All Hail the Whale: 
Cetaceous Metaphor, Monarchy, and Monstrosity in 
Shakespeare and Melville

By Anna C. Everett
Advised by Sarah Wall-Randell

Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the 
Prerequisite for Honors in English

May 2016

© Anna Everett 2016
“Come, Agar, thou unsatiably monster of maidens’ blood and devourer of beauties’ bowels, glut thyself till thou surfeit, and let my life end thine. Tear these tender joints with thy greedy jaws, these yellow locks within thy black feet, this fair face with thy foul teeth.”

– *Gallathea* (1592) by John Lyly

“They say the sea is cold, but the sea contains the hottest blood of all, and the wildest, the most urgent.

All the whales in the wider deeps, hot are they, as they urge on and on, and dive beneath the icebergs. The right whales, the sperm-whales, the hammer-heads, the killers there they blow, there they blow, hot wild white breath out of the sea!

And they rock, and they rock, through the sensual ageless ages on the depths of the seven seas, and through the salt they reel with drunk delight and in the tropics tremble they with love and roll with massive, strong desire, like gods.”

– “Whales Weep Not!” (1932) by D.H. Lawrence

“It is this sense of tranquility – of life without urgency, power without aggression – that has won my heart to whales.”

– Biologist Roger Payne (1935 - )¹

¹ Quoted in Roman 166.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my advisor, Sarah Wall-Randell, for your guidance and imagination and for teaching the Jacobean Shakespeare class that propelled me to continue studying Renaissance English literature in your classes and independently. Thank you also for your kindness.

Thank you, Caroline Bodager, for encouraging me to expand the scope of this project to include cetaceous sea monsters. Thank you to my Wellesley loves, especially the Unitarian Universalist community, Fiona Boyd, Mary Ruth Ngo, Winnie Lin, and Savannah Hauge.

Thank you, Kelly Bushnell, for your advice on researching whales in literature and for generously sharing your work with me; and thank you, Maura Coughlin, for introducing us. Thank you to naturalists Carole Carlson and John Conlon at Dolphin Fleet Whale Watch for teaching me about Provincetown’s whale population during my apprenticeship with you. Thank you, Nadine Lysiak, Marianne Moore, and Jeffrey Hughes for teaching me about whale biology and marine biology.

Thank you, Gwen Everett, Lucy Potter, Timothy Everett, Joanna Lubkin, and Anne Eaton for your love, and for reminding me to just keep swimming.
# Table of Contents

**Introduction** ................................................................................................................. 5

**Chapter 1: Benevolent Whales** .................................................................................. 22

**Chapter 2: Whales, Gender, and Sexuality** ................................................................. 43

**Chapter 3: Royal Whales** .......................................................................................... 63

**Chapter 4: Whales as Sea Monsters** .......................................................................... 82

**Conclusion** .................................................................................................................. 101

**Works Cited and Works Referenced** ........................................................................... 105
Introduction

Written accounts, both real and imagined, have long defined the human-cetacean relationship. I will explore the following contradictions in the literature of Shakespeare, Melville, their predecessors, and today’s writers. Whales are a metaphor for political bodies and yet the sea in which they live is a metaphor for chaos and anarchy. Whales are synonymous with sea monsters but are also considered to be very human-like. Whales are beastly and yet princely. While dolphins are harbingers of rescue, other whales are dangerous and sexually threatening. Whales are one of the great mysteries of biology, but artists and authors have claimed the authority to depict them in various ways, with varying degrees of accuracy, throughout history.

What does cetaceous literature tell us about the humans who tell these stories? Why are whales so often misunderstood?

…”

“In my country,” I said… “the little fish seem to have gotten together and are nibbling at the body of the whale.”

“That will not make them whales,” said Giovanni. “The only result of all that nibbling will be that there will no longer be any grandeur anywhere, not even at the bottom of the sea.”

(Baldwin 35)

In the above passage from James Baldwin’s Giovanni’s Room, the American protagonist David compares the American people to the ocean’s inhabitants by casting the proletariat as “little fish” that try to overthrow and replace the mighty “whale” by “nibbling at [its] body.” The passage associates whales with “grandeur” through their elite position as the only inhabitants of “the bottom of the sea.” Whales have a monopoly

---

2 In this thesis, I will use the terms cetacean and whale interchangeably. The order of Cetacea includes both Mysticeti (baleen whales) and Odontoceti (toothed whales), which include dolphins.
on territory that neither little fish nor humans can inhabit. Baldwin’s character Giovanni suggests, too, that attempting to defeat whales is futile; little fish cannot replace whales at “the bottom of the sea” because they cannot survive there, so whales’ demise would only mean that that territory would be deserted. Not only would the bottom of the sea be devoid of whales’ “grandeur,” but also the rest of the world would be: “there would no longer be grandeur anywhere.” This notion implies that whales’ influence on the world is not limited to the deep sea but rather encompasses the terrestrial world and beyond as well. Baldwin’s whale metaphor is consistent with Renaissance English literary conceptions of whales as signifying the powerful ruling class of humans but also signifying something beyond humankind, something godly in its reach. Shakespeare’s whales in their marine environment, for instance, are a metaphor for politics on land.

Seafarers of Shakespeare’s time had fanciful and strange notions of what creatures they might encounter while at sea. Whales and sea monsters were often synonymous, and pictures of whales from the late 16th and the 17th centuries depict them with tusks, fish-like scales, 3 dragon-like faces, menacing teeth, and mechanical-looking blowholes. We see evidence of this conception of whales in contemporary maps that included illustrations of whales and whale-like sea monsters in areas where sailors were said to encounter them (Van Duzer 38-39, 116). Depicted in this scary but also fantastical way, whales elicited both awe and terror. In the late 18th century, Edmund Burke suggested that that “terror [is] the common stock of every thing that is sublime,” explaining that “the idea of pain, in its highest degree, is much stronger than the highest degree of pleasure” (64). In order for something to be “sublime,” it has to be

3 Ceteaceans are mammals and not fish.
“terrifying” and potentially harmful; this danger elevates the “degree” of emotion that humans feel in reaction to that which is sublime. Whales strike the balance between “terror” and also fascination, so that they are a perfect example of the sublime. Not only do humans fear whales in literature, but whales also threaten the social order on land.

Cetaceous monsters are a potent metaphor for that which is socially marginalized, such as homosexuality and non-white racial identity. Although Deborah Martin’s theory on female sexuality in Argentinian film today pertains to art created five centuries and a continent away, it applies well to John Lyly’s Gallathea, in which women flee a cetaceous monster by crossdressing. If we apply Martin’s thinking that “[t]he monstrous… haunts the straight mind or threatens straight culture” to this play (64), the women in Gallathea become monstrous themselves by manifesting a lesbian love. Therefore, these women flee from a sea monster in order to become monstrous themselves through defying “straight” norms; the sea monster compels these women to manifest more monstrosity.

In William Shakespeare’s The Tempest, we see an association between monstrosity and that which is exotic or non-European: the monstrous Caliban is monstrous partly because he is exploited and exploitable by the colonial forces of Prospero and Stephano. Prospero enslaves Caliban and treats him as an animal, or less than human, which promotes reading Caliban as a colonial subject to Prospero’s colonialism. Within this subjugation, I read Caliban as cetaceous because of his fishy, monstrous, and also human nature. Therefore, in this thesis we will not only see whales that are raised to elite statuses and considered superhuman but also whales that are marginalized because of their perceived sub-humanity.
Shakespeare makes several references to whales throughout his work, and his image of what a whale would have looked like was likely influenced by the ancient Roman natural philosopher Pliny’s *Natural History*. Pliny’s descriptions of whales, including the more charismatic dolphins, parallel Shakespeare’s characterizations of whales, including dolphins. Pliny uses the exact same language to describe whale exhalation that we will see in Shakespeare’s *Pericles*, suggesting that the “physeter” exhales by “belching forth, as it were, a deluge of water” (*The Natural History* 361-362). Pliny also classifies “balaenae,” or whales with baleen filters, in the category of “sea monsters” (*The Natural History* 360).

Like Melville two centuries after him, Pliny incorrectly characterizes whales as big fishes, when they are in fact mammals, but he intuits correctly that whales must breathe with lungs rather than gills: “Neither the balaena nor the dolphin has any gills. Both of these animals respire through vent-holes, which communicate with the lungs” (*The Natural History* 368-369). Pliny recounts stories of whales pitted against each other, Orcas versus baleen whales specifically, and of a large and menacing Orca whale that Julius Caesar had to order to be restrained within the bay (*The Natural History* 365-366). Meanwhile, he describes dolphins as possessing a special kinship with humans,

---

4 See Kenneth Muir’s analysis of Shakespeare’s treatment of oceanography in *Othello* juxtaposed directly with passages from Pliny about the ocean’s movements (224-225).
5 For an analysis of Shakespeare’s treatment of dolphins specifically, see Steven Mentz’s “‘Half-Fish, Half-Flesh:’ Dolphins, the Ocean, and Early Modern Humans.”
6 In their footnote, Bostock and Riley translate “physeter” to “‘a blower’” and explain that it is “probably one of the whale species, so called for its blowing forth the water” (Pliny *The Natural History* 361). Today, *Physeter macrocephalus* is the scientific name for the sperm whale (“Physeter macrocephalus”).
7 Even after Shakespeare’s time, nonfiction accounts of whale strandings conflated whales and sea monsters. See *A True Report and Exact Description of a Mighty Sea-monster: or Whale* (1617) by Anonymous.
especially with children, calling the species “not only friendly to man, but a lover of music as well” (Pliny The Natural History 371-373). Here, we see the beginning of a rich folklore surrounding whales in the Western tradition, some scientifically sound and some only emotionally intuited.

Other than reading natural philosophy or going to hunt whales, Renaissance English people’s closest contact with whales was witnessing beached whales and reading accounts of them, such as A True Report and Exact Description of a Mighty Sea-monster: or Whale, Cast Upon Langar-shore Over against Harwich in Essex, This Present Moneth of Februarie 1617. The title of this account again suggests that whales and sea monsters were considered to be one and the same. The anonymous witness to this beached whale takes the first eight pages of the 11-page pamphlet to explain that there is a precedent for God inflicting his wrath on humanity with similarly catastrophic and awe-inducing natural phenomena such as plagues and floods (4). Finally, the writer describes the whale in all its overwhelmingly large glory, as witnessed on February 1, 1617:

The length 56 foot, the heighth or depth 9 or 10 foot, the breadth 14 foot, the compasse 36 foot, the taile in compasse 16 foot, the le[n]gth of the nether jaw 12 foot. It appears a Male: the skinue blacke and like leather, the flesh in colour and substance like brawne: the eyes huge and being fixed, as it were on the backe, with one open spout in the top of the head, and otherwise very monstruous and confusedly composed, as you may see by the true portraiture thereof presented…. It appears also to be but a yong one, and yet is very fat…. I my selfe and thousands besides have seene and beheld it, lying at Langar side in Ipwich water over against Harwich Towne, about a mile and a half distant. Whether this Monster of the Sea bee ominous or not, I had rather leave to the wise and learned than my selfe determine.

(10-11)
As the frontispiece of *A True Report* illustrates, the people observing this beached whale first take its measurements, climbing all over the carcass and even opening its mouth in order to measure the length of its “nether jaw” (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The cover page of *A True Report* and *Exact Description of a Mighty Sea-Monster, or Whale, Left Upon Langar-Shore Over Against Harwich in Essex, This Present Moneth of Februarie 1617*.

The witness writing this account starts with these empirical observations and thereby conjectures that the whale is a young male. Ultimately, however, the author of this account does not know what to make of the whale, describing the creature as “otherwise very monstrous and confusedly composed” and feeling unequipped to “determine” the whale to be “ominous or not.” Regardless of whether the whale is definitely a portentous sign sent from God, the author sees him as a “Monster of the Sea.” This eyewitness account suggests that the whole community of Harwich in Essex gathers to bear witness to this whale: “I my selfe and thousands besides have seene and beheld it.” One can imagine that it would be a rare and, indeed, sublime experience to walk along the beach and encounter an animal that was “56 feet” long. Such firsthand exposure to a whale on land is more than many English people of the time would have had, and even still there is uncertainty regarding how mystical the whale might be.

More abstractly, whales were a metaphor for scientific inquiry as expressed in literature around this time. Margaret Cavendish’s 1666 science fiction tour de force, *The
Blazing World, illustrates whales’ importance as an indicator of scientific innovation, or lack thereof. The Empress in this novel achieves world domination by wielding power over the oceans, including controlling ships’ commerce between different continents (Earnest 24). This oceanic dominion grows to include attempting to wield power over the oceans’ greatest inhabitants, whales. In her inquiry into the uses of microscopes and other scientific lenses, the Empress hypothesizes that a whale might be a good test of these kinds of scientific equipment:

Then the Empress asked them whether they had not such sorts of glasses that could enlarge and magnify the shapes of great bodies, as well as they had done of little ones? Whereupon they took one of their best and largest microscopes, and endeavoured to view a whale through it; but alas! the shape of the whale was so big, that its circumference went beyond the magnifying quality of the glass; whether the error proceeded from the glass, or from a wrong position of the whale against the reflection of light, I cannot certainly tell. The Empress seeing the insufficiency of those magnifying-glasses, that they were not able to enlarge all sorts of objects, asked the bear-men whether they could not make glasses of a contrary nature to those they had showed her, to wit, such as instead of enlarging or magnifying the shape or figure of an object, could contract it beneath its natural proportion: which, in obedience to her Majesty's commands, they did; and viewing through one of the best of them, a huge and mighty whale appeared no bigger than a sprat; nay, through some no bigger than a vinegareel…

(Cavendish 144-145; my emphases)

Here, whales are the ultimate test of scientific tools. As we saw in A True Report, the most distinguishing feature of the whale here is its “huge and mighty” size, so that it is the first organism to come to mind to test the limits of the microscope, too see whether it could “enlarge and magnify the shapes of great bodies,” too. The Empress is curious to see a whale’s body up close in the same way that she examines tiny organisms, and finding this to be impossible, the Empress asks whether a reverse microscope might provide a macro-view of the whale, and the “bear-men” oblige. All of this takes place in the alternate universe of Cavendish’s fantastical novel. However, despite the
improbability of a tool so large that it can shrink a whale until it “appeared no bigger than a sprat,” or small herring, this passage highlights the importance of the whale in Cavendish and her contemporaries’ minds as a scientific specimen. Additionally, the whale presents a dilemma for the Empress, who tries to classify it as another “object” to view through a microscope, and then tries to minimize its “great[ness]” by finding a scientific tool to shrink it down to a less overbearing size. By being so difficult to understand, the whale pushes scientific boundaries and possesses great imaginative currency.

We see the imaginative currency that whales hold in the English Renaissance folklore surrounding them as well. The phenomenon of Aspidochelone describes whales (or turtles) that are mistaken for islands (Bushnell “Re: Whales/sea monsters in literature”). There are myths, depicted in illustrations on maps as well as in literature, of sailors mistaking whales for islands because of their gigantic size and hauling anchor on whales’ backs (Williams Monsters and Their Meanings 33). Milton’s Paradise Lost, for instance, perpetuates this myth:

…that sea-beast
Leviathan, which God of all his works
Created hugest that swim the Ocean stream:
Him haply slumbering on the Norway foam
The Pilot of some small night-foundered skiff,
Deeming some island, oft, as sea-men tell,
With fixed anchor in his scaly rind
Moors by his side under the lee

(Book 1, lines 200-207)

---

8 I interpret the Leviathan to be equivalent to a whale because there is so much overlap in the literary conception of the whale and the meaning of Leviathan, which the OED defines as “[t]he name of some aquatic animal (real or imaginary) of enormous size” as well as “[a] man of vast and formidable power or enormous wealth,” both of which meanings originated during the English Renaissance period (“leviathan, n.”).
Milton suggests that it is frequent, according to “sea-men” that the Leviathan, or whale, is perceived to be “some island.” Oddly, though, despite the fact that these mariners supposedly get close enough to the whale to be able to “fix[] anchor” in its skin, they perceive this skin as a “scaly rind,” although whales do not have scales like fish do.

There is precedent for seafarers perceiving whales as islands and seeking respite on their supposedly scaly backs elsewhere in this time period as well. One early modern European map illustrator portrayed a group of missionaries creating an altar and stopping to pray on the back of a whale that had not only scales but also a fish-like vertically finned tail rather than the correct horizontally finned whale’s tail (Williams *Monsters and Their Meanings* 33; see Figure 2). This image is perhaps even more bizarre because it is not altogether inaccurate: the whale depicted does have two blowholes, from which it spouts water, and its size in proportion to the supplicating human figures on its back is plausible.

*Figure 2. A 1621 illustration of missionaries stopping to pray on a whale’s back.*
In an example that is similarly indicative of the folkloric potential of sea creatures, literary scholar and thalassologist Steve Mentz drew attention to a 1626 document entitled *Vox Piscis* in his exhibit “Lost At Sea: The Ocean in English Literary Imagination, 1550-1750” at the Folger Shakespeare Library in 2010 (see Figure 3). *Vox Piscis*, otherwise known as *The Book-fish*, is a book of pieces of wisdom about the world that English people claimed they found in the belly of a fish at a Cambridge market in 1626. (Mentz notes that the concept of this book is more interesting than the information it contains, however [“Lost at Sea”].) Again, we see an association between the pursuit of knowledge and fish. Whales were still understood to be fish at this time, so the whale would have been considered a much larger relative of this epistemological fish.

*Figure 3. An illustration of The Book-fish accompanying the text that was said to be enclosed in the fish.*

Outside of their intellectual currency, whales are also considered beastly and even sexually threatening. Going as far back as Greco-Roman mythology, cetaceous monsters threaten to eat virgins, thereby threatening these women sexually as well. For instance, in the myth of Perseus, Andromeda, and the sea monster, in punishment for Andromeda’s mother’s hubris in regards to her beauty, Neptune threatens to have a sea monster eat Andromeda (Murgatroyd 154). Perseus swoops in to save this damsel in distress from the sea monster, and Ovid alludes to the fact that both Perseus and the monster are sexually attracted to Andromeda by characterizing her as “[t]he girl they were fighting over;” further, Ovid describes the sea monster cetaceously:

---

9 “The New Thalassology” is a field of scholarship developed in the early 2000s to undertake the “comparison of real and metaphorical seas” (Horden and Purcell 723).
the monster “spew[s] spume” and when killed, “its colossal corpse cover[s] a huge expanse of ocean” (*Metamorphoses* Book 5, qtd. in Mugatroyd 156, 157). John Lyly’s *Gallathea* and Shakespeare’s plays continue to perpetuate fears about the threat that monstrous whales, or cetaceous monsters as the case may be, pose to virgins, which we will see in Chapter 4. Whales’ greed is often a metaphor for human greed.

