

# Moral Education in “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids”

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In keeping with the allusive density of Melville’s writings, “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” provides readers with a complementary pair of sketches highlighting a gamut of issues relating to gender, sexuality, domesticity, industrialization, and Anglo-American social, cultural, and economic relations. The present essay argues that the ultimate aim of the paired sketches was to educate the reader by dramatically juxtaposing scenes of (English) male privilege and (American) female oppression, showing that the latter was a truer indicator of the human condition; moreover, the second sketch provided a probing and comprehensive survey of the ruthless exploitation of female workers in one of the hundreds of industrial mills established in New England during the antebellum era. With his title drawing on a neglected tradition of proverbial wisdom, Melville incorporated a host of biblical and other religious allusions in his paired sketches in order to enhance the paradigmatic impact of his social and moral critique.

In chapter 96 of *Moby-Dick* (“The Try-Works”), we recall, Ishmael undergoes the unnerving experience of allowing the nocturnal scene of the pagan crew’s trying-out of whale blubber to lull him into a demon-haunted trance in which he momentarily reverses his direction while standing at the helm of the *Pequod* and, as a result, nearly capsizes the ship. The ensuing correction in his vision and orientation leads to a brief disquisition on the need to attain psychological balance in one’s perception of good and evil in the world, avoiding extremes of self-destructive obsession and naïve ignorance. As Ishmael goes on to note, this balance should not blind one to the fact that the world’s evils generally outweigh its goodness, just as the ocean, the figurative “dark side” of the earth, composes a majority of its surface. “So, therefore, that mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him, that mortal man cannot be true—not true, or undeveloped. With books the same. The truest of all men was the Man of Sorrows [i.e., Christ], and the truest of all books is Solomon’s, and Ecclesiastes is the fine hammered steel of woe” (424). Consequently, the

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man who deliberately avoids the spectacle of human suffering in hospitals and prisons, or the thought of death evoked by graveyards, or the more somber writings of such authors as Cowper, Young, Pascal, and Rousseau; the man who “throughout a care-free lifetime swears by Rabelais as passing wise, and therefore jolly;—not that man is fitted to sit down on tomb-stones, and break the green damp mould with unfathomably wondrous Solomon” (424).

In perhaps no subsequent literary work of Melville’s is the overall message of “The Try-Works” more directly relevant than in “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” a pair of complementary sketches in which the narrator undergoes a concentrated moral education akin to that advocated in Ishmael’s narrative homily. Like the other two so-called diptychs, “Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs” and “The Two Temples,” “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” dramatizes a series of ironic contrasts and hidden correspondences between American and English cultures. With its titular juxtaposition of English bachelors and New England maids identified as inhabitants of heavenly and hellish realms, the paired sketches clearly challenge contemporary stereotypes of national identity; yet central its thematic concerns is the message encapsulated in “The Try-Works” regarding a recognition of the preponderance of evil in the world and the obligation of the psychologically mature individual to acknowledge this fact while avoiding extremes of naïve optimism and incapacitating pessimism. Thus a key critical approach to “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” should view the narrator as undergoing a Solomonic moral education, as his experience of the pampered camaraderie of the London bachelors is graphically and paradoxically contrasted with the oppressed lives of the unmarried female paper mill operatives. Such a moral education would include a recognition of the interdependence of male privilege and female oppression while encouraging readers to overcome willful blindness and cultural bias in their perception of the world.<sup>1</sup>

“The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” has drawn attention from critics for its polarized depictions of gender as well as for the daring sexual symbolism and social criticism of its second sketch; yet neither the historical basis for Melville’s fictional critique of the exploitation of female mill workers nor the ultimate purpose of the juxtaposition of the two sketches has been adequately explored. In addition, critics have neglected to reveal how the two sketches, with their host of biblical and religious allusions, illustrate the negation of Christian ethics in both the “Paradise” of bachelors and “Tartarus” of maids; for neither bachelors nor maids have seemingly merited their antithetical moral conditions. Given its remarkably graphic sexual subtext, moreover, the publication of Melville’s diptych in the April 1855 *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* represents something of an April Fools’ Day joke on the antebellum

audience of this middle-class family journal, as well as a potential lesson in the type of deeper reading practices that Melville had advocated in his well-known review of Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse*.<sup>2</sup>

In "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids," this deeper reading begins with the source of Melville's title in Anglo-American proverbial wisdom, for the title belongs to a tradition of the "diverb," or antithetical proverb, relating to English life. So John Florio, the Italian-born Elizabethan translator and dictionary maker, wrote near the end of his English-language instructional volume *Second Frutes* (1591): "England is the paradise of women, the purgatory of men, and the hell of horses." In a section under the general heading of "Love Melancholy," Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) reformulated similar ideas while contrasting England and Italy, women and horses: "England is a paradise for women, and hell for horses: Italy is a paradise for horses, hell for women, as the diverb goes." In a later variation on the same theme, the English antiquary and lexicographer Francis Grose noted in *A Provincial Glossary; with a Collection of Local Proverbs and Popular Superstitions* (1787): "England is the paradise of women, hell of horses, and purgatory of servants." Closer to the time when Melville's was writing, the Unitarian minister, abolitionist, and social critic Theodore Parker produced another variation when he noted in September 1844 in "A Sermon of Travels," based on a recent trip to Britain and the Continent: "England is the paradise of the noble and rich, the purgatory of the wise and good, and the hell of the poor and weak."<sup>3</sup>

Among these writers, we know only that Melville read Burton's *Anatomy*, a copy of which he bought in February 1848; but he was almost certainly acquainted with the general tradition of proverbial sayings noted above. "The Paradise of Bachelors and The Paradise of Maids" thus drew on a history of proverbial wisdom relating to issues of gender and the alleged advantages of British women over British men, or the rich over the poor. By reconfiguring the range of his title to include both England and America and reversing the symbolic status of women and men, Melville was thus creating a modernized portrait of the beneficiaries and victims of the contemporary Anglo-American social and economic order.

