

Speaking Truth to Power from the Depths of Insanity : Azzageddi and Pip, Melville' s Cassandras

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Speaking Truth to Power from the Depths of Insanity: Azzageddi and Pip, Melville's Cassandras

David FARNELL

"Those who seek to know more than God has revealed," Calvin asserted, "are madmen!" (quot. in Herbert, "Calvinist Earthquake" 127)

After publication of his first two novels, *Typee* and *Omoo*, Herman Melville suffered considerable criticism for daring to call into question the benefits of capitalism, missionary work, Western (white) cultural supremacy, and even Christianity itself, all pillars of America's self-image. Indeed, one of the most noticeable changes in Melville's style from novel to novel is his ever-growing subtlety in voicing controversial opinions. One technique he develops is that of putting such opinions in the mouths of characters that will not, at first reading, be taken seriously. Influenced by his growing fascination with Shakespeare, Melville turns to fools and madmen to speak freely that which the author himself cannot, for fear of being called a fool or madman.

Two of the novels of the first arc of his career stand out as romances that are full to the brim with fools and madmen: uneven *Mardi* and masterpiece *Moby-Dick*, and each of these feature particular madmen who warn other characters to turn aside from their self-destructive, monomaniacal paths. In both cases, like the Trojan prophet Cassandra who could unerringly foretell the future but who was doomed never to be heeded, they are unsuccessful, but

their warnings resound for Melville's readers, not only in his time, but for all time. These characters are Azzageddi, the devil that Babbalanja claims possesses him, and Pip, soul-drowned cabin boy of the *Pequod*.

Before launching into the meat of the argument, I would like to make something clear. This paper assumes, as James Miller does, that Melville holds heroically monomaniacal characters like Taji and Ahab to be failures. Miller very reasonably argues that, throughout his body of work, Melville demonstrates again and again "the necessity of man to compromise with his ideals [...] in order to come to terms with the world's evil and his own" (5). Taji and Ahab do not compromise, and thus they perish. Those who survive in this imperfect world are those who, like Babbalanja and Ishmael, can compromise.

Miller makes a good argument, but I cannot say that I fully agree. Evidence from the books themselves and from Melville's letters indicate that he longs to emulate these heroically monomaniacal characters. That does not mean I fully disagree, either, but that I consider Melville's sympathies to be more complex than Miller seems to suggest. Melville was a master at holding multivalent stances. But for the purposes of this paper, taking account of that complexity would result in a confusing morass. Out of many possible angles from which to view the problem, I must choose one, while acknowledging that there are others.

Azzageddi is one of the most striking characters of *Mardi*, although he may more properly be termed a "pseudo-character," especially if one assumes that he is merely a product of the imagination of the philosopher Babbalanja. William Dillingham devotes the entire epilogue of *An Artist in the Rigging* to Azzageddi, portraying him as an impulse toward rebellion that appears in different guises throughout Melville's body of work. As the novel is a romance,

it is possible to think of Azzageddi as the devil he claims to be, but in any case, he serves, purposefully or not, to call into question Babbalanja's responsibility for certain socially awkward statements. Unlike America, Mardi does not even claim to be a land of free speech - it is an archipelago of islands mostly ruled by demigod-despots who do not take criticism lightly. But behind the mask of demonic possession or madness, Babbalanja/Azzageddi can express opinions that would get him imprisoned or even killed if stated by an apparently sane man with free will.

Azzageddi makes several appearances in the novel; one that has not been much examined by critics is the dinner party with King Abrazza, in Chapter 181 ("They Sup"). Here, Babbalanja foreshadows Azzageddi's immanent takeover with his mutterings of "Fogle-foggle, fogle-fi - " (1265), and then proceeds to ruin the party's appetite by hijacking the conversation to the topic of death at every opportunity, in an apparent attempt to remind the smug sovereigns, host Abrazza and Babbalanja's own King Media of Odo, that no matter how much fine food they consume, food which comes from the back-breaking labors of long-ignored serfs, all men are equal in death - recalling the graveyard scene from *Hamlet*. When the topic turns to two historical kings, Azzageddi interjects,

For after devouring many a fair province, and grinding the poor of his realm, Ludwig the Great has long since, himself, been devoured by very small worms, and ground into very fine dust. And after stripping many a venison rib, Ludwig the Fat has had his own polished and bleached in the Valley of Death; yea, and his cranium chased with corrodings, like the carved flagon once held to its jaws. (1266)

These statements repulse Abrazza, who several times orders Babbalanja ejected from the feast, but each time he is defended by Media with increasing

zeal, insisting that no harm come to him, until Abrazza, enraged, declares "the banquet is done" (1271) and sends them all away. The next morning he coldly informs them by message that they had best leave the island (Ch. 182, p. 1272).