In *Pericles*, wealthy people are compared to whales, while less socially powerful people are compared to the tiny fish that whales consume. In Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, the governing body is compared to the monstrous leviathan, which both induces fear in its followers and is also mortal. Other representations of cetaceous creatures suggest that whales are superior to human beings and that they are immortal or godly. *Moby-Dick* suggests that whalers’ attempts to dominate whales are futile because whales are so powerful. Whales vacillate between inhabiting a friendly giant archetype and threatening humanity, whether provoked by men wielding harpoons or not provoked at all.

Whales’ monstrosity comes in part from their association with the chaotic, order-defying sea (Bushnell “Monstrous Taxonomy” 38). In fact, in *Beowulf*, the ideas of the ocean and whales are so inextricably tied that the word for sea is *hronrāde*, which means “whale-road” (Wilton). Laurence Publicover argues that the sea is often an escape from politics on land in Shakespeare’s plays: “the further into the political wilderness of the sea one travels, the less fully one inhabits one’s political identity,” which holds for Pericles in *Pericles*, a political exile who takes to the sea (138). The sea is dangerous because it is a “political wilderness,” but this “whale-road” paradoxically simultaneously mirrors politics on land since the great whale and its tiny underlings fishes are a common metaphor for government and the ruling class in *Pericles* as well as in Hobbes’ *Leviathan*.
written later in the same century. Nevertheless, it is out of these chaotic politics that
whales emerge, whether they are naturally stranding on beaches or being hunted and
brought back to land for luxury products such as corset stays and petticoats and parasols.

Kelly Bushnell investigates the phenomenon of traveling exhibits of hunted
whales’ bodies in England as early as 1383, which I will return to in Chapter 4 (“Politics
and Poetics” 4-5). However, according to Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*, observing whale
carcasses is not as enlightening as whaling: “the only way in which you can derive even a
tolerable idea of his living contour, is by going a whaling yourself” (Melville 2003 316).

Today, whale enthusiasts venture on ships to see whales, but only to observe them. There
are moments of simply watching in *Moby-Dick*, too, when it seems sacrilegious to
attempt to dominate whales, such as when the whales are pregnant or nursing their young.

Relatedly, in the Old Testament, when Jonah commits sacrilege, God punishes him by
having a whale swallow him. In this way, the whale is the hellish punishment for those
who sin but is also divine in its own right since it is able to communicate with God and
enact his wrath. Furthermore, the whale enacts God’s mercy when God decides that
Jonah should be spit out again.

There is a great deal of imagery of whales swallowing, devouring, spitting,
belching, and vomiting. The sea similarly swallows humans who drown, sometimes
killing these humans (like Ahab and his shipmates in *Moby-Dick*), and sometimes
miraculously throwing them up again on shore alive and well. Just as the whale vomits up
Jonah, the sea “belches” up Thaisa in *Pericles* (Shakespeare III.ii.58). Whales and their
oceanic habitat are co-conspirators in this way: they can kill humans or bring them back
to life in similar ways.
Whales’ appetites are large in reality, in order to sustain their huge bodies, but they do not in reality eat humans or even most other sea creatures. Baleen whales, or whales with baleen filters for helping them to separate their food from seawater, eat tiny krill, and toothed whales eat certain other marine animals as well as fish. We will see a lot of associations between whales and fish, as well as characterizations of them as great fish. It is an interesting and complicated task to attempt to differentiate scientific truths about whales from metaphorical beliefs about them, because there is still so much that scientists do not yet understand about whales, such as the purpose of their singing. However, we know that whales are mammals with lungs and the ability to lactate. Whales do not eat humans, despite the great deal of folklore to the contrary.

Humans often project our own emotions and preconceived notions onto whales, including that they must be intelligent and wise like Shakespeare (Melville 2003 406), they must feel grief like we do (Balasubramanian), and they must want revenge against us just like Ahab wants revenge against Moby-Dick (Melville 2003 652). By exploring whale metaphor in literature, we learn a great deal about the human-whale kinship from the human perspective, but the whales’ side of the story is more elusive.

In this thesis, I will first investigate the human-whale kinship as a symbiotic relationship in which whales and humans mutually identify with one another in Chapter 1. Whales’ status as mammals that carry their fetuses in their wombs and then lactate in order to nourish them allies them with humans, as we will see in *Moby-Dick*. Dolphins specifically seem humanlike in that they have non-reproductive sex and love music, which we will see in the myth of Arion on the dolphin’s back.
In Chapter 2, I will look at the ways in which whales are gendered and sexualized. I will also look at ways that cetacean literature allows for queer readings and, therefore, associates whales with othered and marginalized people. I will look at humans’ identification with whale sexuality and gender performance as well as whales’ ability to promote subversive sexuality and gender performance in humans. We will see that dolphins inhabit a particularly interesting liminal space between universal likability and queerness, which is traditionally stigmatized in human society.

In Chapter 3, I will explore royal whales, tyrannical whales, and godly whales. Because whales were misconstrued to be capable of eating humans, they represent greed and predation, including in a political context. However, whales are awe-inducing as well, and they make several appearances in myths and the Bible that suggest that they have the ability to communicate with other deities, so that they are revered as well as feared by humans, contributing to the notion of whales as sublime.

Finally, in Chapter 4, I will tackle the trope of the sea monster-whale. Just as whales are conflated with fish, they are seen as interchangeable with sea monsters, so that there is cetaceous potential in gripping tales of ferocious sea monsters such as John Lyly’s Gallathea. Monstrous whales allow us another window into hierarchies on land, including racism. Melville’s portrayal of the “White Whale” as powerful and superior and the Black shipmates as sub-human and caricaturized characters in Moby-Dick indicated the white supremacist system in which Melville was writing. Similarly, many critics read Caliban in Shakespeare’s The Tempest as a colonial subject, as racialized, and as exoticized, and I weave in to this interpretation Caliban’s particular, cetaceous monstrosity.
This thesis will include a broad range of literary sources, from Ancient Greco-Roman myth to Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and *Pericles* to Melville’s *Moby-Dick* and Sena Jeter Naslund’s feminist re-envisioning of it, *Ahab’s Wife* (1999). I do not intend to draw a cause-and-effect, linear relationship between these different texts but rather to highlight the consistencies as well as innovations over the course of time in cetaceous literature. For instance, whales have always been simultaneously royal and beastly, but (with the exception of dolphins) not until the recent counter-reaction to whaling’s depletion of whale populations have humans conceived of whales as friendly giants who have been victimized, who are friendly and even adorable.

Most people assume that my thesis’ centerpiece is *Moby-Dick* when I tell them that it is about whales in literature. However, *Moby-Dick* is only part of a long tradition going back to Greco-Roman mythology of attempting to understand and categorize whales and yet always knowing that they are paradoxical and complicated. Whereas *Moby-Dick* shows quite deliberately that the whale is ultimately invincible and uncategorizable, and this is seemingly Melville’s intent, earlier literature simply is this contradicting, uncontainable truth: whales are not shown to be unassimilable in any direct way, but the various conflicting portrayals of them as friendly domesticated dolphins, as well as human-eating, virgin-devouring monsters embody whales’ multiplicity.

Melville opens *Moby-Dick* with “Extracts (Supplied by a Sub-Sub-Librarian),” collecting dozens of excerpts from literary works as well as nonfiction accounts of whales and whaling that precede Melville’s time. In my thesis, I, too, aim to collect literary cetaceous excerpts with the intent of showing the simultaneously untamable and very human-oriented nature of whales in literature. Whales confound and delight,
terrorize and rescue, devour and regurgitate, and generally overwhelm us with their
grandeur. Perhaps the only word to describe them in their totality is *sublime*.

Whales are the largest animal ever to have lived on earth – Blue whales, specifically – and yet we harvest their blubber and teeth and baleen and bones to use for quotidian products such as parasols and petticoats. It is no wonder that our relationship to whales, and theirs to us, has been a tumultuous one, but it is also no wonder that they are ever-fascinating, and so we write books of all kinds in order to try to articulate our great passion for these creatures that strike us as alternately godly and monstrous.

The task of capturing whales in any way, literally or through art, is daunting. The only way to capture the whale in all its majesty so that we can observe it in its entirety while it is alive in the sea, is to take panoramic photographs, which provide a wide perspective that the naked human eye can rarely see (see Figure 1). Even on a whale watch, spectators usually only see a whale’s back and dorsal fin penetrate the surface of the water (see Figure 2). If the whale’s whole body breaches, it affords us only a fleeting glance. At the same time, this does not minimize the wonder of experiencing a whale watch. Having worked on a whale watch for a summer, I can attest to the reactions of wonder and awe that most people have the first time they see a whale in the flesh. I find that even just a whale’s cartilaginous dorsal fin is fascinating to watch, since it wiggles as though it has a mind of its own.

*Figure 1. A rare photograph of a Sperm whale in its entirety by Bryant Austin.*
Technology only gets us so close to understanding whales since we do not yet know the full extent of their linguistic ability, their complicated migration patterns, or the emotions that they are able to feel.\(^\text{10}\)

Therefore, I find that science is not the definitive authority on whales at this time, since there is yet so much to be discovered about whale biology. In terms of alternatives to science, we have the humanities, which of course take a human-centric, but also very humane and complex, approach to understanding whales. In this thesis, I will argue that verbal portraits are a powerful way of attempting to understand the human-whale relationship and of analyzing the unknown that whales represent.

\(^{10}\) James Nestor raises the questions of Sperm whales’ particularly large brains and their ability to feel emotions and use language: “Sperm whales’ brains are the largest ever known, around six times the size of humans’. They have an oversize neocortex and a profusion of highly developed neurons called spindle cells that, in humans, govern things like emotional suffering, compassion and speech” (“A Conversation with Whales”).
Chapter 1: Benevolent Whales

Whales represent that which is large beyond human imagining. Blue whales, which one may encounter in the Pacific Ocean, are the largest animals ever to have lived on Earth. Between birth and weaning, North Atlantic Right whale infants’ mass increases 12 times, or by about 32 kg a day (Fortune 1346). It makes sense, therefore, that humans might see whales as godly, sublime, and even monstrous. Whales inhabit depths that humans cannot penetrate without the help of technology: as Mentz observes, “Swimming makes the whale godlike, but human swimmers encounter their limits more harshly” (At the Bottom 37).

Today whales are usually considered to be more like friendly giants than supernatural or monstrous, however. Humans today empathize with whales, and even project their own sentiments onto whales. Children growing up now are more likely to want to be marine biologists or cetologists, whereas young New England boys in the nineteenth century aspired to grow up and go to sea in order to hunt whales.

Well-meaning Whales

To get a good picture of one aspect of the millennial generation’s imaginative affinity with whales, one can examine part of a poem written by Janani Balusabramanian. Balusabramanian is one half of the team of genderqueer activists of color, DarkMatter, and wrote the poem “Whalesong” in 2016:

A few weeks ago I watched a sad sad movie about whales.
I spread water around my face.

---

11 As the documentary The Blue Planet explains, “the Blue Whale, 30 meters long and weighing over 200 tons, is far bigger than even the biggest dinosaur…some of its blood vessels are so wide that you could swim down them. Its tail alone is the width of a small aircraft’s wings” (“Ocean World”).
In the script the mother whale writes a song when the amusement park rips her daughter away: she makes sounds that have never been heard, a totally new form of grief. After awhile the news all starts to look the same: another whalesong, another cage, another shelter, another bomb.

....

Maybe whalesong is another word for you or I. We look out for the clearest day to sing, the longest ocean to belly-slap, the shiniest aquarium to scream, the most expensive theater to break. We are no angels, even the dolphins, but there are only so many times we can sing the word loss and hear the echo tell us it’s a lie. Pretty soon, we will run out of versions and art forms of grief. Just like we ran out of oil, and phosphorous, and fish. I wish we were not living in the age of debris and that men were allowed to sing. I wish there were still beauty and puppets in the belly of a whale instead of trash. Mostly, I wish this whole damn spectacle would end.

The whale in this poem serve as a living and breathing pathetic fallacy: through her grief for the offspring she loses to an “amusement park” for humans, she embodies the poet’s grief for other ways in which “we...[are] living in the age of debris.” The whale’s voiced grief, in the form of song, “is another word for you and I;” therefore, the whale’s voice expresses the experiences of “you,” the human reading this poem, as well as that of the poet. The whale’s care for her baby allies her to humans, and she has full humanity, just like humans do: “we are no angels, even dolphins.” We will continue to see that dolphins are indeed considered to be the most “angel[ic]” kinds of cetaceans, both because of their particular, divine connotations and also because of their altruism toward other species, including humans.

Balusabamanian anthropomorphizes the whale in this poem, assuming that she experiences grief in a similar way to how humans do, and that humans’ desires are easily translatable from those of whales. The poet substitutes humans for whales: “We look out
for the clearest day to sing, / the longest ocean to belly-slap, / the shiniest aquarium to scream, / the most expensive theater to break.” Throughout the poem is the poet’s desire for the world to be less broken, and its brokenness is exemplified by humans’ whaling past: “we ran out of oil, and phosphorous, and fish” as a result of hunting so many whales. Cetaceans are a beautiful part of nature that has been victimized in this schema, rather than the wrathful nemesis or the resource to be hunted. They are humanlike in their grief and in their desire for beauty and joy and even revolution: they want “to break” the system just as the poet does. Their “whalesong” is similar to humans’ songs of mourning and revolution and change.

For further examples of the human-whale affinity perceived by humans today, one need only look at some of the imagery of whales in products such as greeting cards (Figure 3), stuffed animals (Figure 4), Christmas tree ornaments (Figure 5), children’s and young adult books (Figure 6), and leisure books for adults (Figure 7). Today, humans usually relate to whales for the purposes of appropriating them as metaphor and imagery as well as learning about them, at least in the mainland US context,12 whether that be by reading, going on a whale watch, or watching a documentary such as Blackfish, an exposé on the maltreatment of Orca whales in SeaWorld.

Figure 3. Here are two greeting cards featuring whales.

12 In Alaska, indigenous people still hunt whales in a sustainable, small-scale way.
Figure 4. Here is a Humpback whale stuffed animal.

Figure 5. Here is a Christmas tree ornament of a Sperm whale.

Figure 6. Here are two children’s books about whales, first a young adult book and then a picture book.
We have returned to a distant but reverent relationship to whales, in which their byproducts do not any longer make up household products such as corset stays and parasols (Figure 8), and nor do we see them as menacing. Rather, whales are common household products in a more abstract way: we have representations of whales in our homes and on our clothing and postcards in cartoon, friendly form. Whales are still a potent symbol, and with the growing trend of tattoos whose meaning is symbolic, whales and whale tails are a common choice of tattoo (Figure 9).

Because of their association with Cape Cod, including the wealthy tourist destinations of Martha’s
Vineyard and Nantucket, whales are also a status symbol. The Cape Cod designer brand Vineyard Vines’ logo is of a whale, and these tiny whales on polo shirts and tote bags signify a certain socioeconomic status and association with elite Cape Cod destination spots (see Figure 10). This appropriation of whale imagery, therefore, has to do with the idea of the wealth that the whaling industry has promoted in the past and the economy that continues to profit from whale watching and other tourism on Cape Cod. This whale image is cute, idealized, and commercialized. Ironically, this is not the first time in history that whale belongings have indicated elite status in society, although previously these belongings would have been more directly from whales, such as whale meat that royalty ate in medieval England (Roman 50; “Medieval Food”).

![Figure 10. Here is a tote bag with the Vineyard Vines whale logo.](image)

Most readers thinking about whales in literature think first of *Moby-Dick* and the Bible’s Jonah and the whale story, but next to come to mind are children’s stories such as the picture book *Sage’s Ark* by Felicity Marshall and *Whale Rider* by Witi Ihaemara, a young adult book turned into a movie. While *Moby-Dick* paints a picture of a very antagonistic relationship between Ahab and his arch-nemesis, the huge, vengeful White Whale, these children’s stories show children a much more symbiotic relationship between humans and whales, including children riding on the backs of
whales. There is also a precedent for portraying children as having a particular friendship with cetaceans.

In Ancient Rome, the natural philosopher Pliny the Elder told the story of “a child at the city of Iasus, for whom a dolphin was long observed to have conceived a most ardent affection” (“Man’s Best Friend”). In this story, the dolphin and child play together as though the dolphin is his domesticated dog:

At whatever hour of the day he might happen to be called by the boy, and although hidden and out of sight at the bottom of the water, he would instantly fly to the surface, and after feeding from the boy’s hand, would present his back for him to mount, taking care to conceal the spiny projection of his fins in their sheath, as it were. And so, sportively taking him up on his back, he would carry him over a wide expanse of sea to the school at Puteoli and in a similar manner bring him back again. This happened for several years, until at last the boy happened to fall ill of some malady and died. The dolphin, however, still came to the spot as usual, with a sorrowful air and manifesting every sign of deep affliction, until at last, a thing of which no one felt the slightest doubt, he died purely of sorrow and regret.

(Pliny, “Man’s Best Friend”)

Firstly, as we will see again in *Moby-Dick* in my third chapter, Pliny humanizes this cetacean by gendering him as “he.” The dolphin is a veritable part of the boy’s support system, as he carries him “to the school at Puteoli and… bring[s] him back again.” The dolphin and boy develop such an intimacy and friendship that after the boy’s death, the dolphin is heartbroken and “die[s] purely of sorrow and regret,” experiencing grief much like that of the mother whale in Balusabramanian’s poem. The boy rides the dolphin like Arion, “after feeding” the dolphin, like he would feed his own pet dog. The dolphin is sure to make his back smooth and comfortable for the boy, “taking care to conceal the spiny projection of his fins.” The boy trains the dolphin as his own pet, but first and foremost they are each other’s companions “for several years,” and without this symbiotic relationship in its life, the dolphin cannot bear to continue living.
Not only do we see whales as friends to humans, but we also have become more conscientious of our own harmful relationship to whales, and the ways in which they are vulnerable to human pursuits and technology. As activists and environmentalists and scientists, we have taken it upon ourselves to try to right our past wrongs and “save the whales.” Attempts to curb and end whaling in Iceland and Japan, as well as legislature to regulate the speed at which whale-watching ships and cargo ships approach whales in their habitats, are among the efforts to remedy endangered whale populations, such as that of the North Atlantic Right whale, of which there are only about 300 alive today (“North Atlantic right whale”).

The New Bedford Whaling Museum educates its visitors about the continuing by-killings of whales that happen today when ships’ propellers hit and cut them. One particularly compelling story of the specimens at the Whaling Museum is that of a female North Atlantic Right whale whose belly was cut by a ship propeller but who survived this gash initially; however, when she became pregnant, the wound reopened, and she and her fetus both died. This pregnant whale’s skeleton, including her fetus’ skeleton, is featured at the Whaling Museum today as a reminder of these whales’ great vulnerability and of the harm that we can inadvertently do to them (see Figure 11).

