

THE NAMING OF CAPTAIN VERE IN MELVILLE'S BILLY BUDD

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When Herman Melville developed the role and character of Captain the Honorable Edward Fairfax Vere in *Billy Budd*, he did so with care and deliberation.¹ Furthermore, he chose a name for the captain which has provided much exercise for critics. The range of commentary is broad. For Richard Chase, Vere "is Man (*vir*)";² to Phil Withim, the name "at first glance suggests *veritas* 'truth,' but on second glance can as easily suggest *veritus* 'fear'";³ a third critic points out that "the name Vere came to have a pejorative connotation in nineteenth-century fiction where it was often used to suggest a vapid, if not actually villainous, aristocracy."⁴ Each of these critics offers an instructive conjecture on Vere's name; but unlikely interpretations are never far to seek, as in the claim that "'Fairfax' suggests that this is a fair trial, in which the facts are ascertained," and that Vere's nickname, "Starry," derives from a legal term, *stare decisis*.⁵ Yet even this last speculation has some attraction, since it is supported by the strong legal motif central not only to *Billy Budd* but to another of Melville's enigmatic studies, "Bartleby, the Scrivener." Beyond the limits of persuasive speculation lies the argument that Melville may have modeled Vere on "the corrupt, statue-stealing magistrate Gaius Verres . . . [o]ne of Rome's cruellest provincial governors . . ."⁶

Always welcoming a variety of interpretive views on Melville's intentions, while at the same time observing some boundaries of plausibility, we may ask what indeed are the most likely roots and associations of Captain Vere's name? In answering this question, let us impose two restrictions on the enquiry. First, an interpretation should have a demonstrably clear source in the text. For example, the spelling of Vere's name may suggest a

1. Understanding of the importance of Vere begins with study of the Genetic Text and the editors' introduction to *Billy Budd, Sailor*, ed. Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962). Page references in this article are to this edition.

2. "Dissent on *Billy Budd*," *Partisan Review*, 15 (1948), 1215.

3. "Billy Budd: Testament of Resistance," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 20 (1959), 125.

4. Alice Chandler, "The Name Symbolism of Captain Vere," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 22, No. 1 (1967), 86.

5. Blair G. Kenney, "Melville's *Billy Budd*," *American Notes and Queries*, 9, No. 10 (1971), 151-52.

6. Leslie E. Sheldon, "Melville's *Billy Budd*," *Explicator*, 38 (Winter 1980), 45. Sheldon's perception of Vere reduces the moral complexity of *Billy Budd* to the "diagrammatic" opposition of absolutes that John Seelye warns against. "Only Captain Vere seems to give the story complexity," writes Seelye in *Melville: The Ironic Diagram* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 162.

derivation from Latin *veritas*, creating an association at once universal and consistent with the actions of the captain in laying out all the arguments and facts for the drumhead court. Similarly, the lines from Andrew Marvell's "Upon Appleton House" may be assumed to have been included for some purpose; therefore, it is reasonable to refer to that poem in examining the question of Vere's name. Second, other writings, especially Melville's, may supply clues to meaning if they are consistent with internal evidence.

With these rules in mind, consider first Vere's Christian name, Edward. Although Blair Kenney may be right in proposing that the name could have been chosen because "'Edward' means 'guardian of property' (in this case, of Law) and of all the lives on his ship,"⁷ Melville makes so little of this essentially common name that it does not seem possible to determine with certainty what prompted him to pick it. Nor is there necessarily any intentional verbal symbolism or punning involved with the name Fairfax. Melville had good and sufficient reasons to select that name in order to supply a noble lineage for Captain Vere through a link with Marvell's encomium "Upon Appleton House" and to achieve verisimilitude by alluding to the historical naval officer Sir William George Fairfax, whose character and service in several respects parallel those of his fictional counterpart.⁸ When we turn to the parts of the captain's name that Melville chose to emphasize, the text provides direction for symbolic interpretation, the bench mark being the lines from "Upon Appleton House":

This 'tis to have been from the first
In a domestic heaven nursed,
Under the discipline severe
Of Fairfax and the starry Vere. (ll. 721-24)⁹

To consider the epithet first, what does "starry" mean in the context of Marvell's poem? The concluding lines of the stanza that Melville quoted from expand and explain the meaning:

Where not one object can come nigh
But pure, and spotless as the Eye;
And *Goodness* doth itself intail
On *Females*, if there want a *Male*. (ll.725-28)¹⁰

7. Kenney, p. 152.

8. In "The Genesis of *Billy Budd*," *American Literature*, 12 (1940), 332-35, C. R. Anderson convincingly demonstrated that Melville probably based Captain Vere on the historical Captain Fairfax. For literary precedents in which "Fairfax" has negative connotations, see Chandler, p. 88.

