

# Melville's Use of the Vere-Fairfax Lineage in *Billy Budd*

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**B**ECAUSE READERS OF *BILLY BUDD* differ over whether to regard Captain Vere as a spokesman for a justifiable doctrine of expediency or as an example of how civilization separates Man from his natural desire to treat others equitably, they might welcome new evidence that helps to resolve the question of Vere's function in the novel. I believe that Melville named his Captain Edward Fairfax Vere to indicate that he disapproves of Vere's inflexibility more strongly than have persons who agree with Wendell Glick that ". . . Melville and Captain Vere brought in the verdict that the claims of civilized society may upon occasion constitute a higher ethic than the claims of 'natural law' and 'personal justice.'" <sup>1</sup> Comparing Melville's Captain Vere with his historical ancestors, the principals of Andrew Marvell's "Upon Appleton House, To My Lord Fairfax," reveals that Captain Vere has turned away from the qualities of conscience and self-determination that Marvell praised in Fairfax and in Fairfax's equally conscientious father-in-law, Lord Vere. Because Lord Vere embraced and passed on to his daughter these principles of conscience against which Captain Vere is to argue in *Billy Budd*, Marvell gives to the lady of Appleton House the appellation "starry Vere."

The first scholar to suggest that a reading of Marvell's poem might help us to interpret *Billy Budd*, Michael Millgate, currently notes that Captain Vere's cousin, Lord Denton, named him for the "starry Vere" of lines 721-24 of "Upon Appleton House," which Melville quotes in *Billy Budd*:

This 'tis to have been from the first  
In a domestic heaven nursed,  
Under the discipline severe

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<sup>1</sup> Wendell Glick, "Expediency and Absolute Morality in *Billy Budd*," *PMLA*, LXVIII (March, 1953), 104.

Of Fairfax and the starry Vere.<sup>2</sup>

Mr. Millgate goes on to identify the recipient of the idyllic nursing as the historical Fairfax's daughter Maria who,

. . .like a sprig of misleto,  
 on the Fairfacian Oak does grow;  
 Whence for some universal good,  
 The priest shall cut the sacred Bud;  
 While her glad parents must rejoice,  
 And make their destiny their choice.

(“Upon Appleton House,” lines 739-44)

Relying heavily upon these two passages from “Upon Appleton House,” and upon Melville's remorse over the premature death of his own son, Millgate concludes, “. . . Claggart may represent in part the fault-finding father that Melville knew he had been, Vere the understanding father he felt he should have been.”<sup>3</sup> While this interpretation may prove satisfactory to readers predisposed to favor Vere, the contrast between the “domestick heaven” of the Fairfacian “Bud” Maria and the impressed state of Foretopman Budd, as well as the very different ways in which the Fairfaxes and Captain Vere oversaw the development of their “children” suggest that Melville may have judged Vere more severely than does Millgate. Marvell celebrates Maria's growth under the tutelage of her parents until the day of her marriage when a priest will officiate in the changing of her name from Fairfax to that of her husband. While Marvell praises this priest for helping to fulfill the laws of Nature, he praises even more highly the founder of the Fairfax line who removed by force the woman he loved from a convent into which her family had placed her. Faced by the dilemma of having either to give up his beloved to a cloistered existence from which she desired release or to assault the convent, the young man took the latter alternative and, from the resulting marriage, Lord Fairfax was descended. Marvell explains the young man's rationale in language that

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<sup>2</sup> Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)*, Reding Text and Genetic Text, edited from the Manuscript with Introduction and Notes by Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, Jr. (2nd edition; Chicago, 1963), p. 61. All references to *Billy Budd* are from this edition and will be made within the text.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Millgate, “Melville and Marvel: A Note on *Billy Budd*,” *English Studies*, XLIX (1969), 49-50.

echoes the poem's reverence for laws that transcend the dictates of Church and State:

What should he do? He would respect  
Religion, but not Right neglect:  
For first, Religion taught him Right,  
And dazzled not, but cleared his sight.

