

Reading *Billy Budd, Sailor* as the Homoerotic National Elegy

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I. Introduction

In his guidebook to Herman Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor* (1924),¹⁾ Hershel Parker claims that by the time of writing the novella, the writer "was no longer impelled to reach for what he could not quite grasp" (27). However, he soon admits that the author chooses "raggedness" (28)—or in Melville's own words, "ragged edges" (*BB* 381)—over superficial perfection. Such heightened sense of obscurity has spurred active discussions across a variety of fields apart from literature, most prominently, law. Predictably, the mainstream of literary criticism on *BB* has focused on the aspects related to justice, law, and violence. Barbara Johnson's "Melville's Fist: The Execution of *Billy Budd*" (1980) is one of the most authoritative articles in this line. Overall, her analysis views the actions of characters and the motivating forces behind them with a fresh outlook, but she commits an error of undermining the story's specificity when she applies the deconstructivist concept of "undecidability" to analyze *BB*. For this reason, William V. Spanos complains that Johnson's reading, together with other recent criticisms, disregards "the historically specific context—the martial law or the state of exception under which the singular events that terminate in the execution of Billy Budd are enacted" (65). Accordingly, his goal in the recent book is to compensate for these biased analyses.

Notwithstanding the merits of reading the novella as a political, ethical, or religious discourse, both Johnson and Spanos somewhat downplay the es-

1) From now on, I will abbreviate the title as *BB*.

sential thread of the narrative that has to do with emotional entanglements among the characters. Although it has been largely ignored by critics, homoerotic desire in *BB* stands out, for the narrative persistently asserts the centrality of passion, which lies underneath. As the characters' "voice" (294, 302, 321, 329, 347, 375) is repeatedly brought up as their defining quality,²⁾ the gap between what is said and what is left unsaid is highlighted. Based on the premise that passion plays a pivotal role in *BB*, I would like to argue that the novella is best understood when viewed as a homoerotic national elegy that addresses both the paradigms of politics/ethics and passion by telling one of many "inside narrative[s]" (287) that expose the inconsistencies created by the needs of the times. To be more specific, *BB* dramatizes how the times compel the institutionalization of homosociality bound by the potentially homoerotic bonds, and yet ostracize cases of homoeroticism if they come up to the surface.

Through the characterization of Claggart and Billy, the narrative evokes nostalgia for the abstract past that used to apotheosize "spontaneous and profound" (323) display of passion instead of condemning it as "irrational combustion" (303). For one thing, the narrator's detailed depiction of the Handsome Sailor type in the introduction and elsewhere has a thread of connection with his praise of the more poetic past, for instance, in Nelson's glorious days. Therefore, ornaments, instead of being treated as mere supplements to emblemize one's sense of "vainglory" (307), are poetically superior in his eyes; Nelson's *Victory* is "the decaying monument of a fame incorruptible" (306) in contrast to the more technologically advanced, "mightier hulls of the European ironclads" (306). In this light, Captain Vere who is armed with reason and strict discipline seems to be the representation of such unpoetic modernity, but Melville draws only a fine line among the three characters as

2) The voice is a tricky and powerful medium that delivers the spoken words/sounds and much more; other subsidiary elements to be considered include intonation, cadence, rhythm, tone, phrasing, accent, and nuance just as the narrator of *BB* himself clearly recognizes. Facial expression may be another aspect that further complicates the spoken words. One instance in which the narrator presents one's voice as an index to his externality and/or internality is, of course, when he points out Billy's "vocal defect" (302) as his singularity.

I will examine shortly.³⁾ According to the narrator, this ideal, now-lost past is best characterized as Hellenistic since ancient Greece, at least ideally, speaks for the time when no human law prohibited the naturally arising desire of homosexuality.⁴⁾ Moreover, the Neoplatonic ending in which Billy's hanging entails collective action and voice suggests the potentiality of the survival of this homosocial community through an alternative means of poetic, more specifically, elegiac voice that resonates by repeating itself even as it evolves and expands.⁵⁾

II. Claggart: the homoerotic passion incarnate

From the beginning, the narrator emphasizes the importance of spontaneity by repetitively bringing up expressions such as, "spontaneous" (291-93, 323, 328, 362, 375), and "involuntary" (322, 358, 378). Feeling spontaneous

3) Not only are the same words frequently used to describe different characters—Claggart, the Dansker, and Squeak are depicted with a word "ferret[ing]" (317, 320, 329) whereas "queer" (312, 320, 338) for Vere, Claggart, and the Dansker—but the boundaries are always being lifted and relocated. The human voice and the sound the seafowls make are mysteriously melded (375, 379), and the conversation that takes place after Billy's execution hints at the fact that "will power" (376) in this instance is but one remove from human instinct. In fact, the famous passage about the rainbow with regard to Vere's madness (353) demonstrates *BB's* attempt to point out the subtlety in demarcation. The passage is quoted and explained in the third section of this paper.

