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APPROVAL PAGE TEMPLATE

MELVILLE'S MARDI AND THE BOOK OF MORMON

By

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Thesis

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ABSTRACT TEMPLATE

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Literature

Melville's *Mardi* and the Book of Mormon

Chairperson: Brady Harrison

While Melville's *Mardi* has long remained a puzzle to both readers and critics, scholars agree that his third novel marked a significant turning point in his writing career. It is with *Mardi* that Melville realized the novel as a form suited to grapple the various philosophical and religious questions he would famously explore in his following book, *Moby Dick*. Although scholars have already pinpointed many various sources for *Mardi*, this thesis examines the heretofore overlooked connections between Melville's third book and the esoteric volume of American scripture, the Book of Mormon.

The first chapter of this thesis examines some of the shared narrative structures in the opening chapters of both *Mardi* and the Book of Mormon, including similar allegorical imagery. The chapter also shows how the openings of both *Mardi* and the Book of Mormon are structured as a sort of "Old Testament in reverse." Chapter two takes an in-depth look at the teachings and theology of important character named Alma the Prophet from *Mardi*—apparently modeled on a character of the same name whose life and teachings make up one-third of Book of Mormon. Chapter three compares and contrasts the climactic scenes from *Mardi* and the Book of Mormon, both of which employ massive volcanic upheavals immediately followed by depictions of a Christian utopia. The thesis concludes with a look at how the Book of Mormon may have continued to influence Melville after *Mardi*, including how some of its themes and key phrases seem to make an appearance in *Moby Dick*.

“But what is lost forever, my lord, is nothing to what is now unseen. There are more treasures in the bowels of the earth, than on its surface.” -- Babbalanja, *Mardi*

Introduction

Melville, the Reader

Even a novice student of Herman Melville can't help but note the author's voracious appetite for reading. Melville, whose father owned a lending library, makes his enthusiasm for books quite apparent in the opening pages of *Moby Dick*. The book begins with a famous presentation of eighty quotations about whales, compiled by an unnamed (but clearly autobiographical) “Sub-Sub-librarian” who has “gone through the long Vaticans and street stalls of the earth, picking up whatever random allusions to whales he could anyways find in any book whatsoever, sacred or profane” (*Moby Dick* 11). The scope of these cetological “extracts” may astonish first-time readers—especially those who grew up in a post-Google-search age. As the reader continues through page after page of quotes about whales, he or she is led to ponder: how long did it take the author to collect all these scraps? How many books did he have to read to find them? For every book that contained an allusion to whales, how many did the author read that had no trace of them? Melville's opener prompts the reader of *Moby Dick* to accept the author-narrator's statement: “I have swam through libraries” (*Moby Dick* 132).

Difficulty arises in trying to get any accurate sense of just how many books Melville read in his lifetime, or what those books were. At the time of his death in 1891, appraisers estimated that Melville's personal collection held “about 1,000” books (Charvat 191). Most of these volumes were eventually sold at auction by Melville's widow, Elizabeth. As of 2008, less than half (about 400) of the books from Melville's personal collection have been identified—and of

these only the whereabouts of 285 have been accounted for (“The Online Catalog of Books”). Anyone trying to ascertain what books Melville read in his lifetime are left with around 600 unnamed volumes from his personal collection, in addition to all the books the author may have borrowed from other libraries or friends about which we have no record. As Steven Olsen-Smith states: “Just as Melville can be assumed to have autographed, marked and annotated more books than are known to survive from his library, so too he can be assumed to have borrowed and consulted more books than he owned” (“The Online Catalog of Books”). If Professor Olsen-Smith’s estimate is accurate, one could assume Melville read or at least consulted over 2,000 books in his lifetime. According to Olsen-Smith, many of Melville’s lost books “have in all likelihood undergone [some form] of bibliographic demise” (4). Despite this fact, Olsen-Smith is not altogether pessimistic about the mysteries of Melville’s reading: “Owing in large part to the long period of popular neglect that characterized Melville’s later life and career as a writer, a few more periodic, large-scale bursts of new evidence may possibly be in store” (4).

Melville Source Studies

The depth and breadth of Melville’s reading plays an important role in the ongoing critical discussion surrounding his contributions to literature. Essays cataloging Melville’s reading and speculating on his sources (i.e. “source studies”) started appearing in the late 1920s. Source studies achieved a milestone in the publishing of Merton M. Sealts’s *Melville’s Reading* in 1950, and continue in contemporary projects like *Melville’s Marginalia Online*. The digital cataloging of books in the internet age only furthers interest in discovering what Melville may have owned, borrowed, or read for pleasure, personal enrichment, or inspiration.

Attention to Melville's reading goes beyond mere curiosity in what interested a great mind; his reading profoundly influenced his intellectual growth and his growth as a writer ("Purpose and Scope"). Melville's reading was his main source of education after being forced to withdraw from school after the death of his father. He took his books seriously, often engaging in "rigorous, systematic" reading ("Purpose and Scope"). The ever-expanding record of evidence—books Melville marked or otherwise annotated—reveals the scope of his interests, both contemporary to his day and past classics: "the King James Bible, Homer, Shakespeare, John Milton, Alexander Pope, Arthur Schopenhauer, William Wordsworth, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Honoré de Balzac, Matthew Arnold, Ralph Waldo Emerson, [and] Nathaniel Hawthorne" just to name a few ("Purpose and Scope").

The importance of Melville's reading becomes most apparent in the study of his third novel, *Mardi*. This is because the writing of *Mardi* marked a new period in Melville's growth as an author—one where the influences of his reading were "especially significant" (Davis 194). As Melville wrote *Mardi*, he appears to have increasingly immersed himself in the world of the printed word. He started to explore new and interesting genres in the books he read for inspiration, which before had been mostly limited to travel literature (Davis 194). His first two novels, *Typee* and *Omoo*, tell the simple but rousing tale of a captured merchant seaman living among native islanders and his subsequent return to civilization. Although modern scholars have since uncovered some of Melville's borrowings from encyclopedic works and other travelogues to flesh out certain details in these first two books, the majority of *Typee* and *Omoo* are purely Melville's narrative and personal commentary. *Mardi* is where Melville begins to invent freely and openly, no longer relying solely on personal experience or autobiographical details to craft a narrative.

An Overview of Mardi

Although obviously not as widely read today or critically scrutinized as *Moby Dick*, *Mardi* plays an important role for scholars as Melville's first foray into literature as high art. The novel was originally billed as a "sequel" to *Typee* and *Omoo*, but is really a different animal altogether. It begins in the vein of *Typee*, with an unnamed narrator who jumps ship while sailing in the South Seas. For a time it continues to feel like Melville's previous adventures at sea, but it veers suddenly into completely new territory. Erin Suzuki deftly summarizes *Mardi*'s plot:

After several misadventures at sea, the narrator comes across a native ship bearing a young white woman, Yillah, intended for sacrifice to the gods. Smitten by her beauty, he murders the priest keeping her captive and steals her away. They escape into the fictitious archipelago Mardi, where he announces himself as Taji, a powerful demigod who has 'come from the sun' (166). Cordially received by King Media of Odo, Taji and Yillah make themselves comfortable in their new home; however, shortly thereafter Yillah disappears. Taji sets off in search of her, accompanied by four companions: King Media, the historian Mohi, the poet Yoomy, and the philosopher Babbalanja. (373-374)

The narrator's quest for Yillah serves as the backdrop for the bulk of the novel, which is made up of Taji and his companions sailing from island to island, observing the often strange customs of the various Mardian subcultures. All the while the protagonists paddle to escape a murderous band of brothers seeking vengeance for the narrator's killing of their father, the priest who kept Yillah captive. Above all the travelers love nothing more than talking among one another, telling tall tales, reciting poetry, and as Suzuki observes, continually debating what "Sir William Jones calls the 'four principal sources of all mythology'—namely history, poetry, philosophy, and cosmology" (374).

Mardi, with its circuitous plot and detours into rabbit-holes of philosophical discourse, was met with confusion and derision from critics (Parker 626-635). Most reviewers echoed a sentiment that appeared in the London *Weekly Chronicle*: “we have turned the book over, like a dog might a jellyfish, without being able to make it out, for the life of us” (Parker 630). Reviews variously described the novel as “a puzzle,” “*Robinson Crusoe* run mad,” “outrageous,” (Parker 628) reminiscent of Rabelais, except “divested of . . . all its wit and humor,” (Parker 629) “absurd,” (Parker 631) “trash,” (Parker 634) a story with “no movement . . . no significance or point” (Parker 632) and basically “unreadable” (Parker 630).

Not all the reviews were wholly negative, however. A number of critics sensed something of literary greatness in the work (Parker 626). Nathaniel Hawthorne, upon first reading the novel, wrote that he found *Mardi* to be a “rich book,” “with depths here and there that compel a man to swim for his life,” “so good that one scarcely pardons the writer for not having brooded long over it” (Parker 768). One reviewer compared *Mardi* to a kaleidoscope (Parker 628)—an apt simile, since, in the opinion of this writer, *Mardi* offers views to an unseen, entrancing, frequently beautiful, always shifting world. Melville himself, in a response to the negative reviews, described *Mardi* as a plant that has not yet flowered, which might “by some miracle . . . flower like the aloe, a hundred years hence” (*Correspondence* 154).

Merrell Davis, in his book-length treatment of *Mardi*, points out the novel’s function in Melville’s transition from writer of picaresque “pseudo-autobiographical” travelogues to creator of great works of literature: “*Mardi*, despite its flaws, is peculiarly fitted to illustrate Melville at work and is an important focal point in his early literary career” (ix). The reason *Mardi* is so well fitted to show Melville at work is evidenced in its own unique structure. Melville’s first two novels offer a relatively straight-forward narrative structure. *Mardi* begins as a “travelogue-

satire” in its earliest chapters but morphs into something new as it moves along—apparently reflecting whatever the author was reading. Satirical digressions mimicking Laurence Sterne and Robert Burton pop up and work their way into the travel narrative. Accounts of astronomy begin to clash with wild songs, poetry and vivid, colorful characters. Eventually the narrative changes direction from chapter to chapter, seemingly to adapt to whatever ideas Melville feels like discussing (again, inspired by whatever books he was then reading). The main characters in *Mardi*—a king, a historian, a poet, and a philosopher—all get ample space to voice their opinions on the events taking place all around them. Davis writes, “The book he finally published thus took two years in the writing,” and “grew in stature beyond his own expectations for it” (194). Melville created the world of *Mardi* as a “solution to many [of the] artistic problems [he] faced,” (Davis 194) specifically: how does one tell an adventure story that also has something important to say?

At least one study lists more than 100 possible sources for *Mardi* (Bercaw). This may seem a bit excessive if one factors the time it must have taken for Melville to read 100 books over the course of the two years it took to write *Mardi*, but the number may not seem so outlandish when one considers Melville’s methods. Melville often worked, according to Mary Bercaw, from memory, injecting ideas that he picked up from any and every book he’d ever encountered in his life (16). Melville’s use of sources sometimes took the form of him copying verbatim with a source-book open in front of him, but often times his borrowing was much more complex, especially in terms of thematic borrowing (Bercaw 16). His literary inspirations were often synthesized with one another to produce multi-faceted, complex allusions that originated in multiple sources (Bercaw 18). Melville often read his source works only partially. He liked to sample texts that interested him. Bercaw states, “Even some of his major source-works Melville

did not read from cover to cover” (18). These habits help to explain the abundance of sources pinned to *Mardi*, but the abundance of sources also explains the vast array of thoughts covered in the novel.

Beyond its use as a study of Melville’s reading habits, *Mardi* initiates Melville’s literary wrestle with the sundry questions of philosophy, politics, and religion that were first hinted at in his previous novels. The endless conversations between the characters in *Mardi* allow Melville to sort out his ponderings on modern Christianity, the nature of God, truth, and faith, the problem of theodicy, religious hypocrisy—themes that he continues to address and develop in *Moby Dick* and throughout the rest of his literary life.

Mardi’s Inspirations

The books Melville read during the years he wrote *Mardi* all played their (often unquantifiable) parts in shaping the ideas contained in it. Early critics of *Mardi* noticed the obvious influences of Francois Rabelais and Thomas Browne. Contemporary critics have picked up on the importance of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (Bertani 308-338) and Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* (Moses 258-269) in shaping the structure of *Mardi* and providing Melville with some of the book’s thematic concerns. *Mardi’s* major influences make it clear that despite Melville’s status as a great American novelist, he didn’t often turn to novels for inspiration. This makes sense when one considers the fact that, in the words of William Spengeman, “Melville didn’t write novels” (ix). Spengeman argues that Melville wrote fictionalized travel narratives, philosophical dialogues, an anatomy, and a pseudo-biography, among other things, but not “novels.” Spengeman continues: “With certain notable exceptions, [Melville] didn’t even read novels ... His favorite books, rather, were ... anomalies composed by writers, like himself, given more to

high flying and deep diving than smooth sailing or plain sewing” (ix). Melville taking so much inspiration from Rabelais, Browne, Dante and Spenser appears to fit with Spengemann’s thesis. And while all the aforementioned books may have played their part in shaping *Mardi*, a closer reading suggests that Melville’s third novel was also influenced by an earlier American book—one published in the nineteenth century and also met with critical disregard. In this thesis I propose the Book of Mormon be added to the list of books that shaped or otherwise influenced Herman Melville’s *Mardi*.

An Overview of the Book of Mormon

Melville wrote in 1850, “I love all men who dive...the whole corps of thought-divers, that have been diving & coming up again with blood-shot eyes since the world began” (*Correspondence* 121). He might have found a fitting companion in Joseph Smith, who wrote of himself in 1842, “deep water is what I am wont to swim in” (*The Doctrine and Covenants* 257). Joseph Smith published the Book of Mormon in 1830, the same year he founded the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Book of Mormon is a fine example an “anomaly” composed by an American outsider, and the widely circulated story of the book’s creation would have undoubtedly fascinated the author of *Mardi*. According to Smith’s autobiographical account, the book came into being under miraculous circumstances. When Smith was in his early twenties an angel calling himself Moroni appeared to him, eventually leading him to a spot at the base of a hill near his family’s home in upstate New York. The angel explained that he had authored an ancient record that lay buried at the spot, and instructed Joseph that the time had come to unearth it. Joseph dug the volume up out of a stone box buried in the ground and brought it home. Smith and other witnesses (close friends and associates) claimed the record

looked like a book written on metal leaves, or plates, that had the appearance of gold or brass. (Smith “Joseph Smith—History” 47-59). Over the course of approximately sixty-five working days, in a creative process Harold Bloom calls a “magical trance-state” (86) (and described less exotically as “transcription” (72) by historian Richard Bushman), Smith dictated to scribes what amounted to 570 pages of printed text. The resulting document was soon after published as the Book of Mormon.

The Book of Mormon differs from other religious books of its time in that it is not a collection of creeds or theological treatises, but claims to be an ancient historical narrative. This narrative is complex and often oblique, covering a span of one thousand years of history within the framework of a not-always-chronological timeline filled with flashbacks and proleptic narrative leaps across centuries. The book itself is divided up, Bible-like, into different sections, or books, composed by different authors. Some of these books are said to be included whole cloth from the words of their original authors, but most are actually abridgments compiled by two authors: the ancient historian Mormon (the book’s namesake) and his son Moroni. The overall “plot” of the Book of Mormon focuses on God’s dealings with his followers on the ancient American continent.

The book opens in Jerusalem about 600 years before the birth of Christ. Several families of faithful Israelites are led by God out of Jerusalem to sail to “the promised land,” an undisclosed location generally understood by early Mormons to be somewhere in Central America. These families establish a Mesoamerican colony but an internal rift divides them into two main groups: the followers of the faithful son Nephi (designated by the narrator as Nephites), and the followers of the wicked son Laman (called Lamanites). Nephite scribes and prophets pen historical vignettes to illustrate the abominable wickedness of the Lamanite

apostates, who presumably break God's commandment by intermarrying with the heathen (non-Israelite) native population. The Nephites are almost constantly at war with the ever-expanding Lamanites, who seek to destroy their culture and their religion. The climactic event of the Book of Mormon is the visitation of the resurrected Christ to a group of faithful Nephites and Lamanites. Jesus expounds his teachings and establishes a church among the (newly dissolved) factions, resulting in two generations of peace. The groups ultimately return to their warring ways, the Lamanites finally decimating the Nephites only to see their own civilization implode shortly thereafter. God commands two of the lone Nephite survivors, the prophet Mormon and his son Moroni, to compile the Nephite history and etch it onto metal plates. Moroni closes the record with his warning to future generations to learn from his civilization's mistakes.

Harold Bloom, despite unbridled enthusiasm for Joseph Smith as a true American visionary,¹ has little good to say about the text of the Book of Mormon, which he refers to as a "stunted step[child] of the Bible" (81). He does note that the Book of Mormon can be seen as the portrait of the "self-educated, powerful mind" of Joseph Smith. And while he admits that it "has bravura" on the whole he believes it to be "tendentious and frequently tedious" (85). He continues: "What is a contemporary non-Mormon, interested in American religion, to do with the Book of Mormon? I cannot recommend that the book be read either fully or closely, because it scarcely sustains such a reading" (86).