In "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids," the contrast in the narrator's experience is typified not only by the heavenly and hellish references in the title of the story, but also by the contrast of seasons, economic regime, gender, and class illustrated by each sketch. The unmarried London lawyers in the spring-time setting of the first sketch are accordingly the inhabitants of a quasi-monastic paradise, or "temple," of sociable dining, while the New England factory maids in the second sketch are the inhabitants of a hellish winter realm denominated the "Devil's Dungeon" and engaged in stultifying

and self-destructive labor, virtually harnessed to their industrial machinery. By showing the New England factory girls as pale martyrs to their dehumanizing industrial labor, as opposed to the privileged and leisured English bachelors, Melville is manifestly subverting the patriotic typology of Old and New England as antithetical realms of liberty and oppression. Yet the two sketches also challenge the pervasive contemporary ideology of domesticity and gendered “separate spheres” while revealing hidden links between male social privilege and female economic oppression in a rapidly industrializing age.

At the start of the diptych, the narrator is on a spring visit to London, where he finds his way out of the “din” and “mud” (316) of Fleet Street into an urban oasis that proves to be the Temple, a London landmark originally founded by the medieval order of Knights Templar, and one of the cloister-like Inns of Court inhabited by lawyers. The scene evokes the beginning of “London Antiques” in Washington Irving’s well-known *Sketch-Book*, but it proceeds in an increasingly different direction than Irving’s sentimental exploration of the London Charter House. Like Irving, Melville’s narrator is a humorously inclined American interested in “picturesque” London antiquities; but the tone of Melville’s narrator strategically combines exuberant celebration of his “paradise of bachelors” along with its cumulative satirical subversion. The narrator is thus impressed by the romantic history of the chivalric Order of the Templars and also comments ironically on the mutability that has transformed the medieval order of knights into a modern class of lawyers, concluding that “the knight-combatant of the Saracen, breasting spear-points at Acre, now fights law-points in Westminster Hall. The helmet is a wig. Struck by Time’s enchanter’s wand, the Templar is to-day a Lawyer” (318). On the surface suggesting a romantic antiquarianism, Melville’s narrator sees the change not as a declension but as an improvement or even a “fortunate fall” involving the suggestive metaphor of an apple: “But, like many others tumbled from proud glory’s height—like the apple, hard on the bough but mellow on the ground—the Templar’s fall has but made him all the finer fellow” (318).

The proof of this assertion allegedly lies in the narrator’s experience of the dinner he enjoys with the nine bachelors who are comparable to the nine original Knights Templar and who come to the rooms of the narrator’s host. The whole scene, of course, is based on Melville’s recorded enjoyment of three similar meals as the guest of Robert F. Cooke (“R.F.C.” in the sketch) at Elm Court in the Inner Temple and then twice at the Erechtheum Club while visiting London in December 1849 (*Journals* 44–46). As an ironized fictional stand-in, the narrator in Melville’s later sketch fulsomely praises the guests, the setting, and the meal, while underlining the “paradise” motif in the location of the all-male gathering in an apartment “well up toward heaven” (320) and

in the plenitude of food, drink, and conversation. The description of the meal, which depends on a mock-heroic metaphor of dining as military engagement, is an exercise in Rabelaisian comedy evoking the mock heroic male banqueting of Pantagruel and his companions, a motif that exerted a strong influence on Melville's earlier novel *Mardi*. The narrator's witty description of the various courses and alcoholic beverages thus conveys an aura of culinary excess while reducing the diners to children playing at war with their food:

After these light skirmishers had vanished, the heavy artillery of the feast marched in, led by that well-known English generalissimo, roast beef. For aids-de-camp we had a saddle of mutton, a fat turkey, a chicken-pie, and endless other savory things; while for avant-couriers came nine silver flagons of humming ale. This heavy ordnance having departed on the track of the light skirmishers, a picked brigade of game-fowl encamped upon the board, their camp-fires lit by the ruddiest of decanters. (320)

The heroic Napoleonic wars of the early nineteenth-century are thus transformed into comic battles of appetite and consumption by the fraternal diners, with explicit reference to the famous military maneuvers that won the day against the French in 1815: "The cloth was now removed; and like Blucher's army coming in at the death on the field of Waterloo, in marched a fresh detachment of bottles, dusty with their hurried march" (321). The witty transformation of bottles into soldiers thus continues the martial metaphor disguising the self-indulgent nature of their social gathering. Jovial recipients of an endless supply of food and drink, the bachelors are served by a "surprising old field-marshal" in the form of an elderly waiter with "a head like Socrates" (321). The good-natured bachelors are thus spared the heroic martial demands of the medieval Templars as well as of the more recent Napoleonic wars that comically inform the courses of their mock-heroic meal; for they are the inheritors of a modern nineteenth-century civilization in which single professional men can live comfortably insulated from the larger ills of their society.

The narrator is at pains to point out that the dinner was an entirely decorous event, with "nothing loud, nothing unmannerly, nothing turbulent" occurring: "It was the very perfection of quiet absorption of good living, good drinking, good feeling, and good talk. We were a band of brothers. Comfort—fraternal, household comfort, was the grand trait of the affair" (322). The narrator's insistence on the overall "goodness" of his experience will in fact contribute to the ensuing limitations of his moral vision, even as the bachelors' cozy social existence recalls the contemporary cultural ideal of domesticity, but a domesticity exclusively and ironically limited to men, not women. According to the ideology of domesticity, women were ideally suited for the home, which served as a haven from the competitive pressures of the workplace and market,

and where women would find their truest identity as wives and mothers. Yet in Melville's sketch, it is the bachelor men who are able to enjoy the comforts of this idealized domestic condition in their comfortable snug chambers. The narrator's earlier example of the anxious London "Benedick tradesmen" with "ledger-lines ruled along their brows" (316) because of family responsibilities, on the other hand, reveals men acting in the public sphere of the marketplace. The ultimate basis for fraternal solidarity among the London bachelors is thus the fact that none of them were subject to the male duty of supporting a family, a fact that shapes their severely restricted moral imaginations: "Also, you could plainly see that these easy-hearted men had no wives or children to give an anxious thought" (322).

