

## Silent Mutineers in Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor*

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Shiho Hayashi

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### I

Herman Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor* (*BB*) presents the protagonist Billy and his superior, John Claggart, as silent mutineers, destructive forces with ambiguous, untold motivations. To attract Billy, Claggart makes a false accusation, claiming that Billy is a ringleader of a potential mutiny and that his shipmates follow him due to his physical beauty. I propose that Claggart's otherwise inexplicable deed can not only be attributed to attracting Billy's attention but also to undermining Captain Vere's authority; Claggart is silently plotting an indirect, nonviolent mutiny by attracting Billy, who is the center of the shipmates, preserving peace in "the happy family" (47; ch. 1) in the navy. Being envious of Billy's fair appearance, Claggart warns Captain Vere that "A mantrap may be under the ruddy-tipped daisies" (94; ch. 18). He also calls Billy "handsome" (72; ch. 10) to his face, in a provocative manner. Captain Vere's authority and his shipmates' unity become unstable after Billy is removed from the ship at the end of the story. Therefore, Claggart shakes Captain Vere's authority, albeit without intending to.

Critics have often interpreted that what I call Claggart's nonviolent mutiny is caused by his homosexual desire. Robert K. Martin is one critic who regards *BB* as a story of homosexuality. According to Martin, Claggart is a harmful agent who sexually provokes a boy. Martin explicates

the scene where Billy spills soup and Claggart responds by saying, "Handsomely done, my lad! And handsome is as handsome did it, too!" (72; ch. 10), interpreting this remark as a sexually provocative action, expressing a "desire to sodomize Billy." Moreover, the violence of Billy's fist, directed at Claggart, is regarded as equivalent to the violence of a rape (Martin 112). Martin argues that Claggart's desire is fulfilled by being struck dead by his beloved Billy. Although the details of Martin's interpretations indicate a certain propensity for exaggeration, as I will show below, *BB* is certainly a story of an inexplicable suppressed love between men, which possibly engenders the breakdown of comradeship. Captain Vere, for his own reasons, narrates this incident, caused by homosexual desire, as a mere violent plot. Captain Vere's attitude reflects the persistence of the characterized military order both in England and America, which aim to obscure aspects of judgement concerning sexual preference.

This paper examines the pervasiveness of homosexual desire in the military and clarifies the underlying reasons for considering both Claggart and Billy as destructive forces on board. Melville's preface to *BB* shows that this story was dedicated to an English man, Jack Chase, the captain of "the U.S. Frigate" in the year of 1843 (42). Robert L. Gale notes that "the U.S. Frigate" was "the naval vessel on which Melville served between 1843 and 1844" (Gale 70). On the other hand, the historical background of *BB* is set in "the summer of 1797" (54; ch. 3) in the Royal Navy of Great Britain, in the period when the two great mutinies at "Spithead" and "Nore" occurred (54; ch. 3). Such facts show that the author himself wished to present common problems in the British and American navies. These two forces shared persistent problems concerning the sexuality of serving members of the military, which have not been settled even to this day, and are often considered a cause of the weakening of men's bonds in armed forces.

The next two sections of my study discuss factual cases concerning

what were recently considered punishable offences in today's military in the United States as well as in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Royal Navy, comparing these with the story of *BB*. This comparison helps us reinterpret *BB* in the context of the 2000s and determine the meaning of the word "mutiny," which is how Captain Vere characterizes Billy's violence, namely comparing it with a great mutiny, the "outbreak at Nore" (112; ch. 21). This historical background shows readers why Captain Vere must categorize the incident as a mutiny and intentionally omit Billy's actual motives. When explaining why Billy must be hanged, Captain Vere justifies himself citing the case of the mutiny at Nore. The chapter that follows this describes the evidence of Billy's eloquence and persuasiveness to emphasize that he is a practical leader who possesses leadership ability exceeding that of Captain Vere. Although Billy is thought to be generally inarticulate and powerless, he suddenly becomes eloquent at the moment of his execution. In the final section of my paper, I show that the problem of sexuality and Billy's eloquence at his hanging confuse Captain Vere, eventually portraying the captain to be merely a weak man when he remorsefully murmurs "Billy Budd, Billy Budd" (129; ch. 28) on his deathbed. Although the attendant beside him insists that the words "were not the accent of remorse" (129; ch. 28), in order to conceal this weakness, the captain's feeling of regret is reflected in this scene.