(“Upon Appleton House,” lines 225-28)

While Millgate notes that the text of *Billy Budd*, like that of “Upon Appleton House,” contains several references to clerics,<sup>4</sup> he fails to note that most of these references are derogatory to Vere. For example, the narrator tells us that Vere refused to delay judgment on Budd until he had the opportunity to consult the Admiral because a captain's duty to martial discipline resembles a monk's “vows of monastic obedience” (*Billy Budd*, p. 104). This links Vere more closely with the clerics whose claims Marvell rejects before the higher claims of natural attraction than with his historical ancestors. Similarly, Vere tells the drumhead court that the laws of conscience and expediency are not the same, and insists on violating the laws of conscience to satisfy with Billy's summary execution the letter of the Mutiny Act:

. . .in natural justice is nothing but the prisoner's overt act to be considered? How can we adjudge to summary and shameful death a fellow creature innocent before God, and whom we feel to be so?— Does that state it aright? You sign sad assent. Well, I too feel that, the full force of that. It is Nature. But do these buttons that we wear attest that our allegiance is to Nature? No, to the King. Though the ocean, which is inviolate Nature primeval, though this be the element where we move and have our being as sailors, yet as the King's officers lies our duty in a sphere correspondingly natural? So little is that true that in receiving our commissions we in the most important regards ceased to be natural free agents (*Billy Budd*, p. 110).

These words reveal that like his historical ancestors, the fictitious Captain Vere can distinguish between natural and man-made law. Unlike Captain Vere, however, the historical Lord Vere aided the Dutch in their rebellion against Spain, while his son-in-law, Lord Fairfax, rebelled first against his hereditary king, and then against the

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

excesses of the successful Puritan revolution of 1640-1642, that first overthrew then executed Charles I. As an officer in Cromwell's New Model Army, Fairfax fought King Charles. However, when he decided that his comrades had violated the principles of natural law that his love of natural justice had taught him to obey, he resigned his commission. Moreover, Fairfax further demonstrated his adherence to the unchanging law of right reason by publicly criticizing the regicidal excesses of the men alongside of whom he had recently fought.<sup>5</sup> This action makes him a hero within the context of "Upon Appleton House," a poem that celebrates the beauty of Nature and praises Lord and Lady Fairfax and their forebears for having obeyed the laws of Nature even when they conflicted with the man-made precepts of their political or clerical overlords. In praise of the valor of his lord and patron, Fairfax, Marvell declares,

For he did, with his utmost Skill  
Ambition weed, but Conscience till.  
Conscience, that Heaven-nursed plant,  
Which most our earthly gardens want.

("Upon Appleton House," lines 353-56)

These lines dramatize the qualities of a man whose adherence to the dictates of his own conscience distinguishes him from Captain Vere's relativistic insistence that the drumhead court not judge Billy by those selfsame dictates of conscience. By naming him Edward Fairfax Vere, Melville made him the spiritual heir of the historical Lords Vere and Fairfax. Yet the rebellious actions of his historical ancestors would have shocked the more prudent master of the *Bellipotent* who arranged the execution of a man whom he knew to be innocent before God because he feared that a more conscientious handling of the case might have precipitated a mutiny on a ship completely free of unrest. Ironically, the only hint we have of the crew's dissatisfaction occurs when it murmurs disapprovingly in one horrified body after witnessing Billy's execution (*Billy Budd*, p. 126).