As the narrator notes, the waiter whom he had humorously dubbed "Socrates" is envisaged as securing the propriety of the gathering by his mere presence, pointing to the fact that this meal has an ironic prototype in another famous all-male banquet, Plato's *Symposium*. Just as Socrates is impervious to the physical attractions of the drunken Alcibiades in the dialogue, the Socratic waiter in Melville's sketch is the guarantor of bachelor propriety. But instead of being the chief interlocutor and educator, the Socrates of the Paradise of Bachelors is merely a silent supernumerary. Moreover, if Plato's *Symposium* is devoted to a serious philosophical topic—the nature of love and its central role in the ideal quest for goodness, truth, and beauty—the London bachelors' gathering, in contrast, is focused on the pleasures of an endless supply of food and drink, while the conversation among these educated lawyers and scholars, albeit intellectually stimulating, leads to the complacent and fatuous conclusion that human suffering doesn't exist in the world: "The thing called pain, the bugbear styled trouble—those two legends seemed preposterous to their bachelor imaginations. How could men of liberal sense, ripe scholarship in the world, and capacious philosophical and convivial understandings—how could they suffer themselves to be imposed upon by such monkish fables? Pain! Trouble! As well talk of Catholic miracles. No such thing" (322).<sup>4</sup> The universal biblical doctrine of the Fall has been erased from their consciousness by reason of their privileged seclusion.

The final event of the bachelor entertainment changes the implicit cultural context from ancient Greek to Hebrew as the well-fed bachelors are all treated to a dose of snuff from "an immense convoluted horn, a regular Jericho horn, mounted with polished silver, and otherwise chased and curiously enriched; not omitting two life-like goat's heads, with four more horns of solid silver, projecting from opposite sides of the mouth of the noble main horn" (322). The sculpted snuff dispenser is a mock *shophar* or ram's horn such as was used by Joshua to destroy the city of Jericho (Joshua 6); the four other

goat's horns projecting from the central horn also recall the four horns that were placed at the four corners of the altar in Hebrew worship (Exod. 27:2). The image of the Hebrew ram's horn, like the earlier evocation of the ancient order of Templars, again suggests that the modern bachelors, as worshippers of a god of carnal pleasures, are unheroic inheritors of more militant ancient traditions of religious devotion.

The bachelors' final ritual of taking snuff is another satirical comment on the secularizing transformation of crusading medieval knights into complacent modern lawyers, and austere religious tradition into modern physical consumption. The paradise motif informing the sketch ultimately suggests that these bachelors are a set of self-indulgent prelapsarian Adams, free of the incipient evils of Eve and her troubles; by the same token, they inhabit a Promised Land of male pleasure, luxuriating in unlimited culinary gratification and worshipping at an altar of snuff tobacco which they snort from a phallic-shaped horn, but without unmannerly ejaculations: "though they took snuff very freely, yet not a man so far violated the proprieties, or so molested the invalid bachelor in the adjoining room as to indulge himself in a sneeze" (323). The narrator's observation that none of the bachelors violated decorum by sneezing is a *reductio ad absurdum* of his earlier pride in their good behavior, hinting that their taking of snuff is as artificially restrained as their celibacy. At the end of the sketch, the narrator is nevertheless so infatuated with the evening's entertainment that in reply to his host's inquiry about how he enjoyed himself, he hyperbolically affirms that he has experienced the very "Paradise of Bachelors"—a remark showing his naïve admiration, as a transatlantic visitor, for this exclusively male domain of pleasures, which was a common feature of upper-class Victorian club life at this time.

While the narrator's touristic visit to the London bachelors takes place in the month of May, his professional trip to the "Tartarus of Maids" in New England to buy envelopes for his seed business occurs in late January, and the frigid weather conditions play a significant role in the negative portrayal of the New World scene. Melville in fact portrays the "maids" as existing in a modern version of Dante's *Inferno*, under the control of a supervisory devil and surrounded by an abusive industrial process that has usurped their natural reproductive functions. The detailed picture of the papermaking factory shows the author as an outspoken critic of the new factory system and its female wage slaves in a portrait ultimately based on his own short trip, with his mother, wife, and sister, to the Old Red Mill paper factory in nearby Dalton, Massachusetts in January 1851 to buy a supply of writing paper.<sup>5</sup>

The narrator's extended sleigh ride through the wintry landscape to the paper factory—which includes a “Black Notch,” “Devil's Dungeon,” and “Blood River” (324)—has long been recognized as depicting a moralized landscape of the female reproductive system. Less noted has been the salient presence of the contemporary aesthetics of the sublime that also characterize the forbidding scenery (Hovanec; Gretchko). Indeed, the daring sexual symbolism of “Tartarus” was probably obscured for the antebellum reader because the description of the narrator's uterine descent to the mill was so steeped in the traditional pictorial language of the Burkean sublime. Thus, such features as the “Dantean gateway,” the “Plutonian, shaggy-wooded mountains,” the “turbid brick-colored stream, boiling through a flume among enormous boulders,” and the “stunted wood of gray-haired pines” (324) all suggest a fearsome landscape of darkness, magnitude, depth, and rough irregular surfaces consistent with the tenets of this aesthetic theory in the service of a pleasing feeling of terror.

The sketch's reference to the gateway to hell in Dante's poem is appropriate in that this “Tartarus of Maids” is symbolically set in the freezing ninth circle and fourth ring of Dante's *Inferno*: the realm of the traitors, where a giant Lucifer is visible from the waist up, flapping his bat-like wings, and creating a bloody spume from his three mouths in which Judas, Cassius, and Brutus are lodged. The narrator's occasional faintness during his visit to the mill similarly recalls Dante's faintness as he approached the lowest circle of the hell. Other features of the narrator's approach to the mill, from the forests that “strangely groaned” (325) in the wind to the high-pitched gust sounding “as if laden with lost spirits bound to the unhappy world” (325), evoke images from earlier scenes in the *Inferno*.<sup>6</sup>