![Figure 11. A wound from a ship’s propeller killed a pregnant North Atlantic Right whale and her fetus. The skeleton of the fetus is circled.](image-url)
Through its repetition, “save the whales” (see Figure 12) has become devoid of authentic connection to cetology or environmentalism, but this mantra does speak to the prevalence of whales in daily conversation as a symbol of friendly giganticness and the noble natural world. Whales are beyond human understanding by virtue of their size, but they also represent, and always have represented, benevolence. These examples of commercialized and literary whale representations illustrate the ways in which whales’ benevolence can morph into benignity, but other representations of whales promote their godly beneficence.

![Hug A Whale](image)

*Figure 12. Similar to “save the whales” in sentiment, this “hug a whale” bumper sticker is a play on the notion of tree-huggers.*

In early American and English literature, as well as in Greco-Roman mythology, positive depictions of the human-whale relationship include seeing whales, particularly dolphins, as life-savers, and seeing whales more generally as monarchs of the sea, friends to humans, and far superior to humans. Cetaceans break into two categories: mysticetes, or baleen whales, and odontocetes, or toothed whales. Dolphins and Sperm whales, such as Moby-Dick, are examples of toothed whales. Although they are a kind of whale, dolphins have a distinct folklore surrounding them because of what humans interpret as their particularly charismatic, friendly nature, which we will see equally in anecdotes from Ancient Rome as in anecdotes from today.
The Trope of Dolphins and Salvation

Dolphins are the main benevolent cetaceans, and we see this in Shakespeare as well as Ovid. Dolphins are kindred spirits to humans because of their human-like love of music, their altruism, their playfulness, and their practice of having sex for pleasure, not only for reproduction. In Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, when Viola and the Captain have been washed ashore after a shipwreck, Viola asks after her brother Sebastian, and the Captain responds that he saw Sebastian mount a mast from the ship, from which “like Arion on the dolphin’s back,” he floated above the surface of the water (2016 I.ii.62).

Here, the Captain refers to the well-known ancient Roman story of Arion, the lyre player, who was saved from pirates by a dolphin, who loved his music. The dolphin carried Arion on its back, and then brought him safely to shore. In this context, the archetype of the dolphin and salvation serves to reassure and comfort Viola, who worries that her brother may have died among the turbulent waves. The comparison of the driftwood to “the dolphin’s back” is an optimistic, hopeful one.

In his telling of the story of Arion on the dolphin’s back, Ovid emphasizes the key role that Arion’s lyre music plays in this story:

The Dolphin you saw ’til now in relief against the sky
will escape from view on the following night.
He once was a lucky go-between for a secret love affair,
or else he rescued the maestro of the Lesbian lyre.
What sea doesn’t know Arion, and what land hasn’t heard of him?
....
Arion had made his name throughout the cities of Sicily,
and the music of his lyre took Italy by storm.
Returning home from there Arion boarded a ship,
bringing along the receipts of his tour.
Unlucky man, did winds and waves cause you alarm?
The deep proved a safer haven than your ship.
For the pilot drew his sword and took a stand;
the conspiring crew were armed and ready.
....
Shaking with fear, Arion said, ‘I do not beg for my life, just let me take up my lyre and play a bit.’ They granted this stay with sardonic smiles....
In full regalia he dove at once into the water and splashed the stern when he broke the surface. Then—would you believe it?—a dolphin with arching back surfaced beneath this unusual load.
Sitting and holding his lyre, Arion pays his passage
with a song and calms the waters of the deep.
The gods know devotion when they see it, so Jupiter took the dolphin into the sky and awarded nine stars to him.

(Fasti 79-118)

Music is the initial point of connection between Arion and this human-like dolphin.

Arion’s lyre music is renowned among humans on land, and it is very alluring to the dolphin, too. Luckily for Arion, the “safer haven” alternative to the pirate ship is this smart and kind dolphin’s rescue and reciprocally, Arion’s music “calms the waters deep.” Arion seems to know already that his lyre music will save him because it is just after the pirates unsheathe their weapons that he asks that they allow him to play his music. In an act of trust, he “dove at once into the water,” as if anticipating that the dolphin would come and take him safely to shore. When the dolphin does “surface beneath” him, Arion’s song is his “pay[ment]” for the dolphin’s transportation. This human-cetacean connection, therefore, benefits both parties involved: Arion benefits from the dolphin carrying him on his back, and the dolphin and its marine environment benefit from the “calm[ing]” effects of Arion’s renowned lyre-playing.

This story emphasizes the dolphin’s “arching back.” In fact, although the Webster’s Dictionary definition has since changed, Melville cites Webster’s as defining whale as “‘named from roundness or rolling; for in Dan. HVALT is arched or vaulted’” (qtd. in Moby-Dick 2016 “Etymology”). Curvedness and “roundness” remind us of the
human female form, especially the pregnant body, so it follows that this dolphin’s curved body is life-saving and, by extension, life-giving. It is important to note that since whales are mammals, they experience pregnancy like humans do as well as lactate in order to nourish their offspring, further giving them connotations of nurturing life. We will observe pregnant and lactating whales later in this chapter in *Moby-Dick*.

Not only do dolphins in Roman mythology save and transport various humans, but also the gods reward them for doing so. As Ovid tells it, the dolphin’s religious “devotion” causes “Jupiter [to take] the dolphin into the sky and award[,] nine stars to him.” In his study of literary and visual portrayals of mythological dolphins, Charles Avery notes, “constellation still bear their names (Orion and Delphinus) today” (28). Therefore, dolphins are kindly, but they are also godly, or at least affiliated with the divine. Arion’s trust that the dolphin will come at the sound of his lyre music and pluck him up from the waves when he jumps off of the ship proves his faith in the dolphin’s godlike and merciful salvation.

Mid-seventeenth century poet Katherine Philips wrote in support of the restoration of the monarchy on the event of Oliver Cromwell leaving and King Charles II returning to the throne with a poem whose namesake is Arion and the dolphin, “Arion on a Dolphin, To His Majesty at His Passage into England:”

Whom does this stately Navy bring?
O! ’tis *Great Britain* ’s Glorious King.
Convey him then, ye Winds and Seas,
Swift as Desire and calm as Peace.

....
In him two Miracles we view,
His Vertue and his Safety too:
For when compell'd by Traitors crimes
To breathe and bow in forreign Climes,
Expos'd to all the rigid fate
That does on wither'd Greatness wait,  
Plots against Life and Conscience laid,  
By Foes pursu'd, by Friends betray'd;  
Then Heaven, his secret potent friend,  
Did him from Drugs and Stabs defend;  
And, what's more yet, kept him upright  
'Midst flattering Hope and bloody Fight.

*Cromwell* his whole Right never gain'd,  
*Defender of the Faith* remain'd,

....

And like a God doth rescue those  
Who did themselves and him oppose.  
Go, wondrous Prince, adorn that Throne  
Which Birth and Merit make your own;  
And in your Mercy brighter shine  
Than in the Glories of your Line:  
Find Love at home, and abroad Fear,  
And Veneration every where.

Whales often mirror geopolitical hierarchies in literature of this period – I will discuss political metaphor in Chapters 3 and 4 – and in this case, Philips allies the dolphin with the “stately Navy” returning Charles II to his country and his position of royalty. The “Winds and Seas” have a royal role, just as the Navy does, in “[c]onvey[ing]” this monarch back to his throne. Charles’ story parallels that of Arion because, as Arion was threatened by pirates, so Charles was “compell'd by Traitors crimes / To breathe and bow in forreign Climes, / Expos'd to all the rigid fate/ That does on wither'd Greatness wait.” Philips writes of these people who expelled Charles from England as “Traitors” because they opposed the idea of England being governed by a monarchy, while Philips supports it. Like a dolphin, the “stately Navy” saves Charles from “forreign Climes” and returns him ashore, to his native England.

Furthermore, this salvation is divine, as Arion’s was: “Then Heaven, his secret potent friend, / Did him from Drugs and Stabs defend… *Cromwell* his whole Right never gain'd, / *Defender of the Faith* remain'd.” Cromwell, who ruled in place of the monarchy
while Charles was expelled from the country, is not divinely ordained; meanwhile
“Heaven” is Charles’ “secret potent friend” and defend[s]” Charles, who is the “Defender of the Faith.” Charles himself is also similar to the dolphin. His strengths include “[h]is Vertue and his Safety,” and he saves his people: “And like a God doth rescue those
/ Who did themselves and him oppose.” With his godlike mercy, Charles rights
Cromwell’s wrongs, “rescu[ing]” the people who do not know better than to “oppose” the monarchy. The potential for characterization of King Charles II both as Arion and also as a dolphin is a potent metaphor for his supernatural powers and nature’s special alliance with English royalty.

It follows that England’s national character is strongly tied with the sea as well, as though the island of England itself is Arion, and the sea is the dolphin protector of England. In Shakespeare’s Richard II, John of Gaunt touts England as having a special relationship with the sea:

This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle,
... This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall,
Or as a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands,
....
England, bound in with the triumphant sea
Whose rocky shore beats back the envious siege
Of watery Neptune

(II.i)
The famously wrathful god Neptune, who makes appearances in Lyly’s Gallathea as well, does not enact his wrath on England, because the waves “beat[] [him] back.”

England is exceptional in many ways, including being notably royal. The island itself is a “royal throne of kings,” “scepter’d,” a “precious stone,” and palace-like, with the sea as
its “moat.” Therefore, not only does England as a nation have a particularly intimate alliance with the sea, both physically and metaphorically, but also royalty has strong associations with the sea, as though the sea is on the monarchy’s side. England is like Arion because the sea, like the dolphin, protects this island nation from its chaos.

Indeed, the metaphor of the dolphin who rescues Arion continues to have wide-reaching influence in England today. There is a theater company in London whose namesake is this myth, and whose mission is to rescue plays that have been forgotten or undervalued. On its website, the Dolphin’s Back Theater Company’s mission reads, “We are a new professional theatre company dedicated to rescuing forgotten plays and playwrights, bringing them back into contemporary performance” (“Arion and The Dolphin’s Back”).

Figure 13. “The Triumph of Galatea” by Raphael, 1511.

There are several myths of a dolphin carrying a person on its back, and another one relates to Galatea, the namesake of John Lyly’s play Gallathea, which we will explore in Chapters 2 and 4 and which includes a cetaceous sea monster. Galatea and dolphins share a kinship because dolphins transport her, according to some interpretations of the myth. According to Ovid’s Metamorphosis, Galatea is in love with Acis, but Polymephus is in love with her. Throughout the myth, the sea is a refuge for Galatea, and she has Nereids, or mermaids, who attend her (Book XIII). These Nereids have been interpreted to be more or less
dolphin-like and human-like in visual art, since they are “dolphin-born” (Avery 81). Painted in 1511, Raphael’s “The Triumph of Galatea” shows the languid but active Galatea holding onto reins that attach her to the nereids as they pull along her cockle shell carriage (Avery 82; Figure 13).

In surveying the canon of whale-inspired Western art, dolphins seem to be much more prevalent than other whales, perhaps because they are more recognizable than other whale species. Although dolphins are a sub-order of whales, we often consider whales and dolphins to be separate kinds of animals. Furthermore, although we can differentiate dolphins from other large swimming creatures, in history, we have often conflated whales with fishes and with sea monsters. Even the story of Jonah and the whale has only been interpreted as cetaceous, since Jonah is actually described in the Bible as being swallowed by a large fish, which I will explore in Chapter 3. Large fish stories are a part of cetaceous literature, because there was no distinction drawn in defining these different animals, even up through the period in which Melville wrote, when he considered whales a type of fish.

Additionally, there seems to be more scholarship and many more publications on dolphin symbolism and imagery than on other whales’ metaphorical presence. Dolphins have been very popular in art and literature of their own accord, and this is likely also due to their reputation as being particularly friendly and devoted to humans.

Science today supports the idea that dolphins are human-like in personality: they have been known to display characteristics of altruism – including risking their own safety to save humans from the threat of a Great White shark in New Zealand in the early
2000s (Avery 18). In addition to having similar personal traits, humans and whales have similar sexual behaviors.

**Non-reproductive Sex and Whales**

Like that of humans, dolphins’ sexual behavior includes sex for pleasure, not just for reproduction, such as same-sex sexual activity and masturbation. This non-reproductive sexual behavior, considered along with dolphins’ affinity for music produced by humans, contributes to our picture of dolphins as more tending toward leisurely and playful activities, and therefore, aligning more with humans’ nature.

In his investigation of homosexuality in animals, biologist Bruce Bagemihl writes that the Amazon River dolphin, the Bottlenose dolphin, and the Spinner dolphin all participate in same-sex sexual activity. Amazon River dolphins only display homosexual sex among males, and the latter two species among both males and females (Bagemihl 339, 342). Additionally, same-sex sexually activity between both males and females occurs in Orca whales, Gray whales, Bowhead whales, and Right whales (Bagemihl 349, 353, 356). Bagemihl describes that all of the aforementioned species of dolphins are known to masturbate as well (341, 346). Especially because homosexuality is not always considered to be a natural phenomenon in human society, dolphins interestingly have this potentially for being “other” or non-normative just as humans do. We will see homosexual love prompted by cetaceous monsters in *Gallathea*, and we will also investigate the association between monstrosity and homosexuality that I touched on in the Introduction again in Chapter 4. Dolphins ally this marginalized sexual identity with their likable, altruistic traits, so that they are both potentially monstrous and also benevolent and divine. It is perhaps because dolphins displace this non-normative sexual
behavior into the sea that they are able to connect what would otherwise be taboo with both likability and godliness.

**Identifying with Melville’s Whales**

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the pregnant North Atlantic right whale and her fetus who were killed as a result of wounds on her stomach inadvertently inflicted by humans. In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael and his shipmates have the opportunity to kill nursing and pregnant whales, as they swim right next to the boat, but these whales’ maternalism prevents the men from hurting them, and furthermore, the female whales seem to look up at the whalers in a moment of recognition. The humans and whales literally see eye to eye here:

> Queequeg patted their foreheads; Starbuck scratched their backs with his lance; but fearful of the consequences, for the time refrained from darting it. But far beneath this wondrous world upon the surface, another and still stranger world met our eyes as we gazed over the side. For, suspended in those watery vaults, floated the forms of the nursing mothers of the whales, and those that by their enormous girth seemed shortly to become mothers…. Floating on their sides, the mothers also seemed quietly eying us (Melville 2003 450-4511)

The whalers are uncharacteristically pacifist in this interaction. They only give pleasure to the whales – “patt[ing] their foreheads” and “scratch[ing] their backs” – and restrain themselves from taking advantage of the fact that these vulnerable beings are so close to the boat that the men can reach out and touch their foreheads and backs. These female whales’ status as “nursing mothers” and as pregnant saves them in this instance. Pregnancy gives the pregnant whales “enormous girth,” adding to their overbearing presence. Furthermore, Queequeg and Starbuck are in awe of these whales’ trusting nature: they do not shy away from the whalers’ touch, they swim alongside their young, and they “seemed quietly eying us.” This anthropomorphizing of the mothers suggests
that the humans are a bit suspicious of these whales’ intents, as Starbuck uses his “lance”
to scratch the whales and Queequeg tentatively “pat[s] their foreheads,” while the mother
whales seem to be simply curious about the humans and feel some kind of identification
with them, as they are “eying” them. As I will elaborate on in Chapter 2, the whalers’
gendered view of these whales first and foremost as feminine – nursing, pregnant, and
nurturing – makes them better able to see them as human.

Whales’ beastliness in *Moby-Dick* can also make them seem more human. We see
Moby-Dick as all the more monstrous because of how human he is in his pursuit of
revenge against Ahab. Ahab has met his match in terms of vengefulness, but Moby-Dick
is his superior in terms of sheer power. Moby-Dick is described similarly to Ahab
himself. Moby-Dick is ferocious: “Retribution, swift vengeance, eternal malice were in
his whole aspect, and spite of all that mortal man could do, the solid white buttress of his
forehead smote the ship’s starboard bow, till men and timbers reeled” (Melville 2003
652). Ahab is similarly ferocious: “If such a furious trope may stand, his special lunacy
stormed his general sanity... Ahab, to that one end, did now possess a thousand fold more
potency than ever he had sanely brought to bear upon any one reasonable object”
(Melville 2016 “Chapter 41”). Ahab himself has become a monster in his ruthless pursuit
of an impossible goal, and Moby-Dick mirrors this wrath. Moby-Dick enacts his “malice”
and also “vengeance” against the failed human efforts to kill him, which have only
resulted in his continually wearing a lance lodged in his skin as well as other manmade
hindrances to his mobility. Ultimately, he is a monstrous victor against human efforts to
dominate him. One by one, he eliminates every member of Ahab’s crew, except for
Ishmael. This destructive power is in line with that of other whales although not that of dolphins.

In Chapter 4, we will see that “to be a whale” is to be a predator, in the context of Shakespeare’s *All’s Well that Ends Well* (Triensens 213), whereas to be “like a dolphin,” as we saw in *Twelfth Night*, is to be a savior. Even though dolphins are a type of whale, their reputation is quite the opposite of that of dangerous whales. Dolphins are the “good guy” in the schema of whales in literature, as they are safer, kinder, and more highly regarded by humans. In fact, dating back to 1349 and through the mid-nineteenth century, the French word for dolphin, *Dauphin*, was the title of the French prince and heir to the throne (“dauphin, n.”). Whereas naming royalty after another kind of whale might bode ill for that monarch and suggest that he would be manipulative and obsessed with his own power, dolphins carry the prestige and dignity necessary for a princely title. Dolphins are rather gentle and not dominant enough to be king-like, but it is fitting that princes, or kings-to-be, are allied with whales. Dolphins in literature most often serve as saviors or escorts, whether literally carrying Arion or metaphorically supporting King Charles II in his return from overseas.

Other whales species did not take on a “friendly giant” connotation until recently, in the wake of the depletion of whale populations worldwide as a result of hunting by humans. Now, they are considered more like a teddy bear of the sea than a ferocious beast, perhaps because humans’ conquest has disproven the idea that whales are a greater threat to humans than humans are to them. Today, rather than profiting off of whale oil and bones, humans profit off of various products with whale imagery, which depict whales as large and benevolent, more like the dolphins of the literature of the past than
like other whales. Unlike commercialized depictions of whales, however, whales’ presence in literature has never been one-dimensional.