9. These lines are quoted from the Hayford and Sealts edition, p. 61.

10. *The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell*, ed. H. M. Margoliouth, 3rd ed., rev. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), I, 85. All subsequent references to Marvell's poems are to this volume and edition.

In praising the virtuous upbringing of Mary Fairfax, Marvell exalts her chastity, associating purity and spotlessness directly with the eye of the beholder (Mary) and indirectly with the stars. Marvell can rely on his reader to associate stars with chastity in this context since the allusion was conventional: speaking of the supposed sexual pollution of Desdemona as the cause for which he must rid the world of her, Othello says, "Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars" (V.ii.2). In addition to the reference to Mary's own chastity and to her protectively chaste mother, "starry" Anne Vere, other phrases and passages establish chastity as a dominant motif in "Upon Appleton House":¹¹ the house originated as a nunnery (ll. 85-86);¹² Isabel Thwaites, one of Mary's ancestors,¹³ is lauded as a "blooming Virgin" (l. 90); and Mary herself is a "*Virgin Nymph*" (l. 301) so pure that

The *Sun* himself, of *Her* aware,
Seems to descend with greater Care;
And lest *She* see him go to Bed;
In blushing clouds conceales his Head. (ll. 661-64)

Melville is scarcely less explicit than Marvell about the association of stars with moral chastity. Directly following the first occurrence of the epithet "Starry," Melville describes Vere as "one who whatever his sterling qualities was without any brilliant ones" (p. 61). The word *sterling*, signifying genuine purity whether applied to gold, silver, or figuratively to someone's character, probably derives from *steorra*, an Old English word meaning *star*. Since a star may also suggest *brilliance*, Melville hastens to inform his reader that it is not this quality that he wants to associate with Vere — star-like brilliance is reserved for warriors like Nelson, whose glory is commemorated by a "star inserted in the Victory's quarterdeck designating the spot where the Great Sailor fell" (p. 57). To use one of Melville's descriptions metaphorically, "a haze obscured the starlight" of Vere's potential naval glory (p. 82).¹⁴ This contrast with Nelson, achieved in part

11. Michael Millgate has discussed "the emphasis on 'goodness' and purity in lines 726-7." See "Melville and Marvell: A Note on *Billy Budd*," *English Studies*, 49 (1968), 47-50.

12. While Marvell's mockery of the feigned purity of the Catholic sisters is important within the context of "Upon Appleton House" since it sets off the true chastity of the Thwaites-Vere dynasty, his tone is not relevant to my argument that chastity is a dominant motif in the poem.

13. The genealogy and history of the Fairfax family can be found in Margoliouth's edition of Marvell cited above, I, 279-81.

14. Other celestial imagery in *Billy Budd* occurs in references to "Aldebaran" (p. 43), "the horns of Taurus" (p. 44), the "red meteor" banner of revolution (p. 54), and the discordant "comet" linked with Claggart (p. 67). In the last instance, it is useful to note in "Upon Appleton House" the commonplace disparagement of comets, which Marvell describes as "giddy Rockets . . . / Which from the putrid Earth exhale" (ll. 683-86). Melville's allusions to a "cynosure" (pp. 44, 50) in its meaning of *guiding star* or *North Star* have no exact parallel in "Upon Appleton House," though there is a close one in lines 313-14: "But when the vigilant Patrol / of stars walks round about the Pole." In "Upon the Hill and Grove at Bill-borow," commemorating another of Fairfax's estates, Marvell compares the hill, a Fairfax landmark, to the polestar:

by using the star as a symbol for both officers, defines and emphasizes Vere's pure moral integrity, an ennobling virtue if not a glittering one like Nelson's dramatic heroism.

Recognition of the significance of the captain's family name also begins with attention to the lines Melville quoted from "Upon Appleton House." Eulogizing the Fairfax line, Marvell follows in the footsteps of Ben Jonson, whose "To Penshurst"¹⁵ celebrates the virtuous life represented by the Sidneys. Jonson makes clear that it is no accident if desirable character qualities and strong moral values descend from parents to children: the elder Sidneys set examples in chastity (l. 90), "manners, armes, and arts" (l. 98), and conscientiously teach their children religion (ll. 93-96). The good life is a disciplined one, even as it is at Appleton House, where Mary Fairfax's virtue flourishes "Under the discipline severe / Of Fairfax and the starry Vere." To speak plainly, it is probable that one need look no further than the phrase "discipline severe" for the significance of the captain's surname, especially when Melville has described Vere as a "disciplinarian" (p. 100), "a martinet as some deemed him" (p. 128), capable of enforcing "strict adherence to usage" (p. 117) to ensure the continuation of unquestioning obedience aboard the *Bellipotent*. Captain Vere, then, is a *severe* man where discipline is concerned. Appropriately, Melville also uses the adjective *austere* to describe the captain (p. 115). Not only can *austere* serve as a near-synonym for *severe*, the bond is intensified by the fortunate, if probably fortuitous, rhyme.

