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# Report

## Melville Society Bezanson Archive Fellowship 2017

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Meaghan Fritz. Photo courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association.

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I take to the archive the same way that Ishmael takes to the sea. When my writing “hypos” begin to get the best of me, I turn to nineteenth-century diaries, letters, and handwritten literary manuscripts for inspiration. It’s a way I have of “driving off the spleen.” Attempting to write a dissertation chapter on widowed women and *Moby-Dick* proved to be a daunting task, not only because of their infamously small role in the novel (which drew me to the topic of my dissertation in the first place), but also because of the intimidation involved in navigating the vast ocean of Melville critical studies. As the fortunate recipient of the Walter E. Bezanson Research Fellowship, I shipped out to the New Bedford Whaling Museum Research Library for two weeks in early April 2017, where I found the perfect balm for my chapter’s woes: a vast collection of manuscripts written by and concerning the women of nineteenth-century New Bedford and the Melville Society Archives, which contain, among many riches, a repository of materials documenting Melville studies from its inception to the present.

I travelled to New Bedford to better understand the lives of sailors’ wives and widows in nineteenth-century maritime communities. Struck by Ahab’s description of his wife as “a widow with her husband alive!” (NN *Moby-Dick* 544), I began to wonder about her life onshore. How did she spend her time? How did she provide for herself and her son during Ahab’s long voyages? How, affectively, did she endure his absences? What role did her small appearance at the end of *Moby-Dick* play in the larger gender dynamics of the novel? Compounding my interest in these questions were the “Agatha Letters,” or notes that Melville wrote to Nathaniel Hawthorne after *Moby-Dick* was published. The letters describe the germ of a story centered on a woman named Agatha that he wished one of them to write, thematically taking up “the great patience, & endurance, & resignedness of the women of the island in submitting so uncomplainingly to the long, long absences of their sailor husbands” (NN *Correspondence* 232). Melville failed to develop Ahab’s wife as a full character, and Agatha appears never to have come into print, although her story may have been expanded as “The Isle of the Cross,” a lost manuscript by Melville identified by Hershel Parker. As part of my larger PhD project on widowhood, womanhood, and the law in nineteenth-century American literature, this chapter seeks to understand, both in Melville’s novel and in their own words, the unique personhood of sailors’ wives and widows. Because maritime women existed legally, socially, and economically in between the status of a widow and that of a wife during their husbands’ prolonged absences, I argue that authors outside of Melville—and women writers in particular—turned to such figures in fiction to imagine new possibilities for women’s citizenship and sexuality.

Evidently many women, just like Ahab's wife, married shortly before their new spouses took to the sea. I spent the better half of my first week at the New Bedford Whaling Museum Research Library immersed in the letters of Eliza Russell to her husband Thomas, a whaler. The two were married on June 3, 1851, and by early August Thomas had shipped out as first mate of the *Isaac Howland*, not to return until July of 1854. Russell's letters are remarkable in their scope. The collection includes correspondence written to Thomas on three different voyages, with 32 letters existing from the first voyage that he took after they married and 17 from a second. The third collection contains only three letters that Russell wrote to Thomas from Lahaina, on the Hawaiian island of Maui, where she remained in order to more safely deliver a baby while Thomas proceeded on the voyage. Having endured at least two long absences from her husband, Russell appears eventually to have chosen to accompany him.

Because we do not have any surviving correspondence that Thomas wrote to Eliza during his absence, the collection provides a welcome alternative perspective to *Moby-Dick*. Russell's letters are long and full of details about her life onshore, and they reveal much about the in-between status of mariner wives: their loneliness and constant fear of the well-being of their spouses; their social lives centering on the visits of women family members and friends who also had men at sea; their work and hobbies that helped them stay afloat financially and helped to pass the time; their duty to maintain social and familial networks. Eliza repeatedly visited fortune tellers, presumably to relieve some of the uncertainty she must have felt about her husband's dangerous occupation and her inability to communicate with him reliably and regularly. Her seamstress work helped her financially and her piano-playing engaged her socially. Russell's letters begin to flesh out the character of Ahab's wife, or who she might have been if Melville had developed her.