Even when considered to be beastly, whales are humanized by being gendered, and they are usually gendered as male, with a few notable exceptions, such as the aforementioned mother whales in *Moby-Dick*. In addition to being gendered themselves, whales provide opportunities for humans to remove themselves from social norms on land regarding sexuality and gender presentation, liberating them to explore their own queerness. Just as dolphins have homosexual sex in the context of their oceanic environment, so humans experience homosexual attraction in the context of whaling ships out at sea. Additionally, we will see in John Lyly’s *Gallathea* that homosexual attraction is a direct consequence of avoiding a cetaceous monster out at sea and staying on land in disguise.
Chapter 2: Whales, Gender, and Sexuality

In this chapter, I intend to explore humans’ identification with whales through the lens of gender and sexuality. As we have seen, dolphins’ sexual behavior includes sex for pleasure, not just for reproduction, such as same-sex sexual activity and masturbation. Similarly, we will see a homosexual, or at least homoromantic, bond between the characters of Queequeg and Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*, who are brought together by the circumstance of hunting whales. Gallathea and Phyllida of John Lyly’s *Gallathea*, too, share a homosexual love that is driven by a cetaceous creature, but in their case they are fleeing the sea monster rather than pursuing it. In these ways, whales promote subversive sexuality and gender roles. Whales themselves are usually gendered male, but this is with some notable exceptions, such as the maternal females that we have seen, which ally whales to humans as our similarly mammalian relatives.

Most of the works that I explore in this thesis are written by men, and men have predominantly been involved in whaling as well as scientific pursuits of whales for much of history. However, there have been feminist re-interpretations and re-tellings of *Moby-Dick*, including a play that casts Ishmael as a woman named Izzie (“Project Ahab”). I saw this play in August of 2015 in Berkeley, California, and it set *Moby-Dick* in 1973, as part of the movement to save the whales, so that the Pequod ship’s mission was not to hunt whales but to stop other ships from hunting them. This was a refreshing new

---

perspective on Melville’s story because he includes so few female characters in his narrative, other than the whales themselves.

_Ahab’s Wife_ by Sena Jeter Naslund (1999) is a novel that tells _Moby-Dick_ from Captain Ahab’s wife’s perspective, as she waits in New Bedford for Ahab to return home. Before meeting Ahab, however, Una cross-dresses in order to spend time on a whaling ship herself. This is another, more contemporary example of the ways in which whales in literature allow for gender performance outside of societal conventions and norms. The wives of the whalers are significant in _Moby-Dick_ itself as well, because of their liminal positions, and the way they make the whalers yearn to return to domesticity, but Naslund’s story fleshes out one of these women’s narratives and her own complex relationship to whales and whaling.

Because of their position far away from land and deep in the sea, whales enable people to question the society they inhabit on land; whales do so both by removing humans from their terrestrial environments, bringing them closer to whale life, and also by modeling ways in which they can rethink gender, including homosexual behaviors. The whaling ship is a liminal space that traverses between land and sea and has no fixed location. The ship allows for same-sex bonding among males and frees them from constraints that the land presents to them. The experience of whaling is a strange and unusual one that brings humans closer to these otherworldly creatures and also bonds them to each other.

In the process of understanding whales, authors project human desires and social constructs such as gender roles onto them. We will see how whales become an interpretive lens in fact to understand the desires of the humans interacting with them,
since humans’ social constructs of identity do not necessarily actually apply to these creatures who occupy such a different environment from that of humans. Whale metaphors tell us more about the humans representing these whales, and represented by these whales, than about the actual behaviors and personalities of whales themselves.

**Whales, Humans, and Gender**

Melville personifies whales, including gendering them as male, allowing us both to see them as humanlike rather than as monstrous or godly and also to identify with the particular traits that Melville projects onto them. In a chapter entitled “Cetology,” Melville outlines his classification of the different species of whales, and he writes of the Sperm whale, “He is, without a doubt, the largest inhabitant of the globe; the most formidable of all whales to encounter; the most majestic in aspect; and lastly, by far the most valuable in commerce…All his peculiarities will, in many other places, be enlarged upon” (*Moby-Dick* 2003: 173). In fact, it is not the Sperm whale but the Blue whale that is “the largest inhabitant of the globe,” but this characterization conveys the author’s particular reverence and respect for this species above all other species of cetaceans. Melville treats the Sperm whale species as its own character within the context of the narrative, characterizing Sperm whales as “formidable” and “majestic,” with many “peculiarities” to “be enlarged upon” as the novel progresses. In other words, Sperm whales will experience character development in their own right. The author does not refer to this whale as “it” but as “he,” both humanizing and making masculine the Sperm whale.

The question of gender will arise consistently throughout this thesis, in particular because whales and whaling often allow opportunities for humans to explore and broaden
their own gendered and sexual identities. Masculinity, and men’s nature, is an important part of *Moby-Dick*, but femininity is seen in relief as well. In Melville’s catalogue of cetaceous references throughout literature up until his time, entitled “Extracts (Supplied by a Sub-Sub-Librarian)” he cites a passage from Alexander Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock* that allies fierce femininity with luxury goods made of whale byproducts: “‘To fifty chosen sylphs of special note, / We trust the important charge, the petticoat. / Oft have we known that seven-fold fence to fail, / Tho’ stiff with hoops and armed with ribs of whale’” (qtd. in Melville 2003 16). The rigid and insular “seven-fold fence” refers to the “petticoat,” which was made not with “whale ribs” exactly, but rather with the more flexible baleen of baleen whales such as Humpback and Right whales. The idea that this structural support for the lower half of women’s figures, to maintain their womanly shape, came from whales gives the petticoats and their wearers a military connotation: they are “stiff” in their posture, like a dignified soldier is, and also “armed” with “ribs of whale,” like a soldier armed with his or her weapons. This is an interesting departure from the more traditional connotations that female dress takes on of grace, style, and elegance. Whales allow for women to instead be strong and severe in their bearing. Here, “the petticoat” is not an aesthetically pleasing accessory, but rather an “important charge.” Because petticoats have “[o]ft [been] known…to fail,” it is the duty of “chosen sylphs” to ensure that these petticoats carry out their job in giving women a militant posture. Petticoats’ function also includes preserving the modesty of women, as a “fence” keeping out sexual intruders. Because the poem is about a “rape,” despite the strong protection that whale baleen is supposed to have offered to the petticoat, the narrator expresses that “[o]ft have we known that seven-fold fence to fail,” suggesting that the
“fence” did not succeed in keeping intruders at bay. Therefore, this passage associates whales with sexual assault, an association that I will return to in Chapter 4.

Although it was considered bad luck to bring women aboard a whaling ship, and women are rarely mentioned in *Moby-Dick*, the very lack of references to women allows for us to read between the lines. Before Ishmael sets sail with the crew of the *Pequod*, he is apprehensive about not having met its captain yet and worries that Captain Ahab’s seclusion may indicate that he is mad or tyrannical. One of the captain’s mates, Peleg, defends Captain Ahab against Ishmael’s suspicions in the following manner: “‘Besides, my boy, he has a wife—not three voyages wedded—a sweet, resigned girl. Think of that; by that sweet girl that old man has a child: hold ye then there can be any utter, hopeless harm in Ahab? No, no, my lad; stricken, blasted, if he be, Ahab has his humanities!’” (Melville 2003 113). It is Ahab’s alliance to, and association with, this young wife that gives him “humanities” in his shipmates’ eyes, then. According to Peleg, Ahab’s association with this “sweet, resigned girl” and with her child by him prove that Ahab is a good person and a good captain. Women and children soften a man, especially given this stereotypical characterization of Ahab’s wife as “sweet” and “resigned,” and they give him a reason to want to come home. Whaling is Ahab’s maniacal, single-minded, macho pursuit, but the fact that he has a wife and child is supposed to round out his character, so that he seems loving as well.

As the novel concludes, Starbuck poignantly wishes to return home to his wife and family, rather than continue on Ahab’s mad pursuit of the White Whale, especially because circumstances on board the *Pequod* are dire, after the ship’s masts are singed in a lightning storm. However, the lure of his own wife and child waiting for him are not
enough to tempt Ahab to give up and go home, and he chooses to die in pursuit of the
White Whale. Other than these sparse allusions to the women at home in New Bedford,
the novel does not include women in any direct way.

Based on these few allusions to Ahab’s wife, Naslund has written a well-
researched and innovative novel of comparable size and breadth to Moby-Dick, entitled
Ahab’s Wife, or The Star-gazer. The novel does not seek to mimic Melville’s project in
writing an exposé of whaling and men’s pursuit of such untamable creatures (which
themselves embody the rugged, wild ideal of untamable masculinity), but rather takes the
character of Ahab’s wife as a jumping-off point for a poetic and ambitious narrative all
her own. As mentioned earlier, before meeting Ahab, Una cross-dresses and goes by the
name Billy in order to go whaling on the ship Sussex. This is how she first hears of Ahab,
based on other whalers describing him: “‘They say he’s lived among the cannibals’”
(Naslund 177). Ahab is daring and adventurous in Una’s mind from the first time she
hears of him, therefore, but she has had adventures of her own as well. Una is worldly in
other ways as well: just as Ahab does not try to preserve his life and return home to his
wife at the end of Melville’s novel, Una starts her narrative by explaining in its very first
sentence, “Captain Ahab was neither my first husband nor my last” (Naslund 1).

In a nod to the novel that inspired her novel, Naslund’s narrator Una asks herself
about narratives like Moby-Dick: “And if one wrote for American men a modern epic, a
quest, and it ended in death and destruction, should such a tale not have its redemptive
features? Was it not possible instead for a human life to end in a sense of wholeness, of
harmony with the universe? And how might a woman live such a life?” (417). Naslund’s
novel begins to answer the question of “how…a woman [might] live such a life,” because
Una herself goes whaling, and her life includes more chapters in it than just her marriage to a whaling ship captain. She reads Shakespeare to pass the time, she waxes poetic, she survives the loss of her own child, she befriends and aids an enslaved African American woman in making her escape as part of the greater abolitionist movement in the US at the time, and – hence the novel’s subtitle, *The Star-gazer* – she gazes at the stars and learns about astronomy from the real historical figure and woman astronomer Maria Mitchell.

In *Moby-Dick*, Ahab is not an emotional character besides his passion for whaling, but Naslund offers us another side of Ahab’s life and relationships. In *Ahab’s Wife*, Ahab writes home to Una lovingly, calling her “*Una, dove and eagle*” and, because of her knowledge of astronomy, “*Una, whose second name, this night, is Luna*” (Naslund 452, 456). He also closes his letters with effusive passion: “*Though this page be but brief, it is the flag and ensign of a bounteous love*” (Naslund 454). Naslund’s novel is a realistic reimagining of the other side of the story of Ahab’s marriage. If *Moby-Dick* is an important exploration of men and sea and nature, *Ahab’s Wife* is an important exploration of women and sea and science.

In its exploration of men and masculinity as they relate to the sea, *Moby-Dick* suggests how gender is played out at sea, versus on land. Melvillle genders even the sea itself:

> It was a clear steel-blue day. The firmaments of air and sea were hardly separable in that all-pervading azure; only, the pensive air was transparently pure and soft, with a woman’s look, and the robust and man-like sea heaved with long, strong, lingering swells as Samson’s chest in his sleep.

> Hither, and thither, on high, glided the snow-white wings of small, unspeckled birds; these were the gentle thoughts of the feminine air; but to and fro in the deeps, far down in the bottomless blue, rushed mighty leviathans, sword-fish, and sharks; and these were the strong, troubled, murderous thinkings of the masculine sea.

(Melville 2003 619)
Melville enforces a stereotypical dichotomy here of what is feminine and what is masculine. He prescribes the serene atmosphere as possessing a “woman’s look” and “feminine air.” Just as we saw whales gendered with male pronouns, here whales are associated with the “masculine,” rough waters: “the robust and man-like sea heaved…as Samson’s chest in his sleep,” and “leviathans, sword-fish, and sharks…were the strong, troubled, murderous thinkings of the masculine sea.” Women are the antidote to men’s turbulent, disturbed nature, even if only by their mental presence in the seafaring men’s minds: “snow-white,” “small” birds are “the gentle thoughts of the feminine air.” We see a direct comparison between “feminine” “gentle thoughts” and “masculine” “murderous thinkings.” Whereas the leviathans, or whales, in the manly sea are “mighty,” the birds flitting in the air are “small” and “unspeckled,” or uncomplicated, unburdened by their “gentle thoughts.” Just as Ahab’s association with his wife humanizes him and makes him seem less cruel, the birds balance out the “murderous” aspects of the ruthless sea.

**Whales and Queer Desire**

Whales and their environment do not always reinforce a rigid gender binary, however. Beyond their own homosexual and non-procreative sex, in the literary context, whales often promote same-sex bonds between humans. In *Moby-Dick*, at the beginning of the novel, before Ishmael boards the ship, one of our first pictures of who he is, is in relation to a stranger-turned-bedfellow-turned-shipmate, Queequeg. In a famously homoromantic scene, limited vacancy at an inn in New Bedford forces the two men, who have never met before, to share a bed, and they decide to literally embrace the situation. Ishmael’s passion for Queequeg surprises us, because he is wary of him upon first introduction, just as we saw that he was wary about Ahab before meeting him, but this
wariness may also be in reaction to his own fascination and infatuation with his bedfellow.

Queequeg and Ishmael embody traditionally feminine traits of tenderness and affection toward each other, and their love for each other rather than for people of the opposite sex subverts gender norms as well. In a chapter entitled “Bosom Friend,” which evokes intimacy although not necessarily erotic intimacy, Ishmael joins Queequeg in his worship ritual:

So I kindled the shavings [of Queequeg’s idol]; helped prop up the innocent little idol; offered him burnt biscuit with Queequeg; salaamed before him twice or thrice; kissed his nose; and that done, we undressed and went to bed, at peace with our own consciences and all the world. But we did not go to sleep without some little chat. How it is I know not; but there is no place like a bed for confidential disclosures between friends. Man and wife they say, there open up the very bottom of their souls to each other; and some old couples often lie and chat over old times till nearly morning. Thus, then, in our hearts’ honeymoon, lay I and Queequeg—a cosy, loving pair

(Melville 2003 82)

Even though Ishmael and Queequeg’s nighttime ritual described above is not sexual, it is both physically intimate and affectionate, and Ishmael feels as though they are a married couple lying in bed together, “a cosy, loving pair.” Ishmael unashamedly compares his connection to Queequeg to that of “[m]an and wife” because of the way that they are able to “open up the very bottom of their souls to each other” while lying together in bed. Ishmael first bonds with Queequeg spiritually, partaking in his religious ritual, and this results in both of them feeling “at peace with our own consciences and all the world.” They allow themselves to become vulnerable with each other when they get “undressed,” and then they share “confidential disclosures.” The novel feels very modern here: Ishmael is ahead of his time, and perhaps even of our own time in US society today, in
his ability to conceptualize love between men without needing to label it as homosexual and without being afraid of it seeming romantic and, even, marital.

Later, many months together in close quarters on the whaling ship only have solidified Queequeg and Ishmael’s homoromantic kinship. The circumstances required in pursuing whales in order to hunt them, therefore, promote same-sex intimacy. Ishmael again likens Queequeg and himself to a married couple while on board the ship, and their bond only grows tighter in this context. When Queequeg jumps into the sea, attached to a rope that Ishmael anchors from his place aboard the ship, Ishmael remarks that Queequeg’s demise would require Ishmael’s self-sacrifice as well:

So that for better or for worse, we two, for the time, were wedded; and should poor Queequeg sink to rise no more, then both usage and honour demanded, that instead of cutting the cord, it should drag me down in his wake. So, then, an elongated Siamese ligature united us. Queequeg was my own inseparable twin brother; nor could I any way get rid of the dangerous liabilities which the hempen bond entailed.

(Melville 2003 376)

Ishmael and Queequeg share a physical “bond” this time, and all of “the dangerous liabilities” that come with such a connection. Shipmates connected by a “cord” in this way must either keep each other alive or share a twin grave; one shipmate is responsible for anchoring the other to life, and if he fails at this task, he must lose his life, too.

Ishmael compares this relationship not only to that of a “wedded” couple but also to that

14 Ironically, today, when a fan of a television show wants two of its characters to be in a romantic relationship, or imagines that they might be, the slang term for desiring such a union between characters is called “shipping,” as in “relationshiping.” This term is most frequently applied to same-sex pairings of characters as well. In the context of Moby-Dick, it is a ship that affords this intimacy between the two characters, so it would be particularly apt for readers to ship Ishmael and Queequeg (“shipping”). In the 18th and 19th centuries, in sailing contexts, “to ship” meant “[t]o take in (water) over the side; to be submerged or flooded with (water) by waves breaking over it” (“ship, v.1”). We can associate this overflowing outside of the boundaries of the ship with exceeding social norms around sexuality.
of “Siamese” twins, “inseparable…brother[s].” This bond is homosocial, and its homosociality is certainly particular to the context of the ship: these men have only each other, so they depend upon each other for survival as well as emotional support. They are each other’s only family for the duration of their voyage, so in addition to literally protecting each other from sinking, their familial bonds include sibling-like as well as spouse-like intimacy.

When Queequeg falls ill, Ishmael writes worriedly, “Now, at this time it was that my poor pagan companion, and fast bosom-friend, Queequeg, was seized with a fever, which brought him nigh to his endless end” (Melville 2003 549). And when Queequeg recovers, Ishmael again refers to him as his own: “So, in good time my Queequeg gained strength” (Melville 2003 554). Ishmael refers to Queequeg possessively, using “my” repeatedly; and lovingly, using “companion” and “bosom friend.” It would clearly be a great loss to Ishmael if he lost this intimate friend. They were “fast” in developing a close relationship, like love at first sight, and the loss of this relationship would be not unlike the loss of a spouse for Ishmael, as we have seen in his comparisons of Queequeg and himself to a married couple. However, another important dimension to address in this dynamic is that of Queequeg’s race, Ishmael’s racism, and the racist society within which these characters operate.

Ishmael refers more than once to his Black shipmates as “heathens,” and he certainly fetishizes Queequeg’s exoticism, such as his foreign-seeming religious rituals and his tattooed body. Sidney Kaplan notes that the bond between Queequeg and Ishmael does not develop in the same complex way that Ahab’s madness does because of Melville’s simplification and flattening of his characters of color (146-147). Toni
Morrison argues for the idea that “Africanism is inextricable from the definitions of Americanness” (65). Morrison uses a turn of phrase of Melville’s to defend her concept of the key role that Blackness has always played in American literature such as Melville’s: “There is no romance free of what Herman Melville called ‘the power of blackness,’ especially not in a country in which there was a resident population, already black, upon which the imagination could play” (37). Queequeg’s identity as an ambiguously non-white man is inherently significant in this American “romance,” even if racist oppression limits the breadth and depth of his relationship with Ishmael. We certainly see this homosocial kinship much more from Ishmael’s point of view than from Queequeg’s, so that Queequeg’s voice is limited. However, we also understand that Queequeg is empowered by his ability to teach Ishmael about his own religion and worship practices. The Blackness of the sea, the whiteness of the White Whale, and the racial politics of the shipmates aboard the Pequod show Melville grappling with this “power of blackness” and the glorification of whiteness in America. In Chapter 4, we will return to the concepts of racist oppression as they relate to geopolitical hierarchies in *The Tempest*, and how the sea and its inhabitants embody and defy these hierarchies.