Internal evidence, therefore, indicates that Melville derived the captain's surname from the word *severe*. Support for this conjecture can be found in "Bartleby, the Scrivener."¹⁶ As John Seelye remarks, "Captain Vere resembles the lawyer of that story,"¹⁷ and two passages in particular are relevant to this enquiry:

"Very good, Bartleby," said I, in a quiet sort of serenely *severe* self-possessed tone, intimating the unalterable purpose of some terrible retribution very close at hand. (p. 552)

Then something *severe*, something unusual must be done. (p. 611)

[Italics in both passages are mine]

How glad the weary Seamen hast
When they salute it from the Mast!
By Night the Northern Star their way
Directs, and this no less by Day. (ll. 29-32)

15. *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925-1952), VIII, 93-96. References are to this edition.

16. Page references to "Bartleby" are to the first printing in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, November and December, 1853. The text is reproduced in *Bartleby, the Scrivener: The Melville Annual*, 1965, ed. Howard P. Vincent, Kent Studies in English, No. 3 ([Kent, Ohio:] Kent State Univ. Press, 1966).

17. *Melville: The Ironic Diagram*, p. 162.

In these passages, the lawyer, like Vere, is resolving to take action to settle a problem of considerable complexity and moral magnitude. Of course, any extended comparison of these passages with related scenes in *Billy Budd* would call for distinctions, some rather subtle, of tone, character, and situation. In the first passage, for instance, the narrator's self-satisfied pose of dignified, well-bred restraint is wryly mocked. In contrast, although there is humor, comedy, wit, and satire in *Billy Budd*, some of it at the expense of Vere, the captain is not subject to light mockery in his attempt to resolve the question of Billy's guilt and punishment. For this discussion, however, such distinctions are not critical. It is sufficient to note that two men of authority, both merciful at heart but representing the law and caught in a dilemma, evoke in Melville's mind the idea of *severity*.

If Melville intended any other significance to be deduced from the captain's family name, it is probably to be found in the nautical image of a ship *veering*, turning to another course. The captain indeed veers at the crucial moment in *Billy Budd*:

Regaining erectness, Captain Vere with one hand covering his face stood to all appearance as impassive as the object at his feet. Was he absorbed in taking all the bearings of the event and what was best not only now at once to be done, but also in the sequel? Slowly he uncovered his face; and the effect was as if the moon emerging from eclipse should reappear with quite another aspect than that which had gone into hiding. The father in him, manifested towards Billy thus far in the scene, was replaced by the military disciplinarian. (pp. 99-100)

Once Vere has taken "all the bearings" and altered his course, he remains steadfast, subjecting his humane emotions to the "discipline severe" that Melville vividly depicts in the description of the captain standing "erectly rigid as a musket in the ship-armorer's rack" the moment before Billy's execution (p. 124).

A distinction should be made between the nautical meaning of *veer* in the sense I have been considering and the looser usage of the word, in which it may refer to any act of change or variation. Although in a moment of extreme emotional agitation Vere lapses from his ordinary disciplined serenity, causing the surgeon to wonder if the captain is "unhinged" (p. 102), he is soon in control of his feelings and from that time determinedly holds an unvarying course. It is not, then, typical of the captain to "veer" in the looser sense. A comparison can be made with the narrator of "Bartleby" who, confused by his scrivener's conduct, vacillates between conjectures:

After breakfast, I walked down town, arguing the probabilities *pro* and *con*. One moment I thought it would prove a miserable failure, and Bartleby would be found all alive at my office as usual; the next

moment it seemed certain that I should see his chair empty. And so I kept veering about. (p. 609)

This kind of "veering about" is erratic and uncertain, unlike the decisive change of course made by strong-willed Captain Vere. In "Bartleby," the lawyer's veering resembles the uncertainty of the officers of the drumhead court, who have to be recalled to steadiness by the captain (p. 111).¹⁸

Starry Vere of the *Bellipotent* bears, then, a name that connotes sterling purity and severe discipline. Moreover, in the scene in which the captain uncovers his face to show an alteration from loving father to disciplinarian, Melville seems to have been punning on *veer* in a nautical sense. In that same scene, as he reveals "another aspect" of his character to Billy, Vere resembles Oliver Cromwell in another of Marvell's poems — a leader who, "in his sev'ral Aspects, like a Star, / Here shines in Peace, and thither shoots a War."¹⁹

18. In the manuscript of *Billy Budd*, a question by Vere emphasized his perception of his officers' unsteadiness: "Do we waver? To steady us a bit . . ." Melville deleted the first three words of this passage. See the Genetic Text, p. 395.

19. "The First Anniversary of the Government under O. C.," in *The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell*, I, 111, ll. 101-02.

