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**Eldritch Desires:**

**Queer Illegibility and Proto-Cosmicism in Melville's "The Bell-Tower"**




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**Queer Illegibility and Proto-Cosmicism in Melville's "The Bell-Tower"**

**by**

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**Report**

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# Dedication

To my parents, for keeping the lights on and teaching me to love the written word.

# Acknowledgements

# Abstract

## Eldritch Desires:

## Queer Illegibility and Proto-Cosmicism in Melville's "The Bell-Tower"

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2014

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This report combines queer theory with the cosmicist philosophy of early twentieth-century horror writer Howard Phillips Lovecraft to ask new questions about Herman Melville's treatments of gender and genre in "The Bell-Tower," one of his more obscure short stories. Though the tale has been commonly represented as an exemplar of both the Oedipal complex and Gothic horror, my reading reveals a negative, anti-humanist epistemology and very complex presentations of gender and sexuality at work in the text. This peculiar combination indicates a heretofore-unnoticed line of descent from Melville's story to a still-thriving movement in the horror genre.

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# Introduction

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.

—H.P. Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu" (1926)[1]

"The Bell-Tower," a tale of murder whose supernatural elements have often gone overlooked, is one of Herman Melville's more obscure works. It first appeared in the August 1855 issue of *Putnam's Monthly* and was subsequently collected in *The Piazza Tales*. Opening with the perplexing and unnerving image of a titanic ruin, the story moves back in time to detail the exploits of Bannadonna, a mechanician building a bell tower for an unnamed, Renaissance-era locale in Italy. Bannadonna murders a workman whose frightened reaction to the din of their chaotic workplace nearly damages the enormous bell being cast for the tower. After Bannadona kills him with a heavy ladle, part of the man's remains falls into the bell mold. The crime goes unpunished. Unwilling to settle for clemency and the bell, Bannadonna is apprehensive of a human bell-ringer's possible imperfections. He makes Talus, a bizarre automaton designed to ring the bell hourly. Those who see Talus's shrouded form fear Bannadonna's bell-ringer. Some even believe that Talus is more of a creature than a creation. The artisan insists that Talus's presence will add greatly to the completed product.

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[1].  *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*. Ed. S. T. Joshi. (New York: Penguin, 1999), 139.

Strange sights and sounds are reported around the tower in the wake of the crime. Two visiting patricians notice a strange look on the face of Una, one of the 12 bas-reliefs carved onto the bell to represent the hours as young maidens. Bannadonna dismisses their mention of the statue's eerie quality as intentional and ushers them out of his workplace in the belfry. The community eagerly awaits the bell tower's premiere, only to hear an atonal thud sound off at the time of its promised debut. Horrified townsfolk find Bannadonna at Talus's feet, his head staved in. It is rumored that Bannadonna was so invested in changing Una's expression that he was working on it at the moment of his suspicious death. The profane and inhuman form of Talus offends the townsfolk, who sink the automaton in the ocean, along with a dog driven mad by Talus's outlandish appearance.

During Bannadonna's funeral, a local peasant rings the bell, only for it to crack and fall from its moorings, severely damaging the tower. Investigation proves that the weak point in the bell's casting was a heretofore-concealed blemish, the exact point where the murdered man's remains mixed with the bell during the casting process. An earthquake finally tears down the tower exactly one year after its unveiling, replacing Bannadonna's architectural legacy with the crumbling and seemingly cursed ruins that opened the story.

Melville's story is rife with spectral presences: the slain workman, the seemingly unalterable smile of Una, the machine-like Talus,[2] and even the strange presence of the tower itself. Just as these entities and presences seem tirelessly to stalk Bannadonna, a larger question occurs to readers of the story: what of women in the world of "The Bell-Tower?" Put plainly, women haunt the story through their conspicuous absence from it.[3]

There are no actual female characters beyond Una, and she does not even share in Talus's para-life. Her adjacent relief, Dua, is only mentioned by name twice in the context of her interplay with Una. This absence of women from the story is further emphasized by diminishments of Una's femininity and a variety of categorical curiosities that have to do with her place as part of the bell. While Una is the only female character, Melville depicts the natural world with female pronouns.[4] The haunting of "The Bell-Tower" is multilayered, with Talus and the workman comprising a masculine presence and Una and the natural world representing a feminine spectrality.

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[2]. Some critics have previously read Talus as having a humanoid form, though Melville is explicit in his descriptions of the automaton as non-human. Talus's non-humanoid design is important to the larger questions that I ask about "The Bell-Tower."

[3]. This dearth of human female characters has not prevented feminist readings of the story, as exemplified by Lea Bertani Vozar Newman's "Melville's 'Bell-Tower' Revisited: A Story of Female Revenge." She calls the story "a heretofore unrecognized rallying cry for female retribution and revolt against an exploitative, male-dominated culture" (11). My reading of "The Bell-Tower" transcends the gender binary Newman applies to the story.

[4]. R. Bruce Bickley considers the "triumph of the organic over the inorganic" in *The Method of Melville's Short Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1975), 99.

I think that synthesizing these seemingly opposed gendered hauntings and reading them as a unified queer presence opens a new perspective on the story, one that asks new questions about Melville's treatments of genre and gender. This presence is not limited to any one gendered identity or entirely human-centric perspective. Bannadonna may not conform to conventional ideas of sexuality any more than his peculiar creations do, but his violent end gestures towards an unsustainable tension between his driven and ordered queerness and the illegibly queer presence lurking in the story. My reading traces this idea of queer illegibility throughout "The Bell Tower."[5] I define queer illegibility as gender presentation that cannot be read or fully understood through a normative lens. Queer illegibility does not merely form an important piece of the story; it pervades the narrative. In short, "The Bell-Tower" merits a more detailed reading of gender, one that expands upon the arguments of earlier criticism and examines the tangled web of gender identities that Melville weaves throughout the story.

Melville's negotiation of gender, though a pressing and politically important topic, is not the only queer element of the story. The tale is told recursively. The image of the tower's ruins provides both a moody opening and a telos. The posthuman and political implications of Talus are noticeably anachronistic. Time, being out of joint and operating beyond accurate perception, is just as queered as gender in the world of "The Bell-Tower."

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5.　I am indebted to Paulina Palmer's definition of queerness as a challenge to "stable sexual identification" that "problematize[s] the binary division[s] of heterosexual/homosexual" and male/female, found in her 2012 book, *The Queer Uncanny: New Perspectives on the Gothic* (4).

In my reading, what unifies these instabilities of time and gender is the status of "The Bell-Tower" as a work of horror fiction. The overarching queerness of "The Bell-Tower" is rooted in man's inability to comprehend reality, whether through the social construction of gender or the linear construction of time. Both concepts are subverted by the chimerical haunting presence that punishes the punctilious and asexual Bannadonna for his audacious attempts to impose his own sort of order on the universe. I believe it is the presence of an unknowable and monolithic force alternatively apathetic and inimical to mankind in the story that marks Melville as a heretofore-unrecognized forerunner of cosmicism, a movement in horror fiction that was named and perfected by 20th-century horror writer Howard Phillips Lovecraft. Cosmicism's horror is rooted in depictions of the universe as inhospitable and completely incomprehensible to humans. Ironically, this perception of the universe as unknowable makes for the most comprehensible reading of Melville's periphrastic storytelling in "The Bell-Tower." I will trace the queered elements of gender and time in relation to major characters and objects, moving outwards from the recognizably human towards the baffling extradiegetic qualities of Melville's narration in order to highlight his anticipations of cosmicist horror.