Melville empowers his characters in their queerness more than in their non-whiteness. The most homoerotic, rather than only homosocial or homoromantic, passage in *Moby-Dick* relates inextricably to whales themselves. Having harvested spermaceti\(^{15}\) from the head of a Sperm whale, the shipmates knead this fine oil so that it will be fluid

\(^{15}\) Spermaceti was believed to be whales’ sperm, but it is actually a viscous substance in the head of Sperm whales used for echolocation, or bouncing the clicking sounds they make toward other whales in order to communicate. The etymological roots of *spermaceti* are *sperm* and the Greek *cetus*, or whale, although whalers tend to abbreviate this word to *sperm* (“spermaceti, n.”).
again rather than lumpy. Ishmael describes his interaction with the spermaceti in the following sensual manner: “…this same sperm was carefully manipulated ere going to the triworks…. It was our business to squeeze the lumps back into fluid…. After having my hands in it for only a few minutes, my fingers felt like eels, and began, as it were, to serpentine and spiralise” (Melville 2003 483). The process of massaging the oil back to a liquid state leaves Ishmael’s hands wet and slimy, as though they are covered with ejaculate, but this “sperm” is that of a whale rather than a human. This first act of “manipulat[ing]” the spermaceti is like masturbation: “my fingers felt like eels, and began, as it were, to serpentine and spiralise.”

Homoeroticism ensues once the shipmates become more enthralled with the massaging process and “look[] up” to see each other:

…I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-labourers’ hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an unbounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say,---Oh! my dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humour or envy! Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness.

(Melville 2003 484)

This scene becomes a kind of orgy of maleness and male camaraderie, with “squeezing” and “loving feeling” and “looking up into [each other’s] eyes sentimentally.” It is the sperm whale that allows for the possibility of this erotic kinship: Ishmael “mistak[es] [his shipmates’] hands for the gentle globules” of whale oil. Although spermaceti is not actually the whale’s sperm, here it is referred to as such, and Ishmael and his shipmates embrace the maleness of it, with which they identify. This experience is like a sexual climax, increasing in pleasure and excitement, from initially “unwittingly squeezing,” to
“an unbounding…feeling” and “continually squeezing,” and finally, “let us all squeeze ourselves into each other.” Ishmael moves from noticing only the sensation of the spermaceti on his own hands, to unintentionally colliding with others’ hands, to purposefully touching others’ hands, to ultimately touching as many hands and as many bodies as possible.

Sperm whaling affords an opportunity for self-love and love of each other among men. Spermaceti is such a commodity, too, that Sperm whales are valued above other kinds of whales, and one of the captain’s mates, Flask, becomes particularly animated while discussing the glorious feeling of hunting sperm whales: “Don’t ye love sperm? There goes three thousand dollars, men! — a bank! — a whole bank!” (Melville 2003 414). This exclamation – “Don’t ye love sperm” – bespeaks Flask’s love of wealth and profit. However, the question of “lov[ing] sperm” of course also suggests homosexuality and men’s love for other men’s bodies. That which is considered most male in the sea is also most profitable. As we have seen, however, femininity is also a key part of whaling, and female whales play their own, if infrequent part, just as female humans do.

The rich, precious product that female whales produce is milk, which is so thick that its consistency resembles cottage cheese. Melville even remarks in a footnote that “The milk is very sweet and rich; it has been tasted by man; it might do well with strawberries” (Melville 2003 451). There is something about nursing whales that intimidates the whalers of the Pequod and dissuades them from attempting to kill these whales or their young. As we saw in Chapter 1, the whalers watch the mothers and their offspring with a certain appreciation, and receive the whales’ glance in return: “Floating on their sides, the mothers also seemed quietly eying us” (Melville 2003 451). Unlike the
violently maternal ocean that is compared to “a savage tigress that tossing in the jungle overlays her own cubs” (Melville 2003 326), these motherly whales are very protective and nurturing toward their young. The shipmates’ reverence for these whale “mothers” is because of how large their pregnant bodies are, how vulnerable the whales are willing to be, and how fascinated they are by the shipmates, in turn: “the mothers also seemed quietly eying us.” These mothers and their young possess a pacifying influence. Again, we see femininity as the counterpoint to the violence of masculinity. These female, maternal whales defy the whalers’ murderous instincts with their life-giving powers. They return the male “gaze[]” with their own curious “eying.”  

The men and the whales see eye to eye here, and they reciprocally refrain from threatening the respectful, balanced order they establish between themselves.

John Lyly’s *Gallathea* characterizes a cetaceous sea monster as the opposite of these live-giving whales – life-threatening – but women’s subversive gender performance thwarts the sea monster’s violence and sexual predation.

**Monstrous Cetaceousness and Monstrous Lesbianism**

Sea monsters pose a threat to young women’s purity in John Lyly’s *Gallathea*, which slightly pre-dates Shakespeare, because the god Neptune orders them to enact such cruelty. In a play about the dichotomies of love and virtue, beastliness and godliness, and passion and purity, the sea monster Agar is a vehicle by which virgin honor is tested.

---

16 In an article published in the *New York Times* this month about Sperm whales’ method of communicating with echolocation, James Nestor describes a strikingly similar feeling of warmth that he has towards a mother whale and her calf, the only difference being that the one refraining from violence in this scenario is the whale: “The whales could have easily eaten us or pulped us with their 15-foot-wide flukes. But they didn’t. As I stared into the tennis-ball-size eyes of a sperm whale mother and her calf, I immediately recognized that these were extraordinarily intelligent, fully conscious beings. I believe the whales saw the same in us.”
Because the Danes once invaded Lincolnshire, where *Gallathea* is set, and committed sacrilege against the gods, the people of Lincolnshire have had to repent ever since. Each year, the most virtuous maid in Lincolnshire must sacrifice herself to Agar in order to stave off Neptune’s wrath and preserve her town.

I characterize Agar as cetaceous because of its\(^\text{17}\) simultaneous monstrosity and affiliation with divinity by way of Neptune. Agar is also cetaceous simply by virtue of being a sea creature large enough to conceivably swallow a human body. Agar never appears in *Gallathea*, but this cetaceous monster looms around the play’s edges, propelling the characters to act as they do. Though it is dishonorable, at the urging of each of their fathers, the two most beautiful maids in Lincolnshire cross-dress as shepherds so that Agar cannot find them. While disguised as men, Gallathea and Phyllida meet and fall in love with each other, each believing that the other is truly a man and knowing that she herself is actually a woman.

In a truly convoluted scheme, Phyllida suggests to Gallathea that Gallathea pretend to be a woman. This means that Gallathea would be a woman pretending to be a man pretending to be a woman. Phyllida requests, “Seeing as we are both boys, and both lovers, that our affection may have some show, and seem as it were love, let me call thee mistress” (Lyly IV.iv.15-17). The illogical logic behind this thinking is that Phyllida knows that she is a woman disguised as a man, so she sees no harm in trading roles and allowing Gallathea, who she presumes to be actually a man, to pretend to be a woman. If they appear to the outside world as though they are a man and woman, as Phyllida believes that they really are, this will validate their romantic relationship and make it

\(^{17}\) Agar is not gendered in the play, so rather than gendering this monster, and also because of its explicit lack of humanity in the play, I will refer to it as “it.”
“seem as it were love.” Phyllida pretends that she and Gallathea are “both boys,” when neither of them is, but they are truly “both lovers,” regardless of gender. To further complicate matters, all of these characters would have been played by boys originally, since women did not act on stage in Lyly’s time and since the theater company that produced Gallathea originally, Children of Paul’s, was made up of young boys only, not men (“John Lyly”). Therefore, Gallathea and Phyllida are women crossdressing as men considering crossdressing as women, all the while being played by boys.

In reality, which seems to hold little real value here, each woman knows the truth that she is disguised as a man. Therefore, for all intents and purposes, Phyllida and Gallathea are simultaneously two men in love, by outward appearance; two women in love, which only the audience knows; two boys in love, if the audience doesn’t suspend their disbelief; and, respectively, a woman in love with a man, and a man in love with a woman, according to their own perceptions of the situation. Were it not for the threat of Agar, however, these women would never have fallen in love with each other because they would have had no need to disguise themselves. Therefore, they would have no reason to look past gender, both their own and each other’s, and to see each other as “lovers,” no matter their gender; for even when they realize that they are both crossdressing, they are still in love with each other.

Because Phyllida and Gallathea avoid their lots as sacrifices to Agar, another fair maid, Hebe, prepares to sacrifice herself. She laments how unnatural this practice feels to her:

The Egyptians never cut their dates from the tree because they are so fresh and green. It is thought wickedness to pull roses from the stalks in the garden of Palestine, for that they have so lively a red; and whoso cutteth the incense tree in Arabia, before it fall, committeth sacrilege. Shall it only be lawful amongst us in
the prime of youth and pride of beauty to destroy both youth and beauty, and what was honored in fruits and flowers as a virtue to violate in a virgin as a vice?

(Lyly V.ii.15-24)

This passage reiterates that Agar exceeds the natural order through its own monstrosity. In nature, that which is at its peak in terms of beauty, such as “dates” that are “fresh and green,” “roses” that are “so lively a red,” and “incense tree[s] before [they] fall,” is considered “virtu[ous]” and spared an untimely death. In the world of Lincolnshire, each year, the god Neptune grants the opposite fate to the fairest “virgin” by allowing Agar to kill her just when she is at her “prime,” as though her virginity is a “vice.” Only a monster, or a whale, could commit such an act, because it is surpasses nature in its cruelty. This passage also emphasizes that Agar devours not just that which is youthful but also that which has “beauty” and is alluring and attractive, contributing to the idea of Agar as sexual devourer as well.18

Hebe paints a picture of Agar for us, emphasizing its sheer vulgarity: “Come, Agar, thou unsatiable monster of maidens’ blood and devourer of beauties’ bowels, glut thyself till thou surfeit, and let my life end thine. Tear these tender joints with thy greedy jaws, these yellow locks within thy black feet, this fair face with thy foul teeth” (V.ii.50-54). Following the tradition of other cetaceous monsters, both in the classical and Renaissance traditions, Agar has an “unsatiable” appetite, and appetite in the usual sense of the word and sexual appetite are often conflated in reference to whales and sea monsters in this period.19 Agar has “greedy jaws,” “black feet,” and “foul teeth,” rather than the fins or blowholes that we might expect. Like the belching whale in

---

18 We will see more of whales’ sexual predation in Chapter 4.
19 Dan Brayton notes this tendency in Shakespeare’s plays, written about 50 years after Lyly’s, to “associat[e] whales with appetite and abduction” (53).
Shakespeare’s *Pericles* and the vomiting whale in *Jonah and the whale*, Agar devours humans. Agar embodies the most beastly and gluttonous side of cetaceous beings.

In Renaissance English literature, and up through today, humans first notice whales’ overwhelming size. This induces awe, leading us to imbue whales with the qualities of monarchy, godliness, and ravenous appetite. Furthermore, we see them as overbearing and threatening. This contributes to the misconception that whales are capable of eating humans and also that they devour virgins.

Other gendered and sexualized perspectives on whales humanize them and make them more approachable. When Melville genders whales as male, he makes them less monstrous and makes them characters in their own right. When we see lactating and pregnant female whales, and understand that their process of child-bearing and child-rearing is rather similar to that of humans, we also feel that we can identify with them. Dolphins’ desire to have sex even when it is not procreative and even when it is masturbatory likens them to humans, because they find pleasure in the same ways that we do. In this way, sexuality and gender bring humans closer to cetaceans.

The unusual situations that whales put humans in, such as being on a ship remote from land or crossdressing in order to not be perceived as desirable virgins, also promote subversive gender presentation as well as homosexuality. Therefore, cetacean-human narratives defy humans’ social norms of love and sex and identity.

While this chapter has covered ways in which whales are human-like based on their perceived gender and sexuality, in Chapter 3, I will dive deeper into the idea of

---

20 Whale’s largeness looms large in the human imagination, even from a young age. Ironically, I had a nightmare when I was a child that a whale out of water was marching up the stairs to come and get me, which was all the more intimidating because whales are not supposed to be able to walk.
whales as sublime. I will investigate portrayals of whales as royal, superhuman, and divine.
Chapter 3: Royal Whales

As we have seen, one of dolphins’ positive connotations is their affiliation with godliness and salvation. Humans also ally other whale species with that which is sacred. In addition to divinity, whales’ grandiosity often takes on powerful connotations of royalty and government. In this chapter, I will discuss the biblical story of Jonah and the whale as well as instances in which authors employ whale metaphor to describe geopolitical hierarchy, royal and governmental.

We see whales’ bodies’ sheer currency in relation to English royalty if we consider that to this day, English monarchs lay claim to whales over 25 feet long that strand on beaches in England and declare them “Royal Fish” (Brayton 64). Scottish royalty also declares beached whales to be its own property, or “Fishes Royal;” whereas whale meat was a culinary delicacy that kings and queens enjoyed in medieval times, these English and Scottish whales are “now for the benefit of science rather than the consumption of kings” (Roman 50). In further illustration of royalty’s relationship to whales, portraits of Queen Elizabeth I painted during her lifetime feature monstrous whales, as if to show her own affiliation with, and domain over, the sea and even its wiliest inhabitants (see Figure 14). Seeing very monstrous-looking whales domesticated in this way by their affiliation with courtly portraits, including as part of the queen’s dress, is certainly another cetaceous paradox. Furthermore, some of Europe’s earliest and most effective whalers, the Basques (who started whaling in the 11th century) featured whales and whaling in their royal families’ coats of arms (Roman 46, 48; see Figure 15).
Figure 14. These two portraits of Queen Elizabeth, the “Ditchley Portrait” (1592) above and the “Hardwick Portrait” (late 1590s) below, both feature cetaceous monsters, or monstrous whales.

Figure 15. Basque royal families’ coats of arms featured whales and whaling.
Although whales can represent glory and power, they can also inflict pain and channel God’s wrath. In this chapter, we will see whales associated with power of all kinds, including benevolent, punitive, and greedy. Literature from the Old Testament to William Shakespeare to Herman Melville paints a picture of whales as almighty, extravagant, and simply superior to humans. The end result is that these whales are sublime: powerful, terrifying, and awesome.

We will see a great deal of imagery regarding whales’ appetites and desires to eat everything, including humans. This assumption that whales will eat anything and everything may come from their association with the great and daunting ocean in which they live: once a human falls into the sea, it will remorselessly swallow that person up. Whales have an ability to survive in the human-threatening marine environment that suggests that they are in allegiance with the sea rather than with the humans that it can so easily drown. Whales’ insides are a microcosm of the bottomless sea, which represents a foreign, threatening prospect to the humans that it dwarfs by its sheer size and power. As I mentioned in my Introduction, Edmund Burke defines the sublime as that which induces “pain” and “terror” rather than “pleasure” (64). Just as whales are sublime for their gigantic, majestic, and terrifying qualities, so the sea is similarly sublime in human’s minds; the sea is mesmerizing to watch, but it is all the more awe-inducing because it is life-threatening and large beyond human comprehension.

**Jonah and the Fishy Whale**

In the King James Version of the Bible (1611), God tells Jonah to “go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me,” but Jonah disobeys him and instead, like Ishmael, takes to sea (Jonah 1.2). Jonah experiences God’s
wrath, however, when God creates a tempest in the sea and, to placate God, Jonah’s fellow seafarers toss him overboard. Then, rather than being rescued by a dolphin as we might hope, Jonah is swallowed by “a great fish:”

Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Then Jonah prayed unto the Lord his God out of the fish’s belly, and said, I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the Lord, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou hearest my voice. For thou hadst cast me into the deep, in the midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me about: all thy billows and thy waves passed over me. Then I said, I am cast out of thy sight; yet I will look again toward thy holy temple. The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head. I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me for ever: yet hast thou brought up my life from corruption, O Lord my God. When my soul fainted within me I remembered the Lord: and my prayer came in unto thee, into thine holy temple. They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy. But I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that that I have vowed. Salvation is of the Lord. And the Lord spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land.

(King James Version, Jonah 1.17, 2.1-10)

Then, Jonah adheres to God’s will and goes to Nineveh. God saves Jonah “from corruption,” which in Renaissance England would have signified “destruction…by decomposition,” or death, as well as “moral deterioration or decay” (“corruption, n.”). Therefore, the inside of the belly of the “great fish” is tantamount to absolute disintegration, physical and moral. The “holy temple” serves as the counterpoint to the sinful, deathly place in the depths of the sea that is the fish. As Publicover emphasizes, the sea itself often embodies chaos and lack of civil order (138), whereas the land – where the temple is – contains peace and a structured government. However, despite the fish’s dark associations, there is a clear tie between divinity and the great fish: “the Lord spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah.” The fish can communicate with and understand God, and acts according to God’s will. We will also see imagery of whales as
swallowing large gulps of food, gluttonous, burping, and belching, especially in Shakespeare; these depictions of whales’ disgusting digestive processes ally them with this vomiting “great fish,” which is not explicitly interpreted as a whale in the King James Version of the Jonah story.

In the King James Version of the Bible, the great fish acts according to God’s mercy or wrath. Being swallowed by a great fish is the lot of those “that observe lying vanities [and] forsake their own mercy.” God and this great fish collaborate in order to teach a lesson to those who do not adhere to God’s will. God’s mercy is redeemable, however; the fish swallows Jonah whole and can regurgitate him completely intact “upon the dry land,” as evidence of God’s mercy. Jonah does not escape this situation without feeling traumatized; he recalls, “I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the Lord, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou hearest my voice.” In the midst of his “affliction,” “out of the belly of hell,” he seeks God’s mercy and receives it, feeling great relief afterwards and deciding to obey God’s will. Therefore, the great fish is simultaneously sacred by virtue of its ability to work with, and for, God and also sacrilegious, since it embodies “hell.” This great fish embodies divine punishment rather than salvation for Jonah, until it vomits up Jonah.

The “belching whale” is a recurring theme in Shakespeare’s plays, following this image of a great fish who enacts both God’s rage and also his mercy with its voracious appetite and then by vomiting its food again. The great fish’s ability to vomit at God’s prompting shows its special relationship to God. Robert McCloskey’s children’s

---

book *Burt Dow, Deep-water Man* (1963) reinforces the significance of imagery of whales vomiting. After being swallowed by the whale, Burt Dow tries to trigger the whale’s gag reflex so that it will spit him back up again; his efforts to irritate the whale include painting an elaborate picture on the inside of the whale’s stomach.

Philip Stern argues that Jonah is a particularly afflicted prophet. Because of his lot getting swallowed by the great fish or whale, Jonah suffers greatly. Stern makes a distinction between this biblical story in theory or written word and in practice or passed-down folklore: “Not to go over all the details--well known as they are of Jonah’s story--he ends up being thrown overboard and is instantly swallowed by the ‘great fish,’ which in the popular imagination is known as a whale” (23). This fish may only be read as a whale in “the popular imagination,” but this popular sentiment nonetheless connects whales to this “well known…story.” Most importantly, this swimming creature’s belly embodies death, whether one reads the King James Bible version, in which Jonah describes the inside of the fish as “the belly of hell” (Jonah 2.2); or the Complete Jewish version (1917), in which Jonah describes the inside of the fish as “the belly of Sh’ol” (Jonah 2.3).