4) In fact, David Buchbinder takes note of the idealism in this statement when he mentions how male homosexuality at that time was not as widely approved by the culture as now regarded. He claims that there were certain strictures imposed and refers to several sources by Kenneth J. Dover, Michel Foucault, and David M. Halperin. For more, see Buchbinder 624.

5) Modifying and integrating ideas suggested by Plato and Aristotle, Neoplatonism asserts that the ultimate reality can be found beyond the material world while at the same time it strives to unify the natural and metaphysical worlds. To further support the idea that the ending of *BB* is neo-platonic, *Critical Companion to Herman Melville: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work* (2001) lists "Neoplatonism" as one of many key terms in Melville's oeuvre explaining that he was strongly attracted to the idea due to "his own drive to unite his experience of the physical world with a strong metaphysical sensibility" (314).

and profound emotion is natural and essential in human life but for the present setting in which this does not naturally occur anymore, it is treated as something extraordinary and for this reason, Claggart is considered to be a “phenomenal” (325) man. Originally, passion is a force so powerful that it operates indiscriminately, even muddling up the rigid social boundaries.

Passion, and passion in its profoundest, is not a thing demanding a palatial stage whereon to play its part. Down among the groundlings, among the beggars and rakers of the garbage, profound passion is enacted. And the circumstances that provoke it, however trivial or mean, are no measure of its power. (328)

The master-at-arms’s erotic passion for a sailor—though Billy far surpasses any common sailor, for he has “heroic” (326) qualities—disrupts not only the sociopolitical hierarchy but heteronormativity, as a few passages that are ridden with sexual energy indicate. Nevertheless, it should be noted at this point that his passion remains a confusing admixture of envy, hatred, and desire and that he refuses to fully recognize its existence. All the more problematic is the fact that Claggart manipulates “the law of reason [. . .] [t]oward the accomplishment of an aim which in wantonness of malignity would seem to partake of the insane” (327-28).

In one of the earlier scenes, Claggart is enraged when Billy spills semen-like, “greasy liquid” (321) across his path. The narrator describes that the master-at-arms thinks twice, however, and renounces his urge to “ejaculate” (321) a word at the careless Billy. Upon this scene, David Greven comments that this “near-ejaculation signals that in some ways [Claggart] craves a mutual sexual experience, or spilling of soup, with Billy” (210). This trifling occasion indeed enhances the sexual tension between the two characters; it is the first moment in which Claggart’s heretofore hidden erotic desire is externalized. Again, the mechanism of the essential nature of homoerotic passion is here suggested to be something that the subject might not fully realize to exist within himself and, even when perceived to be there, something that he would wish to ignore altogether. He might even pretend not to know of his own desire because it is transgressive, and therefore try to transform it into

a form more palatable to his contemporary society: abhorrence towards homosexual desire. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick analyzes in her groundbreaking work entitled *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Claggart's homophobic hatred towards Billy is symptomatic of paranoia, put differently, "homosexual-homophobic knowing" (97).

In the exact midway of the novella, the reader encounters a more explicit scene of Claggart's unrequited passion for Billy. This time, not only Claggart, but also the narrator seems to be confounded. The master-at-arms is described as a melancholic lover who stands afar from the object of his desire. Adding insult to injury, Billy seems to be completely unaware of Claggart's passion and "flirts" with other young men. Claggart, in turn, feels jilted.

When Claggart's unobserved glance happened to light on belted Billy rolling along the upper gun deck in the leisure of the second dog-watch, exchanging passing broadsides of fun with other young promenaders in the crowd; that glance would follow the cheerful sea-Hyperion with a settled meditative and melancholy expression, his eyes strangely suffused with incipient feverish tears. Then would Claggart look like the man of sorrows. *Yes*, and sometimes the melancholy expression would have in it a touch of soft yearning, as if Claggart could even have loved Billy but for fate and ban. *But* this was an evanescence, and quickly repented of, as it were, by an immitigable look, pinching and shrivelling the visage into the momentary semblance of a wrinkled walnut. *But* sometimes catching sight in advance of the Foretopman coming in his direction, he would, upon their nearing, step aside a little to let him pass, dwelling upon Billy for the moment with the glittering dental satire of a Guise. *But* upon any abrupt unforeseen encounter a red light would flash forth from his eye like a spark from an anvil in a dusk smithy. (337-38; my emphases)

Apart from the divulging details, this scene is impressive because of the very confusion that the narrator himself seems to feel about Claggart's emotion. The narrator struggles to interpret the master-at-arms's mood swing; he once observes that Claggart's passion for Billy might be the forbidden kind ("fate and ban") but immediately contradicts himself saying that it was merely "an evanescence [. . .] quickly repented of." As if he feels guilty after having given

the juiciest tidbit away, or is unsure himself about the nature of Claggart's passion after all, the narrator heaps uncertainty after uncertainty by adding a series of negative conjunctions ("but") upon the initial conviction ("Yes").