Bloom's criticism is nothing new. Controversy surrounded the Book of Mormon since its publication in 1830. Most nineteenth century critics objected to it on purely theological grounds, believing it and Joseph Smith's claims to be deeply blasphemous. Those few who actually read it found it to be sorely lacking as a work of literature. Mark Twain summed up the views of many critics when he quipped the Book of Mormon was "chloroform in print" and essentially "a

pretentious affair,” “slow,” “sleepy,” “an insipid mess,” (58-59) and “rather stupid and tiresome” (135).

Currently, the Book of Mormon is undergoing a process similar to Melville’s critical recovery in the twentieth century (in spirit if not in scope). The past twenty years have marked a period of reevaluation of the Book of Mormon by scholars outside the ranks of Brigham Young University. Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Daniel Walker Howe believes “the Book of Mormon should rank among the great achievements of American literature” (314). Far from the sleep-inducing drivel described by Twain, contemporary historian Nathan Hatch describes the Book of Mormon in terms that would have surely caught the attention of Herman Melville: “Surging through its pages are unmistakable undercurrents of divine rage: destruction, famine, pestilence, thunder, earthquakes, tempests, melting elements, flames of devouring fire, and chains from which there is no deliverance” (116).

The question of the origins of the Book of Mormon is essentially a matter of faith; whether one believes Joseph Smith had a miraculous experience involving the divine, was a malevolent fraud, or something in between does not really matter for the task at hand and will not be addressed here. As one commentator put it, “Mormons and non-Mormons will never agree on the basic nature of the text—to come to agreement would be to move from one camp to the other” (Hardy xvi). Suffice it to say that whatever its origins, the Book of Mormon exists first and foremost as a book with a narrative embedded with distinct philosophical and theological ideas—ideas that appear to have influenced Melville’s *Mardi*.

Along with Smith’s claims to have miraculously translated an ancient religious text came the bold declaration that Christ had appeared to him personally in order to explain to him that all modern Christian sects were now “corrupt” in one way or another, and that many of the plain and

precious truths of the gospel had been lost throughout the centuries (Smith “Joseph Smith—History” 49). The Book of Mormon was said by Smith to be a remedy to these losses. Melville, not one to shy away from the blasphemous or from calling out fellow Christians on their hypocrisy, would probably not have been as appalled by Joseph Smith’s assertions as the more pious of his generation. The Book of Mormon’s outlandish origin story alone may have been enough to attract Melville to pick up a copy; its claim to be uncorrupted Christian scripture from an ancient American civilization would have made it all the more enticing.

Melville and the Book of Mormon

There is no direct evidence—an annotated volume or a specific mention in personal correspondence—that Herman Melville ever read the Book of Mormon. However, evidence suggests Melville was familiar with the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith, and the Latter-day Saint movement in general.

Joseph Smith and Herman Melville both grew up in upstate New York. Smith was born in 1805 and Melville in 1819. Although their respective hometowns of Palmyra and Albany are about two hundred miles apart, Richard Rust points out that they were connected by the Erie Canal (48). Gossip or rumors about Joseph Smith and his activities in Palmyra would have traveled along the canal.

Joseph Smith would never get the chance to know of Melville’s work; he was murdered by an angry mob in the summer of 1844, two years before the publication of *Typee*. The Book of Mormon, however, was published the spring of 1830 when Smith was twenty-four years old and Melville was just ten. Five thousand copies of the first edition were printed and disseminated by Latter-day Saint missionaries throughout the eastern United States. Joseph Smith himself visited

Albany, Melville's home town, to preach the gospel and distribute copies of the Book of Mormon in the summer of 1832 (Bushman 188). Melville would have been thirteen years old. One commentator writes that Mormon missionaries were undoubtedly showing up in Melville's neighborhood from that time forward (Farr 355). By the time *Mardi* was published in 1849, at least three editions of the Book of Mormon were already in circulation in the United States with several thousand copies circulating in England, having arrived there in 1837.²

In his twenty-first year Melville actually took a boat trip along the Erie Canal, past Palmyra, and eventually down the Mississippi. As historian Richard Rust speculates, "while there is no record that he and Joseph Smith ever met ... probably the nearest Melville ever came to Smith was in 1840 when a twenty-one-year-old Melville took a steamboat from Galena to Cairo, both in Illinois" (49). On this boat Melville passed the Latter-day Saint settlement of Nauvoo, a town the Mormons were then building into the largest city in Illinois.³ Another commentator observes, "On such a trip [Melville] would have had many opportunities to meet and hear about the Mormons" (Rees "Melville's Alma" 45). This voyage left a deep impression on young Herman; biographer Hershel Parker notes that Melville remembered some of the people he met on the trip "all of his life" (171). Later in life, Melville used the memories of his riverboat trip to construct scenes used in *Mardi*, *Moby Dick*, *White-Jacket* and *The Confidence-Man* (Parker 171, 177-178).

The opening scene of Melville's *The Confidence-Man* suggests that Melville encountered plenty of Latter-day Saints on his fateful riverboat trip, as he places "Mormons and Papists" in the "congress ... of that multiform pilgrim species, man" boarding a steamboat headed down the Mississippi (6). The same chapter mentions an unnamed "Green prophet from Utah," an allusion interpreted by some as a reference to a young Mormon missionary (Rees "Melville's Alma" 45)

and by others as a reference to Brigham Young, the prophet who led the Latter-day Saints to Utah after the death of Joseph Smith (Farr 354). Later in the *The Confidence-Man*, the narrator describes a missionary-type wearing a “brass plate” hung about his neck “collar-wise by a chain” (98). Cecilia Farr writes that this brass plate is “suggestive of the engraved, ancient metal plates (both brass and gold) from which Joseph Smith said he translated the Book of Mormon” (355-356). In chapter nine the narrator refers to a settlement known as “New Jerusalem ... originally founded by certain fugitive Mormons ... [and standing] on the Mississippi”—a definite reference to the Latter-day Saint settlement of Nauvoo. One critic even notes similarities between the outlandish descriptions of New Jerusalem in *The Confidence-Man* and a city of the same name mentioned in the Mormon scripture, suggesting “Melville might have had in mind ... the New Jerusalem ... described in the Book of Mormon” (Rust 50).

Even if Melville never met Joseph Smith in Nauvoo, he was obviously aware enough of Smith’s teachings to use him as a metaphor for a new kind of religious belief in the face of ubiquitous modernity. Melville’s doggerel poem “The New Ancient of Days” mocks the idea that science is fit to take down religion. The poem tells the bizarre story of a prehistoric petrified man recently discovered in a cave in Belgium. The prehistoric man raves that he is living proof of the theory of evolution and can therefore “dethrone / Joe Smith” and prove religion false (*Collected Poems* 376). Melville’s use of “Joe Smith” in this poem, left unpublished in his own lifetime and written many years after Smith’s death, suggests that Melville understood Joseph Smith’s project, at least in part, and continued to think about him later in life.

Pierre, published three years after *Mardi*, contains the only reference Melville ever makes to the Book of Mormon by name. The book appears briefly as a gift bestowed to the character of Plontinus Plinlimmon, who is the leader of a religious sect. Pierre repeatedly

describes Plinlimmon as having an air of suspicious “non-Benevolence” about him, as if he were wearing a disguise in his plain dress (290). Plinlimmon is the author of a philosophical pamphlet that argues that “in things terrestrial . . . a man must not be governed by ideas celestial” (214). In other words, the teachings of Christ are meant to describe the nature of life in heaven, not to prescribe earthly morality. Melville paints Plinlimmon as a religious hypocrite, drinking wine even as he instructs his followers against it (291). In chapter twenty-one of *Pierre* an anonymous foreign scholar leaves a “very fine set of volumes” on Plinlimmon’s doorstep. The books included in the packet are a wide-ranging collection of religious and philosophical texts, including the writings of English, Italian, French and ancient Greek philosophers, the Zoroastrian holy book “the Zend-Avesta,” and “the Book of Mormon” (291). Plinlimmon ultimately rejects the gift and refuses to read the volumes. As one critic points out, all the books contain “elements antithetical to Plinlimmon’s philosophy” (Rees 42). What they have in common is that they are writings that encourage a belief in the divine (or at least in man’s divine potential), that denounce religious hypocrisy, and that support a belief in a more refined mode of existence available to man in mortality. That these volumes were bundled together at Plinlimmon’s doorstep constitute evidence of Melville’s voracious reading, and also suggests that he was familiar with at least some of the contents of each book.

Introducing Mardi’s Alma and the Book of Mormon’s Alma

The most obvious connection between Melville and the Book of Mormon, however, is the character of Alma the prophet. The native islanders that populate *Mardi* make countless references to a quasi-mystical seer named Alma, “an illustrious prophet and teacher divine” (113). Although Alma himself never appears as a character in the flesh, many Mardians quote his

teachings at length and recite tales from his life. The character of Alma the prophet in *Mardi* points directly to a character of the same name found in the Book of Mormon. The prophet Alma (and his son of the same name) is one of the most prominent characters in the Book of Mormon. The Book of Alma actually makes up an entire third of the text of the Book of Mormon; there are more words devoted to the life story and teachings of Alma than there are for any other character in the book. Melville's use of the name Alma for his Mardian prophet appears to have been intentional; Robert A. Rees sees it as "The greatest evidence of Melville's having read The Book of Mormon" (42).

This parallel between the Book of Mormon and *Mardi* was first noticed by Rees in an essay for *Emerson Studies Quarterly*, published in 1967. In the article Rees notes the similarities of the Almas in *Mardi* and the Book of Mormon, pointing out parallels in their teachings. Rees's short essay is apparently the first and last study of the correlation between *Mardi* and the Book of Mormon, as no scholars have taken up this lead since. Mary Bercaw, citing Rees's essay, lists the Book of Mormon as a possible source for *Mardi* in her 1987 study of Melville's sources—although she marks the entry with a single question mark to indicate it as a "questionable suggestion" of a source (61). *Mardi*'s Book of Mormon connection is brought up again briefly in a 2009 essay by Richard Rust which compares and contrasts the religious ideas of Herman Melville and Joseph Smith. Rust's essay disagrees with Bercaw's question mark and comes to the conclusion that Rees makes his argument "quite persuasively" (49).

Beyond Rees's article, very little has been written about the influence of the Book of Mormon on *Mardi* or Herman Melville. The reason for this probably stems from the fact that despite being nearly two hundred years old and its role as scripture to millions of Latter-day Saints, the Book of Mormon has received relatively scant attention as a work of literature.

Nathan Hatch pointed out in 1989: “For all the recent attention given to the study of Mormonism, surprisingly little has been devoted to the Book of Mormon itself” (115). Daniel Howe echoes this sentiment, lamenting the fact that even by 2007, the Book of Mormon “has never been accorded the status it deserves” (314).⁴ While it is true that many studies have taken a literary approach to the Book of Mormon through the years, these have been mostly overlooked in academic circles due to their apologetic nature and the fact that they were mostly authored by Latter-day Saint scholars for the benefits of fellow church members. Critic Terryl Givens sums up the situation, writing that the only literary studies the Book of Mormon has inspired outside of Latter-day Saint circles have been limited to “vitriolic attacks shelved in the cult section of Christian bookstores” (6). Only fairly recently, with the arrival of groundbreaking works like Grant Hardy’s *Understanding the Book of Mormon* in 2010, has the door been opened to the development of a “poetics of the Book of Mormon” (xix).

Nathan Hatch dismisses critics who have long characterized the Book of Mormon as an awkwardly written deception. His description frames the Book of Mormon as precisely the kind of book Melville would have taken interest in:

[Past critical] interpretations fail to see that the Book of Mormon is a document of profound social protest, an impassioned manifesto by a hostile outsider against the smug complacency of those in power and the reality of social distinctions based on wealth, class, and education. In attempting to define his alienation from the world around him, Smith resorted to a biblical frame of reference rather than to one of conventional politics, a point that Richard Bushman has emphasized. Yet in constructing a grand and complex narrative account of the ancient world, he chose to employ a distinct set of biblical themes: divine judgment upon proud oppressors, blindness to those wise in their own

eyes, mercy for the humble, and spiritual authority to the unlearned. This book is a stern and sober depiction of reality. (116)

Contemporary scholars like Nathan Hatch and Grant Hardy have brought to light the populist themes woven into the Book of Mormon, themes that resonate when compared to Melville's *Mardi*.

Melville himself drew an explicit parallel between *Mardi* and Mormonism in a somewhat cryptic comment to Evert Duyckinck. On February 2, 1850, Melville sent Duyckinck a copy of the newly published *Mardi* along with an accompanying letter. In the letter Melville apologizes but asks that the book be admitted into Duyckinck's library which is full of "exotics & other rare things in literature." He goes on:

Again: (as the divines say) political republics should be the asylum for the persecuted of all nations; so, if *Mardi* be admitted to your shelves, your bibliographical Republic of Letters may find some contentment in the thought, that it has afforded refuge to a work, which almost everywhere else has been driven forth like a wild, mystic Mormon into shelterless exile. (*Correspondence* 154)

The Book of Mormon's emergence as a work of literary complexity coupled with Melville's borrowing of the name Alma makes this "wild, mystic Mormon" comment far more suggestive. This thesis shows the heretofore unexamined connections between Herman Melville's *Mardi* and the Book of Mormon. It illustrates the ways which Melville drew upon certain narrative structures, themes, and even characters from the Book of Mormon for use in *Mardi*. It will also explore why the Book of Mormon's structure, themes and characters may have appealed to Melville and how they align with what Melville attempts in *Mardi*, Melville's first venture into literary fiction and the testing ground where he reevaluated the attributes of truth. Before *Mardi*,

Melville's view of what qualified as truth—what constituted “a true story”—remained limited to collections of empirically-tested facts approved of by institutional authorities (i.e. historical or scientific truth recorded by experts and scholars). Thus the author could safely describe his (mostly) autobiographical memoir, *Typee*, as a truthful narrative. *Typee* recounts things that actually happened to the author, therefore *Typee* depicts the truth. Alternately, the Book of Mormon argues for the existence of eternal religious truths, an understanding of which are not necessarily dependent on empirical testing. Understanding these truths becomes a deeply personal process, requiring the study of one's own memories and emotions in addition to a firm understanding of history. Instead of confirmation from worldly authorities, eternal truths are confirmed in one's heart, mind, and body by God. By the end of *Mardi* (and for the remainder of his writing career), at least a part of Melville appears to have converted to defining truth in this new way, even if he never appears wholly convinced. Essentially, it is in *Mardi* where Melville rejects the predominant philosophy of logical positivism, which suggests that any statement that cannot be empirically proven is meaningless.⁵ Several characters arrive at a similar conclusion in regards to truth in the Book of Mormon. Before he may have turned to the Book of Mormon, however, Melville was spurred down this path of reevaluation by critics who questioned the truthfulness of his early works.

The Exploration of Truth in Mardi and the Book of Mormon

Melville's first book, *Typee*, recounts the story of the author's experiences living with (and subsequently escaping from) a tribe of Polynesian cannibals. When Melville first attempted to sell the manuscript for *Typee*, the publishers Harper and Brothers rejected it. Their reasoning was that “it was impossible that it [the story] could be true and therefore was without real value”

(Davis 8). Reactions like this irked Melville; he intended *Typee* to be read as an autobiographical memoir of his real-life experiences, not as a fiction.

Typee and its sequel, *Omoo*, were eventually published and became critical and commercial successes in both the United States and Great Britain. While most critics accepted the books as nonfiction, their popularity led some to question the veracity of Melville's adventures. Melville was never one to simply brush off objections to his authenticity (Davis 17). The author was perturbed at any suggestion that his books were less-than-truthful accounts of personal historical events, and made it a point to respond—with differing degrees of hostility—to even minor skepticism (Davis 27). Reports of disbelief from readers and critics continued to irritate Melville long after *Typee* and *Omoo* were established as international bestsellers (Davis 194).

One sympathizes with Melville's exasperation, to a degree—after all, how could any critics know whether the author's story was pure invention? And even if the author's stories were not always strictly true—why should that automatically make them “without real value”? Perhaps not surprisingly, Melville sought to address just these types of questions on the nature and value of truth in his third book, *Mardi*. Writing to his publisher about his forthcoming *Mardi*, Melville specified “a *real* romance of mine is no *Typee* or *Omoo*” (*Correspondence* 106). Melville explains that his idea of a “*real* romance” is made up “of different stuff altogether” (*Correspondence* 106). Melville ironically couples the words “real” and “romance;” the very definition of a “romance” according to the Oxford English Dictionary is a “narrative . . . relating the legendary or extraordinary adventures of some hero” or even “An extravagant fabrication; a wild falsehood, a fantasy” (“romance”). Was Melville suggesting that his forthcoming extravagant fantasy tale would somehow be a more accurate depiction of reality? The phrase

“real romance” can make sense when “real” is defined as something “Corresponding to actuality; true” (OED “real”). In other words, a “*real* romance” could be a wild fantasy that in some way or another corresponds to actuality or is somehow “true.” Melville describes his forthcoming work this way because at some point he realized that the truths contained in a work of literature have little to do with their connection to historical or objective “reality.” As he explains in his preface to *Mardi*:

Not long ago, having published two narratives of voyages in the Pacific, which, in many quarters, were received with incredulity, the thought occurred to me, of indeed writing a romance of Polynesian adventure, and publishing it as such; to see whether, the fiction might not, possibly, be received for a verity: in some degree the reverse of my previous experience.

