers dedicated themselves to the single-minded pursuit of the whale,” (Philbrick, 6). Soon, the soil was barren from overfarming and the native inhabitants, the Wampanoag, were wiped out by disease. As a result, Nantucket relied on

whaling and mainland labor to keep the economy prospering. (Philbrick, 8). The effect of Nantucket's monomania is best explained by the symbolic ending of Captain Ahab, who too was brought down by his captivity with the whale. In Chapter CXXXV, "The Chase – Third Day," Ahab and the crew of the *Pequod* finally catch up with Moby Dick and Ahab prepares to exact his revenge. Ahab throws the harpoon to spear Moby Dick but is wrapped in the line about the neck. As Moby Dick evades the whaleboats, Ahab is dragged behind the whale and drowns in his wake, (Melville, 330). The moment of Ahab's death, which only narrowly precedes the sinking of the *Pequod*, is a literary manifestation of what has been figuratively happening throughout Ahab's life and the story of *Moby-Dick*. Like Ahab, Nantucket, too, would be in constant chase of the whale, going to further parts of the world as the harbor would be depleted. Nantucket, too, would be dragged behind the whale, drowning in its wake as the world continued to move forward, and Nantucket struggled to keep up with the whale.

The flaws of Nantucket Quakerism, namely obedience to authority, allowed Ahab to manipulate the rest of the crew on the *Pequod*. The story of the *Essex* is largely the story of Captain George Pollard Jr. and his first mate, Owen Chase. The power dynamic and relationship between Captain Pollard and Chase are uniquely similar to that between Captain Ahab and his first mate, Starbuck. However, Melville seems to have diverted from the original story by transmuting the characteristics of Chase to Ahab and those of Pollard to Starbuck. This is most likely because the power dynamic of Chase and Pollard was distinctly reversed from the typical Captain and first mate relationship that was present aboard Nantucket whaling ships. While Pollard was the Captain of the *Essex*, Chase had a persuasion over Pollard and made most of the decisions that would lead to their doom during the excursion of 1819. Chase not only was

physically taller than most people in the nineteenth century, including Captain Pollard, but he was also described as very ambitious and had aspirations of becoming a Captain himself. “The first mate’s cocksure attitude would make it difficult for Pollard, a first-time captain... to assert his own style of command,” Philbrick comments, (Philbrick, 31). In Thomas Nickerson’s account of the *Essex* Disaster, he describes the sudden change that came over Chase once he came aboard the *Essex*, expressing a harsh, militaristic control over the crew. Chase “routinely underwent an almost Jekyll-and-Hyde transformation when he left his island home,” Philbrick says, “stepping out of his mild Quaker skin to become a vociferous martinet.” William Comstock observed that this behavior was not only acceptable in Nantucket, but openly rewarded: “You will often hear a Nantucket mother boast that her son ‘who is *met* of a ship is a real *spit-fire*, meaning that he is a cruel tyrant, which on that island is considered the very *acme* of human perfection.” Chase was what Nantucketers called a “fishy man,” which was Nantucket’s epitome of a perfect, authoritarian whaling captain. “A fishy man loved to kill whales and lacked the tendency toward self-doubt and self-examination that could get in the way of making a quick decision,” (Philbrick, 100). On August 15th, 1819, only three days after the launch of the *Essex*, the ship suffered a knockdown when the crew responded too late to an oncoming squall, and the storm leveled the ship onto its side. The ship was damaged during the storm, losing two whaleboats and one spare, as well as several sails. Though Pollard had initially declared that the ship would return to Nantucket, Chase encouraged Pollard to continue the voyage, and Pollard gave in, even though many of the sailors aboard saw the knockdown as a bad omen and wanted to go home. (Philbrick, 43). After the attack which sank the *Essex*, Pollard and Chase again debated which direction the crew should sail their three, dilapidated whaleboats. While Pollard