It is such dubious nature of Claggart's gaze that spurs this tragic plot but his socially-conditioned consciousness enables him to refrain from fully displaying his dangerous passion, even when he has the first and last chance to express it. Claggart falsely accuses the object of his homoerotic desire while "bridling—*erecting* himself as in virtuous self-assertion" (346; emphasis added). As can be inferred from the intentional use of the word "erected" here by the narrator, Claggart is about to gain sexual pleasure out of this penal act aimed at the unknowing, heartless Billy, and also at himself for not being brave enough to open up his own emotion. In this "closeted" (348) confrontation under the all-seeing eye of Vere, the master-at-arms packages his secret rage at the unfulfilled emotion with a greater, more socially acceptable cause: patriotism. Under the pretext of communal peace on the *Bellipotent*, Claggart brings the unwitting lover within a safe distance by accusing him, and enjoys the close-range viewing so much that Billy feels his eyes upon himself to be "mesmeric" (349). As the conflict between the brain and the heart comes to an end, passion devours Claggart's "lights of human intelligence" (349) and the monstrous moment of transformation occurs; he is fragmented as "the alien eyes of certain uncatalogued creatures of the deep" (349).

From this point on, the narrator's language is fraught with sexual energy to underline a sense of fulfillment that Claggart intends to achieve out of this sadomasochistic act. Billy's tongue is paralyzed as he finds himself in a position similar to that of a rape victim—the "one impaled and gagged" (349), with "the face like that of a vestal priestess" (349) and of course, he soon turns the table by giving the attacker a lethal blow. What the reader is left with is the image of Claggart's corpse lying on the floor "like a heavy plank tilted from erectness" (350). Ironically, it is only at this tragic moment that the master-at-arms finds a sense of comfort and surrenders himself quite *spontaneously* to Billy's blow. Considering how his death occurs in a twinkle and in such a vapid fashion, it is conjecturable that he has awaited his possible destruction that would be incurred by Billy. By making Billy suffer, Claggart is finally able to elicit a

kind of action from his unfeeling lover. Having sought Billy's attention somewhat in a "juvenile" (337) way, Claggart dies an orgasmic death after giving "[a] gasp or two" (350).

III. Captain Vere: the arbitrary lawmaker

Patriotism is the keyword that links Claggart with Captain Vere who functions as a "father" (350, 367) figure not only of the ship and the crew but also of Billy who is an orphan. With regard to the resemblance between the master-at-arms and the captain, we can refer back to Claggart's homophobia, which is interpretable as a kind of defense mechanism against paranoia he feels as a homosexual. The fact that Vere is keen to notice something askew in Claggart's "patriotic zeal" implies that the captain himself endorses "strained" (344) disciplines to repress his own homoerotic passion. In fact, the narrator reveals that Vere once secretly thinks of Billy as "such a fine specimen of the *genus homo*, who in the nude might have posed for a statue of young Adam before the Fall" (345). This arousing remark is further highlighted when the reader learns that Vere, at one point, even considers "recommending [Billy] to the executive officer for promotion to a place that would more frequently bring him under his own observation" (345).⁶⁾ Despite the affinity between the two

6) At this point, the heretofore well-kept secrets pour out as if they were symptomatic of Vere's sudden outburst of insanity (353). The narrator then hastily adds lengthy information regarding Vere's suggestive thought, as if half-flustered for giving so much away to the reader. His defense of the captain's intention runs on for quite a while perhaps out of a sense of guilt that he feels as a telltale.

Be it parenthesized here that since the mizzentopmen have not to handle such breadths of heavy canvas as the lower sails on the mainmast and foremast, a young if of the right stuff not only seems best adapted to duty there, but in fact is generally selected for the captaincy of that top, and the company under him are light hands and often but striplings. (345)

Ironically, as diffuse sentences such as the one quoted above appear one after another, the reader's suspicion about the captain's hidden motive gathers. On the other hand, moments in the novella that adopt such *spontaneous* writing style seems to correspond with the author's grave concern with the spontaneity of emotion as having poetic power.

characters, however, Vere succeeds in “sublimating” his transgressive desire into a public virtue as he sets up a drumhead court, functioning at once as a witness and a judge. Unlike Claggart who blows the whistle and dies when he is overtaken by his passion, Vere’s wish to exercise power as a legal agent outruns his relatively petty feeling. Furthermore, as he volunteers to be the chief judge in making a final decision, his character becomes emblematic both of the father and the law, something close to the so-called Lacanian Name of the Father.