In short, we must conclude either that Melville was unaware of the rest of the poem from which he extracted the name "Starry Vere" or that he chose the cognomen ironically in order to dramatize the extent

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<sup>5</sup> Augustine Birrell, Andrew Marvell (New York, 1905), p. 32; Hugh Macdonald, ed., *The Poems of Andrew Marvell* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952), p. 179; Clements R. Markham, *The Fighting Veres* (Boston and New York, 1888) pp. 451-60 and *passim*.

to which the Vere-Fairfax line had degenerated in the century and a half since Marvell had praised the Nature-serving Lord and Lady of Appleton House. The latter conjecture appears correct because Melville explained that the term "starry" remained with Captain Vere only because it served to distinguish him from another captain of the same surname (*Billy Budd*, p. 61), not because he had inherited the conscientious qualities of his forebears. By giving the name Denton, a name that occurs in line 30 of "Upon Appleton House," to the kinsman who first calls Captain Vere "Starry Vere," Melville unobtrusively reveals his familiarity with the entire poem. Moreover, anyone who has appreciated the appropriate biblical and literary allusions in Melville's fiction and poetry would hesitate to suggest that so wide a reader and so meticulous a craftsman as Melville would refer us to a well-known poet except for carefully thought-out reasons consistent with the text from which he quoted. The theory that Melville named Vere ironically for his right-minded ancestors is further strengthened because Captain Vere not only stifled the cries of his conscience, but he also "tilled ambition"; "Unhappily he was cut off too early for the Nile and Trafalgar. The spirit that 'spite its philosophic austerity may yet have indulged in the most secret of all passions, ambition, never attained to the fulness of fame" (*Billy Budd*, p. 129).

In these two sentences Melville completes his ironic contrast between Lords Vere and Fairfax and Captain Vere, the former consistent in all their actions, the latter insistent about the laws of Nature not applying to civilized man. Captain Vere considered conscience a weed to be plucked from the brain. Equally unlike his less expedient ancestors, he courted ambition. These character differences further reveal the degeneration of the Vere-Fairfax line. The historical personages adhered to natural law; Melville's Captain Vere refused to save an innocent sailor's life because he considered it inexpedient to suspend a regulation that he knew applied at most in a technical sense to the case at hand. Furthermore, by choosing the name Vere for his unconscionable descendant of a conscientious family, Melville may have been punning on the verb "to veer," which of course means "to change direction" and in nautical terms has the more specific meaning "to sacken,"<sup>6</sup> the very actions he performs in the perspective of his forebears' actions.

Had Melville wished to make a stronger rationale for Captain Vere's

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<sup>6</sup> *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language: College Edition* (New York, 1968), pp. 1457-58.

actions, he could have created a more restive crew aboard the *Bellipotent* or limited Vere's alternatives for handling Budd's case. Instead, by emphasizing Vere's ability to leave the case for the Admiral or to allow the drumhead court to deliberate without his demand for the death penalty, Melville makes him appear like the paranoid weakling that he is. Vere's real goal is not even to uphold the King's law, but to assuage his own unfounded fear of being remembered as the captain of a crew that had mutinied, a very real fear to an officer who courts fame more diligently than justice. Melville reveals this real motive through Vere's reply to the sailing-master's question, "Can we not convict and yet mitigate the penalty?"

"Gentlemen, were that clearly lawful for us under the circumstances, consider the consequences of such clemency. The people" (meaning the ship's company) "have native sense; most of them are familiar with our naval usage and tradition; and how would they take it? Even could you explain to them—which our official position forbids—they, long molded by arbitrary discipline, have not that kind of intelligent responsiveness that might qualify them to comprehend and discriminate. No, to the people the foretopman's deed, however it be worded in the announcement, will be plain homicide committed in a flagrant act of mutiny. What penalty for that should follow, they know. But it does not follow. *Why?* They should ruminate. You know what sailors are. Will they not revert to the recent outbreak at the Nore? Ay. They know the well-founded alarm—the panic it struck throughout England. Your clement sentence they would account pusillanimous. They would think that we flinch, that we are afraid of them—afraid of practicing a lawful rigor singularly demanded at this juncture, lest it should provoke new troubles. What shame to us such a conjecture on their part, and how deadly to discipline."