When first viewing the setting of the paper factory from a distance, the narrator is struck by its unexpected resemblance to the layout of the Temple he has recently visited in London, seeing it as “the very counterpart to the Paradise of Bachelors, but snowed upon, and frost-painted to a sepulchre” (327). Thus, just as the narrator goes through the Mad Maid's Bellows'-pipe and Black Notch on his way to paper mill and then sees the “picturesque clusterings” (326) of its various buildings, he recalls his passage through a “dark and grimy Temple-Bar” to get to the picturesque sanctuary of the Inner Temple in the middle of London, a process he earlier compared to “stealing from a heated plain into some cool, deep glen, shady among harboring hills” (316). In both locations, a secluded campus-like community serves as a gender-restricted professional realm. We are asked, then, to interpret the factory where the “maids” work as an “inverted similitude” (327) to the scene at the Inner Temple, for if the life of the London bachelors in their secluded monastic realm is one of comfort, enjoyment, and camaraderie, the life of the New England factory



maids in their isolated rural mill is a scene of repetitious and unhygienic labor, emotional and physical deprivation, and subservience to a monstrous automaton. The larger paradigm presented here—unmarried men enjoying a cozy domestic life without children juxtaposed with young unmarried women confined to a factory where they are exploited for their cheap labor—suggests the potential injustices implicit in the antebellum cultural ideology of domesticity and “separate spheres.”<sup>7</sup>

Arrived at the factory to buy paper envelopes for his seed business, the narrator encounters a “dark-complexioned well-wrapped personage” (327) who later turns out to be the overseer and proprietor, nicknamed “Old Bach,” a stand-in for the devil (“Old Scratch”) or the Pluto or Hades in this symbolic “Tartarus.” (Antebellum female operatives often nicknamed the factory manager or overseer “the old man.”) By the same token, the narrator’s first sight of the girls in the “folding-room” of the factory is an image of soul-destroying repetition and dehumanization recalling the actions of Dante’s damned souls: “At rows of blank-looking counters sat rows of blank-looking girls, with blank, white folders in their blank hands, all blankly folding blank paper” (328). The narrator’s immediate sense of the oppressive nature of the female operatives’ lives in the factory is confirmed by the details of this initial experience within the “folding-room” to buy paper; but after making his purchase there he asks for a tour of the premises and is shown around by a boy bearing the loaded name of Cupid.

The narrator accordingly goes on to observe the water wheel that powers the mill using the waters of the Blood River, and then climbs upstairs to the “rag-room” where cotton fabric is cut into tatters by a row of young women inserting the old clothing in front of a set of curved blades. He proceeds to another damp room containing vats of soggy paper pulp that empty into another large machine in another room, where he sees various sets of rollers and wheels creating huge sheets of paper—an accurate image of the new Fourdrinier machine that had revolutionized paper making in the antebellum era by creating a continuous single roll of paper (McGaw ch. 4). Asking Cupid how long the paper-making process required, he is told that it takes only nine minutes, a fact that he confirms himself by writing Cupid’s name on a slip of paper, dropping it in the pulpy mass, and timing its appearance on the surface of the finished paper. Returning to the folding room, the narrator now expresses wonderment at the complex machinery to the proprietor, “Old Bach,” while also asking him why all the operatives are called “girls,” not “women.” The proprietor notes that he only employs unmarried women, whom he employs for twelve hours a day, six days a week all year long except Thanksgiving and fast days; but at this point, the narrator decides that he has heard and seen enough of the dreary,

unhealthy, and soul-killing nature of the lives led by these mill girls and hastily leaves the factory grounds in his sleigh.<sup>8</sup>

The narrator's description of the various tasks and mechanical features of the factory are all largely accurate in relation to the contemporary state of paper manufacture, as developed in Berkshire County, Massachusetts, the new industry's most productive region in the nation. In her history of the development of Berkshire County industrial paper making in the nineteenth-century, where forty-three mills were operation by the mid-1850s, Judith A. McGaw has noted that Melville largely excluded the presence of male mill workers from "Tartarus" while remaining true to the larger ideology of "separate spheres" that governed the employment of low-paid "girls" in the newly mechanized factories of antebellum America (ch. 10). Such an ideology allowed employers to view these female employees as less valuable contingent workers who were out of their true sphere, the home, on an allegedly temporary basis. In his sketch, Melville has thus created a portrait of a contemporary paper mill while also portraying salient working conditions for women within the larger system of industrial mills that were currently engaged in the manufacture of textiles, clocks, rope, guns, and metalwork—a system dominated by the seven hundred textile mills in operation in New England by mid-century, including those in North Adams, Massachusetts, twenty miles north of Melville's residence in Pittsfield. In the process, Melville subverts the tenacious cultural stereotype of the allegedly autonomous "respectable worker" employed in the new factories of Massachusetts, a stereotype that impeded full public understanding of the ruthless economic exploitation of mill operatives (Siracusa).

Melville has accordingly portrayed the paper mill in "Tartarus" as filled with female operatives in order to create a representative image of the gender-specific dehumanization created by the new industrial order. The new system began with the advent of the famous Lowell "mill girls" in the 1820s who were employed eleven to fifteen hours a day tending the extremely noisy water-powered mechanical looms. The alleged advantage to these "girls" in their late teens and twenties was that they could make money for themselves or their families (earning from half to a third of a man's salary) while pursuing self-improvement, deferring marriage, and living together in company boarding houses, with good character maintained by mandatory church attendance.<sup>9</sup>

David A. Zonderman's comprehensive study of the working lives of New England factory operatives in the antebellum era demonstrates that the critique of the new factory system evident in Melville's sketch is consonant with many workers' reported discontents with the historical conditions of the mills. Industrial workers felt that their repetitive tasks were numbing to their spirits; their workdays were intolerably long; they felt like they were becoming slaves to the

machines they tended; they faced economic exploitation in the speeding-up and “stretching out” of their manufacturing process and in cuts in wages; they had constant concerns about cleanliness, ventilation, excessive heat or cold, and the use of lamplight after dark; they suffered occupational hazards to their health and safety, including the risks of accident and fire in the workplace; and they were often victims of the vast asymmetry in power between female employees and male managers who were able to discipline, fire, and blacklist employees whom they didn’t like. At the heart of many of these complaints was the reduction of workers to the status of machines:

Many operatives used words like “monotony” to express their concern that machines were defining the conditions of factory labor. Each worker was performing relatively simple tasks innumerable times each day at increasing speeds, and there were few skilled workers with any power to regulate the pace of production. Tasks were constantly being broken down into simple, discrete, repetitive motions to maximize efficiency and output and management’s control over production, while decreasing workers’ knowledge of, and ability to control, the productive process. Machines, and often premade patterns and fixtures, directed the work and the workers. There was little need for human judgement or creativity in these mechanized factories, only stamina and speed. Workers were losing whatever control they might have had over their daily tasks as they were being harnessed to their machines. (Zonderman 25)

The narrator’s initial impression of the “blank-looking girls” with “blank hands” who are all “blankly folding blank papers” (328) thus conveys the monotonous dehumanization of these workers because of the mindless and draining nature of their tasks. The impression is enhanced when the narrator observes a “tall girl” in a corner of the folding room who repetitiously feeds “rose-hued note-paper” into an “iron animal,” or stamping mechanism, that puts “the impress of a wreath of roses” in the corner, but the stamped “rosy paper” forms a dramatic contrast to her “pallid cheek” (328). A graphic illustration of the effects of such monotonous labor is evident when the narrator looks at two girls next to each other, one feeding foolscap paper into a machine creating ruled lines, the other receiving the ruled paper. The first girl has a clear brow, while the second one’s brow is “ruled and wrinkled”; but when he looks again they have mysteriously changed places, and the smooth brow is now wrinkled, providing a visual paradigm of the premature aging caused by their work. The narrator similarly notices that there is no sound of human communication in this room but only the “low, steady, overruling hum of the iron animals” (328), in keeping with the fact that mill owners often forbade conversation among operatives on the job.

In the rag room as well, the narrator subsequently sees the silent female operatives in front of “rude, manger-like receptacles” and looking “like so many mares haltered to the rack” (329), repetitiously dragging cotton rags in front of the sharp blades, all in a “stifling” (330) atmosphere. In this case, the operatives are almost literally “harnessed” to their machines. Showing a sympathetic response to the pale-cheeked operatives, the narrator is both literally and figuratively appalled by what he initially sees in the factory, as is evident when he is observed to have frostbite on his cheeks after he takes off his scarf, prompting the manager to rush him outside to rub his cheeks to restore circulation. This concerned gesture ironically contrasts with the manager’s obliviousness toward the physical and psychological health of the many “blank-faced” girls in his factory, whose fate of becoming mere human machines was a common theme in critiques of the new industrial system.<sup>10</sup>

A related critique of the new factory system was that the industrial machines had been transformed into living creatures—sometimes even monsters—even as the operatives became *de facto* machines. Evidence of this symbolic transformation is found early in Melville’s second sketch when the narrator sees the tall girl acting as the “tame minister” while “feeding the iron animal with half-quires of rose-hued note paper” while another girl high on a “narrow platform” serves “some other iron animal” (328). The ironic inversion of status between operator and machine is noted by the narrator when summarizing his first impression of the folding room: “Machinery—that vaunted slave of humanity—here stood menially served by human beings, who served mutely and cringingly as the slave serves the Sultan. The girls did not so much seem accessory wheels to the general machinery as mere cogs to the wheels” (328). And near the end of his tour, after observing the machine making the finished paper, the narrator is filled with awe and dread at the unceasing regularity of the manufacturing process as he gazes upon “this inflexible iron animal. Always, more or less, machinery of this ponderous, elaborate sort strikes, in some moods, strange dread into the human heart, as some living, panting Behemoth might” (333).

The metaphor of “slavery” was yet another regular feature of criticism of the factory system; its use became more acute with the rise of antislavery sentiment in the 1840s and with increased awareness of the Southern source of the cotton fiber that operatives used to make textiles or paper. As Zonderman writes, “Factory slavery, like all forms of slavery, was decried as a system of arbitrary and illegitimate power. But factory slavery, in particular, was also said to be integral to the class relationship where industrial capital exploited and oppressed labor. Workers were denied the fruits of their labor and the chance to improve their condition. Moreover, female operatives may have seen

a connection between sexual discrimination and slavery as well" (116). The perception of female workers as industrial slaves is implicit throughout Melville's sketch but becomes explicit in the narrator's reference to the maids serving the machine "as the slave serves the Sultan."

The aura of sexual power and oppression exercised by "Old Bach" and his young assistant "Cupid" is also suggested by the sketch, as when Cupid mistakes the narrator's reference to "bachelor's buttons" by declaring that no such flowers grow in the "Devil's Dungeon" and then asking the narrator whether he was referring to the "gold bosom-buttons of our boss, Old Bach, as our whispering girls all call him?" (330)—a reminder of the disproportionate wealth of the manager as well as a hint of the sexual exploitation of female operatives that occurred at some mills (Zonderman 110–11, 127, 133–36, 167). When the narrator subsequently asks what makes the operatives look so "sheet-white" (330), Cupid demonstrates a "strange innocence of cruel-heartedness" when with "ignorant drollery" he claims that it is tearing up old white sheets that makes the girls look so "sheety" (331), the last word here being a scatological pun. Like his classical prototype, Cupid is blind to the suffering of the maidens, whose pain is not derived from love but physical debility and fatigue. The blindness of "Old Bach" to the welfare of his workers is also evident at the end of the sketch when the manager again warns the narrator that his cheeks "look whitish yet" (334) and urges him to "be careful going home" (335), implicitly ignoring the compromised health of his operatives; while the narrator assures the manager that once out of the "Devil's Dungeon" he will "feel them mending" (335).

The danger of the factory to the girls' health is underlined in the narrator's inspection of the facility for shredding the rags to make the pulp that will become paper: "The air swam with the fine, poisonous particles, which from all sides darted, subtly, as motes in sun-beams, into the lungs" (329–30). The blades tended by the girls that chop up the rags remind the narrator of the drawn swords that used to accompany "condemned state-prisoners" as they "went from the hall of judgment to their doom," in this case a death sentence hinted by the "consumptive pallors of this blank, raggy life" (330). The evident threat here to the operatives' respiratory health, as observed by the narrator, evokes many mid-nineteenth-century New England factory workers' concerns about the general health and safety of their occupations: "The physical condition of workers who remained in the factories, either from choice or necessity, was the subject of numerous articles in the operatives' magazines of the 1840s. These essays, and even poetry, were often filled with the specter of human dissolution and death" (Zonderman 83).