This is a great change in Media, who at the beginning of the voyage was far less accepting of any speech which questioned the righteousness of kings. But by the time they reach Abrazza's island, Media has come to respect Babbalanja's insight and that of his devil. Indeed, the softening of Media's heart is Babbalanja/Azzageddi's greatest success in the novel. At an earlier point, when Babbalanja floats an argument that humans have no free will and are thus blameless for their actions (a back-handed criticism of the Calvinist position in the ongoing Great Debate of Melville's time - see Herbert, *Moby-Dick and Calvinism* 131), Media replies calmly but firmly that, "had you published that anarchical dogma among my subjects in Odo, I had silenced you by my spear-headed scepter [...]" (Ch. 135, p. 1083). But by the time they reach the island of Serenia, Babbalanja's constant attacks on his preconceived notions have prepared Media to receive the liberal Unitarian message of the Serenians. He renounces his status as a demigod and announces that "No more shall dismal cries be heard from Odo's groves" (Ch. 187, p. 1293). When Babbalanja charges him to return to his nation of Odo and bring peace, justice, and equality to it, we are left believing he will do so (Ch. 189, p. 1300).

Perhaps the crucial moment when we see Media changing is during their visit to Vivenza, the allegorical stand-in for America in the Mardian world. When Media witnesses the suffering of the slaves in the south of Vivenza, he is, like the other characters in the party, incensed, and comes near to approving open revolt by the slaves (Ch. 162, p. 1190). But there is another moment

in Vivenza worthy of note in respect to Azzageddi, and that is in Chapter 161, "They Harken unto a Voice from the Gods." Here, an anonymous scroll is read out which delivers an in-depth criticism of the pitfalls of Vivenzan/American democracy, calling upon the boastful Vivenzans to beware of the path they are on (1180-87). After listening to it, Media and Babbalanja accuse each other of having written it, but Melville leaves the actual author a mystery. This has puzzled many readers. John McWilliams writes of it, "If the author is Babbalanja, the reader must recognize that the scroll's opinions are those of a decidedly Melvillean thinker, but if Media is its author, one could reasonably dismiss the scroll as royalist propaganda" (151). But there is a third option that I have not seen presented before: What if Azzageddi is the author? The devil can be "a voice from the gods," especially as orthodox Christians consider all "false" pagan gods to be devils, and Azzageddi always calls into question his listeners' cherished beliefs. A document that questions the very basis of Vivenzan/American culture, and warns against being blinded by triumphalism, sounds like the very thing Azzageddi traffics in.

But while shaking Media free of his prejudices is a triumph, we have to remember that Media is reasonably sane and open-minded compared with many other characters in the novel. Paul McCarthy notes that the term "monomania" appears in *Mardi* for the first time in Melville's works, and that "Monomania is a natural condition in the Mardian world, for it is full of champions or advocates of one idea or another" (29). And it is these monomaniacal ideologues that Azzageddi can only enrage, not change.

Chief among these is the narrator, Taji, who starts out as a fairly normal-seeming stand-in for the author like those we saw in *Typee* and *Omoo*, but upon entering the dream-like realm of Mardi transforms into a romantic, obsessive hero. He kills a priest and steals a beautiful sacrifice, who then mys-

teriously disappears, leading to the quest that takes the group to the many islands of *Mardi*. When he arrives in Odo, he claims to be a demigod himself (Ch. 54, p. 827), and by the end of the novel, his arrogance has only grown as Media's has diminished, as he continues his pointless quest alone into what most readers assume can be only self-destruction. McCarthy echoes the standard assumption when he writes, "Taji, like Ahab and Pierre, is defiant, rebellious, and ultimately suicidal" (30). Babbalanja pleads with Taji to give up his quest (Ch. 189, p. 1300), but as with the Vivenzan listeners to the reading of the anonymous scroll, he continues on the path to destruction, because to do otherwise would require a painful reexamination of all his values. Like America choosing Civil War a few years after *Mardi*, or the invasion of Iraq a century and a half later, it seems easier to Taji simply to forge ahead rather than listen to his Cassandra critic and question what he is doing.

After the financial failure of *Mardi*, Melville went back to writing more of the conventional, biography-based fiction that was expected of him, producing a novel based on his first merchant trip, followed by one based on his stint as a sailor in the US Navy. The following novel was meant to be more of the same, examining his experiences on whaling vessels in more detail than he did in his first two novels (in which he only stayed in those whaling vessels long enough to desert them). But like *Mardi*, *Moby-Dick* took on a life of its own and became a very different novel from that he first envisioned.

