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## Captain Ahab and King Lear

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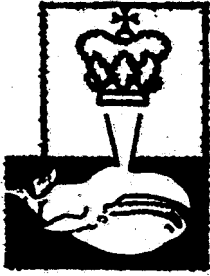
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*Kenneth Lash*

## CAPTAIN AHAB AND KING LEAR



WILLIAM ELLERY SEDGWICK called Captain Ahab "the one character in American literature whom one would dare name beside Hamlet and Lear." I believe that one can do a good deal more than "name" Ahab "beside" Lear.

The connection is easily perceived. Take, for instance, these two quotations:

... in the aberrations of his reason, we discover a mighty irregular power of reasoning, immethodised from the ordinary purposes of life, but exerting its powers, as the wind blows where it listeth, at will on the corruptions and abuses of mankind.

It is the most fearless artistic facing of the ultimate cruelty of things in our literature.

To which character does the first quotation refer, Captain Ahab or King Lear? To which work does the second quotation refer, *King Lear* or *Moby Dick*? Although both William Hazlitt and G. Wilson Knight (respectively) had reference to *King Lear*, their comments would be not one whit less appropriate had they Ahab and his story in mind.

The profound influence of Shakespeare upon Melville is too patent for extended comment here. Melville himself acknowledged it explicitly many times. And, had he said not a word, *Moby Dick* would stand as towering testament.

This general, overall influence devolves into a specific closely knit relationship between *Moby Dick* and *King Lear*. A far-

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reaching investigation of parallels is not my purpose; rather, as the title indicates, sights are to be focussed in each case upon the man maddened. Let us look at these two great old men, tracing first the lineaments wherein is told their deep kinship.

Both were rulers, kingly in fact and in spirit. And both had been "dethroned" from that part of themselves and of life which can give joy and peace, cut off inexorably from their happiness, both past and potential. As Ahab puts it: "Gifted with the high perception, I lack the low enjoying power; damned most subtly and malignantly! damned in the midst of Paradise!"

Yes, both are damned—in part through their frailty, in part through their greatness. If it is the cold and calculating heartlessness of his daughters that drives Lear to the hovel of madness, it is the inscrutable, indifferent malice of the white whale that sends Ahab down into the tight, sweaty cabin of monomania. And both eventually emerge in the full paraphernalia of a most acute and deep-seeing madness that finds its causal factor but a link in the chain of evil that rings the world around.

These are men driven mad by *awareness*, by what has been called "the tragic vision." They have, out of the inner necessities of their natures, looked straight upon the sun of truth and been made forever blind to blindness.

It is this spiritual greatness that is their tightest bond. Taken in and by themselves, the single incidents leading to the madness of Lear and Ahab are insufficient: filial ingratitude is "sharp-toothed," yes, but it had a history even in Lear's time; and that whales are sharp-toothed, every whaleman knows. It is not the act in itself that is primary, but rather the significance which both Ahab and Lear see *in* the act, its relationship to and bearing on the whole stream of circumstance and event which runs counter to man's deepest belief in the mercy and goodness of this world and its gods. It is this insight into the essentially metaphoric quality of a particular injustice that madness brings to Lear and heightens in Ahab; it is their refusal to blink this

vision that, in turn, reinforces their greatness—and their madness. For as Stanley Geist has pointed out, it is a vision essentially self-destructive, a realization which so shakes the vessel of man that it cannot help but crack.

Yet the soul remains intact. More than that, it swells and grows until it is the whole man. Both Lear and Ahab become naked soul, huge soul. And it is in this power of soul that they touch again, for at their heights they are both men of Promethean defiance. Lear dares the storm to do its worst; Ahab grasps in his hand the lightning rod. That last essence of god-like pride and sovereignty is the thing they would not yield.

And so both these men, starved and battered by an unprincipled universe, turn their backs upon irresponsible man and put their questions to the gods themselves. The very *Pequod* is "An Anacharsis Cloutz deputation from all the ends of the earth, accompanying old Ahab . . . to lay the world's grievances before that bar from which not very many of them ever come back." And Lear's last speech asks: "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life, And thou no breath at all?" Their questions are of justice, final and cosmic, and for answer they receive that most peremptory indefiniteness—death.