An ironic antithesis to the hints of the deadly work environment in the paper mill can be found in the subsequent depiction of the actual papermaking

process as a displaced form of human conception, gestation, and birth. It has long been noted that the sketch's allegory of the female anatomy included a comparable allegory of reproduction in which the sperm-like pulp—a “white, wet, woolly-looking stuff, not unlike the albuminous part of an egg, soft-boiled,” issuing from two testicular “great round vats” (331)—goes into a womb-like room “stifling with a strange, blood-like, abdominal heat, as if here, true enough, were being finally developed the germinous particles lately seen” (331). The narrator's guide, Cupid, describes how the machine works and points out that the whole process of converting the pulp into long sheets of paper through innumerable rollers and cylinders takes exactly nine minutes (instead of months). Appropriately enough, at the end of the process the narrator hears “a scissory sound” like “some cord being snapped” (332) while a female operative, a former nurse, is employed in receiving the newly finished “moist, warm sheets, which continually were being delivered into the woman's waiting hands” (333). A monstrous form of mechanical production has superseded the natural form of female “labor” or “delivery” of living human offspring.

Such a symbolic depiction of the manufacture of paper as akin to human reproduction suggests that the transformation of operatives into machines, and machines into living entities (both animal and human), might lead to the creation of substitute humans by these same machines—a usurpation of control that was evident in antebellum debates about the ultimate nature of the new factory system, with their varied interpretations of the unprecedented productivity of the new machines and the dehumanizing effect on operatives: “The machine could be seen as a sophisticated tool, an extension of the operative, with tremendous potential for productive labor. Or it could be feared as an almost living being, capable of defying its supposed master. . . . Yet the question persisted: who was running whom? Machines could produce a multitude of goods, but would they eventually manufacture operatives in their own image?” (Zonderman 14).

The analogy in Melville's sketch between the creation of paper and the creation of a human being is also implied in the limited varieties of paper the factory produces. When the narrator asks if the machine produces anything but “foolscap” (i.e., all-purpose paper in large sheets), Cupid replies, “Oh, sometimes, but not often, we turn out finer work—cream-laid and royal sheets, we call them. But foolscap being in chief demand, we turn out foolscap most” (333). An analogy with the human race is patent here. The narrator demonstrates his philosophical turn of mind by his seeing the production of so much “blank” paper as comparable to the theory of John Locke that the human mind had no innate ideas but was instead a “blank slate” at birth on which were written all subsequent sensory impressions.

Yet if the paper seems to suggest a reductive, mechanistic view of human psychology, the machine itself frightens the narrator with its deterministic mode of operation, as if the organic principle of life itself were threatened by this iron automaton: “But what made the thing I saw so specially terrible to me was the metallic necessity, the unbudging fatality which governed it” (333). Rather than conveying a sense of wonder at the human ingenuity that created it, the complicated machine inspires the narrator with a fear of its ominous power and inflexible regularity. Hence a paradox evident in “Tartarus” is that while the sketch was ostensibly designed to be a work of social criticism inviting remedial action from the reader, it also implies that the conditions of oppression for the “maids” were ultimately created by the determinism of a mysteriously absent divinity operating through impersonal machines—an apparent melding of the sociological and metaphysical sources for the evils facing the narrator.

If the narrator is disturbed by an abstract sense of the “metallic necessity” of the machine, he also has a quasi-religious vision of the “pallid girls” who worked at the factory, and whose mute, suffering faces appear “outlined” by the paper they are producing: “Before my eyes—there, passing in slow procession along the wheeling cylinders, I seemed to see, glued to the pallid incipience of the pulp, the yet more pallid faces of all the pallid girls I had eyed that heavy day. Slowly, mournfully, beseechingly, yet unresistingly, they gleamed along, their agony dimly outlined on the imperfect paper, like the print of the tormented face on the handkerchief of Saint Veronica” (334). According to medieval legend, while Christ was on his way to the crucifixion, Veronica wiped his bloody and sweaty face with her veil and the imprint of his features remained there. Such an image provides a final symbolic gloss on the condition of the “maids” at the factory, whose fate it is to be crucified on the machinery of the new industrial order and its relentless economic laws. All the paper produced by the factory—some of which may find its way into the chambers of the London lawyer-bachelors—thus provides an inscriptional medium” figuring forth the martyrdom of the New England female factory worker.

The symbolic martyrdom of the “maids” is additionally ironic in that many industrial mills in the antebellum era were designed to look like churches, with steeple-like cupolas containing bells that announced the start and finish of the workday, and rows of clerestory windows: “These factories tried to imitate the churches around them, even as they were displacing these buildings from the center of communal life. When mills were built to look like churches, the owners could cover their ventures into industrial capitalism with the physical and symbolic veneer of a religious presence and purpose. The factory would physically embody its pledge to be a moral benefit to workers

and the community” (Zonderman 85; see also Rogin 203–04). Significantly, the paper factory in Melville’s sketch bears a resemblance to a church, for when first approaching the mill on his sleigh, and noting its uncanny resemblance to the secluded “Paradise of Bachelors” in the Inner Temple, the narrator remarks that he saw “the long, high-gabled main factory edifice, with a rude tower—for hoisting heavy boxes—at one end, standing among its crowded outbuildings and boarding-houses, as the Temple Church amidst the surrounding offices and dormitories” (326).

Yet the true nature of the temple-like paper mill was hinted when the narrator had earlier described the “large white-washed building, relieved, like some whited sepulchre, against the sullen background of the mountain-side firs” (324), thus alluding to Christ’s famous denunciation of the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees as comparable to “whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness” (Matt. 23.27). The moral pollution of the factory is thus obliquely suggested at the very beginning of the sketch. When the narrator takes his departure, he notes that “some pained homage to their pale virginity made me involuntarily bow” (334) in an act of respect, or even worship, towards these inadvertently holy virgins, whose passive suffering partakes of Christ’s martyrdom and the Virgin Mary’s sorrow at the Crucifixion.