wanted to sail west towards the Marquesas Islands, which were only 1,200 miles away, Chase feared the cannibalistic natives which were rumored to live there and persuaded the captain to instead point the whaleboats towards South America, which was over 2,000 miles away through opposing winds and currents, (Philbrick, 95). Once again, Pollard gave in to the first mate, and very well may have sealed the fates of many aboard the whaleboats as he did. Thomas Nickerson would later write about this decision, “How many warm hearts have ceased to beat in consequence of it?” While Pollard tended to lean towards listening and succumbing to others, Chase imposed his own will upon the captain throughout the voyage of the *Essex*. In “To Obey, Rebelling,” Wynn M. Goering explores the character of Starbuck in his constant struggle with Ahab throughout the voyage of the *Pequod*. Goering proposes the “Quaker Dilemma,” in which Starbuck struggles between the Quaker virtues of obedience of authority and pacifism. Though Starbuck knows that pursuing Moby Dick is not only “blasphemous,” (Melville, 91), and puts everyone aboard at risk, but also directly opposes the purpose of their voyage, he is unable to supersede Ahab and submits to his authority every time he tries to rebel. “Starbuck is bound to submit peaceably to the laws of his government (Ahab, in this case) while renouncing the ‘corrupt bargain’ Ahab has made with the rest of the crew,” (Goering, 533), creating a distinctly Quaker method of rebelling while still being obedient to authority. When Starbuck realizes, in Chapter CXXIII, “The Musket,” that the only way to save the *Pequod* is through an act of violence, (killing Ahab,) he is forced to reckon with this “Quaker Dilemma.” Does an inherent call for justice outweigh the Quaker law of pacifism? Goering points out that another Melville character, Captain Vere in *Billy Budd*, is forced to make a similar decision in hanging Billy Budd. In both cases, the tested individual chooses to obey the “law,” though for Starbuck that means

pacifism, and for Vere it signals violence. Though Goering claims that “Melville, with characteristic ambiguity, does not say,” (Goering, 537), whether Starbuck and Vere made the correct choice, I argue that Melville uses these characters to warn against the decision to sacrifice others in favor of law and order. Starbuck’s act of pacifism in sparing Ahab would lead to the deaths of the entire crew, save for Ishmael. During the *Essex* attack, Owen Chase experiences a parallel dilemma to what Starbuck is faced with in Ahab’s quarters. Moments before the whale made the fatal blow against the hull of the *Essex*, veritably dooming the crew to their suffering at sea, Chase “grabbed a lance” and aimed for the whale. “All it would take was one perfectly aimed throw,” Philbrick states, “and the first mate might slay the whale,” (Philbrick, 82). Like Starbuck, standing over the sleeping Ahab, musket in hand, Chase is given one single moment to halt the destruction that would soon transpire. But, in an “uncharacteristic display of caution,” Chase hesitated, worried the whale would damage the ship’s rudder if provoked, and the moment passed, (Philbrick, 82). In “The Musket,” Starbuck becomes the first mate of the *Essex*, who in a split-second decision, made the wrong choice. The sleeping Ahab becomes the vengeful whale that he had so longed to destroy. Starbuck hesitates, fearful of crossing the Quaker moral code, and Ahab lives on to sink the *Pequod*, killing (almost) everyone on board. Melville makes this parallel because of the clarity with which we as readers can look at Chase’s dilemma. Nickerson writes, “But could [Chase] have foreseen all that so soon followed, he would probably have chosen the lesser evil and have saved the ship by killing the whale...” Showing his regret and guilt, Chase omits his chance to lance the whale entirely from his account of the attack. Starbuck, like Chase, should have killed while he had the chance. Melville uses the story and character of

Starbuck to point out the flaw of Quaker obedience. Submitting to the greater authority, the “fishier man,” undeniably caused the sinking of both the *Essex* and the *Pequod*.

Perhaps the greatest flaw in Nantucket Quakerism that the story of the *Essex* and *Moby-Dick* addresses is the paradoxical effect of pacifism. Pacifism is one of the most important and central virtues that govern the Nantucket psyche. Despite their fervent pacifism, Nantucketers established themselves as “a Quaker whaling dynasty,” (Philbrick, 9), a line of work that required a brutal, violent, and frequent killing of whales. However, as Philbrick states, “Nantucketers saw no contradiction between their livelihood and their religion,” (Philbrick, 9). This is because the principle of pacifism was “not intended to interfere, in any way, with a person’s ability to make money,” (Philbrick, 9). This inherent cultural need to suppress violence and ostentatious emotion would result in the Quaker phenomenon of whale monomania. Rather than “building fancy houses or buying fashionable clothes, Nantucket’s Quakers reinvested their profits in the whale fishery,” as a “conscious spurning of worldly ostentation,” was one of their chief ideals, (Philbrick, 9). Similarly, the human call for violence that was stamped out in everyday life was pivoted towards an ambitious violence against whales. Philbrick comments, “No matter how much the inhabitants might try to hide it, there was a savagery about this island, a bloodlust and pride that bound every mother, father, and child in a clannish commitment to the hunt,” (Philbrick, 13). Philbrick recounts the story of one Nantucket mother, who found her nine-year-old son had “attached a fork to the end of a ball of darning cotton and then proceeded to harpoon the family cat,” (Philbrick, 13), showing how deep this sea violence was ingrained into Nantucket culture. In the very first pages of *Moby-Dick*, we see a preoccupation with avoiding violence in the character of Ishmael. As our narrator explains his dysthymia, he clarifies