It would be a mistake, however, to see these men as simple equivalents. Above and beyond their common traits is a spate of differences so striking as to make one wonder that resemblance remains.

It is obvious that, before his madness, neither Lear's thoughts nor actions approach Ahab's in stature. Unable as I am to accept Wilson Knight's concept of Lear as a great soul linked to a "puerile intellect," Lear's was, at least, an unharnessed, unrealized intellect: "he hath ever but slenderly known himself." And his life, as hinted, has been one of autocratic rule and impetuous pleasure: "The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash."

But Ahab has been on the sea these forty years, thinking, see-

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ing, feeling the stuff of which his madness is to be made. A great intellect from the start, even in his madness "not one jot of his great natural intellect had perished." If Lear shows, as Hazlitt says, the "logic of passion," Ahab presents the passion of logic.

Lear can be more soft and yet more vitriolic than Ahab; he can be more dazed and helpless; he can welcome death where Ahab spits at it; he can quarrel, misjudge, plead, forgive. He can temporize and turn back. But Ahab? Madness only turns his clay to bronze: "Did you fixedly gaze, too, upon that ribbed and dented brow; there also, you would see still stranger footprints—the footprints of his one unsleeping, ever-pacing thought."

These smaller differences lead to the larger: Ahab is a more consistent, more organic character. His life spins inevitably out of himself. Lear, in a manner of speaking, is pushed.

And what of this push, this match held to the tinder that was Lear? We note immediately that the match was supplied by Lear himself, in the jealousy of his nature and the frailty of his judgment. Not so with Ahab, who was already engaged in deadly battle with the forces of the sea when Moby Dick "reaped" his leg.

And the striking of the match? In the one instance, by Regan and Goneril—beings whose warp is in part the work of Lear himself and in part the eternal human potential for twistedness. At least their frailties may be comprehended and their ambitions perceived. But what of Moby Dick—a thing that Ahab never made? A beast with a history of gratuitous malice! a "dumb" thing possessed with a cunning and contriving malignity! Who put it into this monster to chew off legs it cannot eat? Ahab is already pounding at the door of the Creator while Lear is still reviling a helpless humanity. And so Lear becomes an accuser where Ahab is a champion.

Both are given the motive for madness in the horrible spec-

tacle of evil's outrage and conquest of good. But whereas Lear's ability to withstand and to fight the forked injustices of this world is but little and late, Ahab's is great and ever present. He will uphold man's stature in the teeth of anything and everything; he will somehow hunt down and outrage the outrageous, be it agent or god:

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the moldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to us. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me. For could the sun do that, then could I do the other; . . . Who's over me? Truth hath no confines.

With this difference in origin and motivation, it is but logical that the very madness itself is disparate. For Lear, it is solely a terrible affliction: "O let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!" And Ahab, too, suffers from its horrors, yet finds in it an unsparable advantage. He says to Pip: "There is that in thee, poor lad, which I feel too curing to my malady . . . and for this hunt, my malady becomes my most desired health." In this one sees reflected the very great difference between the type of madness suffered by Ahab and that of Lear. For Lear eventually cracks and crumbles into a complete, helpless, mumbling insanity. Well may he fear this most tragic of ends—the loss of identity. But Ahab is not insane in this sense; he is obsessed. Obsession partakes of insanity without fully being it;

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hence Ahab is helpless only in respect to the obsession itself, but in every other way retains his full intellectual power and awareness. He is fully cognizant of his monomania, and, as we have seen, realizes in full logicity that the obsession is in itself the most potent factor in bringing about its desired ends. This is a "controlled" madness, which serves to clamp Ahab's purpose in a vise that a balanced will could not turn. He analyzes it perfectly: "They think me mad—Starbuck does; but I'm demoniac, I am madness maddened! That wild madness that is only calm to comprehend itself!"