Again, we have a great many "mad" characters, particularly the narrator Ishmael, who goes to sea to escape thoughts of suicide (Ch. 1, p. 3), and Ahab, the greatest monomaniac of American literature, who would "strike the sun if it insulted" him (Ch. 36, p. 164). But in cabin boy Pip, we have another Cassandra, another mad prophet who can see where Ahab's quest will lead and who tries to save him from it. Pip, though intelligent, is not an intel-

lectual like Babbalanja, and feigning madness or demonic possession is not something he would turn to, but even before he is left alone in the ocean until its immensity has “drowned the infinite of his soul” and he has seen “God’s foot on the treadle of the loom” (Ch. 93, p. 414), Pip serves an insightful commentator on Ahab’s quest for the White Whale, particularly of the sailors who are infected with Ahab’s madness as they dance and fight and argue on the forecandle at midnight:

Jimmini, what a squall! But those chaps are worse yet - they are your white squalls, they. White squalls? white whale, shirr! shirr! Here I have heard all their chat just now, and the white whale - shirr! shirr! - but spoken of once! and only this evening - it makes me jingle all over like my tambourine - that anaconda of an old man swore ‘em to hunt him! Oh, thou big white God up there somewhere in yon darkness, have mercy on this small black boy down here; preserve him from all men that have no bowels to feel fear! (Ch. 40, p. 178)

Pip’s comment on fear is worth a closer look, for after he goes mad, one theme he harps on is his cowardice. While many scholars like McCarthy have noted how this demonstrates Pip’s self-hatred (63), few have connected it back to his prayer above. Pip feels fear because it is only right to feel fear when one finds oneself caught up in a mad, suicidal quest. Also, we have to remember another, older meaning of “fear,” and how large the biblical tale of Jonah figures in the novel. As Father Mapple quotes scripture in Ch. 9, “The Sermon,” when Jonah is questioned by the crew of the storm-tossed ship that is suffering the wrath of God, he identifies himself with the words, “‘I am a Hebrew [...] I fear the Lord the God of Heaven who hath made the sea and the dry land!’” (46, and Jonah 1:9). Mapple underlines his point with “Fear him, oh Jonah? Aye, well mightest thou fear the Lord God *then!*” In modern

translations of the Bible, this confusing word “fear” is usually replaced with the more comfortable “worship,” but while accurate, the modern usage does not carry with it the overtone of terror which the thought of God was meant to inspire in sinners in the days when Calvinism was the dominant paradigm of American Christianity. Those “men who have no bowels to feel fear” are godless men; Pip’s self-accusations of cowardice are his “right worship,” as opposed to Ahab’s “defiance” (Ch. 119, p. 507). As the saying goes, fools rush in where angels fear to tread.

After going insane, Pip acts as an independent observer, ironically no longer afraid to voice his views in public because, as Azzageddi serves as a mask from behind which Babbalanja can speak dangerous truths, so does Pip’s holy madness serve to sanction his words. After a series of characters describe what they see in the doubloon nailed to the mast - Ahab seeing nothing other than himself and his pain, Starbuck seeing the Trinity, Stubb seeing signs and wonders, Flask seeing money to buy cigars, and so on - Pip takes his own look, and with his “I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look,” he is stating that they all see nothing but reflections of their own desires and assumptions (Ch. 99, p. 434). Lawrence Buell draws a parallel between this and the idea that “mythicizations of the White Whale are nothing more than artifacts of the observer’s desire” (61).

The relationship of Pip and Ahab becomes something like that of Babbalanja and Media. Of the moment in Chapter 125 where the Manxman sailor, exasperated with Pip’s madness, manhandles him, Charles Olson writes, “Like a reminder of Ahab’s soul he calls to Ahab, and Ahab, advancing to help, cries to the sailor who has seized Pip: ‘Hands off that holiness!’ It is a crucial act: for the first time Ahab has offered to help another human being. [...] his tone, from that moment, is richer, quieter, less angry and strident”

(60). Pip softens and humanizes Ahab as Babbalanja does for Media, and makes them into protectors through their helplessness. In Ch. 129, "The Cabin," Ahab "even goes so far as to ask God to bless Pip and save him. BUT before he asks that, he threatens to murder Pip, Pip so weakens his revengeful purpose" (Olson 61). But though Ahab is more self-aware than Taji, he is less able to reform himself than Media, and for all his humanization at the end of his quest, he pursues it to the bitter end nonetheless. He is no Jonah, repenting of his defiance in the belly of the whale, nor Job, bowing down when angry God demands it after Satan wins their bet. Ahab is defiant to the end, but it is that softened heart that allows us to find something in him to love, making his end tragic.