The captain’s full name, Edward Fairfax Vere, is suggestive of his just, upright character; his first name means the guardian (*ward*) of wealth (*ead*) in Old English while Fairfax is evocative of fairness, and the Latin *verus* or *vera* are also translatable as “true.” He is a lover of books but has “settled convictions” (312) that can never be bent. With these inherent qualities, Vere immediately sees through Claggart’s morbid intention in accusing Billy. Schematically speaking, the captain stands in the middle of Claggart, the symbol of “Natural Depravity” (325), and Billy who stands for utter innocence.⁷ During the closeted interview, Vere’s ostensibly more neutral gaze is contrasted with Claggart’s sinister, inhuman gaze. While the former is likened to that of “an asylum physician” (349), the latter is said to take after “serpent” (349) or “torpedo fish” (349); the former analyzes and the latter ravages. It may be in

7) I do not intend to support the viewpoint that Billy is plainly pure and innocent since the novella prefers to leave ample room for different interpretations. In the opening passage (291-93), for example, the narrator presents two types of the sailor, Handsome Sailor and Billy-be-Dam, the latter of which is morally inferior for its decadence. Curiously, it appears that he is drawn more by the “dandified” (292) version for its charms to trigger others to tell its “[t]ales” (292) than the former. As a result, the narrator’s assertion that the Handsome Sailor is truly the one “always attractive in masculine conjunction” (292) both for its physical beauty and moral goodness lingers with Billy-be-Dam rather than with the original type. By going back and forth between the two types, the narrator has confounded the distinction between the types and it is hard to decide whether his story will be about the Handsome Sailor or Billy-be-Dam. Billy, the subject at the center of the plot, is the hybrid of these two types. To be more specific, the blond-haired, “welkin-eyed Billy Budd—or Baby Budd” (293) would prove himself to be indeed “a mighty boxer” (292), one of the characteristics of Billy-be-Dam. For more, see Johnson 88-89.

this light that Hannah Arendt embraces the violence wielded by Vere. Any sense of injustice that arises out of the captain's action is inevitable since he is merely fulfilling his duty as the guardian of the law. According to Vere, he is obliged to make a decision that might feel heartrending to him personally because he stands to preserve the order. Arendt claims that Vere punishes Billy because "[l]aws and all 'lasting institutions' break down not only under the onslaught of elemental evil but under the impact of absolute innocence as well" (79).

Apart from the mirroring relationship between Vere and Claggart that precludes the former from being portrayed as the unperturbed judge, however, Arendt's analysis overlooks the pitfalls of the inflexible application of legal codes that is grounded upon Vere's exceptionalist politics.⁸⁾ First of all, the captain's remark is clearly mistaken for ignoring Claggart's singularity as a dangerous man who hides his insane motive with "the method and the outward proceeding [that] are always perfectly rational" (326). Upon the officer of marines's question as to why Claggart should have lied about Billy's contribution to the reactionary movement, Vere at first seems to defend the accused but soon answers that only the consequence of the event, Claggart's death, should stand before everything else. Although it may sound sensible enough to push aside the question as something that cannot be addressed sufficiently at the moment, a careful inquiry into the cause-and-effect relationship is requisite for coming to a more well-rounded legal decision. The famous passage that uses the metaphor of rainbow to delineate Vere's madness testifies to the impossibility of seeing the clear demarcation within the same spectrum.

Who in the rainbow can draw the line where the violet tint ends and

8) In the preface to the collection of essays entitled *American Exceptionalism* (1998), Deborah L. Madsen introduces exceptionalism as the pivotal concept in defining American cultural identity. The term can be traced back to the Puritan arrival to the New World as it denotes Massachusetts colonists' belief that they were privileged with "a special spiritual and political destiny" (1). Such "exceptional" authority works in tandem with the rhetoric of patriotism since it can easily lapse into a faulty logic that a country, for being exceptional, is free to create and bend its own rules without having to conform to the existing ones.

the orange tint begins? Distinctly we see the difference of the colors, but where exactly does the one first blendingly enter into the other? So with sanity and insanity. In pronounced cases there is no question about them. But in some supposed cases, in various degrees supposedly less pronounced, to draw the exact line of demarcation few will undertake though for a fee some professional experts will. (353)

Just as the novella has demonstrated throughout, the relationship between what is often regarded as opposite binaries, for example, the positive law and intuitive bending of such legal codes, cannot and should not exclude each other. In this specific instance, Vere commits a grave error of bypassing Claggart's intention and thus completely does away with the "mystery of iniquity" (326), the arena that cannot be reached at by human force but nevertheless must be explored persistently.