In previous studies, critics have largely restricted themselves to underscoring similarities between *BB* and historical mutinies or incidents of cruel punishment. They have not considered the judgement of a potentially homosexual man. To take a representative example, Larry J. Reynolds points out that the cruel punishment enacted at the end of *BB* resembles that of the labor unrest in the United States in 1886, known as the Haymarket affair, in which—similar to Billy—anarchists were hanged (Reynolds 22–29). Reynold's interpretation emphasizes Billy's innocence and powerlessness and never considers the eloquence of Billy's nature, as indicated by the narrator, who states that Billy is "afloat the spokesman"

(44; ch. 1). Another critic, Barbara Johnson, underscores Billy's innocence, noting his transformation through execution into a Christ-like figure and the transformation of his story into "a retelling of the story of Christ" (Johnson 186). However, in neither case does *BB* constitute a perfect parallel. Previous interpretations do not clarify the association between mutiny and homosexuality in *BB*. Billy is not as violent as the mutineer in the Haymarket affair. Billy appears powerless; however, his physical beauty exercises power over others, strengthening men's bonds to him even after his death. In *BB*, Melville highly emphasizes the definition of Claggart's nature and the explanation of Billy's physical beauty, which attracts a homosexual man in an erotic manner. Melville uses the example of historical mutinies only to show Captain Vere's incapacity to explain the issue before him, caused by homosexual desire. "Mutiny" is the word used by Captain Vere to delude, and he attempts to persuade his shipmates to cover up the motivations of both Billy and Claggart.

In *BB*, Captain Vere's authoritative power is indirectly diminished by Claggart's distorted sexual preference since he provokes Billy without a clear reason given for his hostility. As shown below, Claggart wants Billy all to himself and attempts to remove Billy from the center of the "happy family." Claggart's suspicious behavior confuses Captain Vere. Billy's virtue attracts the attention of the men on board, creating a center of power around him, and his virtue of attraction and power is removed by hanging. However, Billy is then apotheosized among his shipmates: he comes to possess an omnipotent mysterious power. Although Billy seems to have no intention of upsetting the order in the navy, he inadvertently undermines Captain Vere's leadership after his death.

## II

*BB* is set in the Royal Navy of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. During this period, homosexuality within the military was a contentious issue. Historically,

homosexuality was abominated, blamed for destroying the moral order within a military force. Homosexual affairs, especially within the military, are still an active political topic in the United States in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Today, *BB* can be understood as a story highlighting the still prevalent questions of sexuality in a military context with regard to the contemporary military.

Until the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the American military was apprehensive about admitting the existence of homosexuality and homophobic abuse within its ranks. Despite the reverence for authority figures, the American military has become more tolerant of homosexuality, although the military of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century in America was somewhat similar to that of the Royal Navy in Britain. According to Nathaniel Frank, the first recorded incident of a discharge for homosexuality in the US military was in 1778, in which Lieutenant Gotthold Frederick Enslin was found guilty of sodomy. Despite the taboos against same-sex relationships, it has simultaneously been knowingly tolerated—and even deeply relied on—in the US military history (Frank 1–2). Having such a historical background, the American military willingly followed the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT) policy, introduced under President Bill Clinton in 1993, which lasted until 2011. Under this policy, the sexual preferences of servicemen and servicewomen were not investigated on enrollment. The National Defense Research Institute states that candidates for the military had the option of not disclosing their sexual preferences. However, a serving homosexual person would be more vulnerable to abuse by superiors or groups, as attempts to obtain a redressal of grievances could easily be impeded by the threat of exposure. Thus, homophobic harassment within the military was widespread, under the DADT policy (National Defense Research Institute 43–44). When unfavorable situations related to military order occur, military authorities find their control compromised.