Stern characterizes the creature first and foremost “not [as] a fish, but [as] Sheol, the underworld, the place of the dead” (23). Both Sheol and Hell signify death for sinners. Ironically, according to the *OED*, Sheol is a place “[from which] return…is impossible,” but it is possible to return from the whale’s belly because Jonah returns to life after this foray into death (“Sheol, n.”). In the King James Version of this story, the “holy temple”

---

22 The *OED* defines “Sheol” as “[t]he underworld; the abode of the dead or departed spirits, conceived by the Hebrews as a subterranean region clothed in thick darkness, return from which is impossible. (Very common in the Revised Version of the O.T., where in the King James Bible it was translated ‘hell’, ‘grave’, or ‘pit’.)” (“Sheol, n.”).
is located outside of the fish’s belly; it is in stark relief to the Hell or deathly fate that lies inside of the fish, and Jonah retreats to land to serve God’s wishes once the fish releases him (KJV, Jonah 2.4). However, in Louis Ginzberg’s telling of the Jonah story, which he entitles “Jonah in the Whale,” the whale’s belly is in fact a temple in and of itself.

Louis Ginzberg’s book The Legends of the Jews (1909) is a “comprehensive” study of the “the Jewish legends,” otherwise known as the Haggadah, that “[e]xtend[] over a period of more than one thousand years…culled from” a wide variety of sources, including “mystics and the various tracts of the mediaeval poets, scientists and philosophers” (Gandz 445, 446). (We may note here the irony of mystics telling the story of whales, the baleen variety of which are known as mysticetes, although there is no apparent etymological connection between these two differently mystical beings.23) In Ginzberg’s words, his book is made up of a wide variety “post-Biblical” versions of the Bible stories, including Christian interpretations, Hasidic interpretations, and “Latin, Syrian, Ethiopic, Aramean, Arabic, Persian, and Old Slavic products translated directly or indirectly from Jewish works of Palestinian or Hellenistic origin” (“Preface” 1909). This great feat required that Ginzberg read all of these various sources and their different versions of the Bible stories and that he write one version of each story that would be representative of all of these different parts of Jewish lore (Gandz 446).

According to the diverse sources that make up the Haggadah, therefore, in the story of “Jonah and the Whale,” there are two fishes, or whales, and the inside of the large fish is decked out with ornate embellishments, in stark contrast to the gloomier

---

23 Mysticete comes from the Latin mystax, meaning moustache, since mysticetes, or baleen whales, have whisker-like baleen protruding from their upper mouths (“mystax, n.”). Meanwhile, mystic comes from the Latin mysticus, meaning “relating to sacred mysteries, mysterious” (“mystic, n. and adj.”).
inside of the more monstrous fish. Ginzberg explains God’s motives behind creating these two creatures and sending Jonah to them:

At the creation of the world, God made a fish intended to harbor Jonah. He was so large that the prophet was as comfortable inside of him as in a spacious synagogue. The eyes of the fish served Jonah as windows, and, besides, there was a diamond, which shone as brilliantly as the sun at midday, so that Jonah could see all things in the sea down to its very bottom.

It is a law that when their time has come, all the fish of the sea must betake themselves to leviathan, and let the monster devour them…. So it came about that Jonah was transferred to another abode. His new quarters, which he had to share with all the little fish, were far from comfortable, and from the bottom of his heart a prayer for deliverance arose to God on high. The last words of his long petition were, ‘I shall redeem my vow,’ whereupon God commanded the fish to spew Jonah out.

(Ginzberg 1947 249-250)

Firstly, when God “creat[es] the world” he “ma[kes] a fish intended to harbor Jonah” apart from the fish that will serve to punish Jonah. God does not only use cetaceous creatures to enact his wrath, therefore, but also to “harbor” and express his love for human beings. Then, Jonah is transferred to the “leviathan” to be “devour[ed].” Jonah is not alone inside of the hellish whale in this version of the story. He “share[s] with all the little fish” his new “abode.” The schema of the little fish alongside the great fish, or whale, is a common one in cetaceous literature, as the little fish symbolize less powerful people on land, and the whale symbolizes monarchs or other elite people on land, which we saw in the Introduction and will see again in Shakespeare’s Pericles. Jonah is, therefore, more like a “little fish” than like the whale, which is so powerful that it is aligned with God in this story. As in the King James Version of the Jonah story, here, the prophet’s prayer to God liberates him from the whale, via God’s command that the whale “spew Jonah out.” There is divine ordination both in the whale “devour[ing]” Jonah and also in the whale regurgitating Jonah. The departure from the King James Version of the
Jonah story in Ginzberg’s telling, however, is in the presence of the first, more glorious and royal fish preceding the monstrous one.

The first fish, or whale, is created for the express purpose of keeping Jonah safe: “God made a fish intended to harbor Jonah.” Furthermore, this fish is “so large that the prophet was as comfortable inside of him as in a spacious synagogue” and possesses “a diamond, which shone as brilliantly as the sun at midday,” as well as “eyes that served Jonah as windows.” The largeness and luxuriousness of the interior of the whale remind us of a mansion with all the markers of wealth and social rank. Its association with “a spacious synagogue” further allies the whale with that which is sacred, so that unlike when he is in the “far from comfortable” belly of the second whale, Jonah need look no further than this whale’s belly in order to feel close to God. This characterization is in keeping with other whales in literature, too, as whales often have a divine and royal connotation. Shakespeare’s whales, and the humans they represent, are royal as well as greedy when it comes to power and wealth.

**Whaling as the Ruling Class**

In what is perhaps William Shakespeare’s most ocean-centered play, *Pericles*, one fisherman asks another “how the fishes live in the sea” (II.i.26). The other fisherman replies,

> Why, as men do a-land—the great ones eat up the little ones. I can compare our rich misers to nothing so fitly as to a whale: a plays and tumbles, driving the poor fry before him, and at last devours them all at a mouthful. Such whales have I heard of o’th’land, who never leave gaping till they swallowed the whole parish: church, steeple, bells, and all.

*(Shakespeare *Pericles* II.i.27-34)*

Whales and “rich misers” are both considered “great” for their impressive status and influence within their societies, but they are also cruel and greedy. In the fisherman’s
mind, these leviathans are the perfect metaphor for “rich misers:” “I can compare [them] to nothing so fitly.” Over the course of this comparison, misers morph into “whales…o’th’land,” so that, except for their terrestrial environment, they are synonymous with whales. Both “devour[]” everything in their sight, according to the fisherman. “[T]he poor fry before” the whale remind of us the small fishes that the whale swallows along with Jonah in Ginzberg’s version of the Bible story. These tiny fishes are completely expendable to the whale, whose greedy appetite extends even to inanimate objects: “church, steeple, bells, and all.”

However, the voracious, man-swallowing characterization of whales is only the way that Shakespeare and his contemporaries wanted to see whales, not how they actually behave. Today’s biologists understand that whales do not eat everything in their path, but rather only eat very small zooplankton and phytoplankton if they are baleen whales and eat certain other marine animals if they are toothed whales. The whale the fisherman describes would be a plankton-consuming baleen whale because it feeds by leaving its mouth “gaping” and skimming along the water until its throat grooves have expanded and it has a good “mouthful” of prey to “swallow[].” Furthermore, in centuries to come, despite depictions of vengeful whales such as Moby Dick, whales would fall prey to human conquest via the whaling industry far more often than they would hurt humans in return. The role that whales play in the literary imagination sheds light, however, on geopolitical hierarchies on land. Whales embody the powerful tyrant, who stops at nothing to get what he or she wants. Meanwhile, those lower on the social food chain are the “poor fry.” This metaphor echoes that of James Baldwin in my introduction: whales, or rich misers, are again the powerful minority who claim a territory that the
smaller fish, or less powerful humans, cannot inhabit. Shakespeare’s characters also worry about whales eating human beings.

When Thaisa, Pericles’ wife, dies in childbirth on board their ship, Pericles laments that he must toss her body overboard: “nor have I time / To give thee hallowed to thy grave, but straight / Must cast thee, scarcely coffined, in the ooze, / Where, for a monument upon thy bones / And aye-remaining lamps, the belching whale / And humming water must o’erwhelm thy corpse, / Lying with simple shells” (Shakespeare Pericles III.i.58-64). The ocean floor is made up of only “ooze” and “simple shells,” and “the belching whale” completes this picture of a slovenly, inhospitable environment. The whale’s characterization as “belching” fits with its previous portrayal as a voracious eater. Pericles’ grief for his wife’s sudden death is only worsened by the fact that whales will be her only company in her burial ground. It is ironic, and fitting, that the whale would replace “aye-remaining lamps” because whale blubber was burned for lamps; again, the whale is inextricably tied to human life on land. Pericles imagines that rather than respecting Thaisa’s dead body and leaving it intact, the whale “must o’erwhelm [her] corpse.” This leaves the audience to imagine the greedy, burping whale scavenging upon Thaisa’s body, or perhaps violating her corpse.

Whales in Shakespeare and other early modern English literature are often considered sexual predators, an idea that we will return to in Chapter 4. They embody beastliness, carnal desire, and greed (Brayton 53). Early modern European illustrations of beached male whales feature their phalluses, so readers who had seen or heard of beached whales were probably able to call to mind the impressively large sex of these creatures (See Figure 16). This imagery likely would have increased whales’ reputation as sexually
dangerous. Shakespeare’s portrayal of whales is multifaceted, however, and their belching can take on more positive connotations as well.

Figure 16. A 1598 illustration of a beached sperm whale by Dutch artist Hendrick Goltzius.

When Cerimon happens upon Thaisa’s body in a coffin washed ashore, only to discover that she is actually still alive, he exclaims, “If the sea’s stomach be o’ercharged with gold, / ’Tis a good constraint of fortune / It belches upon us” (Shakespeare Pericles III.ii.56-58). Although Cerimon describes “the sea” as “belch[ing],” Shakespeare usually associates belching with whales. Earlier in the play, Pericles worried that whales would scavenge upon Thaisa’s body, but here it is as though instead of digesting Thaisa, the whale “belche[d]” her up completely intact instead, just as the whale vomited up Jonah. This belching is a blessed rescue, and we see the association between “gold” and “fortune” and belching, which we associate with the monarch of the sea, the whale. Again, the whale is like a wealthy person, but the gaudy “gold” suggests that this whale has the additional prestige of monarchy.

Shakespeare’s whales fit the Renaissance English notion of whales as having insatiable appetites and also as having a royal, godly quality about them. This is the paradox of studying whale metaphor: whales are beyond humanity, to the point of godliness, but are also base and sub-human in other contexts. Dan Brayton cradles this
paradox well: “By comparing great or exemplary humans—princes and nobles—to the specific behaviors of whales that foreground the animal appetites of princes, Shakespeare implies the obverse of the conventional scenario of humans slipping down the chain of being to the level of beasts” (61). In this cetaceous schema, “humans” climb up “the chain of being to the level of beasts,” so that the more beastly one is, the more one is considered to be powerful, royal, and even superhuman, like the whale. *Sublime* is perhaps the best word to capture this paradox, because whales’ beastliness is part of what elevates them to the level of being revered by humans.

From Queen Elizabeth’s portraits alongside monstrous whales and Shakespeare’s greedy whales, to Katherine Phillips’ use of the dolphin metaphor to describe the restoration of the monarchy one hundred years later, to the rise of English whaling and using whale meat as high cuisine, and the continuing use of “Royal Fishes” for English scientific innovation today (Roman 50), we see that whales have long had both imaginative and real currency for the ruling classes in England. Melville’s characters also associate whales with “superior” humans, or consider whales to be superhuman.

**Whales as Superior to Humans**

Even despite their murderous purposes, the whalers in *Moby-Dick* are able to see whales as deserving a special status and even as beings far superior to themselves. Melville anthropomorphizes whales, comparing them to the aforementioned great genius of the literary canon, William Shakespeare: “…perhaps the most imposing physiognomical view to be had of the Sperm Whale, is that of the full front of his head. This aspect is sublime…. Few are the foreheads which like Shakespeare’s…rise so high, and descend so low, that the eyes themselves seem clear, eternal, tideless mountain lakes”
Significantly, Melville describes both Shakespeare and the Sperm whale as “sublime;” as mentioned above, sublimity requires an aspect of “terror” (Burke 64). This description of a long head and “eternal” eyes is certainly potentially overwhelming and even menacing. Shakespeare and Sperm whales distinguish themselves by being great and terrible, not just great. It makes sense that whales are terrifying because they are so large, and Shakespeare’s ability to intimidate is more due to his ability to confront darkness in his writing, which Melville himself admired (“Hawthorne and His Mosses” 2002 522). Further, “A high forehead,” as Melville describes Shakespeare’s and the Sperm whale’s, “represented intellect” according to 19th century physiognomy (Davison 8). Forehead “broadness was truly needed to be truly wise,” and Shakespeare and the Sperm whale have broad foreheads as well (Davison 8).

Melville goes even further in his high praise of the Sperm whale’s forehead and the “physiognomical” connotations of this head-shape:

this high and mighty god-like dignity inherent in the brow is so immensely amplified, that gazing on it, in that full front view, you feel the Deity and the dread powers more forcibly than in beholding any other object in living nature…. But how? Genius in the Sperm Whale? Has the Sperm Whale ever written a book, spoken a speech? No, his great genius is declared in his doing nothing in particular to prove it.

(Melville 2003 406-407)

Melville emphasizes the dual nature of whales that is “god-like” both in its “dignity” and also in its “dread powers.” This godliness is “inherent in the brow” of the Sperm Whale, as was Shakespeare’s. Shakespeare proved his intellectual superiority through his writing, but for the Sperm whale, “his great genius is declared in his doing nothing in particular to
Sperm whales achieve and perhaps even surpass Shakespeare’s level of greatness because the only evidence of their superiority is phsyiognomical. Sperm whales’ “Deity” qualities align them with the savior dolphins we saw in Chapter 1 as well as Jonah’s whale in the Bible and Agar from *Gallathea*, because the latter whales communicate with deities in order to enact their wrath or mercy.

The character of Ishmael sees other whales’ anatomy as superior to that of humans as well. Just as Dan Brayton suggested that humans climb up the chain of being toward animalistic beastliness in order to embody monarchical traits that whales possess (61), so Ishmael suggests that humans should seek to emulate whales, since they are superior to humans:

> It does seem to me, that herein we see the rare virtue of a strong individuality, and the rare virtue of thick walls, and the rare virtue of interior spaciousness. Oh, man! admire and model thyself after the whale! Do thou, too, remain warm among ice. Do thou, too, live in this world without being of it. Be cool as the equator; keep thy blood fluid at the Pole. Like the great dome of St. Peter’s, and like the great whale, retain, O man! in all seasons a temperature of thine own. But how easy and how hopeless to teach these fine things! Of erections, how few are domed like St. Peter’s! of creatures, how few as vast as the whale!

(Melville 2003 361-362)

Whales take on immortal connotations, like Jesus embodying a man, since they “live in this world without being of it.” Whales’ blubber is such that they can maintain “in all seasons a temperature of [their] own” regardless of the temperature conditions in which

---

24 However, perhaps Shakespeare is even more similar to Sperm whales than Melville lets on in this narrative, for in his essay “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” Melville expounds the virtue of Shakespeare’s truth-telling and adds, “And if I magnify Shakespeare, it is not so much for what he did do, as for what he did not do, or refrained from doing. For in this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a sacred white dove…and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself, as in Shakespeare and other masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth” (2002 523). Therefore, both Shakespeare and the Sperm whale may indeed be geniuses for what they do not do rather than what they do.
they live. They can survive at the equator equally as comfortably as “at the Pole.” Whales possess various “rare virtue[s];” they are “strong,” “fine,” and “great.” They are literally unparalleled in their “vast” stature, since Blue whales are the largest animal ever to have lived on Earth.

Later in the 17th century, Thomas Hobbes’ famous political manifesto named after the whale, *Leviathan*, too, emphasizes the stature of whales, but uses it as a metaphor for the stature of political leaders. The word *leviathan* is used interchangeably with *whale* in *Moby-Dick*, but in earlier works such as *Paradise Lost* this creature was specifically monstrous as well. Strictly speaking, a leviathan need only be a very large “aquatic animal” (“leviathan, n.”), but considering Hobbes’ comparison of the leviathan to governing bodies, I align it with other narratives that have used whales as a metaphor for political leaders.

Hobbes compares the government as a whole to a whale: “For by Art is created that great LEVIATHAN called a COMMON-WEALTH, or STATE, (in latine CIVITAS) which is but an Artificial Man; though of greater stature and strength than the Naturall, for whose protection and defence it was intended” (Hobbes “Introduction”). By being “great” and “[a]rtificiall,” the state differentiates itself from the people over whom it governs. This artificiality, or unreal quality, and greatness contribute to the comparison between the governing body and the unfathomably powerful leviathan. Although Hobbes only touches on the leviathanic metaphor a few times throughout the course of this long manifesto, he does align the leviathan and the leviathanic government with godliness:

This is the Generation of that great LEVIATHAN, or rather (to speake more reverently) of that Mortall God, to which wee owe under the Immortall God, our peace and defence. For by this Authoritie, given him by every particular man in the Common-Wealth, he hath the use of so much Power and Strength conferred
on him, that by terror thereof, he is inabled to forme the wills of them all, to
Peace at home, and mutuall ayd against their enemies abroad.

(“The Generation of a Common-Wealth”)

Hobbes’ distinction between whales, or the human leaders they represent, and actual gods
is their mortality, calling them “God[s],” but modifying that characterization with the
word “Mortall.” However, he does claim that “the Immortall God” himself imbuces
leviathan-like leaders with the ability to foster “peace and defence.” Like a monstrous
leviathan, this political leader possesses “so much Power and Strength…that by terror
thereof, he is inabled to forme the wills of them all,” or influence all of his citizens.

Again, part of whales’ sublimity is the terror that they induce in humans who observe
them. Similarly, Hobbes seems to claim, part of a government’s efficacy is due to its
ability to manipulate its citizens “at home” and its “enemies abroad” alike via “terror.”
Therefore, the leviathan may be mortal, but it induces terror.

The leviathan induces terror in others, but it also has its vulnerabilities. In
preparing his readers for his chapter on governing bodies’ weaknesses, Hobbes invokes
the Biblical leviathan:

Hitherto I have set forth the nature of Man, (whose Pride and other Passions have
compelled him to submit himselfe to Government;) together with the great power
of his Governour, whom I compared to Leviathan, taking that comparison out of
the two last verses of the one and fortieth of Job; where God having set forth the
great power of Leviathan, called him King of the Proud. “There is nothing,” saith
he, “on earth, to be compared with him. He is made so as not be afraid. Hee seeth
every high thing below him; and is King of all the children of pride.” But because
he is mortall, and subject to decay, as all other Earthly creatures are; and because
there is that in heaven, (though not on earth) that he should stand in fear of, and
whose Lawes he ought to obey; I shall in the next following Chapters speak of his
Diseases, and the causes of his Mortality; and of what Lawes of Nature he is
bound to obey.