Closely related to this point is Vere's self-contradictory application of the "logic of the state of exception" (Spanos 102). Since the paradox of the exceptionalist logic is so apparent, Melville's treatment of the captain should not be viewed merely as an "undecidable ambiguity" (Spanos 105) as in the works of several renowned critics including Johnson and Sedgwick. Such a reading colludes with Arendt's failure to grasp at the potential violence innate within the liberalist state power and its exceptionalist policy as represented in the character of Vere. The parts in which the narrator makes an ample use of free indirect speech strengthens the view that Melville rather stands against the idea of American exceptionalism. Vere's persistent self-justification put in the form of free indirect speech, just like the passages that instigate the reader to wonder about Vere's homoerotic passion towards Billy, is most likely a lame excuse coming from Vere himself, though it hovers between the narrator's consciousness and that of the captain. In such parts, Vere adopts the exceptionalist rhetoric both on the emotional and legal levels to attain his own demands. First, he advises his inferiors not to be "moved" (362) by "the exceptional in the matter" (362), which also arises within him. He then affirms that his argument is grounded on the power of the absolute authority ("His Majesty" 363). Upon the pleading statement of the officer of marines, Vere says that the men who rebel should be extirpated without exception. Throughout

his speech, it is noticeable that the more he elaborates on the logical development of his principle, the more self-contradictory his argument becomes. His justification that a court martial is clearly distinct because it takes into consideration the “imperial” (362) conscience, not the “private” one, lays open the arbitrariness of the imperial and martial authority that are being exercised. Likewise, the variability of the one in power is denoted in the narrator’s evocation of ancient history.⁹⁾ The captain’s exploitation of the concept of legal justice ironically facilitates him to continue monopolizing his right to exercise violence within the institution. Simultaneously, as his colleagues’ dubious reactions to his decision-making process reveal, his exceptional position as the preserver of law and order enables him to remain outside the very legal boundaries that he himself declares to safeguard.

The rhetoric of exceptionalism recurs within the legal boundaries but one instance within the very discourse that is also directly related to the novella is the exceptionality of homosexuality. Law aspires to be the realm of universality—in the sense that (1) it is transnational, at least theoretically, with a systematic order that is applicable worldwide (the International Court of Justice, for instance) and that (2) it frequently exploits the language that emphasizes the omnipresence of justice as in the familiar declaration of the US Constitution that “*all* men are created equal” (my emphasis)—and yet, it widely elides homosexuality.¹⁰⁾ In comparison to the heteronormativity, a self-evident term that presupposes the idea of “norm,” homosexuality is anything but normal.¹¹⁾

9) “And, as elsewhere said, a barbarian Billy radically was; as much so, for all the costume, as his countrymen the British captives, living trophies, made to march in the Roman triumph of Germanicus. Quite as much so as those later barbarians, young men probably, and picked specimens among the earlier British converts to Christianity, at least nominally such, and taken to Rome (as to-day converts from lesser isles of the sea may be taken to London)” (372)

10) In the age of globalization, this idea is developed even further, enabling Ruti G. Teitel to propose that the formerly international regime is moving towards “‘humanity law’—that is, the law of persons and peoples” (x). For more, see Teitel’s *Humanity’s Law* (2011).

11) Ratna Kugar discusses the significance of the Indian counter-heteronormative movement that aims at redeeming the “sexual subalterns” (39). Kugar explains that sexual subalterns are those who are positioned on the marginality of the norm in

In “Sodomy, Masturbation, and Courts-Martials in the Antebellum American Navy” (2014), B. R. Burg concludes that homosexual offenses in the pre-Civil War navy were not treated seriously because they were quite commonplace (72), but the fact that such cases were generally silenced may point at a more complex mechanism at work: the tendency to write homosexuals out of law and history, in the long run. *BB*, of course, admits that homosexuality is not so uncommon and that therefore, there is nothing much to be scrutinized. H.M.S. *Bellipotent*, for example, casually passes as a “harem” (296) in which “the seventy-four beauties” (296) look out for Lieutenant Ratcliffe as he himself confidently describes. Nevertheless, the novella also foregrounds the denial of homosexuality in the strictly masculinist society. *BB* exposes the oppressive inner workings of the antebellum sexual politics that coerce all men, not excepting the “exceptional” (317), homosexual men, to “normalize” and negotiate their skewed desire for more justifiable values, namely, “patriotism” (383).