I also spent a great amount of time with a group of "dead letters" kept by a New Bedford postman, so named because, for some reason or other, they never made it to the intended sailors at sea. Although not offering as cohesive a story as those told by Russell, several of the letters reveal lonely wives terrified for their husbands' well-being and struggling to make ends meet by laboring outside the home. For example, Mary E. Potter of Westport confesses to her "dearest husband" Abner that "I am at home know [sic] and have had a great deal to get along with since you have bin [sic] gonn [sic] but I hope I shal live in pease [sic] some time or other." She concludes by placing a lock of hair inside the letter by which she hopes Abner will remember her "as long as you are saling [sic] on the sea" and cautions him to "be carful [sic] my beloved"

(New Bedford Whaling Museum Research Library Mss 80, Sub-group 3, Series K, Sub-series 4). These collections have fundamentally shifted how I think about *Moby-Dick*. As I theorize what it means for a woman to exist as “a widow with her husband alive!” simultaneously fulfilling the roles of wife and widow, the voices of the women of New Bedford will inform and nuance the chapter, and, I hope, our future understanding of *Moby-Dick*.

Every research fellow who traveled to New Bedford before me seems to have had a “New Bedford moment,” where something clicked for them about Melville or his works from exposure to the physical landscapes that he haunted. Mine happened early one morning when construction on the street that I had used to walk to the library was closed to pedestrians and I had to detour. Forgoing my morning coffee at Tia Maria’s, I walked up Bethel Street instead, where I stumbled upon the Seaman’s Bethel, Melville’s inspiration for the chapel where Father Mapple preaches his unforgettable sermon. Although the building was clearly still undergoing renovation, I bypassed the yellow tape and knocked on the front door. A man who worked in the building greeted me. After I explained that I was a Melville researcher, he eagerly brought me to the chapel.

I gasped out loud when I discovered that the cenotaphs that Melville describes on the walls of the chapel actually exist. “The Chapel” chapter of *Moby-Dick* is a major site of investigation for me because of the concentrated presence of “sailors’ wives and widows” (NN *Moby-Dick* 34) in the congregation and because Melville attributes two of the three fictional cenotaph sketches in the novel to women: one to a sister and the other to a widow. I had previously assumed that the cenotaphs were completely fictional. Yet here I was, standing in the chapel surrounded by them, and, curiously, not a single one from the nineteenth century was dedicated by a female family member. In fact, the cenotaphs seemed to be the complete inverse of how Melville described them: instead of being commemorated by mourning women, the plaques in the chapel were mostly dedicated by grief-stricken crewmembers honoring their fallen comrades. Needless to say, I am currently drafting an article-length study of women, cenotaphs, and Melville’s peculiar inversion in *Moby-Dick* alongside my chapter on whaling widows.

The rich repository of scholarly editions of Melville’s works, literary criticism, and historical materials compiled by the Melville Society and housed at the New Bedford Whaling Museum Research Library are unsurpassed. I was especially excited by the Harrison Hayford collection. As a graduate assistant for the Northwestern University Press, I conducted an archival project on the history of the Northwestern-Newberry editions of Melville’s works. A study of Hayford’s personal papers at the Northwestern University Archives revealed a scholar deeply committed to the preservation of Melville and his works for

future generations. It was an honor to visit this extension of Professor Hayford's lifelong work in the Melville Society Archives.

I wish to thank the Melville Society for the opportunity, time, and resources to spend two blissfully concentrated weeks in New Bedford researching sailors' wives and widows. I am grateful to Robert K. Wallace, who guided me toward the beautiful etchings of New Bedford women by artist Kathleen Piercefield. Bob also introduced me to the work of Sarah W. Rose and her ongoing project, "Lighting the Way: Historic Women of the South Coast," an exciting walking trail, app, and website that spotlights the lives and accomplishments of historical women in the greater New Bedford area. Sarah's willingness to share her deep knowledge of the New Bedford women featured in her project with me as well as her enthusiasm for my own findings and dissertation project were immeasurably useful and encouraging. I am grateful to Mary K. Bercauw Edwards's practicality in suggesting that I spend the majority of my research time utilizing the one-of-a-kind primary documents offered by the New Bedford Whaling Museum Research Library. Finally, I extend my deepest gratitude to librarian Mark Procknik, who surprised me in the last days of my visit by unearthing and sharing with me the boxes comprising the Lizzie Marble collection, a treasure trove of letters, logbooks, and other memorabilia regarding the marriage and widowhood of Elizabeth Marble, the riches of which I am still uncovering. While the vibrant lives of nineteenth-century women in New Bedford are condensed to a mere handful of sentences in *Moby-Dick*, my wanderings through the spaces they inhabited and the writings they produced greatly expanded my understanding of Melville's novel. I arrived in New Bedford a little "grim about the mouth." After two weeks immersed in the New Bedford Whaling Museum Research Library I left invigorated, a simple researcher embarking on a new chapter.