According to Belkin and Bateman, under the DADT policy, Barry

Winchell, a military officer, was harassed for his homosexuality and eventually beaten to death by his fellow soldiers with a baseball bat in 1999. Winchell's murder revealed a lack of leadership in the US military. The DADT policy, paradoxically, led to a surge in homophobic abuse in the military and weakened its unity. Belkin and Bateman note that "as much as leaders might try, there is nothing they can do to prevent other soldiers from being harassed or even beaten to death if their peers perceive them to be gay" (1-2). When extra personnel were needed in the military, especially during wartime, the DADT policy was effective because even gay and lesbian citizens were expected to contribute. The policy was originally introduced to encourage personnel to enlist and to protect privacy, morale, and unit cohesion. However, Frank points out that, paradoxically, DADT policy "has struck at the heart of unit cohesion by breaking apart integrated fighting teams and undermining trust and honesty between soldiers," and it "has invaded the privacy of all service members" (Frank 167). Similar to Captain Vere, during wartime, military authorities pretend not to notice homosexual desire, and this occasionally becomes a cause of disorder.

Toward the end of *BB*, the similarity to the DADT policy is shown through the naval publication, "News from the Mediterranean" (130; ch. 29). An article in this publication states "aliens" should be brought into the military because of "the present extraordinary necessities of the service." This indicates that as Billy was an "alien," he would not have been selected as a member if it was not wartime when "considerable numbers" were admitted into the navy. At ordinary times, in general, "aliens" are not welcomed as members of the national navy, as it seems that it is taken for granted that "aliens" always cause disorders. In the article, Billy is described as a "ringleader" and "no Englishman" (130; ch. 29). In a time of war, when the military needs personnel, as with the recent US military, which did not ask about sexual preference, the Royal Navy in the time of *BB* did not inquire into candidates' personal

backgrounds or possibly their sexual preferences.

The pre-modern British navy in the late 1700s also perceived themselves to have an issue related to homosexuality within their forces, and they severely prosecuted homosexual behavior in the ranks. According to Arthur N. Gilbert, buggery constituted a capital offence in England when it was found that higher officials often seduced boys on board (Gilbert 75). In contrast, in recent years, the American military has tolerated homosexuality by maintaining a conscious silence about the issue. Despite using these two different methods of dealing with homosexual issues, both countries struggled to find ways to prevent or exclude homosexuals without decreasing the number of the military personnel.

Similarly, in *BB*, Captain Vere attempts to maintain silence regarding Claggart's motivation for provoking Billy. Captain Vere's instinctive reaction to Claggart's death, namely calling him "Ananias" (100; ch. 19) and calling Billy, "an angel of God" (101; ch. 19) shows his disgust and prejudice against what he suspects to have been homosexual desire. Captain Vere struggles to settle conflicts peacefully and quickly in order not to manifest his innermost emotions in public. The process of the burial of Claggart's body is explained by the narrator, only in a few sentences in chapter 23, in order "not to clog the sequel with lateral matters" (117; ch. 23). Contrary to the precise explanation of Billy's hanging and burial, Claggart's death is depicted to have been less important. To the narrator, Claggart is a nuisance, getting in the way of the dramatic ending of the story. General homophobic attitudes are noticeable in the remarks of both Captain Vere and the narrator.

### III

The historical background of *BB* is the Royal Navy in "the summer of 1797" when two mutinies at "Spithead" and "Nore" occurred (54; ch. 3).

During this period, punishments for “buggery” were usually severe. Gilbert notes, “after the great mutinies at Nore and Spithead in 1797, execution of sodomites began in earnest” (87). In *BB*, Captain Vere too becomes sensitive and strict in making judgments, following this general trend in the navy. A product of the environment in which a same-sex relationship constituted a crime, Claggart resembles the higher officials of the time. His manner is considered to be “rather queer at times” (88; ch. 17), which is attributed to “the monomania in the man” (90; ch. 17) by the narrator. No one decisively states that he is a homosexual man; however, his shipmates’ and Captain Vere’s suspicions are reflected in the ambiguous description of Claggart.

Claggart’s homosexual desires are reflected in his reference to Billy’s “youth and good looks” and “fair cheek” (94; ch. 18) in his warning to Captain Vere. Claggart displays his “envy” and “antipathy” (77; ch. 12), breaking his silence by expressing interest in Billy’s physical appearance. Claggart’s statements show his erotic nature, and overwhelm Captain Vere with a feeling of repulsion. Claggart commits the crime of false accusation, as an indirect provocation toward Billy. He claims that everyone is charmed by Billy’s beauty. Claggart notices that the crew has shown great admiration for Billy and imagines that Billy may use their admiration to establish himself as a leader. Thus, Claggart contrives an imaginary plot to provoke Billy, in order to infuriate him and to cause him to turn his eyes on Claggart; ultimately, Billy is the victim of Claggart’s false accusations. Billy, as “an angel of God,” eliminates a destabilizing factor on the ship in the person of the odd Claggart, and deeroticizes the unity of the men on the warship.

Although Claggart’s deed is far from the sodomy feared by the criminal code, his action toward Billy is equally provocative. Claggart wishes to attract Billy’s attention and establish a one-to-one relationship. As another old shipmate notices, Claggart shows Billy that he hates Billy and is “down on” (72; ch. 10) him, although Billy has had “never come into any special



contact" with Claggart (73; ch. 11). He dramatizes his emotions to attract Billy's attention. Gilbert notes that boys who were victims of rape often had them removed from their positions through legal action. Furthermore, perpetrators are occasionally regarded as deserving of the death penalty (Gilbert 75). Hence, boys who are victims of a provocative act or a rape have the right to complain about their officers. Through complaint to an appropriate authority, an abused victim can damage a perpetrator's career, resulting in the perpetrator's demotion. Boys can often be threats to their officers, when they possess a voice with which to accuse them. Considering Claggart as a man with "a touch of soft yearning" (88, ch. 17) for Billy, his statement, "Handsome done, my lad! And handsome is as handsome did it, too!" has an erotic and sexually provocative overtone in that an adult man calls a boy "handsome," focusing on his physical appearance. Hence, innocent Billy would have a right to complain to an authority if he felt annoyed about being called "handsome," and accordingly, Claggart deserves punishment if his words are to be taken as sexual harassment. Captain Vere understands why Billy is annoyed and that Billy's violent reaction toward Claggart, which causes his death, is a form of punishment.

A similar incident was recorded in the British Naval history. In 1762, Robert Garbutt, a boatswain, was convicted of attempted sodomy, primarily based on the testimony of a boy, John Pyle. However, initially, Pyle did not complain to the ship's officers because he was afraid the boatswain would punish him (Gilbert 75). Due to his fear, he initially refused to reveal what had happened to him. Similarly, Billy's guardian-like Dansker tells Billy that "he [Claggart]'s down on you [Billy]" (71; ch. 10) implying that Claggart intends to set a trap for him out of hatred. Therefore, Billy knows in advance that he is going to be a victim of Claggart's hatred. While Pyle was the victim of sodomy, Billy is the victim of a false accusation resulting from Claggart's harassment. Considering this, Pyle's and Billy's cases are not exact parallels. However, if readers

assume Claggart's statement about Billy's physical appearance to be a sexually provocative action, Billy in fact partially shares Pyle's experience. Billy's stammer is equivalent to Pyle's initial confusion, in that both result in silence. However, if they are allowed to speak out, boys have the power to get rid of the erotic man, who is harmful to men's bonds. Therefore, if Billy had had the ability to defend himself with words, not violence, he could have dealt with Claggart in a legal manner.

Though some boys, such as Pyle, testified in trials, leading authorities were reluctant to convict homosexual men (Gilbert 74). Unlike the military authorities, Pyle and boys like him exhibited a considerable courage. Captain Vere may have expected Billy to similarly testify to convict Claggart. Captain Vere cheers Billy up saying, "There is no hurry, my boy. Take your time, take your time" (99; ch. 19). During the trial, Captain Vere again encourages Billy, saying "I believe you, my man" (106; ch. 21). After realizing that his encouragement is futile and that Billy cannot testify his innocence, Captain Vere exhibits confusion. To hide his confusion, Captain Vere does not try to examine the motive of Billy's violence. As for the judgement of Claggart's false accusation, Captain Vere merely says that this is "a matter for psychologic theologians to discuss" (108; ch. 21), and gives up on resolving the matter by himself.