(“Salaries Certain and Casuall”)
Just as God deems the Leviathan character in the Bible “King of the Proud,” Hobbes aligns the “Governour” with this fearlessness and all-powerfulness. The fact that humans, and whales for that matter, are “[m]ortal[,]” however, requires that Thomas Hobbes admit that political leaders are not infallible. Whereas we have seen representations of whales as godly, superhuman, and almost death-defying previously, this depiction admits that leviathans can be “subject to decay” and to “[d]iseases.” The leviathan is an apt metaphor for political bodies because it is exceptionally large and powerful but is ultimately mortal and “bound to obey” the “Lawes of Nature.” Again, the idea that by identifying with whales, humans climb up the chain of being up to beastliness to become powerful like whales (Brayton 61), fits with this notion. Humans can rise to becoming governors but this elevated status does not preclude them from dying, and, as we have seen previously, can include grotesque and beastly behavior.

In this chapter, I explored the schema of whales as superior to humans in size, body, and sheer power, as well as humans who remind us of whales in their power. I also highlighted examples of ways in which elite, cetaceous humans are still fallible like other humans and perhaps not godly. Whales are seen as godly in their magnificent stature and in their ability to communicate with gods in various stories. Whales are also quite the opposite of gods when they are likened to corrupt, base people who manipulate and feed off of the weakness of less powerful people. Whales’ basest instincts liken them to elite humans who will do anything to attain power, but their grandeur likens them to gods and raises them above humanity. Whales’ ability to swallow large amounts of food or belch them back up again makes them both predatory and also able to bring people back from the dead. In literature starting with the Bible, whales eat humans, but in these same
stories, they often regurgitate them completely intact. In their simultaneously wild, animalistic and also powerful, godly nature, whales embody a great paradox. The idea of the sublime characterizes this paradox in one word, as it encompasses whales’ majesty as well as their beastliness. In Chapter 4, I will elaborate further on whales’ beastliness, particularly its monstrous connotations, as they apply to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*, and Lyly’s *Gallathea*. 
Chapter 4: Whales as Sea Monsters

Monstrosity can take on connotations of wrathfulness, spectacle, and the inhuman. While in Chapter 3 we saw that beastliness ties whales to elite members of society such as monarchs, in this chapter, we will see instances in which cetaceous monsters are considered sub-human. Whales are also commodified as otherworldly monsters for the purpose of display in museums and as byproducts with which to make household products. Whales are allied with humanity more often than not in *Moby-Dick*, but Moby-Dick himself is a vengeful monster that wins in the end of the novel in his battle against humanity. Whales also threaten humanity in classical mythology that portrays them as hungering to devour virgins.

When whales are conquerable, rather than conquerors such as Moby-Dick, their bodies become relics of an exotic, chaotic, distant reality in the depths of the sea, for purposes of human viewing and daily use. In *A True Report and Exact Description of a Mighty Sea-Monster, or Whale* (1617), we see English people wondering at the spectacle of a cetaceous monster washed up on a beach due to natural stranding. By its removal from the sea, the whale literally comes closer to human territory, and it is then also within the metaphorical grasp of humans. Humans can better understand what they can see and touch, and climb onto. They burn down the blubber of such a creature and extract its very teeth (or, in some cases, baleen) and bones for their own use. Royalty claim ownership over these great animals, and their bodies become highly sought-after prizes for the elite people in society. No longer is the whale superior, but possession of the whale’s body parts demarcates certain members of society as superior to others.
In *Moby-Dick*, only one human – Ishmael – lives to tell the tale of Moby-Dick’s wrath, and he brings home no relic other than his own memory to create a spectacle out of this monster for human consumption. Moby-Dick does win in the end, and therefore remains godly in his status. Moby-Dick is a character in his own right, and he defends himself against Ahab’s relentless attacks by being even more relentless. Moby-Dick the monster is larger than life, at least human life, as whales should be according to the natural order that their sheer physical stature suggests. This whale is not destined for museums, palaces, corsets, parasols, or lamp oil.

Although Melville’s masterpiece is the first book to come to mind when we consider the concept of whales in literature, it may in fact be the novel or literary work that I have considered thus far that is the least actually about whales. Annie Dillard writes that in this novel “the whale is the tool of interpretation and not its object” (150). I find that the “object [of] interpretation” is instead humanity. Because Ahab cannot contain Moby-Dick and process his blubber and bones to display, sell, and make a spectacle of as proof of his victory over said whale, the novel centers on the futility of humans’ battle with nature. The novel is a prime illustration of the constant American pursuit of the impossible, at all costs.

I argue that the whale embodies what American people strive to accomplish. The Sperm whale specifically fulfills the ideals of American living: “It does seem to me, that herein we see the rare virtue of a strong individuality, and the rare virtue of thick walls, and the rare virtue of interior spaciousness” (Melville 2003 361-362). In describing the inside of a Sperm whale, Ishmael also describes American society’s emphases on building oneself into something entirely self-made and insular – possessing “a strong
individuality” and “thick walls” – and owning one’s own property with “interior spaciousness.” Therefore, this monstrous being is relatable through its embodiment of very human, and specifically American, aspirations, yet it is also unattainable, since these aspirations are elitist. However, three centuries earlier, in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Caliban’s more ambiguously monstrous nature makes him vulnerable, and we will see that his particular cetaceous nature aligns him with the most marginalized members of human society rather than the most elite.

I define Caliban as cetaceous because of his aforementioned ambiguity. He is not human or fish or monster, but rather is all of these creatures. Caliban is the only cetaceous literary figure we have seen that is specifically supposed to be played by a human actor; while Moby-Dick comes to life only in the format of the written novel, and Agar does not appear on stage in *Gallathea*, Caliban constitutes one of the main roles in *The Tempest* with many spoken lines. I am interested in the union of monstrosity and humanity that this theatrical choice reinforces: Caliban may be played by a human, but he is the most sub-human character in the play, and when Trinculo and Stephano first see him, they think he is a dead fish washed ashore, much like the beached whale in *A True Report* (1617).

One of the few details of Caliban’s history that we learn is that he attempted to have sex with Miranda against her will. Caliban follows in a line of cetaceous monsters known for the sexual threat that they pose to young virginal women. Additionally, though, Caliban is himself a victim of enslavement and exploitation. Prospero, Stephano, and Trinculo all use Caliban for their own profit. He possesses valuable skills – knowledge about the island and its resources – and marginalized traits – exoticism and
dark skin – which his imperialistic masters see as opportunities for their own gain. The monstrous is the exploitable here. The monstrous can also be capitalized upon in its spectacle.

Kelly Bushnell has explored the phenomenon of whale bodies as spectacle in exhibits in Victorian English museums. Whales were among a series of sea creatures in museum exhibits, but were considered the most “fascinating[ly]” monstrous sea creatures (Bushnell “Politics and Poetics” 1). Bushnell describes that whales’ entire preserved carcasses were parts of traveling exhibits as early as 1383 in England, but increasingly effective whaling technologies increased the frequency of these exhibits during the Victorian era (Bushnell “Politics and Poetics” 4-5). This was a rare opportunity for people to see the whale in its entirety, and the fact that humans could conquer this creature considered to be synonymous with sea monsters made these exhibits all the more spectacular.

When we consider human perceptions of whales, the monstrous stands in for humans’ fears about themselves. Monstrosity and homosexuality are equated, as well as monstrosity and exoticism – or non-Anglo, non-white identity. Whales help us to understand problematic dynamics between humans and nature as well as between socially elevated members of society and socially “othered” members of society.

**Monstrosity in Moby-Dick**

The word “monster” occurs 58 times in *Moby-Dick*, which is surprising considering the superhuman and godlike connotations that whales also have in the novel (Melville 2016). If some whales are considered sea monsters, others are very human in their maternal ability to nurture their young, and others are superior to most humans
because of the Shakespeare-like shape of their heads, and their ability to insulate themselves even against the cold waters of the Arctic. The most monstrous whale we see in the novel is Moby-Dick himself, who is described in legends that the whalers tell as, """A very white, and famous, and most deadly immortal monster"""" (Melville 2003 306). Moby-Dick’s reputation precedes him, and the whale himself only enters the scene in the last 30 pages of this 650-page novel. His “white” exterior is significant, as is his ability to be simultaneously “deadly” and “immortal;” he is powerful and insurmountable, which is precisely why Ahab sets his mind on defeating Moby-Dick.

As Caliban’s darkness signifies his lack of agency, so Moby-Dick’s whiteness signifies his power, in a context of American white supremacy: he appears to Ahab in the water first as “a white living spot no bigger than a white weasel,” and then bares his “white, glistening teeth, floating up from the undiscoverable bottom” (Melville 2003 627). Therefore, the first image we have of Moby-Dick surfacing in the novel is that of a “white” patch of his back and then that of his terrifying and perfect “teeth.” His exaggerated whiteness mirrors geopolitical hierarchies in which white people attain privileges that are “undiscoverable” to non-white people. His whiteness is made divine in this statement comparing him to a god: “not Jove, not that great majesty Supreme! did surpass the glorified White Whale as he so divinely swam” (Melville 2003 626). Like a god, Moby-Dick’s characterization – “White Whale” – is capitalized, and his whiteness contributes to his “great majesty” and his “glorified” and “divine[]” characterization.

Starbuck questions the madness of Ahab’s pursuits soon before he and Ahab both die: """Shall we keep chasing this murderous fish till he swamps the last man? Shall we be dragged by him to the bottom of the sea? Shall we be towed by him to the infernal
world?” and the answer to his question is yes (Melville 2003 641). We see in this passage that “the bottom of the sea” is equivalent to “the infernal world.” Moby-Dick’s monstrosity may be divine, but it is also tied to Hell, like the whale whose belly is equivalent to Sheol or Hell in the Book of Jonah (Complete Jewish Version 2.3, King James Version 2.2). As Starbuck sees it, and he is correct, when chasing Moby-Dick, the whalers’ deaths are inevitable. This is a monster that cannot be exploited past ineffectually aiming harpoons at him which only serve to lodge in his blubber and anger him more. The whalers will pay a price for abusing this monster. After a three-day chase, the whalers lose their doomed battle against Moby-Dick.

At the same time that he is wary of Moby-Dick’s murderous and monstrous character, Ishmael does make a distinction between whales and sea monsters. He draws attention to the many inaccurate paintings and descriptions of whales, going back to ancient Hindu and Christian paintings of whales, in a chapter entitled “Of the Monstrous Picture of Whales.” Ishmael rationalizes these paintings, “generally Richard III. whales, with dromedary humps, and very savage,” by the fact that it is difficult for most people to have a real idea of what a whole whale looks like, unless they have gone on a whaling ship (Melville 2003 314). Whales have yet to be painted accurately because, plainly stated, “the living leviathan has never yet fairly floated himself for his portrait” (Melville 2003 314). It makes sense, therefore, that most portrayals of them would be exaggerated, imagined, and conflated with mythical tales of sea monsters. Ishmael concludes that, in order to avoid inaccuracies in portraying whales, “the great Leviathan is that one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last,” and “the only mode in which you can derive even a tolerable idea of his living contour, is by going a whaling yourself”
(Melville 2003 315, 316). Ishmael, therefore, recognizes the real majesty and monstrosity of the “Leviathan,” but not the fabricated vilifying of it. The whale is monstrous because of its great whiteness and great teeth, but not because it possesses “dromedary humps” or other “Richard the III”-like beastly qualities in its appearance. Shakespeare’s history is the most well-known account of Richard the III’s life and his characterization is likely that to which Ishmael refers, just as he compares the Sperm whale’s forehead to the Bard’s own forehead. Shakespeare’s allusions to whales, however, do play into the kind of Richard the III-like exaggerations that Ishmael criticizes.

**Monstrous Whales in *Hamlet***

The most famous, if brief, Shakespearean allusion to whales occurs in *Hamlet* when Polonius says, “Very like a whale,” confirming Hamlet’s suggestion that the clouds above them look cetaceous (III.ii.366). First, Hamlet has compared the cloud formation to a camel or a weasel. The fact that these clouds might look like a camel, a weasel, and a whale at the same time is unlikely, and it seems as though Hamlet is trying to goad Polonius into agreeing with his contradicting statements. However, it is interesting that Hamlet and Polonius would presume to know enough about what a whale looks like that they would be as comfortable comparing the shape of a cloud to a whale as to land animals like camels and weasels. This supports the notion that beached whales in Renaissance England constituted an important public spectacle, especially because royalty such as Hamlet and his kinsmen were not likely to have gone on whaling ships and seen whales in their natural habitat. Furthermore, Hamlet’s choice of the whale metaphor may indicate his state of emotional turmoil and madness because of whales’ connotations elsewhere in Shakespeare’s plays.
As I discussed in Chapter 2, whales in Shakespeare usually suggest excess and predation, including sexual predation. Roger Trienens considers the context of whale metaphors in Shakespeare’s other works and in medieval literature prior to Shakespeare as well as his Renaissance contemporaries’ writing, and determines, “the classical *motif* of the whale assaulting a virgin and the medieval *motif* of the whale devouring small fish are united and…the whale which Hamlet sees in the cloud should suggest lust even more strongly than the camel or the weasel” (Trienens 213). 25 Hamlet, therefore, ultimately lands on a beastly metaphor to describe the clouds rather than an innocuous one. Hamlet is likely thinking of whales like that of *Pericles* that eats everything in its path in a single gulp and the whale in *All’s Well that Ends Well* that Parolles uses to describe Bertram: “I knew the young Count to be a dangerous and lascivious boy, who is a whale to virginity and devours all the fry it finds” (IV.iii.247-250; quoted in Trienens 213). Being “a whale to virginity” means destroying sexual purity. Whales are synonymous with voraciousness, in both their appetite and sexuality: they consume not only “all the fry” but also “virginity,” like Agar in *Gallathea* threatens to do. Hamlet is disturbed, and he certainly wants to disturb Polonius, so his cetaceous metaphor serves his purpose.

Whereas Shakespeare uses cetaceous metaphor to convey certain qualities of characters like Bertram as well as the rich misers of *Pericles*, John Lyly makes the

---

25 Here, Trienens refers to myths such as that of Perseus, Andromeda and the sea-monster, in which Perseus saves Andromeda from being “devoured by the ferocious sea-monster sent by the angry god of the sea” (Murgatroyd 154); as well as the myth of Alcides, the virgin, and the sea-monster, in which, “young Alcides…did redeem / The virgin tribute paid by howling Troy / To the sea monster” (Shakespeare *The Merchant of Venice* III.ii.55; quoted in Williams *Shakespeare’s Sexual Language* 335). Both of these myths call to mind the virgin in *Gallathea* who is sacrificed to the sea monster as well. In none of these cases do the sea-monsters explicitly violate the virgins’ purity, but their insatiable appetites implicitly threaten the women’s virginity in addition to their lives.
cetaceous monster its own character. As I mentioned briefly in my Introduction, in her essay on the “demon-girl” in Argentinian film of today, Deborah Martin makes an important connection between monstrosity and lesbianism that applies to Lyly’s Gallathea. Martin describes that the film La niña santa, directed by Lucrecia Martel, unleashes “lesbian aporia in the straight narrative, telling of the further ‘dangers’ to the social order in uncontained, unchannelled adolescent female sexuality. The monstrous, the uncanny and the spectre have all been theorised as that which haunts the straight mind or threatens straight culture” (64). Lyly’s subversion of heterosexism is quite modern, so it follows that it touches on themes that continue to surface in explorations of lesbianism in art today. As I investigated in Chapter 2, Gallathea and Phyllida experience lesbian love without knowing it, so that the need to label it as lesbian is fairly irrelevant, and their love is compelled by their need to hide from a sea monster by disguising themselves as men. In this way, Gallathea and Phyllida similarly “haunt[] the straight mind and threaten[] straight culture.” Even after they discover that each other are women, they continue to be in love, and Venus turns one of them into a man so that they can stay together.

Even though the sea monster Agar does not ultimately threaten Gallathea and Phyllida, their lesbianism constitutes a kind of monstrosity of its own in the heteronormative world. In escaping one monster, they become another: their lesbianism “uncontain[s]” “the social order” by defying the idea that they need to have cisgender male partners. Instead, one of the women will effectively have a transgender male partner, since Venus will turn her lover into a man. In other words, by averting the fate of Agar being “a whale to [their] virginity,” as Shakespeare would put it (All's Well That
Ends Well IV.iii.247-250; quoted. in Trienens 213), these women monstrously destroy their own purity. They express their sexual desire without involving any cisgender man or monster in the sexual equation. Even their initial acts of cross-dressing threaten the social order because they defy the law that the fairest virgins in the land must sacrifice themselves to Agar. We see a doubling of the monster here: both the monster who plays the role of preying on the virgin and also the virgin herself, who “uncontain[s]” her own sexuality, are monsters in this society.

Victorian Culture and Cetaceous Monster Voyeurism

Inspired in part by Steve Mentz’ groundbreaking “blue studies,” or oceanic literary criticism, Kelly Bushnell studies monstrous whales in Victorian literature and visual culture (“Re: Whales/sea monsters”). Bushnell highlights that Victorian English people displayed whales in museums and considered them to be sea monsters (“Politics and Poetics” 1). She notes the paradox of labeling whales as monstrous and simultaneously dominating them and taming their image for museum display and household use:

Monsters monster their world, making the entire sea a potentially monstrous environment. But this environment can be domesticated, made civilized, and even monetized in an aquarium, museum, or exhibition…. Sea monsters live in ‘turbid’ monstrous places where man cannot, but if you can put something in a glass case, or parade it around on a train car and charge admission to see it, you have bested it. If you have harpooned it and hoisted it alongside your ship you have conquered it and with it the turbid world beneath the hull of that ship. If your wife wears a corset made rigid by the baleen of the sea monster you plucked from the turbid deep then you, as a nation, have domesticated that creature just like the ferocious predators in the London Zoo. Those creatures have been made a commodity, a price attached to them and their use. They are still monsters, they still disquiet the dreams of children and endanger the lives of mariners but, in this cultural moment in Victorian Britain, they can be caught and conquered. However, monsters prove time and again that their particular form of agency does not go gently into that good night of categorization or exhibition. The monster is powerful, chaotic, it resists classification and takes many forms. Morley’s ‘Antediluvian Cruise’ for
Household Worlds, however, in touring the geological habitats of those monsters, also recognizes their limited temporal habitat: ‘If we go farther now, we pass, perhaps, the bounds of life, and we pass, certainly the bounds of knowledge’ (495).