In the conclusion to Melville’s diptych, the narrator leaves the paper mill in his sleigh, but he pauses one last time to contemplate his disparate experiences of the London bachelors and New England maids: “At the Black Notch I paused, and once more bethought me of Temple-Bar. Then, shooting through the pass, all alone with inscrutable nature, I exclaimed—Oh! Paradise of Bachelors! and oh! Tartarus of Maids!” (335). The end of the sketch thus offers no final attempt to reconcile the narrator’s experiences but instead gives an implicit challenge towards readers’ larger moral education. For the antithetical worlds described in the two sketches provide a classic case of cognitive dissonance for both narrator and reader. At the same time, various “inverted similitudes” in the two sketches create a sense of thematic correspondence, as initially hinted in the narrator’s previously quoted observation that the paper mill was “the very counterpart to the Paradise of Bachelors, but snowed upon, and frost-painted to a sepulchre” (327); so, too, the congenial jolly bachelors of the first prefigure the less benign “Old Bach” of the second. The guide Cupid similarly notes that the rags used to make the paper come from local sources as well as “Leghorn and London” (330), leading the narrator to speculate “that among these heaps of rags there may be some old shirts, gathered from the



dormitories of the Paradise of Bachelors” (330). An implicit moral, social, and economic interrelation between privileged London bachelors and oppressed New England maids has thus been established.

In order to gauge the type of moral education that Melville is offering in this diptych, one must ultimately go back to Ishmael’s praise of Solomonic wisdom in chapter 96 of *Moby-Dick*; the mature appreciation of the balance of good evil in the world that Ishmael is advocating must always include a haunting knowledge of the pervasiveness of human suffering and misery, a knowledge taught by the book of Ecclesiastes, traditionally held to be written by Solomon. Thus, Ishmael’s insistence on a key message of the book of Ecclesiastes—that a man is “undeveloped” if he has more joy than sorrow in his heart—directly applies to Melville’s later sketch. In Ecclesiastes, “the day of death” is asserted to be better than “the day of one’s birth”: “It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart. / Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better. / The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth” (7.1–4).

The moral division of human experience into antithetical categories of folly and wisdom, foolish laughter and wise sorrow, manifestly applies to the narrator’s paired experiences in “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids.” In the first sketch, we recall, the narrator had remarked of the general mindset of the London bachelors: “The thing called pain, the bugbear styled trouble—those two legends seemed preposterous to their bachelor imaginations” (322). Such a belief in the illusory nature of suffering not only ignores the wisdom of Ecclesiastes outlined above, but it also contradicts the central Judeo-Christian doctrine of the Fall and Original Sin; the idea that “pain” and “trouble” are mere “legends” to the bachelor imagination thus shows their ignorance of the basic moral teachings of Christianity as well as their male naivety and insularity. The Rabelaisian jollification and overconsumption of the bachelor dinner thus demonstrate that indeed “the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.” Yet if the narrator has inadvertently acted as something of an easily impressed tourist and naïve fool while enjoying his London bachelor dinner, he has become emotionally wiser and more empathic during his wintertime visit to the paper mill, observing the mournful countenances of the exploited maids and showing his compassion. For he has in the meantime discovered that an industrial system of socially sanctioned oppression exists, and in his own backyard, as it were. If the narrator’s self-identified profession as a professional “seedsman” at the start of the second sketch hints at Melville’s literary profession, it evokes Christ’s well-known parable of the sower (Matt.

13.18–23); for the narrator is, in effect, testing whether the imagination of the reader is ultimately “stony” or “fertile” imaginative ground on which he has the cast the “seeds” of his sketches.

The problem for both the narrator and the reader at the end of the diptych is to know how to balance two seemingly irreconcilable experiences: men in England inhabiting a comfortable heaven of male domesticity, and women in New England laboring as martyrs in an industrial hell created by the new market economy. As in his two other diptychs, which examine similarly contrasting but covertly corresponding Anglo-American scenes involving privilege and poverty, the deliberate contrast of gendered viewpoints found in “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” was designed to be provocative, in this case, by undermining conventional ideas about male and female “separate spheres” and the psychological, emotional, and economic costs of America’s rapid industrialization. The incorporation of an Anglo-American tradition of proverbs and diverbs in the title and of biblical wisdom in the text underlines the implicitly aphoristic and moralistic nature of the paired narratives. In the end, Melville’s diptych challenges the reader—and the middle-class reader in particular—to attain a new maturity of vision that would cast doubt on celebrations of national industrial progress, question ideas of American exceptionalism, acknowledge the limitations of contemporary gender ideology, and recognize the direct and indirect relationships between privilege and oppression, all in the interest of the reader’s gaining a more fully informed humanity.<sup>11</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For an overview of critical responses to the sketch up to the mid-1980s, see Newman, ch. 13. Dillingham (ch. 8) argues that Melville’s diptych illustrates the idea found in chapter 42 (“The Whiteness of the Whale”) of *Moby-Dick*, in which Ishmael posits two ways of looking at the world of nature, seeing either alluring but illusory surfaces or deadly appalling depths. Surveying the significance of the appearance of Melville’s diptych in *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*, Post-Lauria notes that the form of the diptych “with its corresponding allusions to social inequities and problems, represented a popular strategy found in mid-nineteenth-century magazines and novels. . . . The bifurcated title, a common practice in sentimental fiction, often refers to the stark discrepancies in the moral, social, or socioeconomic levels of the main characters” (172). Hamilton (117–31) has analyzed Melville’s diptych as a critique of the superficially pleasant and agreeable aspects of Washington Irving’s bachelor persona in *The Sketch Book*, a dominant model for all writers of antebellum literary sketches: “The revision Melville accomplishes is primarily aesthetic, an articulation of a rationale for incorporating ugliness and the dark side of the picture into literary works” (130). Scoppettuolo argues that Melville’s diptych reveals the negative impact of industrialization on democracy: “Industrialization finally results in the separation of the classes and the subsequent dialectical tension of production and consumption.” For Winter, “The diptych evokes a global network of sexual, economic, and moral relationships, expanding its satiric range still farther than that of ‘Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs’” (32). Allen examines the diptych in the context of other “factory fiction” of the era.