IV. Billy: “an organic hesitancy” and the homoerotic elegy

The setting of the story—as a battleship always on the brink of mutiny while the legal enforcement to suppress it created chaos—facilitates the discussion of homosexuality, which is often termed “Greek love,” as a liberating potential. In his essay entitled “Queer Diaspora: Towards a (Re)Reading of Gay History,” Buchbinder writes as follows:

‘Greece’ as the historical memory of a treasured past was romanticised and idealised as a time and a culture when love between males was not only tolerated but actually encouraged, and expressed as the high

terms of sexual identity and at the same time, those who consciously question “the dominant normative assumptions about the subject on which the law is based” (39). Although Kugar’s paper focuses on the legal situation in India, the collective efforts made in redefining the queer as something that is not radically deviant or completely beyond recognition imply the strong presence of heteronormativity in the field of law and culture in general. For more, see “Introduction” and Kugar’s “De-radicalising the Rights Claims of Sexual Subalterns through “Tolerance” in *Queer Theory: Law, Culture, Empire* (2010).

ideal of same-sex camaraderie. [. . .] If tolerance and approval of male homosexuality had happened once—and in a culture so much admired and imitated by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—might it not be possible to replicate in modernity the antique homeland of the non-heteronormative? (624)

As can be inferred from Buchbinder's concluding question, homoeroticism in the antebellum literature can be a signpost of a yearning for such retraceable past. Simultaneously, just as nostalgia comes from the Greek *nostos*, which means to return to home, longing for the Hellenistic past beckons to the desire for the originary, the quintessential as can be seen from the narrator's comparison of Billy to the prelapsarian Adam (301-45). Donning masks of ancient identities ranging from "Apollo" (296) and "Hercules" (299) to the prelapsarian Adam, Billy functions as the icon of the now-lost, halcyon days.

Insofar as the same-sex desire stands for something profoundly personal and unspeakable in public at the same time, it is a pertinent subject matter for an antebellum literary work that addresses questions regarding war, revolution, freedom, and justice within the largely male homosocial setting. In this light, the physician's equivocal words about whether the lack of muscular spasm at the moment of Billy's death underpins Melville's intention to problematize the porous boundary between personal and public, passion and reason. To the purser's remark whether the unfortunate sailor's death was a simple hanging or a merciful death, the physician implicitly admits that the question surpasses his own scientific understanding by saying, "[Euthanasia] is at once imaginative and metaphysical – in short, *Greek*" (377; emphasis added).

If *BB* is indeed a work that acts out the process of mourning of such unnameable past, how is it being mourned? As has been suggested in the second section of this paper, the narrator insinuates Claggart's homoerotic desire for Billy, but he seems to lack a proper means through which he can express it. After all, Claggart himself attributes his passion for Billy to something beyond expression ("that ineffability" 327) that the young sailor evokes. The same logic drives the story from the very beginning as homoerotic passion is constantly mourned but never in an explicit way. The narrator begins with

such a detailed description about the black Handsome Sailor and his followers in Liverpool that it immediately stimulates the reader's visual imagination. His view, however, expands when he turns an individual black sailor into a type that should be treated within a broader historical perspective. At this point, he alludes to "the time before steamships" (291) during which "the 'Handsome Sailor' of the less prosaic times" (291) existed. His "barbaric" (291) beauty is further enhanced by the heavy perspiration on his body under the blazing July sun. Apart from his ambiguity in gender, an unlikely mixture of the signs of his sure nobility and the shabby landscape filled with the motley crew establishes the black sailor as a depersonalized image sprung out of the narrator's repository of memories.

What stands out in this elaborate portrait of the Handsome Sailor is his "offhand unaffectedness" (291); the Handsome Sailor bearing "natural regality" (291) induces his comrades to pay "spontaneous" (291, 292) tribute to him. On both parties, passion *naturally* arises from within and is freely expressed without any hindrance. It is at this moment that the obscurity of the third-person omniscient narrator who has deferred to reveal his spatiotemporal stance becomes all the more intriguing. Indeed, the narrator seems to sympathize with this collective homoerotic encomium paid to the Handsome Sailor. As if his reflection upon this outstanding quality of the bygone era—the spontaneity of passion as in a strangely masturbatory moment in "A Squeeze of the Hand" chapter of *Moby-Dick*, for instance—tears down the bulwark that guards his most vulnerable parts, the narrator suddenly shifts the attention to "Billy-be-Dam, an amusing character all but extinct now" (292).

Directly connecting the suppression of the private in exchange of the public, Leslie A. Fiedler comments on this opening scene: "So in the communal American dream of love (beneath which lurks, for all the idyllic surface, a sense of trifling with taboos), the spouse of the pariah is properly of another race, a race suppressed and denied, even as the promptings of the libido are suppressed and denied" (365). His argument suggests the reason why elegy may be the most convenient form to embody the taboo of homoerotic desire. As Peter Sacks cogently explains, elegy is a work of mourning that requires a certain set of formulae to disguise private emotions so that it becomes publicly

displayed, gaining currency through others' approval (1). In other words, it is through the completion of the mourning process that the mourner in the elegy can overcome the urge to destroy the self and find a new object to direct his or her cathexis to.

In this genre, the forbidden desire may become openly acceptable, only under two conditions; (1) it has to be expressed in a form of a highly conventionalized ritual, (2) either at or after the moment of loss. These conditions, in turn, risk the male-male desire to be on the verge of becoming the loss itself. As desire and loss are at once identified in elegy, the dialectical site in which one consolidates masculinist culture for example, the navy as in the novella's case, can be sustained while on the other hand, the normally unspeakable same-sex desire can be implicitly but nevertheless deeply, and passably ingrained into its fabric. Recognizing such traits embedded in *BB*, Max Cavitch includes the novella as one of the examples that testify to the continuous prosperity of elegy in America (298). He claims that the book captures the oppressive sustenance of a masculinist system by legalizing, thus socializing the tabooed passion, and that it goes well with the telos of American elegy: "fulfillment, rather, of a specifically political, shared happiness that 'loss' mis-names" (Cavitch 24).

Melancholic Captain Graveling, whose name and disposition strangely echo grave or death, is the first one to elegize Billy's loss. He identifies the young sailor with himself by stating that to them both "aught like a quarrel is hateful" (295). This identification does not sound peculiar at first but the parts that follow it shed a different light.

But they all love him. Some o' em do his washing, darn his old trousers for him; the carpenter is at odd times making a pretty little chest of drawers for him. Anybody will do anything for Billy Budd; and it's the happy family here. But now, Lieutenant, if that young fellow goes—I know how it will be aboard the Rights. [. . .] Ay, Lieutenant, you are going to take away the jewel o' em; you are going to take away my peace-maker! And with that the good soul had really some ado in checking a rising sob. (296)

The crew of the *Rights* leads a harmonious life in which an alternative form of family functions so well that there seems to be no need of women whatsoever. While everyone does chores that are commonly categorized as feminine, Billy is both a womanizing Billy-be-Dam and the lady who is courted by multiple admirers. Furthermore, Graveling's extremely sensual speech distinguishes Billy as an arbiter "sugaring the sour ones" (295) and a "treacle" (295) attracting the gang of men who are like "hornets" (295). The double entendre at play alludes to the Handsome Sailor's peculiar position as a sort of femme fatale for the male homosocial group. Finally, his attempt at speaking on behalf of the male homosocial community in accordance with the convention, fails as he blurts out "*my* peacemaker!" (emphasis added) Elegiac mechanism is at full work as Graveling lets out his own prolonged homoerotic desire at the occasion of Billy's departure and at the same time, veils it with the virtues of male camaraderie for the good of nation. Communal values that should have remained in the safer realm of the public is privatized through Graveling's last remark as Billy is "raped away" by the public authority.

On the other hand, "the silver whistles" (378) that represent Vere and the imperial military power restrains the rest of the sailors from mourning for Billy as the expression "pierced" (378) emphasizes. Considering Billy's status as a foundling and the essential un-identifiability of each individual on the ship, the threat that the authority feels towards Billy's death can be explained by Benedict Anderson's argument that the imagined national identity is grounded upon the simultaneous existence of subjects who do not know each other personally: "Void as these tombs are of identifiable mortal remains or immortal souls, they are nonetheless saturated with ghostly *national* imaginings" (9). In this instance, however, it should be pointed out that Billy's death provokes a spontaneous response to formulate an alternative collective identity against the oppressive system, which erases the specificity of the individual and undermines the inside narratives as the story about the dead. By bringing a foreclosure to the process of mourning of the object who arouses and emblemizes homoeroticism, Vere defers the overcoming of the loss and thereby ironically re-inscribes homosexuality within the community.

For this reason, Melville's decision to close the novella with a Neoplatonic

ending should be viewed more optimistically than Sedgwick or Greven have evaluated. First of all, his stutter is an “*organic* hesitancy” (302; emphasis added) because it arises only when he is confronted with passion, a spontaneous, natural force (“yet under sudden provocation of strong heart-feeling” 302) that has been praised as the virtue of the glorious past. More importantly, though, the sailor’s “defect” (302) is a creative orifice rather than a drawback. Gilles Deleuze elaborates on the creative power of stuttering as its ability to facilitate the conventional language to “grow, from the middle, like grass; it is what makes language a rhizome instead of a tree, what puts language in perpetual disequilibrium” (111). In other words, Billy’s stutter is a formula that unsettles the given English language and achieves “the schizophrenic vocation of American literature [which is to make it] by means of driftings, deviations, de-taxes or sur-taxes (as opposed to the standard syntax), slip” (72). More specifically, Deleuze articulates that stutter brings the language into a whole new domain “of continuous variation [. . .] without [it] being confused with speech, which never assumes more than one variable position among others, or moves in more than one direction” (108). As his explanation points at the stutter’s potential to open up a new realm for the language—or viewed from a different light, to return the conventionalized language to its originary state—Billy’s defect signifies the rupture that lets open a conduit through which individual members within the community of compulsory homosociality can be liberated. In this almost mystical scenario, they come together even with the inhuman, “inarticulate” (379) voice of seafowls, finally producing a pantheistic harmony.

V. Conclusion

Billy’s death literally frees his fellow shipmates to reify the inexpressible, for instance, “the word *mutiny*” (368) or the homoerotic desire. Despite his death, Billy lives on in an encarnalized, a much more embracing form of “the vehicles of some vocal current electric, with one voice from aloft and aloft” (375). Reading the ending as reinvigorating the power of elegy, on the one hand, affirms Greven’s regretful comment that “[t]he implacable, ever-regenerating of the utopian ideal of the privileged same-sex space to instigate

its own manifestation” (214) is leveled out by

the equally inescapable and always despairing realization of the inability of that manifestation of same-sex idealization [. . .] and undergirded as it is by occluded desires, undisclosable needs, the willed unself-consciousness of a totalizing wish for enforced sameness—to sustain itself. (215)

The ending, however, tells a different story from what Greven suggests here. Although “measured forms” (380) and the myth of Orpheus are mentioned by Vere to point out the importance of strict rules of his own command, the narrator, as if to mock the captain’s self-assurance, immediately refers to “[t]he symmetry of form attainable in pure fiction” (380), adding that it is impossible to achieve in factual narrations as in historical accounts.

History discards Billy as a mutineer and heroizes Claggart instead but the young sailor’s procreative power lives through time via the voice of the marginalized. In the last chapter, the narrator carefully traces the humble amateur poet’s process of completing “Billy in the Darbies”; the foretopman listens to “rude utterance from another foretopman” (384), composes an elegy with “[t]he tarry hand” (384) that is, “after circulating among the shipboard crews for a while, finally [. . .] rudely printed at Portsmouth as a ballad” (384). Accordingly, the elegy is only a second-rate poem with “ragged edges” (381) but tells a far more truthful account than the publicly authorized versions. “[O]ne voice from aloft and aloft” that resonated in the communal elegy at the moment of Billy’s death is transfigured into the handsome sailor himself who awaits to ascend “aloft from aloft” (“Billy” 12) as if to show the elegy’s power to elevate the almost nameless individual. In this sense, the two elegies—the novella and the concluding elegy—mutually converse. As the threshold spaces, each elegy endeavors to unsettle the boundaries between private/public, passion/reason, norm/deviation, and heterosexual/homosexual. The binaries are continuously re-negotiated in *BB* through the elegiac framework as the story of a sailor is told in different versions, as Billy’s voice is summoned through the surviving elegists both in and out of the novella’s frame.

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ABSTRACT

Reading *Billy Budd, Sailor* as the Homoerotic National Elegy

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As a text multilayered with religious, ethical, and political frameworks, *Billy Budd, Sailor* (1924) presents a perplexing case. Accordingly, the novella has drawn much scholarly attention, often acutely divided, but its critical scope remains rather too confined to the readings of the text as a religious, ethical, or political allegory. Based on this observation, this paper is grounded upon the belief that integrating another indispensable topic of the novella, passion, complements *Billy Budd* criticism and therefore, actively delves into its latent homoeroticism. While I do not diverge from the conventional interpretation of the text as Melville's lifelong pursuit of Truth, I argue that *Billy Budd, Sailor* is most properly understood when it is read as a homoerotic national elegy. In lieu of identifying the trinity of characters as right and wrong, good and bad, or of leaning too much to the issue of homoeroticism, especially to the failure of (compulsory) homosociality, as a few recent critics have done, I view Claggart and Billy mainly as vehicles for the author to mourn for the lost times of America. Whereas Melville presents these two characters and the theme of homoeroticism as emblemizing Hellenistic, or even Neoplatonic energy of the bygone days, Vere displays the pitfalls of the strictly Calvinistic, "conventional" sense of judgment that is not unrelated to the shortcomings of American exceptionalism.

Key Words Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor*, elegy, homoeroticism, exceptionalism