## Mapping the Vortex: Cosmicism Explained

Before I proceed to read "The Bell-Tower" through this queered cosmicist lens, it would be prudent to offer a brief outline of cosmicism as defined by the scholars of the genre. In *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, his venerable treatise on horror fiction, Lovecraft asserts:

> The true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space.[6]

Lovecraft's dismissive listing of common Gothic tropes (conspiracy, rotting human remains, the ubiquitous be-sheeted ghost) indicates the wider aims of cosmicist horror. Rather than tales of ghostly revenge accented by Victorian aesthetics, stories of the cosmicist school express a fear that the universe is simply not human-centric, often flouting the moral concerns of previous tales of terror. S.T. Joshi, the eminent scholar-biographer of H.P. Lovecraft, articulates this outlook:

> given the vastness of the universe in both space and time, the human race (now no longer regarded as the special creation of a divine being) is of complete

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6. Lovecraft, H.P. "Supernatural Horror in Literature." *At the Mountains of Madness: The Definitive Edition*. Ed. S.T. Joshi (New York: The Modern Library, 2005), 107.

inconsequence *in the universe-at-large*, although it may well be of some importance on the earthly scale.[7]

A primary theme of cosmicism is "man's self-destructive intellectuality,"[8] most commonly depicted by Lovecraft in the form of a reclusive male antiquarian, scholar, or scientist whose insatiable curiosity leads him to a place no sane human would dare go. Robert M. Price summarizes the cosmicist trope of the hideous revelation:

> One seeks forbidden knowledge, whether wittingly or, more likely, unwittingly, but one may not know till it is too late.... The knowledge, once gained, is too great for the mind of man. It is Promethean, Faustian knowledge. Knowledge that destroys in the moment of enlightenment, a Gnosis of damnation, not of salvation.[9]

Cosmicism possesses striking similarities to nihilism, but it is important to note that it disregards nihilism's repudiation of the potential for higher beings or purposes to exist in the universe, as exemplified by Lovecraft's use of alien entities and incalculably ancient gods in his famous Cthulhu Mythos stories. In a cosmicist universe, such entities can exist, but they are, "at best, cruelly indifferent to mankind" (Leiber 8). The best example of this almost nihilistic epistemology occurs in Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness*, which features an Antarctic necropolis once inhabited by "Elder Things supposed to have

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[7]. Lovecraft, H. P. *The Annotated H.P. Lovecraft*. Ed. S. T. Joshi. (New York: Dell, 1997), 12.

[8]. Leiber, Fritz, Jr. "A Literary Copernicus." *Discovering H.P. Lovecraft*. Ed. Darrell Schweitzer. (Mercer Island, WA: Starmont House, 1987), 9.

[9]. *The New Lovecraft Circle*. (New York: Del Rey, 2004), xix.

created all earth-life as jest or mistake" (21). Simply put, there is no higher purpose discernible for humanity's existence in cosmicist horror.

**Melville's Ghosts: Considering the Influence of the Gothic**

While I think cosmicism is vital both as a descendent of and a useful lens for Melville's work in "The Bell-Tower," the influence of the Gothic on the story and its reception is also important. When extant criticism considers genre at all, "The Bell-Tower" is often called Gothic. Even the back cover of the Northwestern-Newberry edition of *The Piazza Tales* touts "The Bell-Tower" as a work of "gothic horror."[10] While this categorization is not entirely off base, it does require further analysis. It is my contention that critics, historically speaking, have been too ready to call the story a Gothic one without considering the greater implications or accuracy of the label.

Three major points of Gothic-inflected comparison often appear in the available criticism on "The Bell-Tower." Among this trio, Mary Shelley's iconic horror novel, *Frankenstein*, is an obvious predecessor to Melville's short story. Both stories feature a male creator becoming obsessed with and eventually destroyed by his ambulant creation, begotten through a means other than sexual reproduction. In *Future Perfect*, his seminal anthology of nineteenth-century American science fiction, H. Bruce Franklin makes the bold claim that Melville's tale "may be the first fully developed story in English about a man-like automaton" and adds that it "includes all the elements which were soon to become conventional—the automaton as destroyer; the creator as a being cut off from normal organic creation; society as a possible beneficiary, possible victim of the

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10.    Melville, Herman. *The Piazza Tales*. Ed. Harrison Hayford, Alma A. Macdougall, and G. Thomas Tanselle. (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1996), back cover. Hereafter designated Melville.

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automaton."[11] Franklin is more interested in the figure of the robot than the reanimated corpse, but the grounds for comparison seem present, even though Talus fits comfortably into neither of the former classifications. Later in this paper, I will attend to the oft-drawn parallel between Bannadonna and Victor Frankenstein.

Thus far, no one has considered the significance of genre beyond the plot similarities between Shelley's and Melville's stories. We do know that "Melville borrowed a copy of [*Frankenstein*] in 1849," six years before "The Bell-Tower" appeared in *Putnam's*, proving that Melville was at least conscious of the story.[12] Therefore, Melville is navigating territory first approached in popular literature by a woman. This fact could even be considered an extradiegetic layer to the gendered haunting of "The Bell-Tower."

While Melville has no direct historical connection to Shelley beyond the question of influence, critics frequently invoke his relationship with Nathaniel Hawthorne. R. Bruce Bickley goes so far as to say that the story "is Melville's most overt attempt at allegory in the Hawthornean manner" (96). Bickley's primary point of comparison is Hawthorne's 1844 story, "The Artist of the Beautiful," also about a misunderstood mechanician. In sharp contrast to the amoral misanthropy of cosmicism, Melville's story has a moralistic streak redolent of Hawthorne's ethics of humility. Formalist critic

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11.    "Melville and Science Fiction." *Future Perfect*. Ed. H. Bruce Franklin (New York: Oxford UP, 1978), 145. Hereafter designated Franklin.

12.    Referenced by Robert E. Morsberger in "Melville's "The Bell-Tower" and Benvenuto Cellini." *American Literature* 44.3 (1972) : 460.

Charles A. Fenton describes Melville's narratorial voice as one that "continually remind[s] us of the perils of intellectual and creative pride."[13]

Melville's own marginalia draws us towards one of Hawthorne's darker stories as a possible influence. Found at the end of "The Birth-Mark" in his copy of *Mosses from an Old Manse*, one of Melville's marginal notes declares: "The moral here is wonderfully fine."[14] Both stories display an increased attention to the potential horrors of science, specifically the trope of man meddling with knowledge beyond his ken. Each features a technocratic, oppressive protagonist obsessing over the face of his female counterpart. The non-human, potentially supernatural status of Una complicates the comparison, since Bannadonna is not driven by misguided love for a spouse, but by a strong desire for control of an artistic object whereupon "All was fair except in one strange spot," just like Hawthorne's doomed Georgiana (Melville 176).

Though Melville's supernaturalism is mostly overlooked, his narratorial grimness and Bannadonna's monomania lead critics to liken his tale to those of another Gothic icon: Edgar Allan Poe. Frankly, the connection has been around as long as the story has had critics. In the December 1853 issue of *The Literary World*, one of Melville's contemporaries reportedly called it "a Poeish tale."[15] In 1977, Marvin Fisher mentioned,

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13. "'The Bell-Tower': Melville and Technology," *American Literature* XXIII (May, 1951), 222. Hereafter designated Fenton.

14. http://melvillesmarginalia.org/tool.php?id=16&f=i

15. Quoted in Ivy G. Wilson, "'no soul above': Labor and the 'law in art' in Melville's 'The Bell-Tower'" [sic]. *Arizona Quarterly* 63.1 (2007) : 43.

"the Italian Renaissance setting of the story… reminds some readers of Poe."[16] In addition to drawing up an impressive list of parallels between the figures in "The Bell-Tower" and various works by Poe, John Allison argues that:

> Bannadona is an artist who bears a striking resemblance to Poe's posthumous public image in the 1850s as a writer and a critic who glorified mechanics of form and attention to detail while ignoring moral concerns, who destroyed or belittled those who failed to share his vision or meet his standards, and who blindly fell prey to the consequences of his own excessive ambition.[17]

Melville's seemingly conscious repudiation of Poe works on a political level, like his attempted replication of Hawthorne's moral in "The Birth-Mark." Bannadonna is a hermetic artist with little patience for imperfection or interference. Should he be read as a stand-in for Poe, Melville, ever the populist, punishes him for his elitism.

To be clear, my argument is not revisionist. I do not identify Melville *as* a cosmicist writer, tout court. In the cases mentioned above, Melville—whether or not the comparisons are welcome—flirts with the visual and moral vocabularies of the Gothic. However, as we shall see, the deeply negative quality of the universe he establishes in "The Bell-Tower" exhibits little to none of the human-centric qualities of the Gothic.

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[16]. Marvin Fisher, *Going Under: Melville's Short Fiction and the American 1850s*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1977), 96. Hereafter designated Fisher. This comparison was originally made in the article, "Melville's 'Bell-Tower': A Double-Thrust," published in *American Quarterly* in 1966, which later became part of Fisher's book.

[17]. "Poe in Melville's "The Bell-Tower."" *Poe Studies* 30.1-2 (1997): 17.

Even the narrative's dependence on a lengthy biblical metaphor does not mitigate Melville's forecasting of many of cosmicist horror's trademarks.

## The Outsider: Bannadonna as Foundling and Unconventional Asexual

Bannadonna exhibits many of the traits expected of a cosmicist protagonist, such as an all-consuming desire for knowledge, a noticeable lack of standard sexual concerns or drives, and an ignominiously helpless end. Some might protest my alignment of these traits with cosmicism by citing the Gothic example of Victor Frankenstein as a seeker of forbidden knowledge punished for his transgressions. A point-by-point examination reveals this comparison's essentialist view of the horror genre.

Bannadonna lacks agency. Frankenstein has multiple chances to make good on what he has done, either by appeasing or killing his rebellious monster. Bannadonna has no such options available; he spends the story in a state best described as somewhere between defiant towards and unaware of the threat presented by his own creations. Victor Frankenstein is a markedly classed individual with a substantial history. Bannadonna, like many Lovecraftian protagonists, is not given much in the way of a backstory. Instead, readers are given the background details necessary to move the story towards its conclusion. The most pronounced aspect of Bannadonna's background is his foundlinghood, which is not only shrouded in mystery, but something that further depersonalizes the character by marrying his origins to the realm of the civic, rather than a tight-knit family unit. This civic element continues to make comparison difficult because Frankenstein is an independent researcher, while Bannadonna, daring and revolutionary as his work may be, is municipally commissioned. I would contend that these differences are substantial enough to make the Gothic labeling of "The Bell-Tower" and frequent comparisons of Bannadonna to Victor Frankenstein questionable.

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It seems Melville himself was conscious enough of the potential for perceived similarity between the characters because he simultaneously acknowledges and represses his debt to Shelley. Bannadonna lacks "sympathy for any of the vainglorious irrationalities of his time" (Melville 184). Melville's consummately purposeful and efficient engineer—"had not concluded… that between the finer mechanic forces and the ruder animal vitality, some germ of correspondence might prove discoverable" (184). This line seems to be a jab at Frankenstein's obsessive quest for the creation of independent sentience. While Frankenstein actively pursues the spark of life, Bannadonna desires pure mechanical servility and has little real investment in consciousness. Talus needs to have "the power of locomotion, and, along with that, the appearance, at least, of intelligence and will" (Melville 183). In his meandering style, Melville once more delineates Bannadonna's priorities: he wants the look of will, but is much more concerned with form and function than with feeling or rationality. Frankenstein may seek the soul, but Bannadonna just wants the body.

In considering Bannadonna's nature and desires, we would do well to start with the most intensive look at the character available: Jacqueline A. Costello and Robert J. Kloss's "The Psychological Depths of Melville's 'The Bell-Tower'." Costello and Kloss parse Bannadonna's name, writing, "Since *donna* means 'woman' in Italian, the name *Bannadonna* could easily suggest *ban-a-donna*, that is, 'prohibit woman' or 'without woman,' corresponding perfectly to [Bannadonna's Oedipal] intent" towards the natural

world.[18] While the bilingual message they read into his name seems somewhat nebulous, it is significant that Bannadonna literally cannot be parted from his native tongue's word for woman. This fact undoubtedly contributes to the plurality of sidelined female elements in the story. "Woman" haunts his name, but Bannadonna's ascetic, work-obsessed lifestyle gestures towards the prominent lack of women in the story and the queering of his own identity.

Bannadonna's parentless status as a foundling also ties into the gendered haunting of the story. His foundlinghood is mentioned six times in the text, but his parentage and other details of his background are never addressed by the narrator or by any of the few supporting characters. Costello and Kloss focus on Bannadonna's arrogant approach to his craft, suggesting that the excessive weight of the bell and the prodigious height of the tower indicate an Oedipal "refusal to accept what may be regarded as natural limitations" (256). They argue that Bannadonna is trying to engage in the "[s]uccessful seduction of nature, the ultimate mother [figure]," by flouting the rules of physics and architecture (Costello and Kloss 256).

Instead of considering the absence of his family, they posit zoning laws and physics as his metaphorical parents in order to uphold the link between Bannadonna and Oedipus. Their reading does not completely cohere because a core part of the Oedipus story is adoption and the return home. Bannadonna's foundlinghood is also different because, if we can assume that he was raised by the state, it indicates that his only

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18.    "The Psychological Depths of Melville's 'The Bell-Tower'," *ESQ* 19 (1973): 256. Hereafter designated Costello and Kloss.

homeland is the place where he was found. Being of lowborn origin, Bannadonna has a different relationship to the civic than Oedipus does. King Polybus and Queen Merope eventually take in Oedipus. Bannadonna seems never to be initiated into the status of adoptee, as indicated by Melville's curious introduction of the character as "the great mechanician, the unblest foundling" (Melville 174). He first appears to the reader in the twin contexts of the work he performs for his community and his lack of distinct parentage. The curious modifier "unblest" indicates Bannadonna's ultimate lack of an adoptive nuclear family or any other conventional kinship structures. The city-state's parental presence in Bannadonna's life is most apparent in the figures of the two persistent patricians, indicating that this kinship has a strong level of homosociality, further queering the lone mechanician. In terms of the little narration dedicated to his life outside the workplace, Bannadonna is simultaneously solitary yet tied to the realm of the civic, having been a foundling who grew up with a complex relation to the state, rather than Oedipus's straightforward position as its leader.

The reaction (or lack thereof) to Bannadonna's crime best exemplifies his multifaceted association with his community:

> The casting of such a mass was deemed no small triumph for the caster; one, too, in which the state might not scorn to share. The homicide was overlooked. By the charitable that deed was but imputed to sudden transports of esthetic [sic] passion, not to any flagitious quality. A kick from an Arabian charger: not sign of vice, but blood (Melville 176).

This scene features the second of the story's two mentions of the Middle East, which is particularly interesting because Bannadonna's community is "Enriched through commerce with the Levant" (Melville 174). While the descriptor "Arabian charger" is undoubtedly an animalization of Bannadonna, the inclusion of the Arabian modifier adds a racial aspect to his otherness. This double-othering occurs because Bannadonna cannot be tied to any specific heritage. His unknown identity is inextricably tied to his work because the people do not and cannot know him in any other context. His elitist violence is imputed to his unknown origins. The responsibility for such violence is nominally placed upon Bannadonna's shoulders, rather than upon the shoulders of the community that refuses to penalize its one means to architectural aggrandizement. Because punishing his crime would threaten the municipality's glory, his blood—unknown by and quite possibly unrelated to the community—is grounds enough for clemency. While it protects Bannadonna and allows him to continue his beloved work, it solidifies his otherness by pathologizing his violent misanthropy. He may work for the community, but he will never be part of it.

Aside from highlighting his unusual kinship with the town, the case for reading Bannadonna as a queer character is rooted in his own limited expressions of desire. I read Bannadonna as a solipsistic and unconventional aromantic asexual. Theorist Benjamin Kahan describes asexuality as an identity category that "baffles, dodges, and unthreads the hegemony of hetero- and homosexuality."[19] Bannadonna's foundlinghood emphasizes his unconventional asexuality. He is so removed from the territory of conventional sex

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[19].  *Celibacies: American Modernism & Sexual Life*. (Durham: Duke UP, 2013), 145.

that he cannot even be tied to a pair of biological parents because of the implications of the physical reproductive act that sired him. His "human origins are unknown" (Fisher 97). William Dillingham makes a more persuasive argument regarding Bannadonna's motivation for building the tower, claiming that it "represents to Bannadonna the means to titanic self-glorification," evincing a precedent for reading the character as solipsistic.[20] His solipsism ties into his asexuality in the sense that Bannadonna, not descended from any family, cannot propagate his own line through sexual reproduction, but rather through artistic production. The importance of this model of production-as-reproduction will become apparent later in this section and in my reading of Melville's extended biblical metaphor.

The description of Bannadonna's core desire is rife with sexualized language that feminizes nature. In arguably lurid terms, Bannadonna wants:

> by plain vice-bench and hammer … to solve nature, to steal into her, to intrigue beyond her, to procure some one else to bind her to his hand;— these, one and all, had not been his objects; but, asking no favors from any element or any being, of himself, to rival her, outstrip her, and rule her. (Melville 184)

This passionate moment appears to fly in the face of my characterization of Bannadonna as ascetic. In this passage, the man whose name contains "woman" wants to perform a stereotypically masculine behavior: sexual aggression towards a passive feminine partner. Costello and Kloss argue that Bannadonna's "[s]uccessful seduction of nature, the

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20. *Melville's Short Fiction, 1853-1856.* (Athens: University of Georgia UP, 1977), 215.

ultimate mother, would effectively establish [him] as the ultimate lover and the ultimate male" (256).

Though the domineering language of outstripping and ruling the feminized natural world sounds conventionally referential to sex, Bannadonna's desire to "procure" or persuade someone else to "bind" the natural world to his control implies sexual desires and practices that fall outside the mainstream—those of pimping, polyamory, and sadomasochism, practices that normative thought deems queer or otherwise strange. If we were to apply Costello and Kloss's psychoanalysis to these inferences, then these atypical desires towards nature grow out of his non-normative childhood as a foundling. He is the outcast for whom the community is responsible in a formative sense, as an un-adopted child, and a financial sense, as a contracted laborer. The restriction of these impulses to his craft, however, makes Bannadonna a viable ancestor of the simultaneously driven and repressed Lovecraftian protagonist, an asexual of the aromantic variety who represents "the possibility of theorizing sexuality absent attraction, love, and sex" (Kahan 146).

Bannadonna's presumptuous attitude in the passage above further emphasizes the gendering of the natural world through the repetition of "her." Interestingly, though, this assertion of power over a passive, feminized environment does not increase Bannadonna's masculine virility. While continuing to stress his methodical approach to his craft, this segment again renders him solipsistic and almost aggressively queer, further complicating the relationship between gender and sexuality in "The Bell-Tower." The eroticized language of Bannadonna's desire to control the natural world and harness it to his architectural whims is especially apparent when it is said that he wants to "intrigue

beyond her" and to "rival her." Reading the tower's construction in terms of gestation and birth further challenges Costello and Kloss's Oedipalized reading of Bannadonna. The idea of moving beyond the boundaries of the feminized natural world may imply a desire or attempt to transcend the binary between Bannadonna, a human male, and the feminized environment. A slightly less radical reading might interpret the language of rivalry as indicative of Bannadonna's own feminization, turning his creatorship of Una and Talus into a sort of motherhood. Even if this reading is more appealing, we must remember that Bannadonna's parenthood is still singular; he is the sole creator of Una and Talus, again pushing his identity back towards the realm of the aromantic asexual who allows us to read a sexuality existing beyond the bounds of conventional attraction, a figure for whom artistic production becomes a kind of asexual reproduction.

Bannadonna is "without a flesh and blood companion" (Melville 177). "For all that," the visiting patricians fear Bannadonna "would not be left alone" when they leave his belfry workshop (Melville 177). This brief but significant consideration of the magistrates' perspective concretizes Bannadonna's marginal position in the community. He is, in their minds, a queer recluse whose creations might provide him with bizarre companionship of the non-human, unliving variety. While this supposition diegetically works to build suspense, it also mistakenly equates Bannadonna's perceived queerness with that of his creations.

When asked about a mysterious sound, Bannadonna dismisses it and, in the first of his many attempts to get the magistrates to leave, tells them he would gladly have them back "when Haman there, as I merrily call *him*,—*him*? *it*, I mean—when Haman is

fixed on this, *his* lofty tree, then gentlemen, will I be most happy to receive you here again" (Melville 178, emphasis added).[21] This is where Talus fits into the story's breakdown of the normative gender dichotomy. Bannadonna's unconscious and repetitive act of gendering is so instinctive that it contradicts his strong artistic desire to create an unprecedented form of being, a "creature should not be likened after the human pattern, nor any animal one, nor after the ideals, however wild, of ancient fable, but equally in aspect as in organism be an original production; the more terrible to behold, the better" (Melville 185). Bannadonna has strived to make Talus something beyond classification, but persists in gendering him with the names and pronouns he unconsciously repeats. The gendering of the creature re-emphasizes its queer nature and highlights Bannadonna's need to impose order on the world around him. Instead of this act creating order, however, it draws our attention to the disjunction between his rigidly ordered asexuality and the illegibility of his creations. Again in keeping with the profile of the cosmicist protagonist, Bannadonna's desire to *know* his unfathomable creation marks him as an interloper and a bungler, neither prepared for nor suited to the realm to which his craft has brought him.