one of his symptoms: “My hypos get such an upper hand of me that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street and methodically knocking people’s hats off,” (Melville, 1). The “strong moral principle” he speaks of? The strict Quaker virtue of pacifism. The cure for such a violent urge? “Get to sea as soon as I can,” Ishmael says, (Melville, 1). This misplaced violence is best shown in the character of Stubb, the second mate under Ahab. Unlike the other mates, Starbuck and Flask, Stubb is unique in his treatment and sentiment of whales. Starbuck, the first mate, abides by the Quaker idea of profit excusing violence and makes his living killing whales though he feels no particular way about them. Flask, the third mate, enjoys killing whales because he believes whales are akin to rats and insects, pests that must be exterminated. Stubb is different from the other sailors aboard the *Pequod* because while he does not harbor an outright hatred for whales, he enjoys killing them because he simply enjoys the act of killing. In Chapter LXI, “Stubb Kills a Whale,” Stubb participates in a whale hunt and delivers the killing blows. Stubb stabs it over and over again, the gore of the creature accumulating with each blow. Finally, the whale’s heart bursts, and Daggo must say, ““He’s dead, Mr. Stubb,”” before he stops abusing the animal. Afterward, Stubb “stood thoughtfully eyeing the vast corpse he had made,” (Melville, 162), as if it were a framed piece of artwork. In the subsequent chapter, “Stubb’s Supper,” Stubb asks the cook, Fleece, to make whale-steaks out of the carcass so that Stubb may eat the whale he had just killed. In response to Stubb’s final request to eat the whale’s testicles the next morning, Fleece says, ““I’m bressed if he ain’t more of shark dan Massa Shark hisself,”” (Melville, 168), making the association between Stubb and the sharks which tear apart the body of the whale below the ship. Stubb is a character that wholly reflects this hypocritical Quaker phenomenon of seaward-turned violence.

Melville seems to make the argument that violence is a human necessity, and must be expressed lest it build up and explode. As the strict Quaker society did not allow any acts of violence, Nantucketers turned all their suppressed violence upon the sea and its inhabitants, allowing whale-based monomania to blossom on the island.

When Captain Hussey caught the first sight of the sperm whale in 1712, it is doubtful anyone could have predicted how economically successful the tiny seaport town of Nantucket would soon become. Over the following century, Nantucket would transform into the whaling capital of the world. For the first time ever, the United States excelled beyond every other country in the world in the production of a lucrative source of fuel— whale oil. However, as time passed, Nantucket struggled to keep up with the rest of America as the Industrial Revolution developed across the country and the globe. The *Essex* Disaster forced Nantucketers to come face-to-face with the downfalls of Quaker culture and its role in the horrifying story that the survivors told when they returned to shore. It exposed the greed, violence, conformity, and fear of outsiders that Nantucket Quakerism bred on the island and the dangers of what can happen when it goes unchecked in emergencies. When Nantucket began to fall behind with the discovery of gold in California in 1848 and oil in Pennsylvania in 1859, a meek twenty years after the sinking of the *Essex*, many Nantucketers would be unable to grapple with the changing of the nation and the world, and as whale oil lost value, so did the island. Like the comet that shot across the night sky in July of 1819, the *Essex* Disaster was the portent that told of the coming change Nantucket would come across in the coming decades. Unable to recognize the flaws present within their society and unable to extrapolate themselves from the sperm whale monomania that existed within their culture, Nantucket fell into obscurity as America continued

to grow into the global superpower it exists today. “By 1835,” Philbrick writes, “New Bedford had eclipsed the island as America’s leading whaling port,” (Philbrick, 220), only fifteen years after the *Essex* Disaster. In 1851, only thirty years after the *Essex* Disaster, Herman Melville would publish his *magnum opus*, *Moby-Dick*, inspired heavily by the Owen Chase narrative. The story of the *Essex* is important not only because of the role it played in the history of Nantucket but also because of what the *Essex* revealed about human nature and how we act in life-or-death situations. *Moby-Dick* is often considered, like many of Melville’s works, to be an early depiction of psychological theory, decades before Sigmund Freud would revolutionize our understanding of the human mind. *Moby-Dick* was not only a depiction of human psychology, but specifically a meditation on the Nantucket psyche and what the *Essex* revealed about it. Captain Ahab was not simply a character who represented the worst parts of ourselves, but he represented the worst parts of Nantucket Quakerism. Like the *Pequod*, which perished at the hands of a tyrannical, vengeful captain, the *Essex* sank because of the inherent flaws that existed in the town of Nantucket. Despite this portent of what was to come, Nantucket clung to its ways and would sink, like the *Essex* and the *Pequod*, because of it. On November 16th, 1869, forty-eight years after the *Essex* Disaster, the last whaling ship would launch from the Nantucket harbor, and would never return, (Philbrick, 223).

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