This thought was the germ of others, which have resulted in *Mardi*. (xvii)

Hyland Packard cautions against reading *Mardi*'s preface as some kind of ironic pleasantry or “anxious defense” (242). To Melville, a fiction—indeed *this* fiction—could now contain “verity,” or truths beyond any historical records. Accusing a book of having no “real value” simply because it was presumably fictitious was surely a sign of the reader’s obtuseness, not wisdom. What this thesis argues is that Melville may have arrived at this conclusion, at least in part, after reading the Book of Mormon.

Understanding Melville’s fascination with the questions of “what is real?” and “what is true?” is crucial in understanding why he may have found value in the Book of Mormon. Since we can conclude that Melville was familiar with the Book of Mormon, we can also infer he was aware of the controversy surrounding its origins—a story that many “received with incredulity.” Joseph Smith’s story may have held a special appeal to Melville as he began work on *Mardi*,

considering Smith was associated with so many of the same literary “sins” the author was accused of after publishing *Typee* and *Omoo*. Their critics regularly accused both Smith and Melville of blasphemy, irreverence towards the church, and speaking ill of Christians and organized religion in general. Smith came from a home life of absolute penury, living mostly on the fringes of modern society, and yet claimed to speak for God. He had no formal schooling or education, even his wife describing him as a man who “could neither write nor dictate a coherent or well-worded letter” (Hardy *The Book Of Mormon: A Reader’s Edition* 642). Every vision he shared met with hostility and even violence from fellow Christians, who often accused him of fraud. Smith’s denouncing of religious hypocrites, the wealthy, and his eventual death at the hands of a mob, may have elevated him to “heroic outsider” status in Melville’s mind—a kind of persona he saw and admired in the Jesus of the gospels (Yothers 40). Perhaps such empathy and admiration allowed Melville to also see the Book of Mormon through a more forgiving lens than many of his less-forgiving nineteenth century peers.

One of the questions surrounding the Book of Mormon when it was first published, and which still frames much of the discussion around it today, is “When a book is presented as a historical narrative, does its historicity matter as much as the religious or literary truths it unfolds?” To Joseph Smith and his followers, the answer is obviously “yes.” Smith’s prophetic powers hang on whether or not the Book of Mormon is merely a work of “inspired fiction” or a divinely translated ancient historical document. Melville, however, may have reached a completely different conclusion. As pointed out earlier, some critics accused his early travelogues of being fabrications while later scholarship proves that he did indeed take inspiration or borrow certain elements of his stories from other books. Yet this never stopped Melville from defending his early stories as ultimately truthful.

Melville was a good reader, and like Joseph Smith, is sometimes described as a “creative misreader” (Bloom 84; Cook 64). Melville’s reading (or creative misreading) of the Book of Mormon may have led him to the narrator Moroni’s conclusion that historical facts alone do not lead one to ultimate truth. Therefore, even if Melville did not necessarily believe the Book of Mormon was an actual account written by ancient Israeli-American colonists, he also did not feel this fact alone worth completely dismissing the book over. He disagreed with those publishers who insisted that a book that told an “untrue” story was “without real value” (Davis 8). To Melville, even a so-called fiction could be full of value and could point the reader towards eternal truths. Perhaps what hadn’t occurred to him yet, and what the Book of Mormon made clear, was that certain other kinds of truths could be known or comprehended; they just required a new and different kind of “knowing.”

According to Moroni in his moving closing epistle, religious (or eternal) truth is a mélange of sorts. One obtains an understanding of religious truth by reading, by remembering the facts of history and the facts of one’s own life, and by pondering, both “pondering in the heart” and regular “pondering” in the mind (627; Moroni 10:3-7). Moroni stresses that an understanding of this truth comes to those who sincerely seek it; this truth is not something that can be understood ironically or cynically. In the end, apprehending religious or eternal truth requires a different kind of “knowing” than “knowing” historical or empirical facts. Religious truth can only be “known” by the “power of the Holy Ghost,” an even more subtle concept that is not easy for Moroni to describe (627; Moroni 10:7). Essentially, this kind of “knowing” requires the influence of an external higher power not fully comprehended by human beings. As Babbalanja finally admits at the end of *Mardi*, Moroni explains that this “knowing” does not require approval from institutional authorities, but is a deeply personal forming of “knowing.”

This kind of “knowing” makes the individual (always working in conjunction with God) his or her own authority on the subject of religious truth. Moroni challenges readers not just to arrive at an answer about the Book of Mormon’s truthfulness, either. He explicitly states that this is the formula for knowing the truth of “all things” that are “good” and “just” (627; Moroni 10:5-6).

Mardi appears to follow precisely the template for discovering eternal truth as set out by Moroni. In order to get beyond the limitations of historical narrative, Melville creates a story drawing upon his own memories, personal history, and other stories from other authors. In doing so he rejects the importance of historical accuracy in determining religious truth. The final result, while fictional, was to Melville more “real” than anything he’d previously written. Once the door was opened Melville used this formula to explore deeper religious truths for the rest of his writing career.

Cecilia K. Farr writes in her study of *The Confidence-Man* that Mormonism’s “unusual doctrines and history of victimization” would have appealed to Melville immensely (360). In the same vein, this thesis shows overall that the Book of Mormon’s unorthodox, in some ways un-Christian, answers to questions on the nature of God, truth, and the nature of man—questions the Melville began to take up as he wrote his third book—provided the author with ample matter to endlessly debate in *Mardi*.

Overview of Chapters One Through Three

Chapter One of this thesis compares the ways the narratives of *Mardi* and the Book of Mormon open: with imagery of ocean vessels, sailing, and abandoning ship and home, and how these images act as allegories for different kinds of religious experiences. *Mardi* and the Book of Mormon start their respective narratives with sacred sea voyages and the abandonment of

civilization as parts of a quest to escape “the normal” and discover a more “pure” or “real” version of religion and life. In both books these opening voyages are similarly plotted—like the biblical exodus story in reverse.

Chapter Two addresses the characters named Alma that appear in both *Mardi* and the Book of Mormon. I compare what each book reveals of their personal histories as mortal prophets traveling the land in attempt to reform disintegrating religious societies, as well as their distinct theologies and teachings. This chapter also examines the relationship of *Mardi*'s Babbalanja with the prophets Alma from *Mardi* and the Book of Mormon.

Chapter Three examines the climactic moments of both *Mardi* and the Book of Mormon. *Mardi* reaches its climax as the protagonist and his band witness a devastating volcanic eruption that destroys an entire island. The climactic moment of the Book of Mormon is also accompanied by a devastating volcanic eruption, followed by the visitation of a resurrected Jesus upon the American continent. This chapter is followed by a conclusion that links the Book of Mormon to *Mardi*'s follow-up, *Moby Dick*.

Chapter 1: The Shared Narrative Structures of the Opening Chapters of Mardi and the Book of Mormon

Summary of Mardi's Opening Chapters

Mardi opens with an unnamed narrator aboard the whaling ship *Arcturion*. The narrator does not divulge anything about his own history apart from the fact that he is a sailor. From the very beginning the narrator expresses a deep weariness of being at sea. Although he values the camaraderie of his shipmates, he simply cannot abide to remain on the ship any longer. “Ay, ay, *Arcturion!*” he laments, “I say it in no malice, but thou wast exceedingly dull. Not only at sailing ... but in every other respect. The days went slowly round and round, endless and uneventful as cycles in space” (5).

The narrator argues with the captain of the *Arcturion*, pleading to be put ashore. They have been out for three years—far longer, the narrator explains, than what he or his shipmates ever signed on for. When the narrator brings his grievances to the captain, his request to be put ashore is refused. “Right or wrong, my lad, go with us you must. Putting you ashore is now out of the question” (6).

At some unspecified time later, the narrator climbs the mast-head in order to stand his allotted two hours on lookout duty. There, standing high above the ship, he has a vision. He describes beautiful endless sunsets in faraway lands: “Vistas seemed leading to worlds beyond” in this “Nineveh in the sky” (8). He describes his spirit sailing along with the birds that fly over the horizon and are lost to his view. He then sees, “as in a trance,” a vision of a paradisiacal “beach of shells” full of “mild billows,” “the waving of boughs,” and “the voices of maidens ...

all blended together” (8). This vision of a foreign land impresses the narrator to the point that his desire to abandon the *Arcturion* becomes “little short of a frenzy” (8).

The narrator expresses his desire to abandon ship to one of his fellow shipmates, Jarl. Jarl, in turn, attempts to dissuade the narrator from jumping ship, but the narrator eventually coerces him into accompanying him. Late one night while everyone aboard appears to be asleep, the narrator and Jarl disconnect one of the small boats tacked to the side of the ship’s hull and drop it into the water. They jump into the boat, shouting “A man overboard!” as they go (27). The narrator and Jarl drift in their little boat for many days.

In time they come upon a seemingly abandoned ship drifting aimlessly in the ocean. Jarl hesitates to board it, afraid that the craft “must be a gold-huntress, haunted” (57). The thought that the ship might be filled with treasure only spurs the narrator to board, and Jarl reluctantly joins him. They search the ship and although they find no gold or riches, they do come across a large supply of badly needed fresh drinking water. They also discover a box covered in “divers mystic diagrams” that is filled with life-giving “biscuit” which they sit down to feast upon (64).

Eventually the narrator and Jarl learn that they are not alone on the seemingly empty ship. A man and a woman who appear to be islanders make themselves known after secretly observing the pair (66). The man introduces himself as Samoa, the woman his wife Annatoo. The narrator learns that the abandoned vessel is called the Parki, and was once crewed by a mixture of white and native sailors (69). Samoa describes how a group of island natives massacred the crew of the Parki, leaving only him and Annatoo alive (70-72). Samoa also explains how he lost his arm in the battle (77).

The four continue sailing west in the badly damaged Parki in an attempt to reach the destination the narrator saw in his vision. They have no navigational instruments as they were all

destroyed in the raid (93). Eventually a great storm sinks the Parki (and drowns Annatoo), and the three are consigned to the dinghy taken from the *Arcturion*. They sail for many days, eventually coming upon signs of land—coconuts, flocks of birds—and discover a long canoe filled with paddling islanders (127).

As they gain on the islanders, the narrator discovers a beautiful maiden named Yillah being held captive aboard the canoe. He learns how a native priest, Aleema, and some of his followers plan on sacrificing Yillah to their gods (131).⁶ The narrator boards the canoe in hopes of rescuing Yillah but Aleema threatens him and orders him to depart. When the narrator refuses, a fight ensues; the narrator strikes and kills Aleema with a cutlass (133). The narrator rescues Yillah and escapes with his comrades in their little boat, eventually landing on one of the hundreds of tiny islands that makes up the archipelago known as Mardi.

As he settles into a life of bliss with Yillah, the narrator meets other interesting natives as they island-hop their way around Mardi. One day Yillah disappears, prompting the narrator to form a search party to set out on a quest to find her. All the while the narrator is constantly on the run from three unnamed pursuers—the sons of the priest Aleema whom he killed.

These early chapters of *Mardi* serve to establish the framework for the following 450 pages worth of allegorical exploration and philosophical discourse. These early chapters also serve as an allegory of religious exploration built around a similar framework as the opening chapters of the Book of Mormon.

Summary of the Book of Mormon's Opening Chapters

The allegorical meaning of *Mardi's* opening starts to become apparent as we compare it to the opening chapters of the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon opens with an account

written in the first person by a narrator named Nephi, appropriately titled the First Book of Nephi. After Nephi introduces himself by name, he explains that he is the son of Lehi and begins to recount his life story. Nephi's story begins in the city of Jerusalem, in "the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah," or 597 B.C. (5; 1 Nephi 1:4). Nephi describes the arrival of "many prophets" to the city, "prophesying unto the people that they must repent, or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed" (6; 1 Nephi 1:4). Nephi's father, Lehi, prophesies to the inhabitants of Jerusalem as well, warning them to change their wicked ways or be carried away captive into Babylon (7; 1 Nephi 1:18).

When his fellow Israelites mock his corrective prophecies, Lehi receives a warning from the Lord in a vision to leave Jerusalem and escape into the wilderness with his family (7; 1 Nephi 2:1). Lehi leaves his home and possessions behind and makes his way into the desert wilderness with his family. This is much to the dismay of Nephi's older brothers Laman and Lemuel, who "murmur in many things against their father," because he is "a visionary man" and had forced them to leave behind the "land of their inheritance." Laman and Lemuel believe their father's abandonment of the holy city is mostly due to "the foolish imaginations of his heart" (8; 1 Nephi 2:11).

Soon after departing Jerusalem, Nephi has his own visionary experience in which he hears the voice the Lord. In this vision the Lord promises Nephi that he "shall be led to a land of promise; yea, even a land which I have prepared for you; yea, a land which is choice above all other lands" (9; 1 Nephi 2:20). Nephi is told that he will prosper in this new land as far as he is obedient to the Lord's commandments (9; 1 Nephi 2:20).

Immediately following this vision of the Promised Land, Lehi orders Nephi and his other sons to return to Jerusalem to obtain "the record of the Jews and also a genealogy of [his]

forefathers” which are “engraven upon plates of brass” (9; 1 Nephi 3:3). These brass plates are in the possession of one Laban, a wealthy man of some political importance in Jerusalem. The brass plates must be obtained, Nephi explains, because a durable copy of the written word will be necessary to preserve their language in whatever new society they are going to form in the “Promised Land.” The brass plates are also necessary because they contain “the words which have been spoken by the mouths of all the holy prophets ... since the world began, even down unto this present time” (10; 1 Nephi 3:21). Readers eventually learn that the plates are a collection of scripture that include the Pentateuch (or what Christians consider the first five books of the Old Testament: Genesis through Deuteronomy) as well as the writings of other contemporary biblical and non-biblical prophets.

The brothers make various attempts to secure the brass plates from Laban, first by simply asking him for them and then by offering to purchase them from him. Their attempts to obtain the plates only anger Laban, who sends guards to kill the brothers after ejecting them from his presence. In a third attempt to get the plates Nephi enters Jerusalem under cover of night and discovers Laban asleep in an alleyway in a drunken stupor. After some internal debate and moral justification, Nephi decides to kill Laban and steal his clothing as a disguise to get the brass plates from Laban’s treasury. The writings contained in the plates, Nephi argues, are too precious to leave behind to be destroyed when Jerusalem eventually falls.

Nephi slays Laban and obtains the brass plates. Nephi’s family eventually encourages another family from Jerusalem to join them in the wilderness. This family is led by a patriarch named Ishmael. The two families travel in the wilderness for some time, and Nephi continues to describe his visions of “the land of promise” (26; 1 Nephi 12:1). After much traveling in the desert they eventually arrive at “the seashore” (41; 1 Nephi 17:6). Nephi is then commanded by

the Lord, “Thou shalt construct a ship, after the manner which I shall show thee, that I may carry thy people across these waters” (41; 1 Nephi 17:7).

Nephi and his brethren construct a ship using “timbers of curious workmanship” (46; 1 Nephi 18:1). After many hardships and much in-fighting they finish the ship. The two families embark and set their course “towards the Promised Land” (46; 1 Nephi 18:8). They sail for many days, braving storms and “a great and terrible tempest” (47; 1 Nephi 18:13). They eventually arrive at the Promised Land after “the space of many days” and go forth establishing new homes, tilling the earth, and planting their seeds (48; 1 Nephi 18:24).

After his father, Lehi, dies, Nephi and his followers leave the family settlement because of disputes with Nephi’s older brothers, Laman and Lemuel. Laman and Lemuel plot to kill Nephi (74; 2 Nephi 5:3). This sets the stage for an intergenerational tribal feud that lasts centuries, perpetuated by the descendants of Laman’s followers against the descendants of Nephi’s followers.

List of Similarities Between the Two Openings

Although distinct in their own ways, *Mardi* opens using a pattern similar to the Book of Mormon. The opening chapters of the two books are similar in at least seven distinct ways:

1. Both begin with a narrator trapped within the confines of a hierarchal organization that has utterly failed in its original purpose for existing. In *Mardi*, this takes the form of a narrator stuck aboard the whaling vessel *Arcturion*. The narrator is a whaler but the ship has no whale oil, “her hold a gulf to look into,” despite being at sea for three years (6).

The Book of Mormon opens with Nephi and his family living in the city of Jerusalem. To Nephi, Jerusalem was established as a holy city—the center of all religious worship—for God’s

chosen people, the Israelites. Jerusalem housed Solomon's Temple. For the city to become full of "wickedness" and "abominations" represents a serious moral dilemma to the narrator (7; 1 Nephi 1:18).

2. In both settings, the ship *Arcturion* and the city of Jerusalem, the narrators' attempts at changing their situations through a dialogue with their peers are met with hostility and ridicule. In *Mardi*, the narrator asks the captain of the *Arcturion*: "'Sir,' said I, 'I did not ship for [this]; put me ashore somewhere, I beseech.'" To which the captain replies sardonically that he will not sail the ship near any port, although, "you may leave her if you can" (6).

In the Book of Mormon, the citizens of Jerusalem "mock" Lehi and are "angry with him," because he speaks out against their unrighteous ways (7; 1 Nephi 1:19-20).

3. Both narrators have visions of far-away lands that they feel compelled to travel to. In *Mardi*, the narrator climbs upon the *Arcturion*'s mast-head and has a vision of "some vast Alhambra" or earthly paradise in the west (8).

In the Book of Mormon Nephi describes being "caught away" into "an exceedingly high mountain" (23; 1 Nephi 11:1). There he sees "the land of promise," as well as the future generations of his family inhabiting this land (26; 1 Nephi 12:1).

4. Both narrators decide that the only viable solution to their respective problem is to abandon their current enterprise completely. In *Mardi*, this means the narrator abandoning the *Arcturion*. He convinces Jarl to accompany him and they are later joined by Samoa and Annatoo.

In the Book of Mormon Nephi and his family decide to abandon Jerusalem. Nephi convinces his brothers Laman and Lemuel that this is the right thing to do. Nephi also convinces Ishmael and his family, as well as Laban's servant, Zoram, to join him in the quest for the land of promise.

5. After abandoning their respective settings, both narrators wander in the open wilderness for some time. In *Mardi*, the narrator and Jarl spend thirty pages drifting on the open sea, which the narrator describes as a “blank,” “colorless,” world that “hardly presents a sign of existence” (48; ch. 16).

Nephi and company spend years “travel[ing] and wad[ing] through much affliction in the wilderness” before arriving at the borders of the seashore (40; 1 Nephi 17:1).

6. After a period of wandering in the wilderness, both narrators gain access to a ship and set sail for their respective destinations. In *Mardi*, the narrator and Jarl discover an abandoned ship after drifting on the open sea. They commandeer the ship and use it to sail to “the Terra Incognita” (51; ch. 17). Just before they reach the Mardian archipelago their ship is sunk by a devastating storm, but they complete their journey in a small boat.

In the Book of Mormon Nephi and his brethren construct a ship of their own using divine instructions to aid them. Their party sails from the Arabian peninsula to the “land of promise.” Although they experience several seemingly devastating storms and come close to sinking on at least one occasion (48; 1 Nephi 18:20), they arrive safely in the Promised Land.

7. Both narrators commit an act of violence in order to rescue someone or something they perceive as extremely precious. Both acts of violence effectively close off avenues of retreat and forcibly spur each narrator further towards their “Terra Incognita.” Both acts also carry long-lasting repercussions for the narrators and narratives. In *Mardi*, the narrator kills the priest Aleema in order to save the maiden Yillah, whom he describes as “divine” (139; ch. 44). The search for the lost Yillah later becomes the driving force behind the narrator’s quest throughout the islands of Mardi. The threat of death also hangs over the narrator as he is relentlessly pursued by Aleema’s sons up until the closing line of the book.

In the Book of Mormon, Nephi kills Laban in order to obtain the brass plates inscribed with the word of God, which he describes as “desirable; yea, even of great worth unto us” (15; 1 Nephi 5:21). This killing not only facilitates the obtaining of the brass plates, but, as Grant Hardy observes, effectively cuts Nephi’s family off from ever returning to Jerusalem (20). This self-imposed exile is the cause for the deep rift between Nephi and his older brothers, who bitterly lament “we might have been happy,” had they only stayed in Jerusalem (1 Nephi 17:21). In the promised land this resentment ruptures the colony into two opposing factions who spend generations at war with each other, the followers of Laman eventually destroying the followers of Nephi.

The parallels between *Mardi* and the Book of Mormon suggest that Melville may have modeled his narrative pattern after the Book of Mormon’s opening chapters to structure his own story of spiritual awakening. This makes sense because, allegorically, the opening of *Mardi* is very closely tied to the mission of the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon aimed to radically redefine the parameters of Christianity, reframing God’s scope and revealing Christianity’s true nature as a world religion with followers living in various diverse places throughout the earth’s history. Similarly, the opening of *Mardi* can be read as an allegory about a religious revolution, or in the words of Jonathan Cook, it is Melville undertaking a “creative reevaluation of Christianity” (62).

The Allegorical Meaning of Both Openings

An allegorical reading works for both *Mardi* and the Book of Mormon. Melville, excellent reader that he was, seems to have sensed an allegory at work in the First Book of Nephi. The book tells the story of a people leaving a city to form their own society, but it is also

clearly an allegory for the contemporary restoration of a lost way of religious life or a revolution of religious ideas. Melville's novel opens with the same deep concerns roiling just beneath the light-hearted adventure.

Consider the first chapter of *Mardi*. This begins Melville's allegory about his personal struggle in coming to terms with his own existence and with God. The narrator begins on a ship in the ocean. How he came to be there is never explained; the reader must accept this unknown from the very start. This crucial secret is the origin of life, both on an individual and a universal level. A man or woman remembers nothing of his or her own conception, prenatal growth, birth, or infancy. Human beings seem to arrive on this earth *in medias res* with no clear grasp on how they got here or how things started. All they know about the origins of their own lives must either be told to them by authorities (parents, siblings, extended family) or they must turn to documentary evidence written by other authorities (journals and diaries of parents, personal correspondence, baptismal records) to piece things out. This is true of life on the much larger, global scale, as well. Recorded human history tells a story of the rise and fall of civilizations but those who seek answers about the origins of life itself are left with only theory and conjecture. Institutional authorities hypothesize on how it all began, but when looking to the fossil record or the material evidence of the earth, questions always remain.

The narrator references "four tall fellows" whom the *Arcturion* picked up in an open boat two years earlier. When they were asked how they came to be in that open boat they "spun a long yarn" but ultimately, "they were keepers of a secret" (7). The secret is how they got to be on the ocean is the secret of how all mankind got to be "on the ocean." The answer is shrouded in the past. As Andy Knoll, professor of biology at Harvard and origin-of-life specialist, explained in 2004: "We don't know how life started on this planet. We don't know exactly when it started, we

don't know under what circumstances" (qtd. in Flew 130). Even institutional authorities are at a loss on the specifics of this question.

Nevertheless, here we are, on the ocean. The ocean, in the words of Spanish symbologist J. E. Cirlot, represents "the sum of all possibilities of one plane of existence," as well as the collective unconsciousness of humanity (241). The ocean is the endless and eternal void, "ceaseless" in its movement and yet "formless" forever (Cirlot 241). The shining sun of the human spirit rises out of the ocean; what Julie Johnson refers to as the "womb" of unconsciousness (229). Our narrator is in a sense "born" on the ocean as he begins his narrative there. Melville depicts the ocean as a terrifying place—at least without a ship. The ocean's "formlessness" is the antithesis of the solid, orderly materialism humans are accustomed to on land (Cirlot 241). In this allegory, land (and especially an island) is the "opponent" of the ocean (Cirlot 241) due to its solid, unchangeable nature. The biblical Christ is depicted as master of the seas walking on the water not just to show his dominion over nature, but his perfect control over the human passions the ocean represents.

The ship, therefore, is crucial to surviving the ocean. *Mardi*'s narrator starts to truly fear the ocean only once he has abandoned the *Arcturion*: "Ere this, I had regarded the ocean as a slave, the steed that bore me whither I listed...But now, how changed! In our frail boat, I would fain have built an altar to Neptune" (29). Not coincidentally, the narrator appeals to a deity as he sits atop the ocean in a tiny boat; he is expressing his desire for the order imposed upon the seemingly chaotic and formless universe by religion.

Melville depicts the ship *Arcturion* (as well as the *Parki*) the same way he later uses the *Pequod* in *Moby Dick* or the *Fidele* in *The Confidence-Man*: as a microcosm of Christian society, full of pilgrims making their way through life (Farr 354). The ship protects from the dangers and

uncertainties of the tumultuous sea with its endless depths and deadly sea monsters. The narrator sometimes describes navigating the ocean using religious language. He notes Jarl's "reverence" for nautical instruments, comparing his actions to "a pedantic disciple" (18). The ship is the opposite of formless, aimless chaos: it is a highly organized, regimented, hierarchal institution. A ship assigns every man a specific task and every man answers to a specific master. It functions as every one does his part to make it go. All are under the authority someone else, and the captain has authority over all. The ship subdues the ocean currents and the winds in order to achieve incredible freedom of movement throughout space. The *Arcturion* makes the ocean "a slave" to man's will—man uses this freedom to transport goods and people, to explore new lands, to exchange ideas, to gain wisdom of his own surroundings. He can use the ocean to escape from unfriendly countries or search for new lands, new ideas, and new philosophies. Religion offers a narrative to explain the origins of life: God created the earth, man is created in God's image and placed upon the earth. In the same sense, a ship gives meaning to the ocean. Using the navigational instruments on a ship one can chart his course through the oceans. Without a ship or these instruments, the ocean becomes a flat, meaningless void. Melville was far from the first to employ this allegory; the ship as representative of a church has a long history in Christian symbolism (Cirlot 295).

The initial dilemma of *Mardi*'s narrator takes shape as he realizes that his ship no longer fulfills the purpose of what it was originally created to do. The *Arcturion* was meant to be a whaling vessel. Not only have they not seen any whales in years, but they have also gone far off course. The narrator wonders if the captain is an "ignoramus" (10). This is the narrator's way of suggesting that he is on the proverbial "ship of fools," a medieval icon related to the foolish virgins of Christ's parable (Cirlot 295). The ship of fools, Cirlot explains, is the ultimate folly in

that it “expresses the idea of ‘sailing’ as an end in itself, as opposed to the true sense of ‘sailing,’ which is transition, evolution and salvation, or safe arrival at the haven” (295). In other words, the captain of the *Arcturion*, the narrator suggests, appears to have lost sight of the whole point of the voyage and sails for the sake of sailing.

In this way, *Mardi’s Arcturion* is similar to the Book of Mormon’s Jerusalem. With its thousands of strict laws on ritual purification and priestly tribal castes, the Old Testament Jerusalem is the epitome of a highly organized, regimented, hierarchal institution. Jerusalem is an institution established to house the Lord’s temple and to be the epicenter of religious life for the followers of God. Instead of being on the chaotic ocean, Jerusalem is surrounded by hostile enemy nations. It is also surrounded by the formless and deadly “wilderness” that Nephi and his family spend years “wad[ing]” through (40; 1 Nephi 17:1). Both *Mardi’s* narrator and Nephi begin trapped in institutions that were initially created as a protection for God’s people, but have subsequently lost their way. If they progress it is only because of inertia. In the words of *Mardi’s* blind guide, Pani, “the crowd of pilgrims is so great, they see not there is none to guide” (338).

The *Arcturion* enters an oceanic calm in chapter two, and the ship’s progress comes to a complete halt for untold days. The lack of progress becomes excruciating to the narrator. “The stillness of the calm is awful,” he laments (10). He describes his brain turning into “a dome full of reverberations,” as he sits and waits for some change in the weather (10). The ship no longer serves its purpose to move and navigate the sailors around the ocean. It just sits and bobs. Like an airplane sitting on a hot tarmac for hours because of a flight delay, the vehicle transforms from a comfortable, protective enclosure, to a stifling, maddening prison. The narrator employs language of religious disbelief to describe his lack of movement as “horrible doubts” overtake

him (10). The lull in movement calls up “[t]houghts of eternity” as the narrator “grows madly skeptical” (10).

When the narrator insists to the captain on being put ashore, he asks permission to abandon the religious ideology he has grown so weary of. As he climbs the mast-head and sees his vision he describes “some vast Alhambra,” as well as “airy arches, domes, and minarets” (8; ch. 1). Arches, domes and minarets are all architectural features associated with religious structures: temples, cathedrals and mosques. The narrator not only sees what looks to be a beautiful paradise, he also sees new religious options in this paradise. It is a world far removed from the staid Christianity he is accustomed to. Whatever the reason he boarded this ship (and again, the reason is never given—some convert to a religion while others are born into it), it has not provided him with what he is looking for and wants to be allowed to leave. The passage suggests not that the narrator necessarily desires to turn to Hellenistic worship or Islam for answers, just that he is now open to looking at any alternative. The narrator’s open-mindedness reflects Melville’s own disgust with any kind of religious exclusivism (Yothers 51).

Nephi has a similar vision in the Book of Mormon. Before departing Jerusalem, the Lord tells him of a land of promise, “a land which is choice above all other lands” (9; 1 Nephi 2:20). Nephi describes the land as holding an “abundance” of natural resources (48; 1 Nephi 18:24). Seeds and crops “grow exceedingly” there (48; 1 Nephi 18:24). The land of promise contains “beasts in the forest of every kind,” as well as “all manner of wild animals, which [are] for the use of men” (48; 1 Nephi 18:25). In addition to agricultural and biological wealth, the land of promise contains “all manner of ore, both of gold, and of silver, and of copper” (48; 1 Nephi 18:25). Most importantly, the land of promise will be a place where Nephi’s followers will have the chance to live religiously as God intended. In his vision, Nephi sees a world that is home to a

completely new “reimagining” of traditional Israelite religious belief. An angel reveals to Nephi the true meaning of the Mosaic law: it looks forward to the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. “And the angel said unto me again: Look and behold the condescension of God!” (24; 1 Nephi 11:26) Nephi sees a vision of the future: Christ living and preaching in the Old World. Nephi learns that after Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection he will also visit his righteous followers in the promised land. Nephi is shown a radical alternative to the religious beliefs of his day. He learns of a religion that is not geographically bound to one sacred city or even to one continent, but that is universal and free to followers located anywhere on the earth. He is forced to admit that the Lord cares more about individual righteousness than tribal affiliation (Hardy 83).

The narrator’s choice of Jarl to accompany him is fitting, since Jarl, “descendant of heroes and kings,” represents the mighty Viking explorers of old (12). The narrator appears familiar with old Viking traditions (“Ah! how the old Sagas run through me!” he declares) (12). And thus Jarl’s introduction also calls to mind the Norse alternative to the institutional “canon” history of European exploration. The Viking legend of Vinland suggests pre-Colombian Norse explorations of North America, a theory that was gaining scholarly traction just as Melville was beginning to write *Mardi*.⁷ Jarl’s connection to alternate traditions of trans-Atlantic crossings fits in nicely with a book that appears to borrow its framework from the Book of Mormon.

After Jarl’s introduction, the narrator indulges in a philosophical aside in which he comes to a similarly thrilling theological conclusion as Nephi. The narrator declares that “all generations” of the earth “are blended . . . the nations and families, flocks and folds of the earth; one in all, brothers in essence—oh, be we then brothers indeed! All things form but one whole” and at the last day, “Christian shall join hands between Gentile and Jew” (12-13). The wording calls to mind the title page of the Book of Mormon, which declares the universality of its

purpose: “to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that JESUS is the CHRIST, the ETERNAL GOD, manifesting himself to all nations” (1). Both *Mardi* and the Book of Mormon seek a religious truth beyond the philosophies of men (i.e. “the Stagirite and Kant”) which will ultimately “be forgotten” (13). They seek a truth not bounded by geographical space or time. In *Mardi*, this truth takes the form of “another folio” that will ultimately “be turned over for wisdom; even the folio now spread with horoscopes as yet undeciphered” (13). The narrator specifies this folio as “the heaven of heavens,” implying that revelation from on high will be the ultimate source of wisdom at the last day. Joseph Smith and the early Latter-day Saints also placed great weight on the existence of revelation, claiming the Book of Mormon to be a sign that divine revelation was still at work in the world even in the nineteenth century.

How the Parki Episode Suggests a Book of Mormon Connection

In chapter nineteen of *Mardi* Melville provides another apparent connection to the Book of Mormon. The episode surrounding the abandoned ship, the *Parki*, can easily be read as an allegory for the discovery of the Book of Mormon itself.

After the narrator and Jarl abandon the *Arcturion* and drift on the sea for days, they board a seemingly abandoned ship. In keeping with the “ship as religion” allegory, this ship can be understood as a religious ideology once held by many but now abandoned or lost. At first the narrator and Jarl assume the ship is some kind of treasure-barge (i.e. a “gold-huntress”) and that she might be “haunted” (57). The imagery of a haunted treasure is very closely linked to the Book of Mormon, which was said to be engraved on plates made of gold, buried in the earth, and “haunted” (guarded) by an otherworldly spirit (i.e. the angel Moroni). The association of the angel Moroni as a kind of spiritual “treasure guardian” dates back to some of Mormonism’s

earliest critics, who hoped to draw a connection between Joseph Smith's narrative and the occult (Ashurst-McGee 47).

After some searching the narrator and Jarl find nothing of seeming value upon the ship; only a few mundane items. These items, however, prove to be more valuable than gold. The narrator and Jarl find that the ship contains a well of potable water as well as a box of biscuit. The biscuit is contained in a box:

much battered and bruised...[covered] all over [with] inscriptions and carving:—foul anchors, skewered hearts, almanacs, Burton-blocks, love verses, links of cable, Kings of Clubs; and divers mystic diagrams in chalk, drawn by old Finnish mariners; in casting horoscopes and prophecies. (64)

The box covered in mystic diagrams calls to mind the stone box described by Joseph Smith in which the golden plates lay deposited (“Joseph Smith—History” 54). And while no treasure is to be found on the ship, the life-giving bread and water contained in it are clearly the emblems of Christ. These emblems sustain the lives of Jarl and the narrator while acting as allusive markers of the *Parki*'s Book of Mormon connection. The Book of Mormon declares on its title page its mission to bring all mankind to Christ, serving as another witness to Christ's divinity. It posits itself as a vehicle for a new kind of Christianity; one once followed by some of God's children but subsequently abandoned and lost. The two survivors, Samoa and Annatoo, are echoes of Mormon and Moroni, the two main narrators of the Book of Mormon.

Samoa and Annatoo are both described as “native” in race. The *Parki* was manned by “a mixed European and native crew” (68). This calls to mind the racially diverse Nephite civilization depicted at the end of the Book of Mormon after the visit of the resurrected Jesus. Mormon describes this group who chose to collapse tribal and racial boundaries in the name of

love: “neither were there Lamanites, nor any manner of -ites; but they were in one, the children of Christ, and heirs to the kingdom of God” (550; 4 Nephi 1:17). The narrators Mormon and Moroni are descendants of this group of racially diverse believers. Mormon and Moroni, like Samoa and Annatoo, are also the sole survivors of a brutal attack by a native group hostile to their society. They are left alone to pilot the *Parki*, just as Mormon and Moroni are left alone to collate and abridge their people’s history and religious documents into the Book of Mormon. Samoa and Annatoo hand off the *Parki* to the narrator and Jarl who sail it to Mardi before it is destroyed in a storm. As the *Parki* sinks the narrator describes it “bleeding at every pore” (119). This is an interesting allusion to Christ’s bleeding from every pore at Gethsemane—a traditional belief not specifically mentioned in the New Testament⁸ but an important part of Latter-day Saint Christology and mentioned explicitly in the Book of Mormon: “And lo, he shall suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer ... for behold, blood cometh from every pore, so great shall be his anguish” (184; Mosiah 3:7). The *Parki* represents the Book of Mormon’s Christ, who is witnessed by two native survivors long after their people have been massacred. This is a “revaluated” Christ who speaks to followers in groups found all over the earth.

The *Parki* is the vehicle the narrator and Jarl use to escape their stifling death-by-boredom on the *Arcturion* and their aimless wanderings on the ocean. Melville includes allusions to the Book of Mormon in his depiction of the ship because the *Parki* does for the narrator allegorically what the Book of Mormon set out to do for Christianity: namely, refashion it to explore new religious and intellectual worlds and vistas.

Nephi's Story and the Opening of Mardi as the Old Testament in Reverse

In addition to the Book of Mormon parallels, *Mardi's* opening chapters also use a biblical framework to recount an allegorical story. It tells a story about a man abandoning old religious ideas in favor of new ones. The narrator of this story employs a kind of "Old Testament in reverse" framework to suggest a return to primeval beginnings. Consider the narrative sketch of the story of Moses as found in the first five books of the Bible. The biblical story begins in a paradisiacal garden that becomes corrupted. The end of the book of Genesis introduces the prophet, Moses. Moses slays an Egyptian and flees out of Egypt with his fellow Israelites. They cross the Red Sea. They wander in the wilderness, eventually crossing the River Jordan and entering their land of promise. They eventually form the holy city of Jerusalem and build the Lord's temple there.

The narrator of *Mardi* begins his story in a religious vehicle that has been corrupted (the *Arcturion*) which he then abandons. He wanders the "wilderness" of the ocean, first on an open boat but eventually on a ship. In his ship he crosses his "Red Sea." He slays the priest Aleema and soon after arrives in an unspoiled Edenic paradise (Mardi).

Melville here uses the familiar pattern of the Old Testament to dismantle the narrative "progress" of the Bible in order to return to something older, perhaps more pure. If this seems familiar, it is because the narrator Nephi does the same thing with the opening chapters of the Book of Mormon. Nephi seems very taken with the story of Moses, the scriptural account being one of the only pieces of literature he's ever had available to him all of his life. Nephi compares himself to Moses repeatedly, using the story of Moses to spur his brothers to action in times of doubt: "let us be strong like unto Moses" (11; 1 Nephi 4:2). Nephi begins his chronicle in a holy city representative of centuries of Israelite history. After slaying Laban, Nephi abandons the

corrupted holy city and wanders the wilderness with his family. He eventually builds a ship and crosses his own “Red Sea” arriving in his unspoiled Eden, the land of promise.

Both the Book of Mormon and *Mardi* begin with a narrator casting off tradition and finding a new course through the ocean. Both narrators appear to use narrative frameworks from works of sacred literature to frame their own stories of religious discovery. The narrator of *Mardi* reveals:

Oh, reader, list! I’ve chartless voyaged. With compass and the lead, we had not found these Mardian Isles. Those who boldly launch, cast off all cables ... with their own breath, fill their own sails. Hug the shore, naught new is seen ... That voyager steered his bark through seas, untracked before; ploughed his own path mid jeers; though with a heart that oft was heavy with the thought, that he might only be too bold, and grope where land was none. (556-557)

The narrator’s exuberance could almost be read as Melville’s approval of Nephi’s rejection of institutional authority and the way he fills his “sails” with his “own breath.” The narrator’s description of plowing “his own path” in the ocean even calls to mind a similar passage from Nephi. But where the narrator of *Mardi* exults in his own fearlessness, Nephi gives thanks to the Lord for steering him through the path of the sea to a new and better land:

And now, my beloved brethren, seeing that our merciful God has given us so great knowledge concerning these things, let us remember him, and lay aside our sins, and not hang down our heads, for we are not cast off; nevertheless, we have been driven out of the land of our inheritance; but we have been led to a better land, for the Lord has made the sea our path, and we are upon an isle of the sea. (90; 2 Nephi 10:20)

Although Nephi has been “driven out” of the land of his people’s inheritance, he believes he has found a better land. Similarly, while Melville may have felt driven out of the land of historical narrative by doubters or his own restlessness, *Mardi* proves that he was led to an even better literary land—a land where religious truth and authority are in the hands of the individual, not the historian, scientist, or seminarian.

Chapter 2 – The Prophets Alma and Babbalanja

The Origins of Alma

Alma is one of the most influential characters in *Mardi*, despite the fact that he never appears in the narrative in person. The novel introduces him and often refers to him as “the great prophet Alma” (324). Followers describe him as “an illustrious prophet, and teacher divine” (348). His teachings on morality are quoted as scripture by many of the Mardians and he has several “denominations” of followers on various islands who interpret his teachings in their own unique ways. The historian Mohi explains to the narrator how Alma came “to instruct them [the Mardians] in the ways of truth, virtue, and happiness; to allure them to good by promises of beatitude hereafter; and to restrain them from evil by denunciations of woe” (348).

The general consensus is that Melville borrowed the name Alma from the character of the same name who presides over the House of Temperance in Spenser’s *The Fairie Queene* (Moses 258). One problem with this hypothesis is how little *Mardi*’s Alma has in common with the character from *The Fairie Queene*. Spenser introduces his character: “*Alma* she called was, a virgin bright; / That had not yet felt *Cupid*es wanton rage, / Yet was she woo’d of many a gentle knight, / And many a Lord of noble parentage” (262; Book 2, Cant. IX). *The Fairie Queene*’s Alma appears as a beautiful young maiden dressed in a flowing white nightgown. She also plays a relatively small role in Spenser’s poem: she greets knights who visit the House of Temperance and is not heard from again once they leave. This is very different from the mysterious wandering prophet whose teachings permeate nearly every page of the second half of *Mardi*.

In 1967 Robert A. Rees was the first—and for many years only—scholar to suggest that Melville may have instead borrowed the name Alma from the Book of Mormon. The Book of

Alma is by far the longest book in the Book of Mormon, and the character of Alma actually makes his first appearance even earlier, in The Book of Mosiah. Thus the name Alma is used more often in the Book of Mormon than any other name, with the exception of Nephi (Hoskisson 72). Early critics of the Book of Mormon claimed the name Alma was an obvious blunder by Joseph Smith, who apparently supplied a Latin feminine name to a masculine character (Hoskisson 72). More recent studies suggest the Book of Mormon's Alma is probably derived from a Semitic expression meaning "lad of God" (Hoskisson 73). Other scholars have suggested the name Alma comes from the Arabic root words "alama" or "alima," meaning "knowing, erudite; distinguished; chief, chieftain" (Hoskisson 73).

Whatever the origins of his name, Alma is easily one of the most compelling characters in the Book of Mormon. To be precise, there are actually two major characters named Alma in the Book of Mormon: a father and his son of the same name. Traditionally, Latter-day Saints distinguish the two as Alma the Elder and Alma the Younger. Although no such titles are ever used in the Book of Mormon, for the sake of clarity we will also distinguish between the two characters using these titles. These Book of Mormon Almas have much more in common with *Mardi's* Alma, and apparently Melville saw their potential to act as representatives for a new kind of Christianity. The Book of Mormon Almas are prophets who live in a Christian society that oppresses the poor and places too much value on showy, outward appearances. The Book of Mormon Almas also appear as desperate outsiders striving to reform a Christian society obsessed with class distinctions and the minutiae of the law. They are embodiments of all the character traits Melville loved most about Jesus as he was portrayed in the gospels, without being divine themselves (Yothers 39-59).

The Book of Mormon and Polynesian Culture

One of the lesser discussed aspects of the Book of Mormon as a work of literature is its relation to Polynesian culture. After the publication of the Book of Mormon in 1830, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints launched several missions to island nations, including missions to French Polynesia, Hawaii and New Zealand (Underwood 137). Interestingly enough, this would have been precisely the time that Melville was himself in the Marquesas, living the experiences he would later detail in *Typee* and *Omoo* (Hughes). But although *Omoo* is rife with satire about Christian missionary efforts towards the islanders, no mention is made of the Mormons specifically or their missionary work. This may seem surprising at first glance, considering the success the Mormons had in converting islander populations. By the turn of the nineteenth century, for example, an entire one-tenth of the New Zealand Maori population had converted to Mormonism. Missions to Samoa, Hawaii, and French Polynesia also experienced high conversion rates (Underwood 133). Historian Grant Underwood attributes these early Mormon successes largely to the Book of Mormon itself (137).

The Book of Alma in the Book of Mormon contains a vignette of one “Hagoth,” simply described as “an exceedingly curious man” (434; Alma 63:5). At around 50 B.C., according to the Book of Mormon’s narrative chronology, Hagoth constructs “an exceedingly large ship” and many followers “did enter therein and did sail forth with much provisions” (434; Alma 63:5-6) presumably launching from the Nephite colony in Mesoamerica. Hagoth initiates several expeditions of this nature, until his final expedition sets sail and Hagoth and his followers “[are] never heard of more” (434; Alma 63:8). The narrator assumes they are drowned. No mention is ever made of these explorers again, but their story was of great interest to the Pacific Islanders the first Mormon missionaries encountered. No one knows whether the islanders or the

missionaries initially made the Book of Mormon connection, but by the 1840s and 1850s it was common for Latter-day Saint missionaries to “[suggest] that these voyagers from ancient America [Hagoth and his followers] may have settled in the Marquesas” (Underwood 137). Native converts embraced the Book of Mormon history, grafting Hagoth’s story into the story of their people; it was perfectly compatible with their oral histories of migration across the sea from some distant homeland. In fact, modern historians even mark the first century BC as rough estimate of the native settlement of the Marquesas (Underwood 137n18).

Melville never explicitly criticized any Mormon missionary efforts he may have observed in the Marquesas. This may simply have been because he was unaware of any specific Latter-day Saint proselytizing taking place, and so he lumped the Mormon missionaries in with the traditional Christian missionaries depicted in *Omoo*. On the other hand, Melville may have spared the Mormon missionaries his criticism because the Mormons did not attempt to dismantle native culture as they preached their gospel. Instead, they provided the islanders with “an unusually rich, culturally compatible resource for shaping and proclaiming their identity” (Underwood 133). The Book of Mormon story specifically allowed the islanders to connect their traditions and history to the larger sphere of sacred Israelite and world history (Underwood 138). If Melville was aware of the way the natives of the Marquesas had fit themselves into the Book of Mormon narrative, his choice to make the Mardians the followers of a Book of Mormon prophet makes even more sense.

An Overview of the Prophets Alma from the Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon introduces Alma the Elder in The Book of Mosiah, which takes place at about 150 B.C. Alma serves as a priest to the wicked King Noah. When the righteous

prophet Abinadi is brought before the king's court, he boldly denounces the king's wicked lifestyle. Abinadi's words move Alma deeply, and he takes care to write them down in secret. Alma pleads with his fellow priests to let Abinadi go, but Abinadi is sentenced to burn to death for heresy. Alma leaves the court of King Noah and escapes into the wilderness where he preaches the words of Abinadi and gains followers. He and his followers form a Christian church that looks forward to the eventual birth of the Messiah.

Alma the Elder's son, Alma the Younger, spends his youth undermining the very church that his father founded. He roams the land with his wicked friends, the sons of Mosiah, attempting to destroy the faith of others and bring the church down. Alma and the sons of Mosiah have a miraculous experience when an angel appears to them as they are out and about destroying the church. This angel rebukes Alma and his friends and strikes them unconscious for two days and two nights, during which their spirits experience the torments of hell as well as the redeeming love of Christ. When they regain consciousness Alma and the sons of Mosiah are converted and become righteous missionaries and valiant leaders for the church for the rest of their lives.⁹

Alma's Connection to Christ

Mardi's Alma, in many ways, is clearly meant to evoke Christ. Melville uses "the followers of Alma" throughout *Mardi* to satirize Christian hypocrisy and religious believers in general. However, the attributes that differentiate *Mardi's* Alma from Christ make him all the more similar to the Book of Mormon Almas. For instance, neither the Alma in *Mardi* or the Almas in the Book of Mormon claim to be divine or to be the sons of God. None of the Almas suffer or die to atone for the sins of their people, and neither offer individual redemption or

salvation to their respective followers. Neither are described as perfect or sinless, and neither are resurrected. Unlike the biblical depiction of Christ, none of the Almas can be described as omniscient, and none are depicted as godlike, omnipotent beings. Apart from *Mardi's* Alma bringing a man back from the dead and Alma the Elder striking an opponent dumb, little is said of their power in the way of miraculous healing, miraculous feeding of the hungry, mastery over the elements, and so forth.

What the Almas have in common is their distinction from (but close relationship to) Christ. The Almas from both books are prophets who act as mortal representatives or “types” of Christ. As he approaches the end of his journey, the narrator of *Mardi* observes the constellation “the Crux-Australis” in the night sky, which he explains is “the badge, and type of Alma” (553). The Crux-Australis is also known as the Southern Cross, a cruciform constellation most easily visible in the southern hemisphere. No mention is ever made of the Mardian Alma ever being crucified, and so for his “badge” and “type” to be a cross reinforces the idea that this Alma acts as a representative of Jesus Christ.

Despite the fact that the Book of Mormon Almas lived about a century before Christ’s birth, Alma the Younger teaches that the law his people follow—the Old Testament law of Moses as recorded in the brass plates—is really just a “type of his [Christ’s] coming” (323; Alma 25:15). In other words, a perfect understanding of the law of Moses teaches believers to look forward to the arrival of the Messiah (323; Alma 25:15). Mormon narrates how Alma the Younger pushes back against the misguided belief that strict adherence to the law of Moses will bring about individual salvation. Mormon states that Alma finds success with some: “Now they did not suppose that salvation came by the law of Moses; but the law of Moses did serve to

strengthen their faith in Christ” (323; Alma 25:16). The prophet remains true to his calling inasmuch as he strengthens belief in the Christ to come.

Alma the Younger also speaks to his people about the importance of the high priesthood, or the priesthood held by himself and his father: “I would that ye should remember that the Lord God ordained priests . . . And those priests were ordained after the order of his Son, in a manner that thereby the people might know in what manner to look forward to his Son for redemption” (288; Alma 13:1-2). Alma the Younger makes the high priest analogous to the Son of God; the relationship between believer and high priest ought to be the same as between believer and Christ.

Alma the Restorer

With *Mardi's* Alma, Melville envisioned a prophet who came at a crucial time to reform religion and turn the hearts of the people back to the parts of Christianity that had been forgotten or lost. The historian Mohi describes to the narrator how Alma exists as one of a long line of religious reformers who has appeared under “different titles” and on “various islands” at “long intervals” throughout history (348). Alma appeared during “a comparatively dark and benighted age” to instruct the Mardians in the true religion free from all the “impurities and corruptions” that had crept in during centuries of stagnation (348). In this respect *Mardi's* Alma has much in common with the Book of Mormon Almas, who strive to restore the church of their people to its proper order and who preach that “all things” will one day “be restored to their proper order” through the resurrection (367; Alma 41:2). In fact, even first-time readers will notice that the whole Book of Mormon is awash in the concept of restoration. Early in the Book of Mormon the narrator Nephi writes repeatedly of how many of the “plain and precious truths” of the gospel

will one day be lost, and how a future restoration will need to take place (29; 1 Nephi 13:28).

Nathan Hatch describes the Latter-day Saint movement growing “out of the perception that there was no authoritative center. The entire religious world, perched upon shifting sand, cried out for prophets who could recover the missing bedrock” (65). The first Latter-day Saint converts viewed the Book of Mormon as proof that this restoration was taking place, and that the “long night of apostasy” was finally at an end.¹⁰ The early Saints even bestowed upon Joseph Smith a title reminiscent of *Mardi*'s Alma: “Prophet of the Restoration.”

Beyond being restorers of truth, the Almas from both books also have much in common in regards to their teachings. Their theologies emphasize the fundamental importance of charity towards the marginalized of society. These Almas also represent the “heroic outsider” Jesus that Melville so admired (Yothers 40). Like Jesus, they dare to speak the truth and express disgust over hypocrisy. Also like Jesus, the Almas boldly confront religious authorities. The Almas stress how wealth and personal interest corrupts organized religion. Like King Donjalolo lamenting the difficulty of arriving at a real understanding of truth by solely relying on others (“Oh Oro! how hard is truth to come at by proxy!” [249]) the prophets Alma stress that individuals do not require the proxies of organized religion to come unto God. This is not due to moral relativism; quite the opposite. Alma's teachings only help his followers discover the eternal truths that were there for finding all along. In *Mardi*, one of Alma's disciples puts forth a rhetorical question to the travelers: “are Truth, Justice, and Love, the revelations of Alma alone? Were they never heard of till he came?” (626). Obviously these concepts pre-date the teachings of Alma, and so the disciple explains that Alma's teachings are valuable because they “[open] unto us our own hearts” where spiritual truths are confirmed (626). Alma teaches individuals how to discern spiritual truths for themselves. The prophets Alma stress individual accountability

over the importance of organizations and religious hierarchies. Their form of Christianity rails against the establishment and against religious exclusivism. As will be discussed later on, the absolute inevitability of the resurrection acts as one of the most important doctrines to the prophets Alma. The Almas stress that all human life is of a necessity eternal, and that divine judgment cannot be escaped, even by a (temporary) death. This view reinforces the idea that even the lowliest of people living in the most humble of circumstances are of eternal value and significance to God.

Denying the Kingship

This view is one of the reasons both Alma the Elder and *Mardi's* Alma deny themselves a kingship offered by the people. When the followers of Alma the Elder ask him to serve as their king, he refuses, stating: “Behold, it is not expedient that we should have a king; for thus saith the Lord: Ye shall not esteem one flesh above another, or one man shall not think himself above another” (230; Mosiah 23:7). The narrator of *Mardi* agrees with Alma the Elder, as he ruminates on monarchy: “Man lording it over man, man kneeling to man, is a spectacle that Gabriel might well travel hitherward to behold; for never did he behold it in heaven” (183). Alma the Younger is never offered a kingship *per se*, but he does relinquish the position of chief judge—his society’s highest political office—in order to travel the land as a missionary. He is moved by the plight of the poor, after “seeing all [the] inequality” among his people (259; Alma 4:15). *Mardi's* Alma, the poet Yoomy recounts, “put off the purple” as he taught in Mardi; he also “decline[ed] gilded miters” (552). And while Melville draws an obvious parallel to Christ in Alma’s “enter[ing] the nations meekly on an ass,” (552) *Mardi's* Alma differs in that, unlike Christ, he

never claims to be an earthly *or* a heavenly king. Alma's followers in Serenia explain that the prophet's precepts "rebuke the arrogance of place and power" (627).

The Persecution of the Poor

In line with their rejection of political lordship over their followers, Alma the Elder and his son spend their lives combating the evolution of hierarchal systems within their respective religious communities. In a particularly poignant episode, Alma the Younger faces a dilemma. Although he has found success among "the poor class of people" in preaching the gospel, the people are "cast out of the synagogues because of the coarseness of their apparel" (342; Alma 32:2). Instead of engaging the rulers of the synagogues, Alma the Younger's non-violent solution is to simply reframe the parameters of where one may worship. Houses of worship cost money to build and can be used as outward expressions of wealth and power. Alma the Younger drains them of their spiritual importance as he poses the question: "Behold I say unto you, do ye suppose that ye cannot worship God save it be in your synagogues only?" (343; Alma 32:10). Alma removes power from the rulers of the synagogues and places it in the hands of the individual worshipers by making worship a personal action that can be engaged in anywhere. The followers of Alma in *Mardi* arrive at a similar conclusion. When Babbalanja meets the Serenians he asks them how they can claim to adore the prophet and yet have no temples in their groves. Their response pushes back against Babbalanja's assumptions on what worship is: "In Mardi, Alma preached in open fields,--and must his worshipers have palaces?" (628).

Alma the Younger asks the ejected poor, "do ye suppose that ye must not worship God only once in a week? I say unto you it is well that ye are cast out of your synagogues, that ye may be humble, and that ye may learn wisdom" (343; Alma 32:11-12). Alma the Younger sees

this moment as a learning opportunity. He appears pleased that the traditional rules are breaking down, for it is in this moment of crisis when real “wisdom” may be learned. The stripping away of performative expressions of devotion enables Alma and these followers to get at the core of worship. Similarly, the Serenian followers of Alma in *Mardi* declare when asked about the Sabbath day: “Where’er we go, our faith we carry in our hands, and hearts. It is our chiefest joy. We do not put it wide away six days out of seven; and then assume it” (629).

Alma and Priestcraft

The Mardian followers of Alma on Serenia stress that all must develop a personal relationship with God and live their lives in accordance with his gospel. They do not believe in paying another person to preach the gospel: “We hold not that one man’s words should be a gospel to the rest; but that Alma’s words should be a gospel to us all” (629). Earlier in *Mardi* when the narrator’s group is visiting the holy island of Maramma, a blind guide requests payment before allowing the travelers to ascend the sacred mountain. The historian Mohi whispers to King Media that “the great prophet Alma always declared that, without charge, this island was free to all” (327). The travelers then learn how their guide lives in an “exceedingly comfortable” house despite the fact that every other home on the island looks “miserable” and “squalid” (327).

Alma the Younger also confronts the practice of paid clergy which the Book of Mormon deems “priestcraft.” In the first chapter of the Book of Alma, Mormon narrates the story a man named Nehor who argues that priests “ought not to labor with their hands, but that they ought to be supported by the people” (249; Alma 1:3). This doctrine appalls Alma the Younger, who then declares: “were priestcraft to be enforced among this people it would prove their entire

destruction” (250). Mormon, who compiles the record many centuries after the life of Alma the Younger, includes this direct quote from the prophet as a narrative foreshadowing, since the church eventually does fall apart as its followers “[divide] into classes” and begin to “build up churches” to “get gain” (550; 4 Nephi 1:26). Economic disparity is the central driving force behind all the enmity and violence in the Book of Mormon; it is the force the prophets Alma continually work against in both books.

Alma, Clothing and Finery

The narrator Mormon explains that the poor in Alma the Younger’s day “were not permitted to enter into their synagogues to worship God, being esteemed as filthiness” because of their impoverished state and their shabby clothing: “Therefore they were poor; yea, they were esteemed by their brethren as dross” (342; Alma 32:3). The role of clothing in shaping class distinctions permeates the Book of Alma and always signals the rise of wickedness. The narrator Mormon notes the historical rise in income inequality by mentioning the wealthy and their interest in wearing “costly apparel” (258; Alma 4:6). Mormon sees costly apparel as yet another outward expression of class distinction by a group of people already obsessed with outward expressions. Mormon launches into the final downfall of Nephite civilization by first describing the people adorning themselves in “costly apparel, and all manner of fine pearls, and of the fine things of the world” (550; 4 Nephi 1:24). As Moroni closes out his father’s book he has a vision of a future people who will one day unearth his life’s work. He delivers a withering critique of this future society—a society has fallen so far away from the original tenets of Christ’s church: “ye do love money, and your substance, and your fine apparel, and the adorning of your

churches, more than ye love the poor and the needy, the sick and the afflicted” (574; Mormon 8:37).

Melville was no stranger to the importance of clothing in forming class distinctions in a society; in *Omoo*, he cites the importation of manufactured clothing by European Christian missionaries as one of the chief factors in the slow disintegration of the Tahitian islander culture. Melville blames the islanders’ economic impoverishment on their inability to adapt to Western industry—specifically the textiles industry (Suzuki 366). Thus a young Melville observes how the economic trifling of some wealthy Christian investor led to the “wretched” and “destitute” state of the native peoples (*Omoo* 217). Class distinctions abound in *Mardi*, and are also signaled in terms of clothing and finery. In one chapter the travelers come across a group known as the Tapparians. They learn that the Tapparians place great stock in fine clothing. Not coincidentally, the group also places much importance on the exactness of the “the minutest things in life” (399). The law of the Tapparians is convoluted, long, and “amazingly arbitrary,” considering they were merely farmers (399). In another chapter the travelers meet the wealthy people of Pimminee. The people of Pimminee follow a similar pattern as the Tapparians and the narrator describes them as obsessed with finery and clothing. Moreover, they ignore the basic needs of their fellow man (408-409).

The whole of *Mardi* appears to have a serious problem in terms of the inequality of its citizens. The narrator speculates on the unequal distribution of *Mardi*’s wealth early in the book, describing “this jolly round board, our globe,” which despite its apparently endless resources does not provide for all; “many go away famished from plenty” (170). To strangers, the narrator explains, *Mardi* appears “care-free and beautiful,” but in reality, concealed within “lair for beasts” and “mouldy” trees live a class of people hidden away by “the chiefs” (191). These

people are considered “filth” by the ruling class (191), calling to mind the way the wealthy reject the poor in the Book of Mormon for “being esteemed as filthiness” (342; Alma 32:3). In a place called by the Mardians the “Temple of Freedom” (an obvious allegory for the United States Capitol) a cadre of fat men gorge themselves on an endless feast while a gaunt man stands at the side of the room looking on (516). While all these groups express undying devotion to the teachings of Alma, we are reminded that “When Alma dwelt in Mardi, ‘twas with the poor and friendless” (628). Alma himself asserted that “Paradise is almost entirely made up of the poor and the despised” (487).

Life as Probation

In the Book of Mormon Alma the Younger attempts to counter the oppression of the poor by reminding his listeners again and again that mortal life is merely “a probationary state; a time to prepare to meet God; a time to prepare for that endless state which has been spoken of...which is after the resurrection of the dead” (287; Alma 12:24). Alma’s words echo the sentiments of Nephi, who describes mortal life as “a state of probation” and a time to repent and prepare to meet God (67; 2 Nephi 2:21). *Mardi*’s Alma also teaches that “this life is a state of probation” (620). What both Almas strive to teach their followers is that life ought to be seen as a relatively short test of one’s individual soul. The thought of life as a probationary test is a logical answer to the age-old question of pain and suffering: God allows human suffering because he allows his creation, humankind, the free will to help or hurt one another as they please. The way individuals respond to their own suffering as well as to the pain of others is all a part of the test. In the end, the various trials and pains of life will matter little in comparison to the eternal state of the soul in the afterlife, which this mortal probation will decide. While Babbalanja disagrees with this

particular teaching of the prophet (he calls it “vain” to think that our everyday actions have eternal implications [620]), Alma’s description of life as “a state of probation” appears to have its origins in the Book of Mormon; the word “probation” is not used in the King James translation of the Bible.

The prophets Alma continually press the idea that life exists first and foremost as a probationary state to remind their listeners to put their lives into the context of the eternal. Those who are poor and despised in this life will not have to suffer forever. Those who live riotously and selfishly will only enjoy their hedonism for a short moment. Even the most mundane thoughts, words and deeds, the prophets teach, have eternal significance in this scheme of things. Eventually all will be restored to its proper frame and order. The doctrine of the resurrection was on Melville’s mind as he wrote *Mardi*; he uses the narrator’s musings on a stream in the seventy-eighth chapter to voice his thoughts. The narrator describes the water running along a “loitering path” to a “subterranean outlet” (233). He compares this stream to the life of man: it “bounds out of night; runs and babbles in the sun; then returns to his darkness again; though, peradventure, once more to emerge” (233). In the following chapter, Babbalanja airs what appears to be the author’s skepticism regarding the concept of the resurrection. He berates Donjalolo, asking him if the spirits of his dead ancestors have ever spoken to him about life beyond mortality: “which of thy fathers . . . telleth thee what cheer beyond the grave?” (237). Babbalanja’s rhetorical question echoes father Lehi’s sentiments from the Book of Mormon, who describes the “grave” as a place of “silen[ce]” where no more words may be uttered (62-63; 2 Nephi 1:14). Babbalanja uses the silence of Donjalolo’s ancestors to suggestively draw his own conclusions about the afterlife. Donjalolo’s fathers “have gone to the land unknown,” Babbalanja

asserts (237), calling to mind father Lehi's description of the afterlife as a land "from whence no traveler can return" (63; 2 Nephi 1:14).¹¹

The Resurrection

The importance of the resurrection, to Melville, lies in the essential role of the physical body. Babbalanja asks Yoomy what good an eyeball is if removed from its socket; "will it see at all? Its connection with the body imparts its virtue" (488). Babbalanja never rejects the existence of a soul, he only ever reiterates the crucial role of the body: "Our souls belong to our bodies, not our bodies to our souls. For which has the care of the other?" (505). Babbalanja finds divinity in the inner workings of his body, as he describes the sensation of feeling his own heartbeat through his chest and declares: "I feel the great God himself at work in me" (538). A human being is neither completely body or soul, Babbalanja suggests, because "without bodies, we must be something else than we essentially are" (505). He goes on to describe the prophet Alma's teaching that "at the last day, every man shall rise in the flesh" (505). Although Babbalanja admits this doctrine "is deemed most hard to believe of all his instructions," he now believes it is "the most reasonable of [Alma's] doctrinal teachings" (505).

Melville may have been moved by the Book of Mormon's depiction of the resurrection, which shuns exclusivism and emphasizes the final equalizing force of God's justice upon the human family. Alma the Elder teaches that the resurrection will bring about an orderly and fair judgment day, as those who died "in their ignorance," never having heard of Christ nor "having salvation declared unto them," will yet be "redeemed by the Lord" (214; Mosiah 15:24). Alma the Younger is especially focused on the doctrine of the resurrection, The Book of Alma using the word "resurrection" more than any other book in the Book of Mormon. Alma the Younger's

take on resurrection is that it is “requisite with the justice of God” that a “restoration” take place (367; Alma 41:2). In Alma the Younger’s scheme, God’s justice will not allow the wicked to go happily into the annihilation of death unpunished. The righteous who suffered in mortality will also not be forgotten. The resurrection is, in the words of Alma the Elder, a “resurrection of endless life and happiness” or a “resurrection of endless damnation” (216; Mosiah 16:11).

Amulek, missionary companion to Alma the Younger, emphasizes the importance of the physical body in the perfecting of the human soul. The resurrection will bring about a final union of spirits and bodies, “never to be divided” (284; Alma 11:45). This union causes individuals to become both “spiritual and immortal” resulting in a perfected “whole” (284; Alma 11:45).

Alma and Babbalanja

By the end of *Mardi*, after the travelers’ visit to the isle of Serenia, Babbalanja finally converts to Alma’s teachings. This final acceptance of faith is all the more striking when one recalls that Babbalanja had very good reason to be disillusioned with religion. Babbalanja witnessed atrocities committed in the name of Alma all of his life: “So long, even from my infancy,” he says, “have I witnessed the wrongs committed in his name; the sins and inconsistencies of his followers” (625). He tells Mohi the historian, “take from your chronicles, Mohi, the history of those horrors ... resulting from the doings of Alma’s nominal followers, and your chronicles would not so frequently make mention of blood” (349). Similarly, the preaching of Alma the Younger not only does not prevent certain hostilities in the Book of Mormon, but is itself the catalyst of a bloody war (Hardy 149). Perhaps the best reason Babbalanja has for being disillusioned is the fact that his father was long ago burned to death on the island of Maramma for heresy, “in the name of Alma,” by religious zealots (349-350). The miracle of Babbalanja’s

conversion echoes that of Alma the Elder's in the Book of Mormon, whose mentor Abinadi is also sentenced to death by flames by a group of religious zealots (218; Mosiah 17:20).

Babbalanja appears troubled by the idea that the souls of the wicked go into everlasting flames, as this is what Alma's followers "devoutly swore" had happened to the soul of his father (350). He comes to the conclusion, "But better we were all annihilated, than that one man should be damned" (350). Babbalanja's abhorrence is comparable to the feelings of Alma the Younger and his fellow missionaries in the Book of Mormon. The narrator Mormon describes how Alma the Younger and his companions "were desirous that salvation should be declared to every creature, for they could not bear that any human soul should perish; yea, even the very thoughts that any soul should endure endless torment did cause them to quake and tremble" (243; Mosiah 28:3).

Babbalanja's conversion accompanies a final vision, in which he says he hears "exulting choral strains" and sees before him "a form, traced all over with veins of vivid light" (633). This "spirit," "angel," or "god" communicates with Babbalanja in a "low, sad sound" that is "no voice" yet is understood as language (633). The spirit inquires, "tell me what thou'st learned" to which Babbalanja replies: "This I have learned, oh! spirit!—In things mysterious, to seek no more; but rest content, with knowing naught but Love" (633). Babbalanja then reports that the angel's form "[grows] dim" but that the spirit whispers to him, "Blessed art thou for that" (633). The spirit then invites Babbalanja to "Come, and see new things" (633). Babbalanja describes flying through "systems, suns, and moons" finally reaching a point of a "new heaven" where "all our firmament seemed one nebula" (633).

Babbalanja's vision is a kind of inverse of Nephi's vision from the Book of Mormon. Nephi's father, Lehi, recounts to his family a dream in which he tastes of the fruit of the Tree of Life, which fruit he explains is the love of God. Nephi, after listening to his father's account,

prays to the Lord, in his words, to “behold the things which my father saw” (23; 1 Nephi 11:3). The Spirit of the Lord then speaks to Nephi, asking, “what desirest thou?” (23; 1 Nephi 11:2).¹² While Babbalanja tells the spirit that he has learned to “rest content” with love and to “seek no more” in regards to “things mysterious,” Nephi has not learned the same lesson. Nephi does not ask to feel of God’s love by tasting the fruit of the Tree of Life for himself. Instead he asks for knowledge, or “to know the interpretation thereof [of his father’s dream]” (23; 1 Nephi 11:11). The Spirit asks Nephi if he believes the words of his father, to which Nephi responds in the affirmative. The Spirit responds, “blessed art thou, Nephi, because thou believest in the Son of the most high God” (23; 1 Nephi 11:6). The Spirit of the Lord then commands Nephi to “Look!” but as Nephi turns his gaze upon the Spirit he sees nothing. Nephi realizes the Spirit has “gone from before [his] presence” (23; 1 Nephi 11:12). Nephi then describes an angel coming down and standing before him, who conducts the rest of the heavenly interview (24; 1 Nephi 11:14).

Unlike Babbalanja who begins by speaking to an angel with an actual bodily “form” but who then converses with nothing but a voice, Nephi begins his interview with a voice that is eventually replaced with an angelic form. In the opinion of Grant Hardy, the voice Nephi hears initially is that of the Holy Ghost himself; the angel who arrives later is more of an anonymous heavenly messenger. Nephi is “demoted” to speaking with an angel after he responds that he seeks knowledge and not love (Hardy 86). Like Babbalanja who is instructed to “see new things,” Nephi’s angel repeatedly tells him to “Look!” and behold the scenes of his father’s dream, among many other things. Before the angel shows Nephi the future birth of Jesus Christ he asks him, “Knowest thou the condescension of God?” (24; 1 Nephi 11:16) To which Nephi responds, “I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all

things” (24; 1 Nephi 11:17). Nephi’s answer calls to mind the words of the young boy visiting the temple of the god Oro in *Mardi*, “I love great Oro, though I comprehend him not” (347).

Melville saw the moral implicit in the story of Nephi’s life—one that is repeated in Moroni’s narration at the end of the Book of Mormon—and reworked it to give Babbalanja a happy ending. Nephi chooses to pursue knowledge over love, just as the narrator Mormon pursues historical accuracy and balanced literary representation. The narrator Moroni, like Babbalanja at the end of *Mardi* and Nephi at the end of his own life, comes to question the importance of facts. A nuanced understanding of historical details, scientific facts, and artful presentation are no match for a witness from God’s spirit. Babbalanja can “rest content . . . knowing naught but Love” (633). Ironically when Babbalanja resigns his will, accepting that he cannot know everything, new visions of the secrets of the universe are opened up to him. In the worlds of the Book of Mormon and *Mardi* spiritual knowledge can be sought after but must ultimately come from a higher source. The books take an egalitarian view of religious knowledge; their worlds are ones where God reveals his secrets freely to any and all who wish to follow him.

Chapter 3 – The Climactic Scenes from Mardi and the Book of Mormon

Eruptions in Mardi and the Book of Mormon

Like the opening of *Mardi* and its similarity to Nephi's story, Melville appears to have turned to the climactic chapters of the Book of Mormon as a template to create what could be called the climax of *Mardi*. As the travelers approach the island of Porpheero they witness a fiery volcanic eruption that engulfs the island and spreads to neighboring islands (498). The travelers then visit an island named Vivenza, an obvious allegorical stand-in for the United States of America (521). After departing Vivenza the group discovers the island of Serenia. This island is inhabited by a group of devout followers of the prophet Alma (622). Their religious sincerity and utopian society are enough to bring about the climactic conversion of the skeptical hearts of Babbalanja and all of his traveling companions, with the exception of the narrator (628; ch. 187). The narrator chooses to pursue the maiden Yillah indefinitely instead of being converted to Alma's ways (654). The book ends without a definite resolution to the narrator's quest, and Melville chooses to leave his fate ambiguous.

The climactic events of the Book of Mormon revolve around the fulfilling of an ancient prophecy and Christ's visit to his followers on the American continent. After Christ's crucifixion in the Holy Land, great tumults and catastrophes rock the Book of Mormon peoples on the other side of the earth, including days of darkness brought about by a volcanic eruption (501-502; 3 Nephi 8:5-13). The believers understand the natural disasters to be a sign of Christ's death. Eventually the resurrected Christ appears to the believers, descending from the heavens (508; 3 Nephi 11:8). He performs miracles among the people and recounts to them the sermons he preached among his disciples in the Holy Land (511; 3 Nephi 12:1-11). After reestablishing his

church among the people, Christ ascends into heaven—presumably on his way to visit yet other lands and nations (i.e. the “other sheep” that he repeatedly refers to) (518; 3 Nephi 16:1). The Book of Mormon followers of Christ live in a utopian state of peace and prosperity for two hundred years following his visitation, although the eventual rise of class differences and a return to tribal affiliations lead to wars and bloodshed that destroy their entire society (550; 4 Nephi 1:1-45).

The narrative connections between *Mardi* and the Book of Mormon’s climactic chapters can be summarized in the following three points:

1. Both climaxes are preceded by massive destruction and upheaval caused by natural disasters and a volcanic eruption.
2. Special visitations to the American continent immediately follow the catastrophes in both books. The travelers in *Mardi* visit Vivenza, the allegorical America, while the resurrected Christ visits the American continent in the Book of Mormon.
3. Both books follow these visitation scenes with depictions of utopian societies modeled on Christian principles. The Book of Mormon presents the model Christian church in The Fourth Book of Nephi while *Mardi* presents the island of Serenia as the perfect religious society.

The Volcano as Allegory

As he did with the opening of *Mardi*, Melville uses the Book of Mormon’s narrative framework to tell an allegorical story of revolution and change that imitates the revolutionary nature of what the Book of Mormon itself was attempting. In *Mardi*, the “fiery storm” the travelers witness is an obvious metaphor for the revolutions that helped create the United States (“Vivenza”) and France (“Franko”) (Suzuki 378). But Melville’s metaphors are multi-faceted

and often contain multiple meanings working within meanings, and *Mardi*'s volcanic eruption is no exception. In addition to being an allegory for political revolution, this volcanic eruption is meant to evoke the literary revolution taking place within Melville's own writing.

In the words of Cirlot, the volcano is symbolic of "the primary force of nature and of the fire of life," representing both creation and destruction (361). The volcano is also the site of the "descent" of the elements—"air, fire, water and earth are intermingled and transformed" in its bowels (Cirlot 361). The volcanic eruption in *Mardi* is more than a mere destruction of old monarchies leading to the creation of new nations; it is a reordering of the elements that make up Melville's fundamental understanding of truth. The travelers in *Mardi* are approaching the island of Porpheero when the volcano erupts. On top of being a stand-in for Old World Europe, the island of Porpheero is described as a land of "science and sages" containing "manuscripts in miles" (497). In addition, Porpheero contains vast "treasures" of books of history as well (497). When the volcano erupts, Porpheero—with all its scientific manuscripts and libraries of history—is immediately destroyed. In this way the climactic scenes of *Mardi* are about the writing of *Mardi* itself. In writing *Mardi*, Melville finally dispensed with the idea that truth could only be found in an accurate description of history. The autobiographical narratives of *Typee* and *Omoo* were more or less historically true, but Melville realized truth need not be limited to only the facts of history. This realization was important enough to manifest itself as a volcano utterly destroying libraries of scientific and historical volumes and the empirical versions of truth they represent.

The use of a volcano to represent cataclysmic change and the reordering of fundamental ideas could have come from Melville's insightful reading of the Book of Mormon, where the climactic volcanic eruption and visitation of Christ can be seen as another radical reordering of

the elements that make up the truth—specifically religious truth. At the death of Christ in about A.D. 34, the Book of Mormon describes “a great storm, such an one as never had been known in all the land” (501; 3 Nephi 8:5). This storm is accompanied by “a great and terrible tempest” along with “terrible thunder” that shakes the whole earth “as if it was about to divide asunder” (501-502; 3 Nephi 8:6). There are also “exceeding sharp lightnings, such as never had been known in all the land” (502; 3 Nephi 8:7). The narrator Mormon describes the city of Zarahemla taking fire, followed by the city of Moroni sinking “into the depths of the sea,” followed by the city of Moronihah decimated as an earthquake throws up a great mountain in place where the city used to be (502; 3 Nephi 8:8-10). The listing of cities and their destruction is echoed in *Mardi* as the narrator lists Porpheero, then Franko, then Verdanna and Dominora all taking fire because of the eruption (499).

The catastrophe in the Book of Mormon leads into days of “thick darkness upon all the face of the land” in which no candles or torches can be lit, and which obscures the light of the sun and moon (502; 3 Nephi 8:20-22).¹³ Melville also employs the phrase “thick darkness” to describe the atmosphere surrounding his volcano, out of which come “clamorous sounds” and “fiery showers” (498). These volcanic showers are said to increase the darkness three-fold (498).

The narrator Mormon says that “the whole face of the land was changed ... highways were broken up, and the level roads were spoiled, and many smooth places became rough” (502; 3 Nephi 8:12-13). This violent physical rearranging of geography is part of the volcano’s metaphorical reordering of the elements of truth. In the Book of Mormon’s case it is Christian tradition that is being reordered. In The Third Book of Nephi the survivors of the cataclysm gather round “showing one to another the great and marvelous change which had taken place” upon the land (508; 3 Nephi 11:1). As they converse they see “a Man descending out of heaven;

and he was clothed in a white robe; and he came down and stood in the midst of them” (508; 3 Nephi 11:8). This is the resurrected Jesus Christ, whom the believers had been awaiting for many years. The significance of Christ’s visit to his followers on the American continent becomes apparent in how it completely reshapes the boundaries of the biblical story of Jesus. The Book of Mormon Jesus is one that does not limit his earthly ministry to one nation. The Book of Mormon uses Christ’s words from the Gospel of John as a launching point: “other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd” (KJV John 10:16). After reading the Book of Mormon, readers of the Bible are supposed to understand Christ’s words as a direct reference to Book of Mormon peoples. In the Book of Mormon Christ even repeats these words before departing, insinuating that there are still “other sheep” or other nations or followers that he needs to minister to in person before passing into heaven. The Book of Mormon’s continuation of Christ’s story would have appealed to Melville’s repugnance towards religious exclusivism, as it offered a version of Christianity that was simultaneously made available to many nations around the earth by the hand of God. Evidence from Melville’s own markings in his copy of the New Testament suggests that he was open to the idea of altering scripture when necessary. Although his annotation at the bottom of the page is lost, Melville actually crossed out a part of Revelation 22:19 which reads “And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life” (Yothers 51). Incidentally this scripture (along with the previous verse forbidding additions) was often used by religious critics of the Book of Mormon in an effort to prove that the God forbids any scripture beyond the Bible.

The Visitation to Vivenza and the Visitation of Christ

The other major reordering of religious truth that takes place in the Book of Mormon's visit from Christ is in the way Christ proclaims his divine authority to his gathered followers.

Grant Hardy explains:

Krister Stendahl, former dean of the Harvard Divinity School, observes that Jesus [in the Book of Mormon] is not the synoptic teacher of righteousness, basing his teaching on the law and prophets. He is more a Johannine Jesus, the revealed revealer who points to himself and to faith in and obedience to him as the message. Like the Jesus of the Gospel of John, [Book of Mormon] Jesus does not tell parables. (196)

The biblical Jesus cites the writings of the law and the prophets to grant himself authority. The Book of Mormon Jesus does not need to cite anything to prove his authority; he descends from the sky in all his divine glory for everyone to witness. There is absolutely no question to the people gathered there that he is the Son of God. When the Book of Mormon Jesus quotes the scriptures to his followers, he is in fact granting the scriptures authority, not the other way around. This Jesus does not turn to the expertise of others or prophecies recorded in the annals of history to prove himself; he simply states that he is deity. The truth of the Book of Mormon Jesus is a truth that does not require the empirical details of recorded history or science to validate it. It is the version of truth that Melville discovered in writing *Mardi*.

After the volcano's destruction of Porpheero's libraries of knowledge in *Mardi*, the narrator introduces Vivenza, the allegorical America. Melville's placement of an allegorical America directly following the volcanic destruction is highly suggestive of the Book of Mormon's Christ appearing in the Americas after the equally cataclysmic (and symbolic) volcanic destruction. Melville makes the Book of Mormon connection even more overt as he

specifies the country of Vivenza itself—the allegorical America—as a symbol for Christ. And not just any version of Christ, either. The narrator states specifically that Vivenza could be likened to a “child-like . . . young Messiah” to whose discourse “the bearded Rabbis bowed” (472). Here Melville alludes to the New Testament story of the boy Christ, as recorded in the Gospel of Luke. Mary and Joseph lose track of Jesus in Jerusalem when he is only twelve years of age. They eventually find him “in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors” (KJV, Luke 2:46). The rabbis present were “astonished at his understanding and answers” (KJV, Luke 2:47). When his parents ask for an explanation of his behavior, Jesus responds with a rhetorical appeal to his own higher authority: “wist ye not that I must be about my Father’s business?” (KJV, Luke 2:48). It is interesting that Melville chooses to invoke this story of Christ declaring his own divine authority against the far paler institutional authority of the Rabbis in the temple. In this story, Christ does not turn to Old Testament prophecies as support to his divine authority, as is his usual practice when questioned. Here he astonishes the professionals and the well-educated despite his lack of formal training, and then he simply declares that he is the son of God and doing God’s business. In this way, Melville makes out the allegorical America (Vivenza) to be much like the American Jesus of the Book of Mormon: they are both entities that declare their own divine authority openly without turning to history, scripture, or other institutional authorities for support.

Vivenza’s main problem lies in its hypocritical class distinctions and economic inequality. The travelers meet a citizen of Vivenza who declares, “All kings here—all equal. Every thing’s in common,” as he attempts to pickpocket someone and is subsequently arrested (521). Vivenza’s biggest hypocrisy lies in the presence of the ultimate form of economic inequality: state-sanctioned slavery. But while Melville uses Vivenza to criticize the American

institution of slavery, he is not altogether pessimistic about America's potential. He illustrates this by following the scenes in Vivenza with the travelers' visit to Serenia.

Serenia and Christian Utopia

Upon their arrival in Serenia the island citizens greet the travelers: "Alma's blessing upon ye, voyagers! ye look storm-worn" (622). Babbalanja replies, "The storm we have survived ... and many more, we yet must ride" (622). Babbalanja refers to the volcanic upheavals here, but Melville also refers to the existential crisis of writing *Mardi* (which is almost at an end) and to the potential crises of writing future books. The Serenian offers the island and its religious ideology as a respite from existential crises, a place where "many storm-worn rovers land at last to dwell" (622). Babbalanja initially acts skeptical of the followers of Alma on Serenia and interrogates them on their practices. He asks what is done with those who don't believe in Alma's teachings: "surely, ye must cast him forth?" The Serenian responds: "No, no; we will remember, that if he dissent from us, we then equally dissent from him; and men's faculties are Oro-given ... we care not for men's words; we look for creeds in actions" (625). The Serenian followers of Alma echo the doctrine of Alma the Younger in the Book of Mormon: "For there was a law that men should be judged according to their crimes. Nevertheless, there was no law against a man's belief; therefore, a man was punished only for the crimes which he had done; therefore all men were on equal grounds" (335; Alma 30:11). Melville's Christian utopia is a place where people are free to believe whatever they want to believe, and no one is compelled to agree. Babbalanja's skepticism begins to waver.

The Serenians place great stock in alleviating the suffering of the poor. One Serenian explains:

[W]e make not the miserable many support the happy few. Nor by annulling reason's laws, seek to breed equality, by breeding anarchy. In all things, equality is not for all. Each has his own. Some have wider groves of palms than others; fare better; dwell in more tasteful arbors; oftener renew their fragrant thatch. Such differences must be. But none starve outright, while others feast. By the abounding, the needy are supplied. (625)

Major income gaps are not a part of Melville's Christian utopia. This lack of class distinctions also appears to echo the model iteration of Christ's church found in the Book of Mormon.

Mormon describes how the followers of Alma the Younger "did impart of their substance, every man according to that which he had, to the poor, and the needy, and the sick, and the afflicted; and they did not wear costly apparel, yet they were neat and comely" (251; Alma 1:27).

Similarly, those who were present for the Messiah's visit in the Book of Mormon are afterward described as having "all things common among them; therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free, and partakers of the heavenly gift" (548; 4 Nephi 1:3). Babbalanja's heart appears to soften further as he learns of how the poor are treated.

The Serenians then provide Babbalanja with the solution to his paradox of knowledge versus faith. After hearing the appealing descriptions of a utopian life on Serenia, Babbalanja questions, "methinks, that in your faith must be much that jars with reason" (628). The Serenian replies, "No, brother! Right-reason, and Alma, are the same; else Alma, not reason, would we reject. The Master's great command is Love; and here do all things wise, and all things good, unite. Love is all in all. The more we love, the more we know; and so reversed" (628). This statement dismisses Babbalanja's assumption that empirical knowledge will eventually lead to truth. Instead it is love (i.e. charity), the ultimate expression of Christian faith, that leads to truth. This is the wisdom Babbalanja sought all through *Mardi*. In his parting words he admonishes his

company to seek the wisdom he has found: “Gain now, in flush of youth, that last wise thought, too often purchased, by a life of woe. Be wise: be wise ... Companions all! adieu” (637-638). Babbalanja’s farewell bears a striking resemblance to the closing words of the prophet Jacob in the Book of Mormon, who admonishes his readers: “O be wise; what can I say more? ... and to the reader I bid farewell, hoping that many of my brethren may read my words. Brethren, adieu” (157, 159; Jacob 6:12, 7:27).

It certainly seems like a conspicuous borrowing, but it is not necessarily proof of Melville’s conversion to the Serenian way. At least, it shouldn’t be taken as proof of a *complete* conversion. After all, if Babbalanja represents some fragment or part of Melville’s psyche, the unnamed narrator of *Mardi* remains unconvinced to the bitter end. At the end of the final chapter, after the rest of the party remains happily converted to the religion of the Serenians, the narrator quests out again into the endless ocean in search of the long-lost maiden, Yillah. The narrator’s companion Yoomy, fearing for the state of his friend’s everlasting soul, implores: “Through yonder strait, for thee, perdition lies” (654). Yoomy realizes that if the narrator abandons Serenia he will not only be rejecting God’s gift of truth, finally bestowed upon their traveling band after untold days of searching, but that he will most likely die on the open ocean, killed by the three pursuers who still seek vengeance for the death of the priest, Aleema. A final rejection of God’s grace coupled with no chance to repent in mortality leads Yoomy to beg, “commit not the last, last crime!” (654). The narrator will have none of his companion’s pleadings, though. Apparently the thought of surrendering his will to some higher power disgusts him, no matter how safe it will keep him. He shouts: “By Oro, I will steer my own fate, old man.—Mardi, farewell!” (page #) With that the narrator bids farewell to the island country and Melville bids farewell to his third book.

Mardi finally closes with a traveling party divided and with a divided author. On the one hand, the “Babbalanja” inside Melville appears to have resolved many of his issues on matters of faith. He has come to the conclusion that individuals do not necessarily require proxies to come unto God or even to come to an understanding of eternal truths. This is because eternal religious truths simply exist to be accessed by anyone. For instance, he has also learned that there is a purer form of Christianity available to all the world, and it can be learned of by any individual who seeks it. This form of Christianity offers a version of God previously unimagined. He is a deity not bound by exclusivity, tribal, national, or racial affiliation, or even geography. He speaks to and appears to all peoples throughout all eras of history. Melville’s inner Babbalanja comes to the conclusion: “In things mysterious, to seek no more; but rest content, with knowing naught but Love” (633). In other words, God—the most mysterious of all—cannot be reached through the same kind of intellectual process one uses to seek other truths. One arrives at him using love and faith. It is also when the Babbalanja inside Melville resigns his will that the secrets of the universe begin to be opened up to him.

This new-found faith may have worked for a time, but for whatever reason it was not enough to wholly convert Melville to a life of resigned contemplation. The narrator of *Mardi* asks, “why put back? is a life of dying worth living o'er again?” (654). As he sets off he exclaims: “Now, I am my own soul's emperor; and my first act is abdication!” (654). The narrator would rather give up his own soul by keeping his free will than surrender his will to a life of safety and eternal bliss. Such a drastic act of self-sabotage may appear to come out of nowhere; the narrator’s final act in *Mardi* continues to puzzle literary critics to this day. But it is a perfect illustration of the deep division that took place within Melville during *Mardi*; a division that may have been caused by the Book of Mormon and one that perpetuated itself through *Moby*

Dick. Indeed, Melville may have continued to use Book of Mormon references to illustrate this psychological divide as he began his next book, *Moby Dick*.

Conclusion

The Book of Mormon and Moby Dick

Perhaps Melville was not finished taking inspiration from Book of Mormon upon completing *Mardi*. After all, if the Book of Mormon impressed Melville enough for him to borrow a main character from it, it may certainly have had some long-lasting influence on Melville's attitudes about the nature of God and Christianity as well. If the split between Babbalanja and *Mardi*'s narrator is any indication, perhaps some of the theological ideas presented in the Book of Mormon helped to create the deep spiritual rift that most critics agree Melville never resolved in his lifetime. This divide pitted Melville's inner philosopher (Babbalanja) against his own identity as active god of his own fate ("Taji" the narrator). Reduced to their essence, these two sides of Melville could also be termed "contented yet passive believer" and "the actively seeking skeptic." This divided persona shows up in the opening line of *Moby Dick*, which takes on new meaning when contrasted with the opening line of the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon begins with a series of unskeptical, affirmative declarations by its narrator: "I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father" (5; 1 Nephi 1:1). In this line a first-person narrator, Nephi, announces himself unambiguously. There is no mistake of the narrator's identity or name—it is "I, Nephi." After firmly establishing his identity, the second detail Nephi divulges of himself is the fact that he is "born of goodly parents." He links himself positively to his father, explaining how he was educated in the same manner as him. These are the words of a man with a firm understanding of who he is and where he came from. They are the words of a true believer.

Compare this line to *Moby Dick*'s famous opening, "Call me Ishmael." Right from the start the identity of *Moby Dick*'s narrator is ambiguous. He asks the reader to "call" him "Ishmael," but is this really the narrator's given name? He never specifies that he IS Ishmael; maybe he uses a pseudonym. Perhaps "Ishmael" acts as a symbolic title for the narrator, which would hint at parental issues since the biblical Ishmael, the unwanted son of Abraham, acts as the archetypal family outcast. *Moby Dick*'s narrator is the complete inverse of Nephi, the steadfast and unwaveringly faithful son. Ishmael appears unsure of himself; there is no telling what is real and what is not in his world, and his relationship with his father seems shaky and uncertain. Both stories could be described using the technical language of narratology as "autodiegetic, temporally distant, embedded narrative[s]" (Hardy 13). In other words, both narrators appear to be describing events many years after they took place. Both narrators also later reveal a deep loss they are attempting to come to terms with through their writing. Nephi describes a seemingly impossible quest to a new land, initiated with the killing of a fellow Israelite on his part and ending with the dissolution of his extended family unit in the New World after many years of hardship, leaving him separated and alone. Ishmael also describes an ill-fated voyage—one that initiates with thoughts of suicide and ends with the death of all his closest friends, leaving him alone. Is it possible that Melville continued to draw inspiration from the Book of Mormon through the symbolic use of the name, Ishmael?

After all, the name Ishmael actually appears thirty four times in the Book of Mormon. That's only ten fewer times than it appears in all of the Bible.¹⁴ In the Book of Mormon, Ishmael is the name of Nephi's father-in-law, and although the character dies early on in the book without ever having accomplished much, his name appears throughout the Book of Mormon to describe his descendants (the sons of Ishmael) as well as lands commemoratively named after

him in the New World. As a character Ishmael doesn't receive much attention, but from what little is written of him he could be said to represent a reluctant follower of a new way. He is persuaded by Lehi to leave Jerusalem and venture into the wilderness. He does so, but dies abruptly before reaching the land of promise. He is a follower of a new path who doesn't have the strength to make it all the way. His death strikes a deep division between the two families, one that Melville seemingly appreciated. As they reevaluate their circumstances upon Ishmael's death, some family members remain convinced that Lehi is inspired of God to leave Jerusalem behind. The more skeptical of the party believe that Nephi has been inventing all of his visions in order to assert control over his brothers. The oldest brother, Laman, declares of Nephi immediately following Ishmael's death:

Now, he says that the Lord has talked with him, and also that angels have ministered unto him. But behold, we know that he lies unto us; and he tells us these things, and he worketh many things by his cunning arts, that he may deceive our eyes, thinking, perhaps, that he may lead us away into some strange wilderness; and after he has led us away, he has thought to make himself a king and a ruler over us, that he may do with us according to his will and pleasure. (40; 1 Nephi 16:38)

The skeptical Laman accuses his believing brother, Nephi, of all the typical things skeptics accuse believers of: inventing his spiritual visions in order to deceive and ultimately rule over the other religious followers. To Laman all this religious talk really boils down to a power struggle: whose will ought to be resigned to whose? The brothers never successfully resolve this divide, which leads to a family rupture and division into forever-warring tribes. Nephi sorrows over this divide for the rest of his life. The familial rift, exacerbated by Ishmael's death, pushes believers and skeptics into different tribal camps who can never fully resolve their differences. The split

between the righteous Nephites and wicked Lamanites drives the entire one-thousand year narrative of the Book of Mormon. An astute reader like Melville may have picked up on Ishmael's psychic importance and re-used him the same way he re-used Alma in *Mardi*. The same way Babbalanja and the unnamed narrator of *Mardi* can be seen as aspects of Melville's persona, so Ishmael can be seen as an obvious stand-in for the author in *Moby Dick*. The difference is that in *Moby Dick*, skeptic and believer are fused into one character. To Melville the war between faith and knowledge was not so much between different external factions, but continued to rage on and on internally.

As mentioned in the introduction, Melville once compared his book *Mardi* to a "wild, mystic Mormon," in a way that suggests the author felt he understood the Mormons or their theology on some level, or at least held sympathetic feelings towards them. The "wild, mystic" descriptors actually make an appearance in *Moby Dick*'s titular chapter, chapter 41. Ishmael, echoing Nephi's opening remarks, states: "I, Ishmael, was one of the crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest ... A *wild, mystical*, sympathetic feeling was in me; Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine" [emphasis added] (169). Melville linked his Mormon descriptors with sympathy for others over their apparently unattainable pursuits. Like the Book of Mormon's Ishmael accepting Lehi's seemingly insane quest, *Moby Dick*'s Ishmael cannot help but feel sympathy for Ahab's. Maybe Melville understood the other side of every argument all too well, resulting in his simultaneous love for and deep distrust of God.

In one of the most beautiful passages in *Moby Dick*, Ishmael ponders on the cyclical nature of human life. The passage acts simultaneously as commentary by Melville on his own divided nature in the realm of the spiritual. "There is no steady unretracing progress in this life," he says:

[W]e do not advance through fixed gradations, and at the last one pause:—through infancy's unconscious spell, boyhood's thoughtless faith, adolescence' doubt (the common doom), then scepticism, then disbelief, resting at last in manhood's pondering repose of If. But once gone through, we trace the round again; and are infants, boys, and men, and Ifs eternally. (421-422)

Clearly whatever conclusions Melville made about the nature of truth at the end of *Mardi*, like the hypothetical boy described by Ishmael, he continues to go through, tracing “the round” again. *Mardi*'s Melville was never wholly satisfied with Babbalanja's conclusion. *Moby Dick*'s Melville appears to hold similar reservations, never able to simply rest “at last” in any “pondering repose” (422) but having to cycle through endless rounds of faith followed by skepticism followed by resignation. Nephi invokes the same “eternal round,” a term not used in the King James translation of the Bible, as he describes the act of seeking out God:

For he that diligently seeketh shall find; and the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto them, by the power of the Holy Ghost, as well in these times as in times of old, and as well in times of old as in times to come; wherefore, the course of the Lord is one eternal round. (21; 1 Nephi 10:19)

The ultimate understanding of God, according to Nephi, causes one to see the universe in terms of the cyclical. It is no “advance through fixed gradations, and at the last one pause” (422) It is, instead, an “eternal round.” This imagery appears to have struck Melville, and his elucidations on such concepts led him to compose some of the most powerful prose of his writing life.

Perhaps one wonders why, if the Book of Mormon had such an effect on Melville, did he not speak of it more openly? We will probably never know the answer. Although Melville did leave us hints and clues here and there, he preferred to keep his inspirations to himself.

Additionally, there were many attitudes at play in the nineteenth century (some of which are still in effect to this day) that would have made open discussion on the literary merits of the Book of Mormon a socially, politically, and academically disastrous idea. However, in one chapter of *Mardi* the travelers all share their experiences reading the writings of an author named Lombardo. On the surface this scene appears to be Melville having a little fun talking about himself, but like words passing over words in an “eternal round,” the comments could also very much apply to Joseph Smith and Book of Mormon. Lombardo’s work is “hooted during life” (something that could not yet be said of Melville’s two widely critically praised novels) but “lives after him” (602). It is said to also be “written with a divine intent” (602). One traveler remarks: “I never hugged it in a corner, and ignored it before Mardi” (602). Perhaps this last comment is Melville openly remarking on his relationship with the Book of Mormon. After writing *Mardi* he may not have turned to the Book of Mormon much for inspiration, but by the time *Mardi* was finished it had done its job. It inspired Melville to leave behind the *Arcturion* of historical narrative and steer his own course through the seas of truth.

¹ “I also do not find it possible to doubt that Joseph Smith was an authentic prophet. Where in all of American history can we find his match? The Prophet Joseph has proved again that economic and social forces do not determine human destiny. Religious history, like literary or any cultural history, is made by genius, by the mystery of rare human personalities. I am not persuaded by sociological and anthropological studies of Mormon history. ... In proportion to his importance and his complexity, he remains the least-studied personage, of an undiminished vitality, in our entire national saga.” (Bloom 95)

² Consequently 1837 is also the year a young Melville first sailed to England where he lived for several years. He recounts his experiences as a cabin boy on a merchant ship during these years in his novel *Redburn*. Melville spent time living in England off and on for the remainder of his writing career. His early books were just as popular there as they were in the United States.

³ Others have noted Melville’s river passage along the Mormon settlement of Nauvoo. Blogger Martin Blythe recreates the scene in his ahistorical narrative, “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice.” This bizarre piece of speculative fiction imagines Melville stepping off his boat and searching for Joseph Smith in Nauvoo, with Melville coming across one

of Joseph Smith's "seer stones" and even using it to write *Moby Dick*. [<http://www.sexualfables.com/the-sorcerers-apprentice.php>]

⁴ American historian Jan Shipps, writing on contemporary criticism of the Book of Mormon in 1980, holds that most scholars dismiss Smith's visions "as hallucinations, regard his 'golden bible' as a worthless document, and wonder how any intelligent person could ever accept it as true" (29-30).

⁵ Albert Einstein arrived at a similar conclusion and puts it best: "Positivism states that what cannot be observed does not exist. This conception is scientifically indefensible, for it is impossible to make valid affirmations of what people 'can' or 'cannot' observe. One would have to say 'only what we observe exists,' which is obviously false" (238). Albert Einstein, *The Quotable Einstein*. Ed. Alice Calaprice (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005)

⁶ The kidnapping of the maiden Yillah from a verdant glade by the priest Aleema is similar to a story from the Book of Mormon in which the wicked priests of King Noah come upon the beautiful daughters of the Lamanites making themselves merry in the forest. The wicked priests kidnap the daughters and take them to wife. See Mosiah ch. 20.

⁷ For more on this, see Danish historian C. C. Rafn and his scholarly treatment of pre-Columbian Norse exploration of North America, published in 1837.

⁸ The Gospel of Luke is the only one of the gospels that mentions Christ's sweat dropping, "as it were great drops of blood" (KJV Luke 22:44). The word "pore" is not used in the King James translation of the Bible.

⁹ The circumstances of Alma's death are mentioned once in *Mardi*, when Mohi declares he is said to have "departed to the skies" at the end of his ministry (324). This resembles the circumstances of Alma the Younger's death in the Book of Mormon, who is said to have been "taken up by the Spirit" unto the Lord (380; Alma 45:19).

¹⁰ The Mardian idea of "a comparatively dark and benighted age" coming to an end was common in early Latter-day Saint culture, and is reflected in the sunrise imagery of the 1840 poem "The Morning Breaks" by Parley P. Pratt (today sung as a popular Mormon hymn): "The morning breaks, the shadows flee; / Lo, Zion's standard is unfurled! / The dawning of a brighter day / Majestic rises on the world. / The clouds of error disappear / Before the rays of truth divine; / The glory bursting from afar, / Wide o'er the nations soon will shine!"

¹¹ This description of death by Lehi was long seen by critics of the Book of Mormon as one of Joseph Smith's "plagiarisms" since it echoes Shakespeare's description of death as "that undiscovered country, from whose bourn no traveler returns" (Hamlet Act 3 s.1, 80). Mormon scholar Hugh Nibley observes that the description of death as a "land of no return" is extremely common in literature of the ancient Near East and has a history dating back much further than Shakespeare. See the chapter, "New Approaches to Book of Mormon Study" in *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* by Hugh Nibley. 1992.

¹² The voice of the Spirit is later described in the Book of Mormon similarly to the "low, sad sound" heard by Babbalanja—it is "not a harsh voice" or "a loud voice" but a "small voice" that, despite the hearers' incomprehension, "pierce[es] them that did hear to the center" (509; 3 Nephi 11:3).

¹³ Although no specific volcano is mentioned in the upheavals described in The Book of Third Nephi, the cataclysmic destructions followed by days of darkness are understood by many students of the Book of Mormon to be caused by a volcano. For more information see Bart J. Kowallis, "In the Thirty and Fourth Year: A Geologist's View of the Great Destruction in 3 Nephi" from *BYU Studies* 37, no. 3 (1997-98) 137-190.

¹⁴ The name Ishmael is not the only Book of Mormon connection to *Moby Dick*, though. As pointed out by Richard Rust, the Book of Mormon actually makes mention of the potential danger of a destructive whale in The Book of Ether (164): "And thus they were driven forth; and no monster of the sea could break them, neither whale that could mar them" (589; Ether 6:10).

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