

MOBY DICK IN PERFORMANCE AND GUIDE 1:75

by Scott Michael Alexander

I know what you are thinking. What could *Moby Dick* possibly have in common with Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*?

I show in my essay on *Guide 1:75* the significance of Manichaeism for this chapter, but was there ever a greater Manichaeism in literature than Captain Ahab of *Moby Dick*? Only Milton's Satan wages such a war on God.

So while I was not originally thinking of the relation of these two things when I started rereading Herman Melville's masterpiece, the two serendipitously coalesced.

Now, in connection with this reading, I have seen four different kinds of performance of the novel, all of which have merit.

First I want to recommend a large volume of illustrations for each and every page of *Moby Dick* by the wonderful artist Matt Kish, which is available on Amazon. He realized his own obsession to find a phrase, sentence, or paragraph on each page, and to render that passage in a colorful style all his own. Each is done on what he calls "found paper," which are pages from volumes on whaling, the Bible, shipping, or even from *Moby Dick*. This is what you might expect. But he also uses many pages, in a sort of steam-punk style, from such things as outmoded vacuum tube diagrams. They are like no other drawings you have seen of this book.

If you can still get in to see the Lookingglass Theater Company adaptation of *Moby Dick*, playing in Chicago's Water Tower, you should. David Catlin ingeniously adapted the novel for his gymnastic Chicago-style rendering. I found it enjoyable despite my several criticisms. On the good side, they did not artificially try to make the story "relevant" to our times, but did try to render as much of this huge novel as they could in a normal running time of slightly over two hours. Full use of shipboard riggings and other set devices had the actors flying through the air, indeed, spending much of their time in the air. The action takes place on a multilayer deck made to look like a huge shapeless piece of fine driftwood furniture, well-beaten from use.

They tried, evidently expecting the audience not to recognize many biblical allusions, to hold them to the barest minimum. I think this was a mistake since *Moby Dick* owes as much to the Bible as to Shakespeare as its primary sources, and especially since this audience of Melville worshippers would not have been lost, as the general public might be, in the biblical allusions that adorn and import meaning to each and every page of the novel. In this regard, I thought that the adaptation of Father Mapple's sermon was no more than a thin rereading of Jonah rather than Melville's electrifying Midrash, voiced so well by Orson Welles in the John Huston/Ray Bradbury adaptation (more on which below).

On the other hand, Christopher Donahue's reading of Ahab was unique and physically fascinating, with every motion or gesture of his body oddly contorted and askew. At some points, his projection was weak, but otherwise I enjoyed his interpretation. Jamie Abelson did what he could with the thankless role of Ishmael, Melville's projection. Still, in my view of his arc, from his initial abandonment of mankind and mankind's God, followed by his subsequent conversion both to and then from Ahab's Manichaeism war on

God, more should have been done to elevate Ishmael's stature, he "whose hand was against every man and every man's hand against him." Anthony Fleming was outstanding as Queequeg. For obscure reasons, Pip was transformed into an entirely new character called Cabaco, well enough played by Micah Figueroa, but otherwise puzzling. Catlin felt that something needed to be done to remedy the fact that apart from a few of the Nantucket women, the entire story is masculine. He introduced three athletic and singing women to act as chorus, to evince death, the sea, and ultimately the whale. As death and the sea they were good, frequently astonishing. In one of the death scenes they performed a ballet on the rigging ropes as the victim plunges around in the sea. Their evocation of the whale was not as successful, as the little trio of women in vampire makeup seemed merely to be pecking at the men in the whaleboat. Similarly unconvincing was one of them, probably Emma Cadd, in the role of Elijah, the Nantucket character who warns Ishmael and Queequeg to avoid the doomed Pequod.

The best performance of *Moby Dick* in the movies is still the John Huston 1956 filming. Gregory Peck comes closest to the Ahab of the book. Ahab is frequently referred to as "old thunder" and we expect our Ahab to have a voice of thunder. Ray Bradbury grasped the meaning of Ahab's Manichean war on the white whale and expressed it in compact, precisely rendered scenes. Somehow Huston made it all look real, even with the "limitations" of 1950s film technique, unaided by any sort of CGI. I have no idea how he made the whales look so good. I was initially unconvinced by Richard Basehart's Ishmael, but I've come around. His opening scene gets in more of the important first chapter the book than any of the other productions. Leo Genn is okay as Starbuck, though not as good as Ethan Hawke in the 2011 Encore TV production (more below on that). On the other hand, they did a great job in casting the important second and third mates, Stubb and Flask with Harry Andrews and Seamus Kelly, as well as Friedrich von Ledebur's interesting turn as the cannibal Queequeg. One scene I've always wondered about was Bradbury's depiction of Queequeg's false death. In the novel Queequeg becomes deathly ill and has a coffin built for him. He is shown stoically, immobile, like a Stylite or Zen monk, waiting out his death, until his amazing recovery. This is all well done in the film, but at one point Bradbury has the crew sadistically carve Queequeg with razors to try to get a rise out of him. In the novel Queequeg is beloved by the crew, it's impossible to imagine such a scene. My sense is that Bradbury used the moment to depict the crew's descent to the savagery of Ahab's paganism, graphically sealing their own moral doom.

Interesting, but not nearly as successful, was the 2011 two-part television staging by Nigel Williams and Mike Barker. Charlie Cox is forgettable as Ishmael. Donald Sutherland was totally miscast as Father Mapple, bringing to that image of moral certainty the unrelenting hippie irony that he brings to everything. More troubling was the performance of William Hurt as Captain Ahab. William Hurt's performance as *William Hurt* was magnificent, unforgettable, but had nothing whatsoever to do with Melville's Captain Ahab. Everything, as you might expect, looks great, and much money appears to have been thrown at the production. In some ways, it's incredible and gripping. Ethan Hawke is the best of the Starbucks. Eddie Marsan was completely miscast as Stubb, although he does fit the adaptation, which makes him a much darker, sadistic character than the merely thoughtless and upbeat Stubb of the novel. "Relevance" turns up in a bad way in the rewriting of the first chapter as a didactic allegory on the evils of racism and slavery, almost making Pip a more important character in that first scene than Ishmael (and Pip doesn't occur until much later in the novel).

Try to see the Lookingglass Theater production if you can, get hold of the Matt Kish book, and see Gregory Peck as Ahab. And, of course, dive into Melville's spectacular prose. This will provoke the

passionate Manichaean intensity which Maimonides is doing his best to conceal as he tries to invoke Islamic theology's misshapen fruitless war on Dualism, in Guide 1:75.

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