And so his power and determination are beyond those of a sane man, are in fact a match for the very gods themselves:

I now prophesy that I will dismember my dismemberer. Now, then, be the prophet and the fulfiller one. That's more than ye, ye great gods, ever were. I laugh and hoot at ye, ye cricket players, ye pugilists. . . . Swerve me? Ye cannot swerve me, else ye swerve yourselves! man has ye there. Swerve me? The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run.

Is there another speech in our language that creates such stark terror, such gaping awe? Lear's "Blow, winds" speech approaches it, but Lear is calling upon the gods to punish "ingrateful man." Ahab is warning the gods to look to themselves! Lear's essential trait is the passion and beauty of his humanity. He is his greatest self in his magnificent "O, reason not the need" speech; in his tender portrayal to Cordelia of the beauty they will find together in their prison cell; in his towering pity for the "loop'd and window'd raggedness" of the poor. The purposeless outrage of this great-souled old man creates "the supreme pathetic figure of our literature." And it is in this aspect of pathos that Lear and Ahab reach their most extreme opposition.

King Lear is the perfect Aristotelian hero: "noble"; possessed

of a "tragic flaw"; a man "like ourselves"; one whose downfall is capable of inspiring in us "pity and fear." Captain Ahab, in default of one of these requirements, sacrifices another. For Ahab is very little a man like ourselves, and therefore, aside from his scattered moments of normality, does not arouse pity in us.

Sedgwick sees this as a fault of characterization. He believes that Melville should have made Ahab a more poignant portrayal (see Chapter V of his magnificent book, *Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind*). For me, "Ahab" and "poignant" comprise a contradiction in terms. One might as well wish to cuddle Achilles or play darts with Hercules. Intellectual sympathy we must and do feel for Ahab; to separate his monomania from his great underlying humanity is to ignore the cause for the effect. The madness itself is enlisted in Ahab's fight against a hostile universe, perverted though his attack becomes. But to provoke emotional sympathy, pathos, Ahab would have to be more like us, hence *less like himself*. His very essence would be diluted, and it is this essence with which Melville is primarily concerned. Compare the deaths of Lear and Ahab:

Faced with the finality of Cordelia's death, the most meaningless and most intense of the long series of cruelties to which he has been subjected, Lear's heart cracks. He dies in uttermost defeat, with death itself the world's one kindness. Kent says:

Vex not his ghost: O, let him pass! he hates him  
That would upon the rack of this tough world  
Stretch him out longer.

Here is pathos, rendered even sharper by the fact that the world around Lear has more or less righted itself, but has done so a moment too late to save him.

How does Ahab die? Hideously. Mutilated, toyed with, staggered, battered in this infinitely decisive battle with the super-

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human, Ahab, led to the last wall, uses his final breath to cry out upon the destroyer a hymn of eternal defiance and hate:

Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee . . . let me then tow to pieces, while still chasing thee, though tied to thee, thou damned whale. *Thus*, I give up the spear!

And so Ahab, too, dies in defeat. But not pathetic defeat, for though his purpose is thwarted, his stature remains undiminished, his soul unconquered: "Oh, lonely death on lonely life! Oh, now I feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief."

Even in defeat, Ahab wins a victory. He is not humbled. We cannot pity him. We can admire or we can shudder, but we cannot pity. The alembic of our tears would but reduce him to our component parts, man's final stratagem in the face of the superior.

No, Melville did not falter in creating Ahab, any more than Shakespeare went astray in shaping Lear. Both are the rarest of all literary creations—the truly original character.

Lear is more the man, for he has something of the woman in him. Ahab is more the symbol, for he has something of the god in him.

If Lear is the quick of palpable life, Ahab is the quintessence of man's mythology.

Both were kings among men, hands among claws, eyes among the blind. Yet their paths have diverged. For King Lear sits in the sun with Cordelia, an integral in the recurring numbers of beauty; but Captain Ahab even now slips cursing from the jagged rocks as he tears at the chains of a dead Prometheus.