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[21]. The name Haman comes from the Biblical villain whose murderous machinations were overturned by Esther, the Jewish queen of the king of Persia. In "Melville's 'Bell-Tower' Revisited: A Story of Female Revenge," published in *Melville Society Extracts* 65 in 1986, Lea Bertani Vozar Newman argues that this naming "could be Melville's wry way of suggesting 'half-man,' a creature with the brutal strength of the masculine but with the submissiveness usually associated with the feminine" (13). I am indebted to Newman for her suggestion, as it forms a precedent for the work I do in this paper.

Bannadonna's engagement with Talus is more nuanced than the Oedipal complex's strict hierarchies will allow. Bannadonna's "equivocal reference to [Talus] caused some return of restlessness" among his wealthy and unwelcome patrons (Melville 178). We are subsequently told, "the visitors forbore further allusion to it, unwilling, perhaps to let the foundling see how easily it lay within his plebeian art to stir the placid dignity of the nobles" (Melville 178). This narratorial aside stresses Talus's illegibility to the community's masculine arbiters of normative thought and sexual standards. Furthermore, Bannadonna's queerness is reified in the sense that his gender perception differs from the community's to a disturbing extent. Unlike them, he projects a version of masculinity that seems to encompass the machine-like and the non-humanoid.

At the same moment that Talus threatens to embody absolute alterity, there seems to be a chance of his identity's somehow becoming entangled with Bannadonna's. The chief of the nobles, eager to sidestep any further awkwardness from Bannadonna, says, "Our interest in you, not less than in the work itself, makes us anxious to be assured of your success" (Melville 178). We can take the phrasing of "not less than in the work itself" to imply that Bannadonna is not valued in the way a respected artisan might normally be. Instead, he is as much a curiosity to the townsfolk and their leaders as Una and Talus are.

Even after having killed off his protagonist, Melville manages to further otherize Bannadonna by describing his construct as "Talus, iron slave to Bannadonna, and, through him, to man" (184). In a politically charged moment, Bannadonna—foundling, queer outcast, class non-conformist, murderer—is branded anew: slaveholder. The artisan

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sought to create a beast that he could harness first to his will and then the service of mankind. In a morbid sense, he has succeeded all too well. His rigidity takes on an unsavory, anachronistic valence, and divides him from his prized constructs. Further examination of Una's and Talus's forms and functions will better explain their queerly illegible identities and their differences from their creator.

## Bodies in the Bell

Nowhere in "The Bell-Tower" is the act of reading more critical than the scene where an increasingly agitated Bannadonna must contend with the town elders' questions about Una's face. The specific subject of the patricians' inquiry is "the expression of the unchanging face of the Hour Una" (Melville 179). The magistrates deem her smile "a fatal one," unlike the more benign grins of the other maidens, and ask Bannadonna why he did not maintain uniformity in their expressions (Melville 179). Here, Melville imbues the inanimate Una with subjectivity, or, at least, the potential for a malevolent consciousness. The titling of 'Hour' for Una is a particularly strange moment in the narrative that sees time being wedded to the human form in the most literal sense possible. A basic unit of time, the hour, is presented on the page as the title of Una's office, compounding her strangeness, since her numerical name is already evocative of her totemic status.

Melville further stresses the ghostly malignity of Una's face when a magistrate says to Bannadonna that she "seemed intently gazing on you; one would have almost sworn that she picked you out among us three" (180). The magistrate's suggestion of Una's subjectivity brings to mind the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea. However, as the dark world of "The Bell-Tower" has made clear, there is no potential for a mythic romance between male sculptor and female sculpture. In response to the magistrate's remark, Bannadonna first jokes, "If she did [gaze upon me], possibly, it might have been her finer apprehension" (Melville 180). He then assures his visitors that "no *soul*" remains in the belfry once they depart (Melville 180). The remark implicitly refers to

Talus for the purpose of building suspense and terror of the inhuman bellringer and the possibility that he may indeed be alive. His remark also denies both agency and soul to Una. By linking Una's gaze to his own idea of self-worth, Bannadonna again asserts his own order-obsessed epistemology by emphasizing the precedence of creator over artwork. Simultaneously, he displays his disdain for the romantic attentions and structures that the elders seem to be reading into his and Una's relationship. His facetious mention of her 'finer apprehension' turns Una into a device by which her creator can solidify his queerness by emphasizing her ostensibly simple gender expression.

Bannadonna claims credit for the perceived difference of Una's countenance, saying:

> Eccellenza, now that, following your keener eye, I glance upon the face of Una, I do, indeed, perceive some little variance. But look all round the bell, and you will find no two faces entirely correspond. Because there is a law in art… which bars the possibility of duplicates… I like this law forbidding duplicates. It evokes fine personalities. Yes, Eccellenza, that strange, and—to you—uncertain smile, and those fore-looking eyes of Una, suit Bannadonna very well (179-180).

The circumstances of Bannadonna's end reveal this long-winded remark to be little more than a self-aggrandizing lie. In the end, Bannadonna is found with his skull cracked open, struck down at the junction between the uncontrollable originality of Una's face and the endless repetition of Talus's duty. Bannadonna's unyielding belief in order and the precedence of creator over creation is overturned. The intensity of Bannadonna's desire to alter Una's face is undeniable, as he is literally driven, first to distraction by her face,

and then to death by Talus's mallet. This desire complicates his earlier diminishments of her form and character as being either soulless or purposeful on his part. Bannadonna is dead because he came across something in Una's face—the story's physical locus of femininity—that he could neither understand nor control.

Alongside reading Una, we must consider her physical circumstances—namely, her place as part of the bell. The bas-reliefs on the bell embody a sense of queered time. They are initially described as "twelve figures of gay girls, garlanded, hand-in-hand, danc[ing] in a choral ring—the embodied hours" (Melville 178). Melville characterizes them not as representations of femininity, but as manifestations of time, an indomitable and basic element of physical existence. Their location in a clock tower, an artificial establishment designed by a human and resulting from hours of labor and machinic effort, is crucial. Bickley references this temporal element, saying Bannadonna is "destroyed by time's servant," his own mechanical bell-ringer, after he "constructs an elaborate clock mechanism to serve time and bring fame to himself and his state" (97). What Bickley does not consider is the importance of gender in relation to Bannadonna's specifically designed depiction of time. The female statues represent the idea of embodied time in the naturally occurring biological sense: circadian rhythms, "the menstrual cycle … [and] pregnancy" (Costello and Kloss 255). Two of the three cycles suggested by the feminine figures on the bell are irrelevant to Bannadonna. He considers himself neither a servant of time nor indebted to acknowledging its biological manifestations. He is trying to subordinate time, a natural force that he does not

comprehend, to his own aesthetic desires and to the organizational needs of his employers.

What's more, Bannadonna wants each ringing of the bell to "give forth its own peculiar resonance" (Melville 185). The bell is supposed to make a different sound for each of the times it is to be struck during a 24-hour period; this would require the bell to have a variety of densities at its various points of impact while still maintaining its uniformly curved shape. Simply put, what Bannadonna wants is sonically and physically impossible. All he gets is "a dull, mangled sound," and it costs him his life (Melville 181). The frustrated, atonal ringing of his supposed masterpiece becomes the centerpiece of a monument to human failure and inconsistency in the face of an unforgiving and unquantifiable universe.

The making of the bell, and what causes the death of the ill-fated workman, is indicative of the bell's hybrid nature. Even before the injection of dead human flesh into the mold, species seems to be another category that can somehow be applied to the bell. As it is molded, Melville narrates that the "unleashed metals bayed like hounds," which causes the laborers to recoil at the sound (176). The cosmicist trope of reality malfunctioning, for lack of a better word, is at work here. In this universe, the pouring of molten metal does not just make the sound of a single animal—it makes the sound of a pack of ravening animals.

It is important to remember that "From the smitten part" of the workman's head, "a splinter was dashed into the seething mass, and at once was melted" into the bell

(Melville 176).²² Though the word "splinter" here describes the dead man's skull fragment, the term is associated with wood, one of the various organic materials making up the tower—a connection that highlights the structure's inherent link to the feminine natural world, as well as the bell's bond to questions of gender beyond those that Una provokes.

The only component of the tower that is biologically male is located in "a small spot in the ear" of the bell (Melville 186). The ear of a bell is the part where things merge. It is the point where the bell can be affixed to its mooring and rung properly. For the community, the bell has become an almost totemic item. It is enwrapped in figures of femininity. The fact that the bell's most vulnerable spot was also the only part of it that was biologically male all along is yet another element of the ghostly presence's unassailable and indecipherable queerness. To make things even more chaotic, the contrasting presences of the workman's remains and those of Una and her sisters endow the inanimate bell with not one, but two genders. Just as the splinter is detached from the greater male body it once belonged to, the haunting presence is perfectly free of a singular, constrictive gender assignment. The queer force *is* the moral of the story. Narratorial gestures toward the inherent trouble found in both Bannadonna's and the

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22.    Fisher, Allison, and others have argued that this splinter might well be part of the metal ladle. I remain unconvinced. The bell itself is made of tin, copper, and donated silver, meaning that the addition of a negligible amount of another kind of metal would not make much difference. The story's second-to-last line explicitly mentions the man's blood and Melville takes the time to narrate (and return to) a scene wherein Bannadonna uses an unknown compound to hide the blemish left by the organic material inadvertently added by the dead workman.

community's vanities leave readers with a moral that neither comforts nor comfortably instructs; it merely reveals an overwhelming and certain sense of doom. Like a Lovecraftian entity, the presence is beyond Bannadonna's ability to control or even understand. It is a self-determinedly impenetrable queer force that cannot be harnessed or altered; and when it mercilessly destroys Bannadonna and his legacy, it does so to punish his audaciously solipsistic designs.

# Beast of Burden: Talus as Disruptive Emblem

The revelation of Talus's unshrouded form destabilizes the narrative. Immediately after the infuriatingly sparse and evocative description of Talus's actual body, Melville writes a single line: "Uncertainty falls on what now followed" (182). For the remainder of the story, every event is conjectural. Many of the remaining lines and paragraphs open with qualifiers. The narrative itself is damaged. We are not given the data necessary to finish the story with anything approaching confidence in the veracity of incidents reported. Here, Melville's fragmented form mediates the cosmicist content of the story; much like one of Lovecraft's truth-maddened characters, the credibility and certainty of the narrative disappears. When Talus is revealed, the very world of the story seems to deteriorate.

Supposedly, the idea for Talus "indirectly occurred to Bannadonna," having been inspired by "the purely Punchinello aspect of the human figure" when seen at the top of the tower (Melville 183). This latter portion of the narrative is explicitly based in the rumors and suppositions of the townsfolk; extradiegetically, Melville's language seems to indicate that something other than Bannadonna is the primary source of his inspiration for Talus. The invocation of the cultural figure Punchinello, of Punch and Judy fame, employs the cosmicist image of humanity as puppets of greater, malevolent powers. The municipal supposition of Bannadonna's association of Punch with the human figure accentuates the town's perception of the artisan as a misanthrope. They think that he sees them all as subhuman; the derisive municipal assumption of Bannadonna's sense of inherent superiority fits my reading of Melville's association of Bannadonna with

slaveholders. The tower does not signify the pinnacle of human achievement. It merely belittles man, literally and figuratively.

In keeping with the disorienting elements of cosmicism, Talus is a creature of contradictions, straddling the lines of living and dead, object and subject. His introduction to the story is ominous, to say the least. Lifted into the belfry, shrouded Talus is first described as being "not entirely rigid, but… in a manner, pliant" and, upon reaching the summit of the tower, "seemed almost… to step into the belfry" (Melville 176). Opinions in the criticism on "The Bell-Tower" are terse, at best, when it comes to the actual nature of Talus. The flexible descriptions do not match the implied rigidity of the term "automaton," Talus's common critical epithet. An old blacksmith witnesses the hoisting and says, "it was but a living man" (Melville 176-177). The fact that it is a blacksmith who makes this claim widens the gap between Bannadonna and his fellow craftsmen, as the wizened smith's incredulous reaction implies a lack of familiarity with whatever technique Bannadonna has used to make the creature. The magistrates consider whether or not Talus takes nourishment. A cup they notice near the hidden figure "was just such a one as might, in mockery, be offered to the lips of some brazen statue, or, perhaps, still worse" (Melville 177). Unveiled, Talus has "limbs" and is "clad in a scaly mail, lustrous as a dragonbeetle's [sic]" (Melville 182). The insect becomes a convenient analogue for his form, but Melville's indistinct language complicates the comparison, since six limbs and an exoskeleton taxonomically define an insect. Talus's armored exterior is mentioned, but the number and nature of his limbs are kept obscure, blurring the image readers can form of Talus by depriving them of any specific analogue.

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Talus's otherness becomes a way for Bannadonna to posit his own distance from the community that would constitute his only source for structured kinship. The visiting elders gaze upon the semi-hidden form of Talus "as at some suspicious incognito—at a Venetian mask" (Melville 177). Like his creator, Talus is a cipher. Having a background even *less* accessible than Bannadonna's, Talus is immediately associated with another Italian locale, a tense analogy to make considering Renaissance-era Italy's bellicose atmosphere. He tries again to get the magistrates to leave by telling them that the bell shall ring at one the next afternoon, saying that is when "the poor mechanic will be most happy to give you liege audience, in this his littered shop. Farewell till then, illustrious magnificoes, and hark ye for your vassal's stroke" (Melville 178). Lest readers somehow misinterpret his high-flown and class-oriented language as entirely sincere in this scene, Melville calls the mechanician's flippant manner "ostentatious deference" (178). Bannadonna's last words beg a simple question: *who* is the vassal he mentions? It is Talus who is to ring the bell the next day, but calling the automaton a vassal seems to endow him with some kind of agency or personhood that is evocative of the city's feudal form of government—an agency or personhood from which the community legally exempts Bannadonna (Melville 178). This moment during the administrators' visit reiterates the threat of Talus's and Bannadonna's identities somehow merging.

Talus is not merely *created*; he is an individual subject, both Bannadonna's creation and his destroyer. His own deliberately non-human design and his ties to the realm of the feminine, as represented by his queer kinship with Una, push him and his

relationship with his creator outside of what Judith Halberstam calls the "ugly legacy of Oedipal models of generationality."[23]

Bannadonna is not the one who unmakes Talus or even, as in the case of Frankenstein, gives the creature the means to unmake himself. Townsfolk, led by Bannadonna's persistent magistrates, are said to have "quickly rehooded the figure…. The same night, [Talus] was secretly lowered to the ground, smuggled to the beach, pulled far out to sea, and sunk" (Melville 182). Talus does not seize control of Bannadonna's paternal phallus, nor does he replace his father. Once again, the civic dimension to Bannadonna's character appears. His only available kinship structure, the community that contracted (and presumably raised) him, arrives not to destroy the inhuman monster that killed him, but merely to remove it from their proximity.

Talus's liminality bridges the gap between genre fiction and political fable, as well. Within the brief but intense scene of Talus's revelation, all his physical details are laid out for readers, including the fact that he is "manacled" (Melville 182). For antebellum readers in August 1855, the image of a manacled automaton clubbing its master to death was neither opaque nor the stuff of wholly fictional nightmares. Described "as a partial type of an ulterior creature, a sort of elephantine Helot," Talus is undeniably redolent of slavery, but not in a straightforward sense (Melville 184). We never know whether he is capable of any thought, seditious or otherwise. He does not

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[23]. "Forgetting Queer Family: Queer Alternatives to Oedipal Relations." *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*. Ed. George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007. 318.

murder Bannadonna in rebellion. He kills Bannadonna in the course of carrying out his duty to the letter, moving on a fixed track and a set schedule. This ironic inversion of his creator's earlier violence allows readers to project the murdered workman's agency onto Talus, but Melville never commits. Rendered murderous and inhuman by the duty he was made for, Talus is not the emblem of the slave. Talus is the emblem of slavery itself, irrespective of the individual agency of the cultural figure of the rebellious slave. He performs his labor without halt, without reason, without mercy. Nothing can stop him.

A lone spaniel follows the concerned townsfolk up the steps to the belfry after the bell's disastrous premiere and is rumored, by some, to have "gone mad by fear" at the sight of Talus (Melville 182). Reports of the dog's hostile reaction to Talus further evoke the brutality of slavery, as well as white fears of slavery's capability to dehumanize its subjects beyond rational limits. It is unknown whether the rifle called for by the town elders was meant for the fear-maddened animal or the static yet threatening Talus; but the animal is said to have "shared the burial" that he experiences at sea, as though exposure to Talus irretrievably corrupted it (Melville 182). This tension between the queer monster Talus and the spaniel, nature's supposed representative, seems to confound the case that I make for a universal haunting in the story that comprises both the unnatural and nature. However, the dog's mammalian qualities and its sentimental value as a figure of loyalty keep it from being involved in the haunting. It climbs the stairs *alongside* the people of the town and shares their horror. Melville allies the dog with humanity rather than nature, placing it in opposition to the non-human, insectile Talus.

## Creatures of the Book: Melville's Extended Allusion to Jael and Sisera

Before moving away from readings of characters to environments and Melville's storytelling, we must acknowledge that, in addition to its proto-cosmicist and Gothic elements, "The Bell-Tower" exhibits substantial awareness of Abrahamic principles and epistemologies. The last line of story, "And so pride went before the fall," is Melville's condensed version of Proverbs 16:18, indicating a strong biblical influence (Melville 187). Melville's tale depends upon an extended, metaphorical allusion to the story of Jael and Sisera from the Book of Judges. The prophetess and judge Deborah foresees the death of the commander of an enemy army at the hands of an unidentified woman. Sisera, the commander in question, flees the battle when the Israelites overpower his forces. He seeks refuge in the tent of a Kenite woman named Jael. Sisera receives hospitality from her and sinks into deep sleep. To prevent Sisera from further threatening the Israelites, Jael drives a tent peg through his skull, killing him.

This allusion does not just uphold the Hawthornean morality of the story and it does not support a human-centric epistemology. Instead, the allusion is the crowning point of gendered chaos in the story. It is part of Melville's array of narratorial tools used to cast the universe as ultimately incomprehensible and arguably apathetic towards (if not outright inimical to) human existence. Put plainly, in this universe, there *are* higher powers and they *will* punish us; they simply will not treat or covenant with us because they have little to no investment in us. This stark worldview indicates a potential line of descent from Melville's writings towards the cosmicist movement.

The allusion to the story of Jael and Sisera first comes up during the town elders'

visit to Bannadonna's workplace in the belfry. One of the patrons is struck by how much

"Una's face looks just like that of Deborah, the prophetess, as painted by the Florentine,

Del Fonca" (Melville 179). Women, in this universe, seem to exist only as mystical

presences or objects of aesthetic reference. Una cannot be likened to, say, a daughter of

one of the magistrates, but she can be compared to a biblical character in a painting.[24]

Una's association with Deborah's supernatural prescience does the exact opposite of

Bannadonna's gendering of the ostensibly un-gendered Talus; it effectively puts her

seemingly malign and uncontrollable femininity in cahoots with the supposed masculinity

of Talus, whose role in his creator's murder is anything *but* conventionally masculine.

Femininity, in the world of "The Bell-Tower," can mediate or form the presence of a

haunting, but it seemingly cannot completely manifest in a female character.

The older patrician silences his comrade, replying, "Tush, tush, Signore! …A

passing whim. Deborah? —Where's Jael, pray?" (Melville 180). Though the allusion is

not completely explained at this point in the narrative, the elder patrician is implying that

Bannadonna is Sisera, and that a woman will be the end of him. As the end of the story

shows us, it is not a woman, but Talus, the masculinized automaton, who kills

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24.    Celia Wallhead's "The Story of Jael and Sisera in Five Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Fictional

Texts" corroborates Charles L. Crow's claim that Del Fonca, the painter mentioned in the story, "was

apparently Melville's invention" (156). This is backed up by the Del Fonca entry in Robert L. Gale's *A

Herman Melville Encyclopedia*, which states nothing at all about there having been an actual Florentine

painter known by this name (108).

Bannadonna. The elder's ominous mention of Jael underlines the dominance of heteronormative thought in the community. This moment with the elders also gestures towards the overarching queer presence that haunts the story.

Critics have not considered the queer association of Talus's role in this extended biblical metaphor: Jael. When Bannadonna is found dead, his fabricated beast is standing over him "like Jael over nailed Sisera in the tent" (Melville 182). By following Jael's precedent, Talus upsets the established order by appropriating a phallic weapon and murdering Bannadonna in a brutally penetrative act—arguably piercing him in the locus of his asexualized life, the only procreative organ he seems to use: his brain. Here is where I return to Bannadonna's unique model of production-as-reproduction. I do not read his brain as his phallus, because that would place him in a standard parent-child relationship with Talus and Una, which does not accurately depict their wholly weird kinship. If we read Bannadonna's placement between the two automatons in conjunction with his inability to control Una's expression as the townsfolk surmise, then Melville is casting him as an intruder amongst his creations. He is merely an unwelcome figure that wants to correct or somehow alter Una's femininity. There is no kinship, queer or otherwise, in Bannadonna's final moments—only death and destruction.

## Derangements of the Tower, World, and Time

Having attended to the prominent characters, I will extend my gaze towards the environment and the narrative form of "The Bell-Tower." The opening of the story features a blatant derangement of time that reifies the cosmic horror of its universe. The titular structure is called "the black mossed stump of some immeasurable …stone pine" (Melville 174). Fenton succinctly articulates the primary conflict of the story: "man has begun to compete with nature. He is, indeed, surpassing nature" (222). While the story illustrates a struggle of arguably titanic proportions, Melville begins with its outcome. Nature's victory is assured but unkind. The tower, once an astounding monument, is now an entropic ruin that confounds human onlookers and perverts time's linearity.

The decaying tower is simultaneously natural and unnatural. The very idea of a stone pine is inherently bizarre. Melville defamiliarizes the environment by hybridizing separate and naturally occurring objects (rocks and trees) to describe a building. The use of the word stone, rather than rock, connotes hewing or masonry (since one speaks of stoneworkers rather than rockworkers), which implies some sort of human agency—an agency almost immediately negated by the overwhelmingly outré sense of the figure. This natural image of an unnatural thing, neither organic nor inorganic, non-existent yet based upon ubiquitous referents, is suggestive of cosmicist horror's dependence upon the aberrant and unexplained appearing in a world whose rules we thought we understood.

The prolonged breakdown of the tower

leaves a mossy mound—last-flung shadow of the perished trunk; never lengthening; never lessening; unsubject to the fleet falsities of the sun; shade

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immutable and true gauge which cometh by prostration—so westward from what

seems the stump, one steadfast spear of lichened ruin veins the plain. (174)

Melville's prose is rife with the impossible imagery and vile implications that are the

trademarks of what would become cosmicist horror. Carrying on with the "unnaturally

natural" figure of the stone pine, Melville's look at the tower's masonry is loaded with

horrifying implications. He gives us the inexplicable images of stone degenerating into a

mossy substance or turning into some kind of living matter, rather than merely

disintegrating. Though rot seems to be the order of the day during our introduction to the

remains of the tower, the phrase "never lengthening; never lessening" creates the image

of perpetually rotting stasis, heightening the narrative's damaged sense of time. The

tower is capable of continual degradation, but never enough to actually change. Though

literally covered in what seems to be plant matter, judging from Melville's references to

moss and lichen, the blooming remnants of the tower do not seem to photosynthesize or

conform to any other botanical laws. Even fallen, the tower seems to challenge human

visual perception. Its actual magnitude is only apparent when observers lay themselves

down before it. Again, Melville is playing with time, as if the prostration required to

accurately see the ruins ridicules the idolatrous worship that the structure once received.

That the tower's wreckage "vein[s] the plain" suggests that the awe-inspiring corruption

of the debris is not done. It may well go on to infect the surrounding land. Nature is

reclaiming Bannadonna's structure, but it is not the nature of Romanticism, nor is it the

picturesque environment of the Gothic. This natural world is entirely beyond our ken. It

can do unutterable things to us, and to our structures, with impunity. The fact of the

natural world's vituperative and uncaring supremacy is the key to the story's formal qualities. The stone pine that opens the tale assures readers of Bannadonna's (and, by extension, humanity's) ruin.

The tower's initial disruption plays into the story's ongoing mystery of gender. "The most robust man of the country round… [is] assigned to the office of bell-ringer" at Bannadonna's funeral ceremony (Melville 186). He is explicitly defined by his masculinity, having no name and only a vague sense of belonging to the story's setting, echoing traits of the man Bannadonna killed. His raw, physical strength ruins both Bannadonna's funeral and his opus by destroying the bell with a sharp pull of its rope. The bell-ringer is trying to replace Talus by forcing himself into a system of queer kinship where he does not belong. His namelessness, as well as the fact that he was assigned to the duty by the unwitting public, makes him more of a metonym than a character. The entire community has again misread the queerness of Bannadonna's creation. In trying to fit their fixed gender binary to Bannadonna's work, they get nothing but chaos and destruction.

To describe the final breakdown of Bannadonna's legacy, Melville gives us this brief scene: "on the first anniversary of the tower's completion—at early dawn … —an earthquake came; one loud crash was heard. The stone-pine … lay overthrown upon the plain" (Melville 186). The tower is felled not by man, but by a natural disaster. The environment launches its fatal attack on Bannadonna's work, fulfilling the opening of the tale. Melville's repeated description of the tower as a stone pine takes on a new valence. It associates the tower, previously the emblem of Bannadonna's masculinized industry,

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with the natural world by drawing attention to its component parts, wood and stone. This association effectively feminizes it. This feminizing of the tower reifies the story's pushing of women into a queer supernatural realm, as well as the cosmicist tendency to upend human-originated certainties about how the universe works by seemingly emphasizing the normality of the tower's materials, even though we already know these natural materials will proceed to rot in a most unnatural way.

Even before its fall, the tower has a bizarre effect on perception. Some surmise that Bannadonna got the idea for Talus from watching laborers working at the tower's summit: "the human figure, viewed from below, undergoes such a reduction in its apparent size, as to obliterate its intelligent features. It evinces no personality. Instead of bespeaking volition, its gestures rather resemble the automatic ones of the arms of a telegraph" (Melville 183). Melville's use of deliberate anachronism, citing the example of a telegraph pole in a story set in Renaissance Italy, interferes with readers trying to gain an understanding of the universe of the story. Yet again, the reader's position as a comfortably removed viewer and possessor of information is challenged by Melville's temporal inconsistency and withholding of certitude.

In sharp contrast to the varying suppositions that crowd the latter half of the story, Melville's narrator returns in the final paragraph, saying:

> So the blind slave obeyed its blinder lord; but, in obedience, slew him. So the creator was killed by the creature. So the bell was too heavy for the tower. So that bell's main weakness was where man's blood had flawed it. And so pride went before the fall (187).

The indecision, conflicting accounts, and qualifications of the wavering narrative all cease in the above passage, replaced by a plodding, declarative, and moralistic ending. Melville's second-to-last line expresses the overall illegibility of the haunting force's queerness. A Gothicized interpretation of the story would have readers believe that the downfall of Bannadonna's masterwork is the outcome of a vengeful haunting engineered by a male murder victim. Yet such a reading contradicts the final destruction of the tower by strange natural forces, which Melville meticulously feminizes. This sad and slow summation of events is clear to the point of pedantry, standing in stylistic opposition to the circuitous prose weaving throughout earlier parts of the story. This all-too-neat and plodding summation is what comes of our attempts, as readers, to make sense of Bannadonna's efforts at imposing order upon the universe of "The Bell-Tower."

Melville closes the tale with an acknowledgement of extradiegetic human failure in the form of a footnote, which reads: "It was not deemed necessary to adhere to the peculiar notation of Italian time. Adherence to it would have impaired the familiar comprehension of the story. Kindred remarks might be offered touching an anachronism or two that occur" (187). Evinced by the tone and abstracted subject in the phrase "It was not deemed necessary," Melville subtly stresses his writerly authority by disregarding cultural differences in timekeeping. The limited store of criticism does not explain what exactly Melville means by the phrase "peculiar notation," nor can I cogently explain this oblique turn of phrase for an arcane topic. Different cultures, in this case Renaissance Italy and nineteenth-century America, may indeed have varied approaches to the aesthetics and mathematics of time, but it continues to pass and affect humanity

monolithically. Nonetheless, it is intriguing to see authorial recognition of the very same failing that plagued the doomed protagonist of the story: the ultimate inadequacy of mankind's attempts at controlling, or at least understanding, the universe.

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