<sup>2</sup>Almost a century after the diptych’s original publication, Eby was the first to point out the oblique sexual allusions to the female reproductive system found in the second sketch. More recent critics have tended to overlook the fact that in the sexual symbolism of his diptych, Melville

is manifestly drawing on Renaissance traditions of moralized landscape and corporeal allegory; the allegory of human gestation in “Tartarus” is thus akin to Spenser’s depiction of the seminal production of human life in the Garden of Adonis in Book III, Canto VI, of *The Faerie Queene*.

<sup>3</sup> Florio, Burton, and Grose are quoted in Speake 95. Burton’s maxim is found in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Pt. III. Sec. III. Memb. 1. Subsect. 2. For more on Melville’s copy of Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*, see the listing for this volume at *Melville’s Marginalia Online*. It should be noted that the maxims of Florio and Burton were adaptations of earlier proverbial remarks about sixteenth-century Paris; see Speake 95. Grodzins (403–04) discusses Parker’s sermon, which remained unpublished, so Melville was likely unaware of the Unitarian minister’s use of the proverb.

<sup>4</sup> In his discussion of Melville’s use of Irving’s writings in the first sketch, Bickley (89–90) notes that the narrator’s naive dismissal of “pain” and “trouble” is adapted from the obtuse, self-indulgent conversation of the old general in “An Old Soldier,” a sketch in Irving’s *Bracebridge Hall*.

<sup>5</sup> Thompson (511–16) notes that there were actually five paper mills in Dalton manufacturing high-quality paper; all were powered by the Housatonic River that flowed past Melville’s Pittsfield residence.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of some of the mythological and Dantean symbolism of the narrator’s journey in “Tartarus,” see Young (118–20). The rugged landscape in the sketch is based on the mountainous topography north of Pittsfield adjacent to Mount Greylock (Woedolor Mountain), which Melville traversed by carriage with Evert Duyckinck and a group of friends in mid-August 1851 on an excursion to spend the night on the top of the mountain. See Olsen-Smith (62–63) and also Young (115–17).

<sup>7</sup> Rogin notes that Melville’s diptych “segregates the sexes to reverse their stereotypical occupations. . . . All they [the lawyers] do is eat in Paradise, parodying consumption in the home. The daughters who had done household work on the farm now ‘undertake rough laborer’s work’ in the factory. Deprived of a domestic family circle, these celibate maids find their home in the mill” (202).

<sup>8</sup> As Zonderman remarks, “Workers were troubled, not only by the physical dangers of tending machinery, but also by the specter of operatives mentally deteriorating into mindless drones and drudges. Some workers feared that their stultifying labor, coupled with increasingly powerlessness on the job, would take over their lives—they would become like the very machines they tended” (45). Fogle notes that the female operatives in Melville’s sketch “are the damned at their eternal labors. Hell is a system of perverted values, in which the machines have taken on the vital functions, and the human beings have become their slaves” (49). Fisher (77–94) views the sketch as an outspoken critique of the nation’s new industrial system; but he does not relate it to contemporary testimony of factory operatives. Pfister (110–21) relates the sketch to Hawthorne’s “The Birth-Mark” as a critique of the patriarchal control of women. Dimock claims that the female worker in “Tartarus” is “made to stand metonymically for the entire working class,” arguing that this figure is then doubled on itself, “for the focus happens not to be on the woman generally but on her sexualized body specifically, the oppressions and deprivations of that body serving as a stand-in for the full range of her oppressions and deprivations” (84, 85).

<sup>9</sup> In 1834 and again in 1836, mill girls in Lowell “turned out,” or struck (unsuccessfully), because of wage reductions, and in 1845 they formed the first women’s labor union in the country, the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, to help recruit workers to their cause. In the mid-1840s, efforts to pass a ten-hour workday law in Massachusetts ultimately failed, while in New Hampshire, where it passed, factory owners were still able to obtain “special contracts” from workers to work longer hours. Beginning in the later 1840s, a growing number of recent immigrant workers from Ireland also put downward pressure on wages. See Zonderman chs. 7–8.

<sup>10</sup> McGaw points out that most female employees at paper mills worked in the rag rooms and finishing rooms: “The largest number still worked at rag processing, where they either sorted rags by color, fabric, and condition or cut them to open seams, remove fasteners and damaged portions, and reduce the rags to small, uniform squares. Mechanization altered only the number of workers and the distribution of rag room work” (338). Women in the rag rooms were paid for piece work, earning their day’s pay for a specific number of pounds cut and sorted, with extra money for “overwork.”

<sup>11</sup> Fisher remarks on the conclusion to the sketch: “Like the narrator ‘Bartleby,’ in his final exclamation, he [the narrator] reveals not only his guilt but also his growth in understanding and sympathy” (92). Weyler notes, “There can be no paradise in Melville’s world unless there is a hell; paradise is purchased by the bachelors at the expense of the maids” (468). For Hamilton, Melville’s diptych is “employed as a heuristic for teaching middle-class readers more about themselves than ‘smooth, pleasing’ descriptions would do” (130). Post-Lauria notes that “the worlds of the bachelors and the maids remain fragmented rather than interactive. The narrator offers only discordant slices. While these discordancies challenge and criticize newly formed middle-class attitudes toward social stratification, they also simultaneously reflect those views” (176). Rowland sees the narrator as having learned nothing in the end: “The final exclamation serves to convey his pleasure in the bachelors’ world and his recoil from the world of women, which have been the subjects of the diptych” (404). Wiegman views Melville’s narrator as complicit with the patriarchal oppressions of his culture: “Bonding with Cupid and Old Bach—the only bonding to take place in Tartarus—guarantees the narrator’s denial of the hierarchical structures implicit in Paradise and Tartarus and enables him to lend his economic approval to female oppression by purchasing the symbolic children of their labors, the envelopes” (745–46). Serlin characterizes Melville’s narrator as a “fluid persona” who “provides the means for the stories’ ideological polarization” (81).

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