Why must Pip be so indirect and confusing in his statements? First, Melville wishes to evoke pity and make the madness seem authentic. McCarthy writes that, "Bright, sensitive, and spirited before the submersion, Pip shows the same qualities after he is struck with insanity. But [afterward], Pip is so upset and confused that he must play games with himself and others and act silly much of the time" (64). Second, as Melville writes, "man's insanity is heaven's sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic [...]" (Ch. 93, 414). Like those who have left Plato's Cave to be dazzled by the real sun, celestial (or infernal, in the case of Azzageddi) truths defy human comprehension and cannot be expressed clearly to those who have never experienced them directly. Third, Pip and Azzageddi both speak in nonsense and riddles for the same reason that *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick* could not have been written in the plain, straightforward language of a more easily-marketable potboiler: great truths stated plainly tend to fall flat. The words of Azzageddi and Pip, like the passages throughout their novels, puzzle us, forcing us to read more

slowly, to think along unfamiliar paths, to take breaks to digest ideas, so that we create the wisdom in our own minds rather than having it spoon-fed to us. (And thus we can answer the most common student complaint about Melville: "Why does he have to be so *hard*?")

Finally, Pip and Azzageddi are clearly inspired by the characters of the Fool and Edgar in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, as well as Hamlet in his feigned madness, and Melville uses many similar speech patterns to those of Shakespeare's. Since Babbalanja is probably assuming the mask of Azzageddi on purpose, at least at first, he most closely corresponds to Edgar, who pretends to be tormented and possessed by "the foul Fiend" in Act III, Scene 4; or of Hamlet in his numerous scenes of pretended madness. As for Pip and Lear's Fool, Olson writes,

Someone may object that Pip is mad, not foolish. In Shakespeare the gradations subtly work into one another. In *Moby-Dick* Pip is both the jester and the idiot. Before he is frightened out of his wits he and his tambourine are cap and bells to the crew. His soliloquy upon their midnight revelry has the sharp, bitter wisdom of the Elizabethan fool. (63)

So with Azzageddi's and Pip's "crazy talk," Melville is linking his work to that of Shakespeare himself.

After suffering many critical rebukes and financial failures as a writer, Melville himself must have felt like a fool, a mad prophet, a Cassandra, and this is why he chose to have mad fools speak for him in his works. They warn of disaster, and the sane fail to pay heed. As Lawrence Thompson writes, "In *Mardi*, Melville delights to point out repeatedly that the value of the word 'madness' [...] depends entirely on the viewpoint of the user" (65). The supposedly sane average Americans in both North and South were either actively

promoting or passively accepting the coming division of the nation and subsequent civil war. They were following Ahab-like idealists into a war that could have been avoided with the application of patience and self-awareness, but both sides on the slavery issue, just like the intellectuals on both sides of the Great Debate over Calvinism vs. Liberal Christianity, retreated into more extreme positions the longer they argued, until they could no longer even hear each other. At that point, calls by the few remaining moderates for compromise and reasoned discussion seemed like insanity to the extremists.

As C.L.R. James wrote about reading *Moby-Dick*, “The question of questions is: how could a book from the world of 1850 contain so much of the world of the 1950s?” (80). Here in the early 21st century, the question is just as relevant. America is once again in a terrible war, and families are divided over the issue into extreme camps that can barely speak to one another. Stopping to reflect and rethink is regarded as weakness; like Taji closing his ears to Babbalanja, launching unprepared into an unknown darkness seemed easier than pausing, planning, and questioning our actions. And those who do question, who dare point out that America is less than perfect, are called insane, terrorist sympathizers, and even traitors. Like Ahab, we had been struck, and we had to strike back, no matter the consequences. And who are our best critics, those who just now are beginning to shake some Americans free of their extreme positions and back toward sanity?

A recent Pew Research Center poll correlates how aware Americans are of current issues - that is, how much they are paying attention to what is happening in the world, rather than closing off their minds - with what their sources for that information are. It found that, shockingly, the most well-informed Americans are the ones who list *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* as their regular news sources. But these are two connected comedy

shows hosted by Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert that poke fun at politicians, journalists, and other people and issues in the news. While they do analyze the news, they do it for the purposes of comedy, using irony and parody. That Stewart and Colbert would do a better job at informing the public than traditional news sources is unsettling, until we consider that they are not merely informing: they are encouraging their viewers to think and reflect by shocking them and by challenging assumptions, using comedic techniques which often include feigning insanity. It is up to these modern fools, the comedians, who, Azzageddi-like, cheerfully deflate the egos of those in power, no matter who they are. May our Ahabs turn out to be Medias in the end.

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