(*Billy Budd*, pp. 112-13)

Despite my esteem for Mr. Millgate's contribution to Melville scholarship, I must respectfully argue that Vere's words sound less like those of an "understanding father" than of a testy elitist. The extent of Vere's paranoia becomes apparent when we remember that Melville emphasized the fact that no hint of mutiny existed among the men of the *Bellipotent* (*Billy Budd*, pp. 59-60). Vere's snobbish remark, "You know what sailors are," hardly reflects Melville's feelings about such "people" as Redburn, White-Jacket, Ishmael, or, of course, Jack Chase, to whose "great heart" he dedicated the novel (*Billy Budd*, p.

42). In fact, during his career as a seaman Melville himself fell into that “sailor” class that Vere derides so viciously and with so little justification.

As a further tribute to the sailors, Melville makes their reaction to Billy’s fate far more honest and compassionate than Vere’s determination to allow the Mutiny Act to function in place of his conscience. The shock of witnessing the death of the “Handsome Sailor” generates in the men an “intelligent responsiveness” of which Vere considered them incapable. They not only murmured “in revulsion of thought and feeling” (*Billy Budd*, p. 126) against their captain, a rather unorthodox act for men “long molded by arbitrary discipline,” but they also revered Billy’s memory and later sang “Billy in the Darbies” even though Vere had informed them that Billy died a convicted murderer and mutineer. To the contrary, Vere witnessed Billy’s execution standing “. . . erectly rigid as a musket in the ship-armorer’s rack” (*Billy Budd*, p. 124). It is perhaps the crowning irony of the novel that Vere is himself far more inflexibly molded by arbitrary discipline than the less mentally constricted sailors whose humanity he sneeringly and incorrectly castigates.

From this contrast between the historical Vere and Fairfax and the fictitious Captain Vere, the former believers in the immutability of natural law, the latter a devotee of expediency, I believe that Melville desired that we see in Captain Vere a man whose insight is far more correct than his actions. Incapable of innovation, unwilling to consider alternatives that do not concur with his close-minded idiosyncracies, he is not starchy but rigidly overcautious. Melville neither excuses nor exalts Captain Vere as many scholars have done. Instead, he demonstrates that in a crisis Vere felt the King’s yearn running so tightly through him (*Billy Budd*, p. 63) that he was incapable of independent action. Yet lest the Captain Veres of posterity misread (as they have done anyway) his irony for fact, Melville gave his protagonist a name so fraught with conscious irony that I do not see how anyone who compares him with the personages of “Upon Appleton House, to my Lord Fairfax” can miss it.

As the novel moves toward its denouement, Vere’s fear of mutiny turns him into a monomaniac similar to Hawthorne’s and Melville’s earlier portraits of obsessed men, and Billy becomes transformed in death from the innocent who saluted his executioner with the cry of “God Bless Captain Vere!” (*Billy Budd*, p. 123) into the narrator of “Billy in the Darbies” who declares of the proceedings against him, “But aren’t it all sham” (*Billy Budd*, p. 132). In the resurrecting eyes of the sailor who composed “Billy in the Darbies” and his comrades who

sang it, Billy, the living embodiment of innocence, has metamorphosed into so convincingly antityrannical a voice of experience that it liberates those sailors who sing it from their instinctive acceptance of arbitrary rules that Vere regards as the mark of their lowborn station. Much as Melville admired his most upright of noble savages, I cannot agree that he intended for the audience to confuse Billy's childlike praise for Vere with his own judgment of the man. More likely, Melville intended that we read "God Bless Captain Vere!" in the same unconsciously ironic sense that we read Billy's earlier farewell to his ship when he is impressed onto the *Bellipotent*: "And goodbye to you too, old *Rights-of-Man*" (*Billy Budd*, p. 49). Being thoroughly guileless until the transforming creator of "Billy in the Darbies" turns him into a seasoned savior, the living Billy possesses a child's propensity for making cuttingly naive statements.