(Bushnell “Monstrous Taxonomy” 38)

As I have suggested as well, whales and their environments can work together to defeat humans. Monstrous whales and their environments both affect each other: “Monsters monster their world.” Therefore, with the entire ocean on whales’ side, humans may be able to trap, contain, and observe the remnants of whales they have hunted in voyeuristic settings, but there is still a limit to their control over these monsters: they do not have intellectual, or metaphorical, control over them, because these monsters surpass humans’ “bounds of knowledge.” Humans use the bodies of these animals, the largest ever to have lived on earth, to make superfluous products like “corset” stays, and to create museum displays, and they catch them alive to put “in an aquarium.” In this way, humans have found a way to make whales’ monstrosity a “commodity” off of which they can profit, but “monsters prove time and again that their particular form of agency does not go gently into…categorization or exhibition.” This brings us back to whales’ essentially double nature: they are both beastly and princely, both conquerable and superhuman, both human-like and immortal. It is their sublime monstrosity that makes whales sought after and so desirable, but this same monstrosity “disquiet[s] the dreams of children and endanger[s] the lives of mariners.”

Alongside her investigation of museums and visual culture surrounding whales, Bushnell explicates Elizabeth Gaskell’s Sylvia’s Lover (1860) and R.M. Ballantyne’s Fighting the Whales (1863), which each feature a whaling character (“Monstrous Taxonomy” 1). In discussing Fighting the Whales, in keeping with Dan Brayton’s
suggestion that humans climb the natural order up to the level of beastliness (61), Bushnell suggests that the whale body “threatens the Victorian conception of natural order and the human place within (or rather atop) it” (“Monstrous Taxonomy” 3). Therefore, monstrosity is not that which lacks humanity. Rather, monsters trump humanity and the “natural order” that would locate “humans…atop…it.” This re-ordering of nature reestablishes humans’ reason to fear monstrous whales and feel inferior to them.

In Gaskell’s Sylvia’s Lovers, former whaler Daniel Robson still fears whales, despite his experience with hunting them: “‘‘There’ three things to be afeared on...there’s t’ ice, that’s bad; there’s dirty weather, that’s worse; and there whales theirselves, as is t’worst of all’’” (quoted in “Monstrous Taxonomy” 1). Whales are “worst of all,” worse than the treacherous sea and its “ice” and “dirty weather.” We have explored depictions of the sea as the antithesis to social order, but here, Bushnell notes, whales themselves embody “chao[s]” (“Monstrous Taxonomy” 38). This Victorian novel reflects a continuation of the attitude that Shakespeare and Lyly established about these mysterious and large sea creatures: they were sublime in the threat to civilization on land that they posed. Shakespeare’s Caliban is an interesting mix of sublimity, animalism, monstrosity, and exoticism; he is all of these things, as well as a sexual predator and a victim of Prospero’s prejudice.

Caliban as Cetaceous

In Shakespeare’s The Tempest, I read the character of Caliban as cetaceous. Apart from his “fins like arms,” Caliban is like a whale in his simultaneously humanlike, fishlike, and monstrous characterization (II.i.33). He is also mistaken for a fishy sea monster by Trinculo and Stephano; like a beached whale, he lies still on the ground, and
Trinculo and Stephano theorize about his fishiness just as the spectators in *A True Report* (1617) do. We have seen that humans project their own motivations and desires onto whales, such as elevation in the social hierarchy, and here Caliban’s deformed, and thereby formless, character makes him open to interpretation, reinforcing Bushnell’s point about how whales resist “categorization” (“Monstrous Taxonomy” 38). Like a large beached whale, whose blubbery body is a blank canvas onto which humans project, there is much to explore and theorize about Caliban.

Prospero and Miranda nurture and dote on Caliban when he is young, teaching him their language, but when he grows up and attempts to rape Miranda, Prospero punishes Caliban by enslaving him. Miranda follows in the tradition of virgin women who are nearly sacrificed to the (sexual) whims of cetaceous monsters but are thankfully saved. Rather than slaying Caliban in defense of his daughter’s honor, as the heroes of classical mythology do, Prospero enslaves Caliban. Caliban becomes his “subject[],” or his colonized inferior (Shakespeare *The Tempest* I.ii.341). Rather than embodying royalty as other cetaceous monsters do, then, Caliban embodies the colonial subject who is at the mercy of the monarch. Caliban is both perpetrator – to Miranda – and oppressed – by Prospero. Caliban’s monster-fish-human capabilities make him more than human, but as is typical of the paradoxical nature of cetaceous monsters in literature, Caliban is also sub-human, due to the way he is treated by his masters.

Critics have read Caliban as a racial “other,” as a colonial subject viewed as “savage” by his colonizers, and as an oppressed and enslaved person (Jaczminski 2). Like other cetaceous characters, Caliban leaves us feeling conflicted: he is both guilty of wrongdoing and wronged by others. Over the course of *The Tempest*, Trinculo and
Stephano add to our complicated and contradicting picture of Caliban, calling him, “strange fish,” “very shallow monster,” “very weak monster,” “most poor credulous monster,” “most perfidious and drunken monster,” “puppy-headed monster,” “most scurvy monster,” “abominable monster,” “most ridiculous monster,” “brave monster,” “man-monster,” “most ignorant monster,” and “half a fish and half a monster” (Shakespeare *The Tempest* II.ii, III.ii). Caliban is always “strange” or “monst[rous]” in Stephano and Trinculo’s eyes, but he additionally takes on the traits of dishonesty, trickery, foolishness, humanity, fishiness, and courage. He has non-human, or animal, traits that make him appear to be a “strange fish,” but he also has enough of a human-like body to be considered a “man-monster;” therefore, he cannot be limited to any single identity.

Caliban is every bit as multidimensional a character as any non-animal character in *The Tempest*, and is perhaps more so because of his many facets. There is reason to fear Caliban – he has threatened rape – but he is also completely at the mercy of his various masters – first Prospero and then Stephano. Caliban is powerless to those who dominate him, but he also possesses the power of knowledge that his masters – both Prospero and Stephano – need in order to survive on the island, such as where to acquire fresh water (Shakespeare *The Tempest* I.ii.337-338 and III.ii.66-67).

Caliban’s status as an island dweller contributes to the multiplicity of his identities; he operates both in a marine context and a terrestrial context. Caliban invokes watery locales, in fact, when he curses Prospero: “All the infections that the sun sucks up / From bogs, fens, flats, on Prosper fall, and make him / By inchmeal a disease!” (Shakespeare *The Tempest* II.ii.1-3). Caliban curses Prospero with an “infection” from
the still water, illustrating that Prospero is not the only character who uses the water in order to enact his wrath against other beings. In another one of the few scenes in which Shakespeare grants Caliban a particularly evocative voice, Caliban describes his relationships to his surroundings: “the isle is full of noises, / Sounds and sweet airs that hurt not” (Shakespeare The Tempest III.iii.134-135). This is a surprisingly poetic description, coming from a character generally perceived as brutish. Caliban’s relationship to the land itself is not antagonistic: “the isle is full of” phenomena “that hurt not,” contributing to the idea that Caliban had a symbiotic relationship to the island before Prospero invaded and colonized it, disrupting Caliban’s relationship to his home.

Prospero’s language to describe Caliban is uncomplicatedly negative: he refers to Caliban as “poisonous slave got by the devil himself,” “most lying slave,” “savage,” “beast,” “demi-devil,” and “thing of darkness” (Shakespeare The Tempest I.ii, IV.i, V.i). Additionally, Miranda curses “thy vile race” when addressing Caliban (Shakespeare The Tempest I.ii.358). Modern critics read Caliban’s character as racialized, exoticized, and “othered,” both because he is treated as though he is of an inferior race and because he is described as dark-skinned (Jaczminski 4). Daniel Jaczminski sees Caliban’s animalism, and therefore non-humanity, as contributing to his marginalized position in the context of the island society: “[b]y attributing animal features to the character’s physiognomy (and thus hinting at its uncivilized condition) Shakespeare indeed positioned his Caliban on the very edge of humanity” (1). Caliban may be a perpetrator, therefore, but he also represents the marginalized and oppressed person who is considered to be, and treated like, an “animal.” By occupying a space between humanity and animalism, Caliban is more cetaceous, since whales are human-like and beastly at the same time.
Stephano and Trinculo, too, see Caliban as an opportunity for conquest. His “otherness” marks him as a potential object of domination and commodification: Stephano remarks, “If I can recover him, and keep him tame, and get to Naples with him, he’s a present for any emperor that ever trod on neat’s leather” (Shakespeare The Tempest II.i.67-69). Caliban is cetaceous in his marketability and his ability to fascinate people, like the commodified and “domesticated” monstrous whales that Bushnell describes (“Monstrous Taxonomy” 38). He is a wild creature to “tame” and to make into a luxurious “present for” royalty, just like the concept of the “royal fish” in the United Kingdom. His very body is a fine product. Caliban is worthy of this kind of fascination and royal society, but he is also considered inferior to such society.

In the schema I explored in Chapter 3, Caliban’s monstrosity might make him considered to be royal; but here this cetaceous beastliness moves him down the chain of being to “the very edge of humanity” (Jaczminski 1). Prospero characterizes Caliban as a “thing of darkness,” suggesting both that he is not enlightened and that he is literally not light, or is a person of color. Jaczminiski writes that many critics problematize this “pejorative portrayal of a character that could easily have been interpreted as a representative of the New World or Africa by the Elizabethan audience… [and] recognize[] Caliban as a victim of racism” (4). Jaczminski further asks why Caliban does not refute these negative characterizations of himself when they are spoken directly in front of him (6). Caliban is simultaneously complicated and human and also simplistic and less than human, without a voice to defend himself. This monster is dangerous and sexually voracious, but given that other characters treat him as inferior to them, the threat he poses is more threatening in a brutish way than in a socially powerful way, like that of
the royal whales we have seen before. Caliban is cetaceous in the way that he allies himself with marginalized members of society, just as dolphins and other whales whose sexual behavior we can read as queer do.

Furthermore, Caliban operates in a world in which people believe that whales eat human carcasses when they drown at sea, and such whales are described in ways very similar to Caliban’s characterizations: Alonso bemoans Ferdinand’s fate when he believes that he was lost at sea: “O thou mine heir / Of Naples and Milan, what strange fish / Hath made his meal on thee?” (Shakespeare The Tempest II.i.111-113). I read this hungry “strange fish” as a whale because there is precedent in Shakespeare’s Pericles for another character, Pericles, worrying that whales, which are synonymous with large fish, will eat Thaisa’s sunken body. Furthermore, characters express concern in both The Tempest and Pericles about the “ooze” that coats the ocean floor along which whales swim. Just as Pericles worries about Thaisa being buried in the ocean floor’s ooze (Shakespeare Pericles III.i.60), so Alonso laments, “Therefore my son i’ th’ ooze is bedded” (Shakespeare The Tempest IV.i.100). Ariel also uses cetaceous language to describe Alonso’s emergence from the waves after the shipwreck: “the never-surfeited sea / Hath caused to belch up you” (Shakespeare The Tempest III.iii.55-56). As in Pericles, the sea is anthropomorphic in its ability to miraculously regurgitate humans who could have died in it, just as the whale that swallowed Jonah “belche[s]” him up. Therefore, the sea may be associated with filthy “ooze” and sub-human cetaceous creatures such as Caliban, but it is also forgiving and sometimes life-saving.

The sea is a burial ground full of “ooze” at the same time as being a powerful life-force; it propels many a Shakespearean plot, as it is the vehicle by which Prospero uses
his powers, the force that brings Prospero and Miranda to the island in the first place, and the power that is capable of both sinking people and delivering them safely to shore. This calls to mind myths both of whales eating humans and also of whales transporting them safely to dry land. The marine and the cetaceous are co-conspirators, both capable of great good and great harm toward humanity.

Whales and sea monsters are considered synonymous in much of literature, including nonfictional accounts such as *A True Report* (1617). However, whales’ beastliness contributes to humans seeing them as sublime since part of humans’ fascination with them is due to their large and threatening stature. Monstrosity is also associated with social difference and marginalization, since lesbianism, for example, is a way that humans can “monster their world,” to use Bushnell’s terminology (“Monstrous Taxonomy” 38). In a different but related manner, Caliban’s, a person of color with fish-like and monstrous characteristics, threatens established societal norms when he tries to overthrow his colonial master, Prospero, in order to reestablish the island society under his own and Stephano’s rule. Therefore, cetaceous monsters promote socially subversive behaviors – Gallathea and Phyllida fall in love because they cross-dress in order to avoid being devoured by Agar – and enact socially subversive behaviors themselves as well.

The monstrous may be exploitable in some cases, but it also displaces and re-conceives of social norms away from land, in a marine context. The sea is monstrous, too, because it provides a liminal space that ships can occupy without having a fixed location, and where seafaring people and cetaceous monsters alike can challenge conventions that exist on land. Additionally, the sea and whales have similar powers of
swallowing humans but also bringing them back to shore, as a part of their paradoxically monstrous nature.
Conclusion

Whales are full of paradoxes. Occupying a place both far removed from humans and generally inaccessible to them, whales are a foil to human tendencies ranging vastly from power mongering to altruism. Whales can be human-like, sub-human, and superhuman. Their beastliness likens them to greedy monarchs as well as to stereotypes of the people who are subjugated by these monarchs’ colonialism.

At their worst, whales are a foil for human tendencies of greed, ruthless revenge, and manipulation. Whales are larger than life, immortal due to the power that they embody in humans’ eyes. Their large bodies make them impossible for humans to understand them, or even see them, in their entirety, adding to the interpretive possibilities that humans can project onto them.

As Kelly Bushnell succinctly explains, “monsters prove time and again that their particular form of agency does not go gently into…categorization or exhibition” (Bushnell “Monstrous Taxonomy” 38). Conversely, Annie Dillard argues, “the whale is the tool of interpretation and not its object” (150). Therefore, according to Dillard, rather than having a multiplicity of possible interpretations, whales are not meant to be interpreted. Bushnell would argue that whales can be analyzed and studied and can indeed be the “object [of interpretation],” but that such interpretation is not easily done. At the same time that I agree that whales in literature are often only a vessel for humans to understand themselves, I also find value in Bushnell’s point that, although we must not expect interpretation of whales to be simple, it is not impossible.

26 Even today, we see sea monsters as an apt metaphor for power-mongering politicians. A commentator on National Public Radio compared presidential candidate Donald Trump to a sea monster: “Trump is the creature that has emerged out of the black lagoon” (The Colin McEnroe Show).
The two interpretations of whales in literature that feel truest to me in regards to whales outside of literature are that whales’ relationships to humans are sublime and that whales are multifarious. They are utterly unattainable, occupying depths of the sea that humans cannot reach without the use of submarines, and they are also literally attainable and tradeable and profitable, when their bodies are harvested to be made into lamp oil, petticoats, and other household goods. They are fish-like, but they are mammals. Humans see whales as both monstrous and godly or superhuman, allowing for the conclusion to be that they are sublime. Different species of whales take on different traits: Ancient Romans saw dolphins as friendly; whale watchers today see Humpbacks as particularly charismatic; and Melville saw the Sperm whale as possessing “great genius” which was “declared in his doing nothing in particular to prove it” (Moby-Dick 2003 407). Even if these particular characterizations underestimate the complexity of whale psychology and personality, whales do certainly have different natures, from species to species and from individual to individual.

Whales propel the plot of many oceanic stories, and ambiguously cetaceous creatures complicate seaside stories in interesting and contradicting ways as well. Whales teach us about ourselves, because of the ways we endeavor to understand whales, which are patently not understandable. Whales are indomitable, and yet, humans have long attempted to capture their essences as trophies of our species’ superiority. Even after having depleted the world’s whale populations significantly, humans cannot claim to know the inner workings of whales’ brains, but instead better understand our own tireless and futile tendencies to try to dominate that which is impossible to grasp.
One of the most comprehensive and complex ways that humans have attempted to explicate the whale, and the human relationship to the whale, has been through literature. I find that the common threads of seeing whales as great, large, highly intelligent, majestic, and terrifying, do speak to whales’ essential nature: sublime but formless. Literature keeps whales’ inherently contradictory nature intact. If we see whales’ huge, broad bodies as a blank canvas, humans writing about whales are the painters attempting to put something they can look at and understand onto this blank formlessness. These literary portraits get us closer to this creature which may indeed in its full breadth “remain unpainted to the last” (Melville 315).

Now, humans commodify whale imagery by portraying whales as cute and loving with products such as greeting cards and children’s toys, and before that, humans made commodities out of whales’ very bodies. However, whales represent a great deal more to humans, and emblematize our dependent, sometimes symbiotic, sometimes exploitative relationship to nature.

Whales are similar enough to humans that we identify with them and make them characters in their own rights. Moby-Dick is a most vengeful, wronged character, much like Malvolio in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*; both characters may not get the last word, but they do have the penultimate word. Amidst a comedy ending in two marriages, Malvolio’s heartbreak over having been tricked into pursuing his lady, Olivia, still rings loudly after the curtain has fallen. Amidst an exploration of the human psyche and its preoccupation with violence, Moby-Dick’s human-like desire for revenge and non-human, leviathanic power leave the reader’s mind reeling with fright and awe. *Moby-Dick* simultaneously allows readers to identify with the White Whale and also to see him
as oppressive and representative of white supremacy and those who benefit from that hierarchy in the US. Similarly, Malvolio is a character who we pity, but he is also a tyrant. Again, cetaceous characters are never one-dimensional.

As I have mentioned, *Moby-Dick* is not the first novel to portray whales in all of their paradoxes and ineffability, although it is the best-known. Melville is informed by the cetaceous texts that have come before him, as is evidenced by the way he begins the novel with “Extracts (Supplied by a Sub-Sub-Librarian).” *Moby-Dick* is less of an earnest representation of humans’ conceptions of whales than earlier texts like *Gallathea, A True Account*, and *Pericles*, which by their very grappling to understand whales epitomize whales’ formlessness and fascination to the human mind.

By not attempting to quantify the unquantifiable, I find that these texts do greater justice to whales than science can, because they are comprehensive, sometimes misinformed, but never simplistic. Literature gives whales a paradoxical but broad definition and characterization. Ishmael claims that the best way to observe whales is out at sea, but I argue that in order to witness whales’ sublimity it is essential that one also read literary texts.
Coda

In this thesis, I have limited my scope to literatures of England and the United States as well as to the genres of drama and fiction. However, I have encountered whales in Latin American literature, especially that of Gabriel García Márquez, and I am aware of the presence of many whales in scientific fiction as well, such as *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams. Therefore, I intend to continue this project of investigating whale metaphor in the literatures of a wider range of countries and genres. I also hope to explore the concept of the sublime further, and to put it in its 18th century literary context more thoroughly. I hope to write a nonfiction book on this subject in my postgraduate career. This thesis has been a wonderful opportunity to start my research and has revealed that whale metaphor literature provides an optimally narrow but also rich topic for further exploration.
Works Cited:


Works Referenced:

