

“All of us are Ahabs”:¹
Captain Ahab, Captain Flint, and the Monomaniacal
Sea Captain’s Violence of Influence

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Introduction

In the words of Herman Melville scholar Henry A. Murray, there is “no [...] experience more thrilling than being witched, illuminated, and transfigured by the magic of another’s art.”² While Murray is discussing Melville’s experience of reading Nathaniel Hawthorne’s collected stories in *Mosses from an Old Manse*, his words may also suggest Melville’s fascination with the captivating power of storytelling. Given Melville’s formative years spent upon the high seas, an alertness to the compelling qualities of the tradition of “yarning,”³ which portrays maritime endeavors as adventurous and heroic, would figure significantly in Melville’s imagination. Generations after Melville authored his seafaring works, television producers Jonathan E. Steinberg and Robert Levine demonstrate a preoccupation with older maritime narratives that evokes the impulse to create Melville experienced, as Murray discusses. Looking to Robert Louis Stevenson’s classic maritime adventure *Treasure Island*, Steinberg and Levine developed the television series *Black Sails* for the Starz network,⁴ which weaves together invented origin stories of Stevenson’s characters with historical anecdotes of piracy’s purported “Golden Age”⁵ and the immersive production qualities of contemporary long-form television.⁶ Steinberg and Levine’s use of visceral imagery and ascription of intricate, erudite dialogue to their interpretations of Stevenson’s characters evokes the notion that “the yarn is perpetually invented and reinvented [...] whether at sea or ashore, as individual storytellers add their talents and fashion their tales for an ever-changing audience.”⁷ The immersive and compelling storytelling qualities of *Black Sails* — particularly in the construction of both the Captain Flint character and his origin story — seems to suggest Steinberg and Levine’s awareness of the yarning tradition, thus characterizing their television adaptation of *Treasure Island* as a contemporary sailor’s yarn.

This essay will explore the intricate camaraderie of sailors — dependent on the community-building activity of yarning — aboard both whaling and pirate vessels, arguably the most violent iterations of seafaring in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A comparison of two significant instances of on-deck violence in Melville’s *Moby-Dick* and Steinberg and Levine’s *Black Sails* will expose how the captains of each vessel — Captain Ahab and Captain Flint, respectively — create “Hells of their own”⁸ amidst the microcosmic worlds of their ships. I will suggest that in welcoming violence aboard with open arms, Ahab and Flint corrupt the tenuous sense of harmony that these vessels depended upon to remain fruitful in their chosen endeavors. Broaching this crucial outer wall of the maritime praxis exposes the underbelly of another significant tradition, yarning, and renders the tradition vulnerable to their further

corrupting influence. I propose that each captain's power of persuasion — their skill to cast a yarn that becomes sinister in its compulsion — reveals a significant intertextual relationship between *Moby-Dick* and *Black Sails* that demands critical attention. Ultimately, in suggesting that Ahab and Flint have both drunk from the same cup,⁹ these representations of monomaniacal¹⁰ visions in mariners offer scrutiny of the image of the heroic sea captain in maritime fiction as a whole.

Bloodied Deck, Bloodied Hands Outstretched: An Open Invitation to Violence

Every individual who has taken to sea knows deep in their heart that it is a violent element. Melville polishes the narrative lens of Ishmael, a man experiencing the horrors and thrills of whaling for the first time,¹¹ with vivid imagery to illustrate awed respect for the sea's violent undercurrents: “consider, once more, the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began.”¹² For Melville's narrator, the sea decides who lives and who dies, and the sailor worth their salt must express both reverence and vigilance in the face of this inherently violent world. Storms, doldrums, lack of sleep and proper nutrition, warring factions, and indeed attacks from creatures of the deep¹³ all threatened to destabilize any sailing enterprise, wherein one small misfortune could cost the entire crew their lives. Mariners thus developed complex socio-cultural customs to negotiate the unpredictable and dangerous landscape upon which they made their living. Particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the culture of ordinary sailors ensconced a deeply rooted sense of community and mutual respect, regardless of their particular career.¹⁴

Amidst the intense close quarters and genuine perils, the moods of sailors were bound to be just as turbulent as the changeable world upon which they lived, worked, and died. The *mise-en-scène* of the first pirate hunt in *Black Sails* exposes the delicate social relationships of mariners, in which personalities often chafed against one another as external pressures threatened to cause any slight between two sailors to explode into physical conflict. As Flint begins to walk away from the spectacle of a defeated merchant captain lashed to the mast, a buccaneer named Singleton¹⁵ barks, “Where are you going? Justice is about to be done, and you turn your back.”¹⁶ The tension between the captain and this particular crew member is palpable. With a view of the weak, deposed captain presiding above, Singleton menacingly raises an axe, punctuating the noun *justice* as he points toward his captain's exposed back. Singleton *performs* his desire to undermine Captain Flint's position, alerting the audience that such discord may have been brewing for some time and will boil over before the first episode concludes.

In the social world of eighteenth-century piracy, to manage quarrels amongst pirates, in particular, an acute understanding of this delicacy underscores the drafting of a ship's Articles, a written code of conduct to which every signatory onboard, including the captain, was beholden. Expressly, a majority of ships' Articles explicitly prohibit any violent clashes between crew members while aboard. Instead, their oaths bound the pirates to wait until landfall to settle their disputes to maintain “harmony in the crowded quarters below decks.”¹⁷ While Dufresne, the

Walrus's quartermaster, briefly cites "the Articles"¹⁸ to mediate the rising tension between Flint and Singleton, which also grounds the fictional pirates of *Black Sails* in historically derived codes of conduct, no further exposition on the particular content of the *Walrus*'s Articles is divulged to the audience. What becomes lost in this shift from an intradiegetic to a mimetic mode of representing the world of pirates is the ability of the Articles' rigid juridical codes to subvert contemporary assumptions that eighteenth-century pirates were mere brawling brutes. Thus, were Flint and Singleton to engage in a duel while still aboard the *Walrus*, the average viewer would fail to register the severity of not just the fight itself but Flint's eager participation in on-deck violence and, consequently, the defiance of shipboard laws.

To reconcile this sacrifice of historically-founded evidence regarding the pirate's strict maintenance of shipboard decorum, I suggest that the Dufresne character's introduction represents the maintenance of on-deck order dictated by pirate Articles. A jarring transition from the bloodied faces of the defeated merchant vessel sailors places the viewer in the quiet of the captain's quarters. A respectable-looking, bespectacled man named Dufresne records the contents of the ship's hold.¹⁹ A close-up of his hand reveals fingers blackened by ink, indicating to the viewer that this image of the scribing pirate is not an aberration but routine, as integral to the enterprise of the *Walrus* as its vanguard. I contend that Steinberg and Levine deliberately insert Dufresne just eleven minutes into the narrative to juxtapose his clerical actions with the incursive violence of his compatriots. This dichotomy guides the audience to consider how historical pirates' agreement to a democratic, contract-based system maintains the health of their enterprise as Dufresne *embodies* the maintenance of order delineated by the ship's Articles.

Consequently, when considered against this implication of the Articles' maintenance of order, viewers may interpret Captain Flint's response to the direct challenge and threat of physical violence from a member of his crew and revelation of the decay in camaraderie aboard the *Walrus* as unconscionable. In a deft maneuver that begins to crystallize his reputation amongst both his fellow buccaneers and the audience, Flint seizes this moment of breakdown to explode, rather than repair, the social conventions aboard the eighteenth-century pirate vessel and subsequently assert absolute power over the *Walrus*'s fragile ecosystem. With the cleverness of a master storyteller, Flint dramatically descends the steps from his quarters to the deck and begins a yarn of tantalizing power: "I'm sorry [...] for the disregard it seems I've shown you. The most important element of a healthy ship is trust. Trust between men. Trust between captain and crew. Without it, a ship is doomed."²⁰ The repetitive emphasis on the "trust" amongst sailors serves Flint as an explicit acknowledgment of the egalitarian codes by which they are all bound.²¹ Yet irony drips from the scheming captain's speech as Flint simultaneously appeals to trust and frames Singleton for the theft of a page from a logbook, thereby lying about the recovery of the page. An aura of "doom" further subsumes the trust between captain and crew. The timbre of the adjective and the implications of its grave consequences blend with Flint's critical gaze to tacitly accuse Singleton of thwarting the *Walrus*'s pursuit of what could be their most significant prize to date: L'Urca de Lima, a treasure galleon laden with the riches of the

Spanish empire.²² Such allegations incite a fight to the death between captain and crew member, a violent displacement of an election that Flint recognizes he would lose and thereby crystallizes his abuse of piratical law. In direct violation of the historically cited pirate Articles, the *Walrus'* main deck serves as the site of this violent outburst. Under the authority of Captain Flint, intra-crew violence receives an open invitation to climb aboard, destroying the already brittle social relationships of the pirates. Furthermore, Flint not only permits this eruption of intense violence in the “domestic space” of the pirates, but he is also its main actor, signifying his corruption of the Articles’ authority.

Subverting one strict code of the Articles does not satisfy Flint, however. Just as it seems Singleton may triumph, Flint seizes a cannonball to beat Singleton to death. As per the Articles, execution is an appropriate means of reinstating order only when a crew member puts his fellow sailors' lives at risk.²³ However, execution becomes the blunt instrument with which Flint exerts *his* new breed of order. The crew members’ jeering shouts fade, signifying their realization that Flint has asserted ultimate dominance aboard the *Walrus*. With his own blood-soaked hands, Flint subverts the traditional order to welcome violence aboard. It is plausible that ships’ Articles exist primarily to maintain discipline amongst an otherwise rowdy rabble of sailors. However, the captain is still subject to this “effective egalitarianism.”²⁴ The question of who may control Flint now lingers as this “tyrant captain”²⁵ has destroyed not only the skull from which a dissenting voice²⁶ issued but also the ship’s tenuous sense of harmony in the most visceral,

violent manner. In this world, it is *Flint* who decides who lives and who dies.

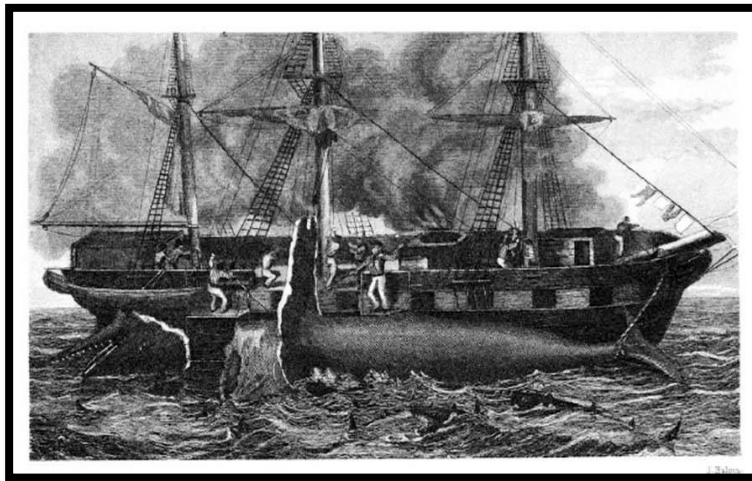


Figure 1 Trying out a whale. From J. Ross Brown, *Enchings of a Whaling Cruise*. Harper: New York, 1846.

Paralleling Captain Flint’s inscription of violence upon the *Walrus*’s deck, Ishmael’s narrative perspective in *Moby-Dick* offers an impression of the corrupting violence of the whaling enterprise. Ironically, by the cover of darkness, the violent truth of whaling is illuminated, as the whalemens:

“were strangely revealed in the capricious emblazonings of the works. As they narrated to each other their unholy adventures, their tales of terror told in words of mirth; as their uncivilized laughter forked upwards out of them [...] as the wind howled on, and the sea leaped, and the ship groaned and dived, and yet steadfastly shot her red hell further and further into the blackness of the sea and the night [...] then the rushing Pequod, freighted with savages, and laden with fire, and burning a corpse, and plunging into that blackness of darkness, seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander’s soul.”²⁷

Ishmael's figural language transmogrifies the Pequod's deck into a stage for the *danse macabre* of rendering whale oil. The players cheerfully yarn as they work, yet the unsettling backlight of the try-works' flames and their cacophonous laughter signify to the reader that this moment is indeed anything but mirthful. The chiaroscuro of aural and ocular images — of demonically-cast bodies fading in and out of the surrounding night as their howls of laughter dissipate in the air — assaults the reader's senses. Furthermore, Melville experiments with his narrator's spatial relationship to this site of violence to further alienate the reader from the action on deck. As Ishmael observes "the rushing Pequod,"²⁸ it is as though he gazes down upon the horrific scene below from a god-like position. I suggest that, given Ishmael ships aboard the *Pequod* as a first-time whaler,²⁹ this curious construction of his spatiality relative to the ship indicates that he remains outside of the close-knit community of whaling, letting him see the extraction of whale oil for what it truly is: a violent, Gothicized nightmare.

As Ishmael describes the "blackness of darkness,"³⁰ his diction's curious syntax and its inherent redundancy create a narrative black hole. Significantly, Ishmael's phrase forges a link between the *Pequod's* transformation into a hell-scape and the inner world of Captain Ahab, the "monomaniac commander."³¹ Ahab presides over this display of human brutality against the natural world, rendered grotesque by Ishmael's narrative language and privileged position outside of the whaling community. Furthermore, in deliberately casting Ahab as not only the principal actor in this *danse macabre* but a monomaniacal one at that, the narrative raises a significant question à la Michel Foucault: "could this be [...] the action of a madman?"³² The question of the captain's sanity as it influences the microcosmic world of the ocean-going ship thus not only figures significantly in *Moby-Dick*, as demonstrated by the passage, but also grafts neatly onto Flint's assertion of absolute dominance in a display of almost feral violence. Despite the inherent outward violence of both the piratical and whaling endeavors, Flint's murder of Singleton and Ishmael's representation of the try-works signify each captains' internalized violence being set free to lurk in and amongst their crews. With each ship's deck rendered into a hellish arena of violence, the monomaniacal captain's influence begins to trickle down to infect still more of the common sailors belowdecks community like the rivulets of blood seeping through the deck of the ship.

"Hells of Our Own:"³³ The Perversion of the Sailor's Yarn

Belowdecks, sailors of all trades and cultures strung together a vibrant tradition of storytelling, known colloquially as yarning. The telling of yarns not only offered sailors pleasing diversion on tedious voyages but also democratized social relations. The skill to spin an engaging yarn was not tied to a sailor's station, and those who heard a particular yarn possessed the power to retell its critical points through their interpretive lens.³⁴ In *Black Sails*, Captain Flint uses the yarn to seduce Richard Guthrie — the master of Nassau's trade market — to support his quest for L'Urca de Lima financially. He coolly utters, "Let me tell you a story about a Spaniard named Vazquez,"³⁵ the storytelling register and suggestion of a provocative mystery revealing

him to be a dexterous spinner of yarns. The camera pans to Flint’s companion and boatswain, Billy Bones, whose brow furrows with worry.³⁶

In a moment of dramatic irony, the fears underscoring Billy’s realization come to life as Flint’s gruesome staging for the conclusion of his enigmatic yarn about Vazquez, which reveals his ultimate objective:

“Friends, brothers, the prize that you and I have been pursuing is L’Urca de Lima [...] With this page securely in our possession, we can begin our hunt. And we will succeed no matter the cost. No matter the struggle. I will see that prize is yours. I’m not just gonna make you rich. I’m not just gonna make you strong. I’m gonna make you the princes of the New World!”³⁷

Flint drags the revered tradition of yarning from its usual receptive space and context — below the ship’s deck in a moment of leisure amongst comrades — out into his gladiatorial arena. Significantly, the dead man’s blood streaking down Flint’s face and staining the ship’s deck seem to enhance the diabolical aura of this spectacle. According to historian Marcus Rediker, yarns “engaged and inflamed the imagination; they fueled fantasy.”³⁸ In the deliberate framing of the pursuit of L’Urca de Lima with a collective pronoun — “we will succeed no matter the cost”³⁹ — Flint dupes his men into embarking on a hunt for L’Urca de Lima. Flint’s allusion to the image of the tempting, mystical prize entices the crew’s imaginations, as if Rediker’s analysis of the yarn directly inspired the writers of *Black Sails’* first episode.

However, Billy’s sickened, remorseful, and knowing expression⁴⁰ juxtaposed against the unnervingly joyful chants of “Flint! Flint! Flint!”⁴¹ reveals the truth of this spectacle. Billy recognizes that Flint’s invocation of collective glory is a lie, the blank page in his hands working as the instrument of this deceit.⁴² Rather, it is *Flint* who will stop at nothing to ensure the prize is obtained, his monomania symbolized by the brutalized corpse at his feet. The shared glory is the wicked fiction Flint creates, the blood of the *Walrus’s* sailors the ink with which he will inscribe that empty page, that empty promise. By casting his tale amidst this scene of overwhelming violence, Flint enacts violence against the tradition of yarning itself. Specifically, Rediker asserts that a portion of the yarn’s power lay in its ability to incite “resistance” to traditional notions of eighteenth-century propriety amongst pirates.⁴³ However,



Figure 2. Billy Bones. From R.L. Stevenson, *Treasure Island*. Scribner: New York, 1911.

Flint's deceitful championing of the collective empties the yarn of its potential for resistance by tempting the crew into complicity. Under Flint, yarning mutates into a grotesque moment of oath-taking, symbolized by the crew's rallying to their captain. As a response to Flint's yarn of "gleaming gold,"⁴⁴ the crew's cheers — as well as Billy's silence — provide the force behind his swelling power, signifying their utter lack of resistance to his monomaniacal quest.

To appropriate Murray's statement, Flint "witched" and "transfigured" the sentiments of his crew through his "art" of storytelling,⁴⁵ in the same manner Captain Ahab manipulates the crew of the *Pequod* to swear a diabolical oath, a grotesque call for loyalty adroitly disguised in the trappings of the mariner's revered traditions. What is striking is how the writers of *Black Sails*' first episode seem to borrow both Ahab's persuasive language and his spatial relationship to his crew as he reveals his intent. As Flint gazes upon his gathered crew, his physical position as the locus of attention parallels the piqued curiosity of the *Pequod*'s sailors when the notoriously reclusive Ahab gathers them on the main deck. Standing at the center of their scenes of violence, their magnetism undeniable, both captains command rapt audiences, like actors poised to deliver their monologues.⁴⁶

Ahab further seduces his crew with the promise of an ounce of Spanish gold as a reward for the task that demands their utmost loyalty.⁴⁷ At this moment, the intertextual relationship I observe between Ahab and Flint begins to crystallize, as Flint similarly wagers allegiance for the price of Spanish gold. When Ahab begins his dramatic yarn of the vicious white whale that "razed" and "dismasted" him,⁴⁸ if one were to read the passage with the awareness of *Moby-Dick*'s connection with *Black Sails*, it is as Ahab adopts the same rasping tones as actor Toby Stephens (Captain Flint): "this is what ye have shipped for, men! to chase that white whale on both sides of land, and over all sides of earth, till he spouts black blood and rolls fin out!"⁴⁹ In deploying the visceral, grotesque image of spouting blood, Captain Ahab acknowledges the violence inherent in his monomaniacal quest. While Captain Flint veils the extent of the violence inherent in his hunt, the *physical* presence of blood sullyng his face and white shirt mimetically parallels Ahab's explicit description of the bloodied body of the brutalized white whale. Whether through descriptive imagery or the physical presence of blood, the captains of both the *Pequod* and the *Walrus* saturate their yarns in this by-product of violence, rendering the storytelling tradition into something wholly diabolical.

While Flint masks the fact that he is exploiting their desire for riches to further *his* ambition, Ahab takes no care to disguise his designs. Rather, in invoking the pronoun *ye*, which may be interpreted as a *singular* pronoun, it is as if Ahab addresses each whaler directly, looking into their eye and demanding their oath. Ahab explicitly signifies to his crew that the dramatic, violent tale he has spun of the elusive white whale has been a ploy to elicit their unwavering fealty all along. *Each* member of the crew, addressed by this singular *ye*, will dedicate his energy to the pursuit of the whale, "no matter the cost. No matter the struggle."⁵⁰ Significantly, the response of the *Pequod*'s sailors mirrors that of the *Walrus*'s, despite the promise of reward being significantly less substantial and the command overt. Indeed, as the sailors cry, "Aye,

aye!” and “[run] closer to the excited old man,”⁵¹ they swear their oaths in support of his design. Both Flint and Ahab’s yarns, then, effectively compel their crews to congregate around the figure of the monomaniacal captain. Indeed, even Ishmael — the voyeur into this hellish world of whaling — admits that:

“my shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded with theirs [...] Ahab’s quenchless feud seemed mine. With greedy ears I learned the history of that murderous monster against whom I and all the others had taken our oaths of violence and revenge”.⁵²

These tales of elusive prizes are no longer mere yarns to tell during a time of leisure. Rather, they have transformed under “the magic” of Flint and Ahab’s “art.”⁵³ Under Flint and Ahab’s respective command, the sailor’s yarn imbibes the diabolical aura of oaths sworn in blood, forging a different kind of shipboard community altogether.

Both captains also welcome violence aboard their vessels and manipulate the presence of that violence to mutate the sacrosanct tradition of yarning while the *Pequod* and the *Walrus* are so far out to sea. The sailor who dares oppose his captain has two options: to die a brutal death like *Black Sails*’ Singleton or fall into “enchanted, tacit acquiescence,”⁵⁴ the path that each captain’s potential naysayers, Billy Bones and Starbuck, ultimately choose. While the mariners aboard each vessel may “begin to gaze curiously at each other, as if marvelling how it was that they themselves became so excited”⁵⁵ by the wholly violent spectacles enacted by their captains, they realize their powerlessness in their isolation, bereft of the land’s grounding influence. Indeed, it is only in deep ocean waters that the reader of *Moby-Dick* and the viewer of *Black Sails* are permitted to meet the diabolical captains, like monarchs fully coming into kingdoms of their own. However, with the on-deck and belowdecks worlds manipulated for the captains’ violent aims, the crews of each vessel partake in the same cacophonous swearing of oaths upon talismanic objects steeped in blood.⁵⁶ Thus, the *Pequod* and the *Walrus* exist not as kingdoms but transmogrify into utter “Hells” of Ahab and Flint’s “own” design.⁵⁷

The Ahabidity of *Black Sails*’ Captain Flint: Transmedia Adaptation as Entangled Intertextuality

While my comparisons of Captain Ahab and Captain Flint’s invocations of violence and subsequent perversions of the maritime tradition of yarning suggest proximity between the two diabolical mariners, what remains to be seen is how the two converge, as previous chapters of this essay only hint. Literature provides cinema with a well-spring of narrative content and long-form television, to cite previous research in literary adaptations.⁵⁸ From a contemporary perspective, this is especially pertinent given the 2011 adaptation of George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, *Game of Thrones*, which inspired a popular culture phenomenon. *Thrones*’ showrunners David Benioff and D. B. Weiss were not the first to adapt literature to television, nor to use the long-form structure to produce their adaptation on subscription-based networks.⁵⁹ Though *Thrones* did not engender a new mode of immersive visual storytelling, its savvy capitalization upon the increasing budgets of subscription-based television networks and

freedom from the censorship of network television arguably solidifies its status as a breakthrough series. *Thrones* spearheaded the more gripping and, often, more graphic interpretations of literature characteristic of current television dramas. Furthermore, it demonstrated how long-form television is well suited to the literary narratives sustained over a series of texts, which would otherwise be constrained by standard television, or even film, run-times.

It may be germane to consider how Melville participated in transmedia⁶⁰ adaptation for crafting his narratives even in the nineteenth century. Melville often recited his narratives orally, relying upon an audience's real-time reception of his work to craft its ideal form before fixing the story in print.⁶¹ Melville used the modern technologies of his time — that is, mass-produced, serialized publications like magazines⁶² — to disseminate his work while looking to a “traditional” mode of storytelling, oral recitation and performance, as his inspiration and source material. In light of this detail, I contend that, in a nuanced way, Melville himself engaged in an early method of transmedia adaptation. On the other hand, *Black Sails* fleshes out the anterior action of *Treasure Island*, the transformation of this source material imprecise. Steinberg discusses how the creation of the program was founded upon:

“a desire to strip it of some of the more fantastical campfire elements that have long been part of pirate narratives. In Season 4, the idea of storytelling and narrative come into play a lot more. It's so wrapped up in the book *Treasure Island* [...] More than anything else, it's really a story about a story.”⁶³

Steinberg's description of his project supports my analysis of transmedia adaptation as a means to broaden and enrich the imaginative possibilities of a narrative, ultimately creating new ways for that story to endure.⁶⁴ Stevenson's cast of characters in *Treasure Island* — Long John Silver, Captain Flint, and Billy Bones, primarily — enter *Black Sails*' narrative twenty years younger than how those familiar with Stevenson's text may recognize them. In addition to this temporal shift, *Black Sails* departs from the conditions of the line-for-line literary adaptation by deconstructing the boundaries between fiction and history. Steinberg and Levine create a discursive space in which Stevenson's swashbucklers interact with and influence the actions of notable Golden Age pirates such as Charles Vane, “Calico” Jack Rackham, Anne Bonny, and less significantly Edward Teach (Blackbeard). Demonstrating that adaptation across storytelling media figures in the ancestry of both *Moby-Dick* and *Black Sails* solidifies the distinct intertextual relationship between the two narratives I have been suggesting in my examinations of the characterization of the violent, monomaniacal figure of the sea captain figure integral to each story.

Despite the layers of disparate temporal contexts and categories of mariners, *Moby-Dick* and *Treasure Island* also exhibit an apparent contextual entanglement that demands critical attention. According to the literary critic Andrew Loman, “Stevenson may well have been familiar with [Melville's] *Benito Cereno*” as “Stevenson knew and admired Melville's fiction.”⁶⁵ Loman intimates that as a result of this admiration, the silver-tongued Babo — the mastermind of

the historically-based slave mutiny aboard the *San Dominick*⁶⁶ and the central antagonist of Melville's short story — may have inspired Long John Silver's comparably adroit oratory skills in *Treasure Island*. Though he suggests that Stevenson's engagement with Melville's work may encompass more than just *Benito Cereno*, Loman limits the potential of this provocative link so as to only comment on the Africanist presence in Stevenson's text. However, Rediker asserts that "part of [a yarn's] power lay in its flexible [...] nature: anyone could tell a story."⁶⁷ It is thus critical to consider the implications of Stevenson's reception of Melville's work in the broader framework of maritime fiction, one with flexible boundaries, as Rediker suggests, that may stretch to encompass a variety of sources and media to depict nautical experiences.

In light of *Black Sails*' more flexible adaptation project,⁶⁸ it is striking that Stevenson seems to introduce the hypothetical interaction between fictional and historical pirates. Stevenson enlists the historical Blackbeard as a symbolic measure of Flint's wickedness and consequently grounds the events preceding *Treasure Island* in piracy's Golden Age.⁶⁹ However, Stevenson did not pursue this creative avenue, containing it within the boundaries of allusion. I propose that Steinberg and Levine seize this opportunity offered by Stevenson and use their power of creative interpretation to explore and fill in the gaps of that potential narrative. The genesis of *Black Sails* subsequently parallels the spinning of an elaborate yarn, with Steinberg and Levine deftly manipulating the malleable nature of maritime stories and the entangled strands of *Treasure Island* and history to weave a wholly new story. Is it, therefore, an interpretive stretch to posit that their liberties with maritime source material are *not* limited to *Treasure Island* and fragments of historical accounts, as the proximity of Captain Flint and Captain Ahab discussed in my close readings suggests? As Melville's logorrheic Captain Ahab muses, "I leave a white and turbid wake; pale waters, paler cheeks, where'er I sail. The envious billows sidelong swell to whelm my track."⁷⁰ When Captain Flint's century-long silence ends,⁷¹ it is in this moment that his Ahabidity rises to the surface, as well as *Black Sails*' prismatic union of Melville's opus *Moby-Dick* and its source text, *Treasure Island*. It would seem that this Captain Flint imbibes the waters of Ahab's wake, his character ultimately overwhelmed by Ahab, his predecessor.

In Stevenson's 1883 novel, the body of Captain Flint is cast adrift in narrative purgatory. The mariner's *physical* self is conspicuously absent, despite his treasure-hoarding deeds igniting the events of the plot. Captain Flint flits at the narrative fringes, haunting former crewmates from a thicket of trees or existing only in allusions to a time long past, a textual ghost.⁷² Perhaps as punishment for his allegedly wicked and bloodthirsty deeds at sea, he is forbidden from manifesting as a tangible body yet condemned to spectral immortality in the yarns of *Treasure Island*'s grisly sailors: "You have heard of this Flint, I suppose?' Heard of him!' cried the squire. 'Heard of him, you say! He was the bloodthirstiest buccaneer that sailed. Blackbeard was a child to Flint."⁷³ As the squire's exclamation insinuates, one only ever hears tell of Flint; Flint is never seen. One hundred and thirty-six years later, the whine of a rusty hurdy-gurdy heralds the jarring transformation of *Treasure Island*'s content, style, and form into the series *Black*

Sails. The uncanny sound disorients the viewer as they are suddenly thrust into a brutal skirmish between a British merchant vessel and the *Walrus*. When a pirate charges to cut down the merchant captain, a body cloaked in black intervenes. Lit as if by some otherworldly glint, a pair of green eyes flash into the foreground of the scene, and audiences are at long last permitted to look upon the fearsome Captain Flint. Out from the shadows he steps, emphasized by actor Toby Stephens's dramatic tearing away of the black cloth covering his face. The audience becomes alert to the threat of danger inscribed upon his very aspect as they gaze upon his face hardened by the harshness of the sea. "It's done," he says, breaking his century-long silence with words that seem to signify the end of his story.⁷⁴ The action stills: yet this is only the beginning.

"I'm a demoniac. I am madness maddened!"⁷⁵

"We will have been for nothing. Defined by their histories distorted to fit into their narrative until all that is left of us are the monsters in the stories they tell their children."⁷⁶

Maritime fiction exists as a species of mariner's yarn itself, in which its central themes — such as the inherently violent world of the sea — and the malleability of its characters create significant opportunities for retelling and intertextuality, as observed in the adaptation of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* to a contemporary television series. In this corpus, Captain Ahab of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* and the elusive Captain Flint of Stevenson's novel figure as mariners of a peculiar kind. The reader of *Treasure Island* is only afforded glimpses of Flint, whom "the devil himself would have been feared to go to sea with."⁷⁷ It is the wont of the reader to interpret these allusions to his fearsomeness and his legendary hoarding of riches as indicative of a violent mind plagued by obsession. Conversely, in brazenly declaring himself "madness maddened,"⁷⁸ Ahab acknowledges the diabolical ascriptions to his character with acute self-consciousness. The deliberate linguistic redundancy in the short sentence also structurally parallels his heart that beats to the tune of a particular note: *madness*. Furthermore, by entrapping his dual characteristics in the confines of a brief seven-word line, the claustrophobic discursive space forces his demonism and madness to reverberate against one another until the reader is utterly overwhelmed by this aura of diabolical monomania.

Yet in Stevenson's text, Captain Flint is never afforded such a degree of self-reflexivity and self-awareness; instead, "Flint is dead."⁷⁹ Yet just as sailors' "labors not only connected, but made possible, a new world [...] because water links the continents of the globe,"⁸⁰ so too do fictional narratives *about* sailors exist within a similarly fluid network of exchange and reciprocal influence, infusing and hybridizing to create a new (narrative) world for the figure of the troubled sea captain. As examined throughout this study, the characters of Captain Ahab and Captain Flint — the latter adapted for television in Jonathan E. Steinberg and Robert Levine's pirate drama *Black Sails* — exhibit significant intertextual entanglement. Specifically, Captain Ahab's embodiment of the tradition of yarning through his characteristically effusive musings seems to infect the silent, spectral character of Flint as Steinberg and Levine look to other sources of maritime fiction to fill in the narrative void Stevenson left behind.

When resurrected with Ahab's logorrheic power, *Black Sails'* Captain Flint is thus afforded the ability to not only self-reflexively muse on his position within maritime fiction as a whole but also to articulate a monomania all his own. As Flint becomes consumed by the wholly violent mantra "war against the world,"⁸¹ one cannot help but wonder whether Ahab — who would "strike the sun if it insulted" him⁸² — would seize his twisted harpoon to take up arms with his narrative double, the pair wholeheartedly and demonically embracing their image of tragic grandeur. As the pair enacts significant moments of violence within the fragile world of the ship, their compounding monomaniacal deeds suggest that Ahab and Flint ultimately transform to become "the monsters in the stories"⁸³ of the sea and do so with arms outstretched in welcome.

End Notes

¹ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 483.

² Henry A. Murray, "In Nominae Diaboli," *The New England Quarterly* 24 no. 4 (1951): 435, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/361337>.

³ Nautical slang derived from the practice of "picking oakum," or separating the individual fibers of woven hemp rope. The term defines sailors' tradition telling an in-depth, complex, yet richly creative story about maritime exploits (Marcus Rediker, *Outlaws of the Atlantic: Sailors, Pirates, and Motley Crews in the Age of Sail* [Boston: Beacon Press, 2014], 13-15).

⁴ This essay's length constraints limit the scope of content in *Black Sails* for discussion, as the program contains a total of thirty-eight episodes running for approximately one hour each. Consequently, the first season's first episode will serve as my primary text when discussing the series.

⁵ The "Golden Age" is a contemporary colloquialism ascribed to the period between 1716 and 1726 when Atlantic piracy achieved its climax. Primarily operating out of remote Bahamian and Caribbean outposts and failed colonial enterprises, pirates significantly disrupted European imperial powers' empire-building pursuits through a series of successful maritime altercations (Rediker 63-64).

⁶ For this argument, I define "long-form" as longer than standard cable television run-times (typically forty minutes without commercial breaks). Furthermore, I intend this term to allude to the more cinematic quality of television programs that adhere to this structure, such as *Black Sails*, *Game of Thrones*, *Outlander*, and so forth, that appear on subscription-based television platforms as opposed to the more widely accessible cable networks.

⁷ Rediker 13.

⁸ A reworking of an alleged statement made by Captain Edward Thatch (Teach), known colloquially as Blackbeard: "Come, says he, let us make a Hell of our own, and try how long we can bear it" (Captain Edward Thatch quoted in

Captain Charles Johnson, *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates* [New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1972], 100).

⁹ Melville 168.

¹⁰ In the context of this essay, I will refer to Michel Foucault's definition of the condition, in which monomania is "a form of madness localised in one point and only developing its delirium around a single subject" (Michel Foucault, *History of Madness* [London: Routledge, 2006], 108-131).

¹¹ Melville 25.

¹² Melville 270.

¹³ Writer Nathaniel Philbrick discusses the disastrous 1820 voyage of the whaling ship *Essex* in his book *In the Heart of the Sea* (New York: Viking Press, 2000), in which historical accounts by the ship's first mate, captain, and cabin boy provide evidence that the ship was stove, and eventually destroyed, by a sperm whale.

¹⁴ Rediker 14-15.

¹⁵ Perhaps a sly reference by Steinberg and Levine to another fictitious eighteenth-century mariner, Captain Singleton, of Daniel Defoe's 1720 novel, *The Life, Adventures, and Piracies of the Famous Captain Singleton*.

¹⁶ *Black Sails*, episode 1, "I," directed by Neil Marshall, performed by Anthony Bishop, aired January 25, 2014, on Starz, 15:20-15:31.

¹⁷ Rediker 70-71.

¹⁸ *Black Sails*, "I," performed by Mark Ryan, 5:17-5:19.

¹⁹ *Black Sails*, "I," performed by Jannes Eiselen, 11:14-11:20.

²⁰ *Black Sails*, "I," performed by Toby Stephens, 55:45-56:39.

²¹ Yet Flint has no intention of upholding egalitarianism, as he has declared privately to Billy Bones, "I am your king" in the scene prior (*Black Sails*, "I," performed by Toby Stephens, 53:11-53:27).

²² *Black Sails*, "I," directed by Neil Marshall, 56:49-56:54.

²³ Execution is not necessarily the prescribed punishment if a troublesome sailor jeopardizes the crew's access to riches or openly disagrees with the captain (Rediker 71).

²⁴ Rediker 68.

²⁵ *Black Sails*, "I," performed by Anthony Bishop, 10:11-10:13.

²⁶ Pirates were free to challenge their captains and call votes to elect a new captain if the existing captain was deemed ineffectual by a majority of the crew (Rediker 68). In Singleton and Flint's case, Singleton was within his rights to begin agitating for Flint's removal from the captaincy. Flint's brutal response to his men's consideration of deposition — to murder his primary opponent — therefore exposes just how unsettling his behavior truly is.

²⁷ Melville 403-404.

²⁸ Melville 403.

²⁹ Melville 25.

³⁰ Melville 404.

³¹ Melville 404.

³² Foucault 526.

³³ Captain Edward Thatch quoted in Johnson 100.

³⁴ Rediker 21-22.

³⁵ *Black Sails*, “I,” performed by Toby Stephens, 36:45-36:49.

³⁶ The constraints of this essay dictate that my primary case study to support a correlation between *Moby-Dick* and *Black Sails* will be limited to the characters of Captain Ahab and Captain Flint. However, the relationship between each captain and their first mate/boatswain could offer fertile grounds for further exploration. Specifically, when Billy Bones openly questions one of Flint’s schemes, crying, “Jesus, do you hear yourself?” (*Black Sails*, “I,” performed by Tom Hopper), he echoes Starbuck, *Moby-Dick*’s measured voice of reason that critiques Ahab’s violent quest for the whale: ““I came here to hunt whales, not my commanders [*sic*] vengeance. How many barrels will thy vengeance yield thee even if thou gettest it, Captain Ahab?”” (Melville 166-167).

³⁷ *Black Sails*, “I,” performed by Toby Stephens, 1:01:54-1:02:54.

³⁸ Rediker 14.

³⁹ *Black Sails*, “I,” performed by Toby Stephens, 1:02:22-1:02:27, emphasis my own.

⁴⁰ *Black Sails*, “I,” performed by Tom Hopper, 1:02:41-1:02:49.

⁴¹ *Black Sails*, “I,” directed by Neil Marshall, 1:02:50-1:03:04.

⁴² This page allegedly contains the coordinates of L’Urca de Lima’s whereabouts. The correct coordinates are in John Silver’s possession; Silver consequently shares in Billy’s epiphany over the deception.

⁴³ Rediker 17.

⁴⁴ Rediker 18.

⁴⁵ Murray 435.

⁴⁶ Melville 164.

⁴⁷ Melville 162.

⁴⁸ Melville 166.

⁴⁹ Melville 166.

⁵⁰ *Black Sails*, “I,” performed by Toby Stephens, 1:02:24-1:02:27.

⁵¹ Melville 166.

⁵² Melville 180.

⁵³ Murray 435.

⁵⁴ Melville 168.

⁵⁵ Melville 164.

⁵⁶ This is a reference to both the blank page that allegedly holds the promise of L'Urca de Lima's treasure and the twisted harpoon of Ahab's design, which he baptizes in Queequeg's blood: "Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli!" deliriously howled Ahab, as the malignant iron scorchingly devoured the baptismal blood" (Melville 462).

⁵⁷ Captain Edward Thatch quoted in Johnson 100.

⁵⁸ Maggie Sadler, "Is This a Kissing Book?": Transmedia adaptation and reverse reception in relation to William Goldman's contemporary fairy tale *The Princess Bride*" (undergraduate dissertation, University of St Andrews, 2016), 1.

⁵⁹ In keeping with the maritime theme of this essay, consider, for example, the adaptation of C.S. Forester's series of ten novels about the fictional sailor Horatio Hornblower, adapted to television in 1998 with Ioan Gruffudd in the titular role. The eight episodes span a total run time of one hundred and twenty minutes, similar to the format of many popular book-to-television adaptations in the recent decade, on A&E Network, a pay-to-view network.

⁶⁰ I define *transmedia* as adapting a narrative across media platforms, as in literature to film adaptation. A particular narrative then straddles multiple forms of storytelling mediums in the nexus of the audience's awareness of that narrative.

⁶¹ Mary K. Bercaw Edwards, *Cannibal Old Me: Spoken Sources in Melville's Early Works* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2009), 3.

⁶² Many of Melville's short stories, such as *Bartleby* or *The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids* appeared in periodicals such as *Putnam's Monthly Magazine of American Literature, Science, and Art* and *Harper's Magazine*, respectively (Brian Yothers, introduction to *The Piazza Tales*, by Herman Melville [Guelph: Broadview Press, 2018], 12).

⁶³ Jonathan E. Steinberg and Robert Levine, interview by Lauren Sarner, *Inverse*, 28 March 2016.

⁶⁴ Sadler 4.

⁶⁵ Andrew Loman, "The Sea Cook's Wife: Evocations of Slavery in *Treasure Island*," *Children's Literature* 38, (2010): 10, <http://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/380758>.

⁶⁶ In Captain Amasa Delano's historical account, this ship was called the *Tryal*. Melville deliberately altered the name to evoke the late eighteenth-century slave revolts in Saint Domingue instigated by Toussaint Louverture. Much like Steinberg and Levine, Melville is also seen to be taking creative liberties with history.

⁶⁷ Rediker 21.

⁶⁸ Not merely a strict word-for-word adaptation but one that plays with the concept of time and history concerning its fictional source text, *Treasure Island*.

⁶⁹ Robert Louis Stevenson, *Treasure Island* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1931), 42.

⁷⁰ Melville 170.

⁷¹ Besides *Black Sails*, only two other visual adaptations of Stevenson's novel — Brian Henson's *Muppet Treasure Island* (1996) and Disney's *Treasure Planet* (2002) — physically represent Captain Flint. However, these are but fleeting glimpses and both cameos do not permit any dialogue for the character.

⁷² Stevenson 235.

⁷³ Stevenson 42.

⁷⁴ *Black Sails*, "I," performed by Toby Stephens, 6:33-6:39.

⁷⁵ Melville 171.

⁷⁶ "Black Sails XXXVIII Quotes," *Internet Movie Database*, 2017, http://imdb.com/title/tt5174426/quotes/?tab=qt&ref_=tt_trv_qu.

⁷⁷ Stevenson 78.

⁷⁸ Melville 171.

⁷⁹ Stevenson 109.

⁸⁰ Rediker 2-5.

⁸¹ *Black Sails*, "I," directed by Neil Marshall, 0:20-0:29.

⁸² Melville 167.

⁸³ "Black Sails XXXVIII Quotes," *Internet Movie Database*, 2017.