Unlike Billy and his fellow sailors, Vere dismisses from consideration the questions of natural innocence and guilt. In *Pierre* (1852), Melville had ridiculed the expediency-minded doctrine of Plotinus Plinlimmon which insisted on a justifiable dichotomy between man-made and natural law.<sup>7</sup> By condemning Billy even though he knows him to be "innocent before God," Vere likewise embraces Plinlimmon's position. Hence, if we read *Billy Budd* as Melville's acceptance of Vere's reasoning, we must likewise conclude that he became reconciled with the philosophy of the clownish Plinlimmon. I do not believe that the text of *Billy Budd* supports this reading. Near the beginning of the novel, Melville makes a statement that deserves more attention than it has hitherto received:

And here be it submitted that apparently going to corroborate the doctrine of Man's Fall, a doctrine now popularly ignored, it is observable that where certain virtues pristine and unadulterate peculiarly characterize anybody in the external uniform of civilization, they will upon scrutiny seem not to be derived from custom or convention, but rather to be out of keeping with these, as if exceptionally transmitted from a period prior to Cain's city and citified man. The character marked by such qualities has to an unvitiated taste an untampered-with flavor like that of berries while the man thoroughly civilized, even in a fair specimen of the breed, has to the moral palate a questionable smack as of a compounded wine.

(*Billy Budd*, p. 53)

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<sup>7</sup> Herman Melville, *Pierre, or the Ambiguities* (New York, 1852), chapters XV and XXI.



With these lines Melville restates his lifelong objections to the austerity of contemporary civilization. That Billy is an example of unfallen, pristine man is apparent. Equally apparent, Vere's adherence to the Mutiny Act makes him a "compounded" inheritor of the fratricide Cain. Even the implied warmth that Vere shows for Billy after he has presided over his condemnation (*Billy Budd*, p. 115) only demonstrates how thoroughly his intellect has overthrown his humanity.

Melville's undisguised disdain for the inheritors of Cain's city makes it difficult to regard so thoroughly citified a person as Vere as either Melville's spokesman for a justifiable doctrine of expediency or as an understanding father. Just as Claggart suffers from a "depravity according to nature" (*Billy Budd*, p. 75) Vere suffers from a depravity induced by civilization. Like the self-centered creations of Hawthorne, Vere is a monomaniac and his mania is for his singular concept of order. Like Aylmer of Hawthorne's "The Birthmark," to whose victimized wife Melville compares Billy (*Billy Budd*, p. 53), Vere sacrifices to this mania a person for whom he feels a considerable attachment.

Despite Vere's place in Hawthorne's and Melville's history of self-justified madmen, his position as Captain of the *Bellipotent* represents a frightening advance over Hawthorne's madmen. Aylmer, Ethan Brand, and Roger Chillingworth are isolated monomaniacs who exist in settings that are more symbolic than real. Unlike Hawthorne, Melville put his madmen in positions of authority in the world that we inhabit. When Captain Ahab allowed his insane vendetta with a white whale to usurp his feelings of responsibility toward the crew and owners of the whaler he commanded, he destroyed not one or two experimental human subjects, but an entire ship's crew.

In Vere, Melville linked insanity even more closely to civilized Man's concept of duty. For Vere's sickness does not emanate from a reluctance to fulfill the terms of a contract, but from his unreflectively monkish devotion to the Mutiny Act. When we read of the pity of twentieth century officers for civilians whose homes and persons they were forced by military necessity to destroy, we perceive the prophetic power of *Billy Budd*, a novel that half a century before Nuremberg unites unreflective obedience with monomania. In this disturbing picture of a world in which pity is a luxury to be indulged only after the pitied objects have been sacrificed to the gods of war and expediency, Vere emerges as the victim as well as the representative of a fallen state. Like Claggart, he is to be pitied and feared, but hardly emulated. Melville's dramatization of Vere's separation of expediency and justice

proves Melville as much a spokesman for the conscience as were Lords Vere and Fairfax, and a creative amplifier of Marvell's work in praise of these historical personages.

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#### NECROLOGY

The Secretary-Treasurer regretfully announces the deaths of the following members:

Irene Dudley on February 26, 1978;  
Oskar Grunow on March 23, 1978;  
Robert C. Pooley (no date available).