It is not just Captain Vere but also the narrator who explains Claggart's nature in an ambiguous way. The narrator implies the possibility of homosexuality, speaking of "the mania of an evil nature" (76; ch. 11). Similarly, Paul McCarthy describes Claggart's behavior as manifesting signs of possible "monomania" or "symptom of moral insanity" (127-28). Furthermore, Alan Bray explains that sodomites were historically thought to be "the attendant of witches and demons," being regarded "as the force of anarchic disorder set against divine Creation" (112). However, none of these indicate how a homosexual man would engender disorder or mutiny. Critics commonly insist that homosexuality is an ethical or moral problem. Captain Vere's thought to leave the case to "psychologic theologian" is

similar to Bray's. Bray states that Elizabethan theology considered homosexuality to be "a temptation common to our fallen human nature" (105). Captain Vere makes his own judgement on the basis of what actually happened and stops examining the psychological aspects of both sides.

Reluctant to explain Claggart's motivation publicly, Captain Vere elides the case into a common mutiny to make it more comprehensible:

Will they not revert to the recent outbreak at Nore? Ay. They know the well-founded alarm—the panic it struck throughout England. Your clement sentence they would account pusillanimous. They would think that we flinch, that we are afraid of them—afraid of practicing a lawful rigor singularly demanded at this juncture, lest it should provoke new troubles. (112–13; ch. 21)

Publicly, Captain Vere speaks of the case of Nore, which was a major mutiny by sailors of the Royal Navy in 1797. Although Captain Vere certainly knows that Billy is not at all like the sailors at Nore, the captain deceives his shipmates with fair words, giving his decision the appearance of a reasonable and understandable justification. Thus, Captain Vere's decision resembles the idea of the DADT policy, that is, maintaining silence to smooth things over.

In the same way as Captain Vere instinctively understands Claggart's evil nature, the narrator also notices Claggart's inexplicable abnormality. The narrator notes that "Claggart could even have loved Billy but for fate and ban" (88; ch. 17), knowing that military policy rejects homosexuality. We cannot be sure of the narrator's perspective on homosexuality, but there appears to be an expression of homophobia in the use of the words "monomania," "queer," and "insanity" to describe him.

As Captain Vere does not explain the motives for Claggart's false accusation, Billy too cannot find the right words to explain why he is provoked. Billy's confusion causes his stammering, which is described by

the narrator as a “vocal defect,” “organic hesitancy,” or “more or less of a stutter or even worse” (53; ch. 2). However, the blow of his fist operates in place of words, thus displaying his anger and protest against Claggart. While male victims pass through the legal system, as we can observe from judicial records, with authorities finally punishing the perpetrator of their rapes, Billy himself punishes his perpetrator directly. Captain Vere regards this scene as an execution “by an angel of God” (101; ch. 19). Captain Vere considers Billy ethically and theologically right; whereas, Claggart is considered morally wrong.

Claggart is considered to be a homosexual man, by unspoken agreement, and can be compared with a historical homosexual figure, Dr. Titus Oates (64; ch. 8). While Billy isolates abominated homosexuality from the male bonds, by becoming a god-like supernatural figure, Claggart is developed as an evil image with a potential homosexual nature in both Captain Vere and the narrator. Dr. Titus Oates was infamous for his role in the national emergency known as the “Popish Plot” (64; ch. 8). According to Wayne C. Bartee and Alice Fleetwood Bartee, Oates falsely accused five Catholic noblemen of plotting to assassinate the king (114), just as Claggart falsely accuses Billy. Ian McCormick notes that Oates was notorious not only as a traitor but also for his homosexual orientation (51). Claggart’s evil and Billy’s high morals are brought into sharp relief by the references to biblical and historical figures.

Therefore, Captain Vere cries out, “It is the divine judgment on Ananias!” (100; ch. 19) in front of Claggart’s dead body, thereby acknowledging Claggart’s guilt. Captain Vere’s warning to Claggart that “there is a yardarm-end for the false witness” (95; ch. 18) thus becomes a reality. Billy uses his own physical strength for the punishment, and Captain Vere agrees that Billy’s decision is ethically right. As Billy does not pursue reporting his officer’s sexual provocation, the process followed is not exactly the same. Hence, as Gilbert illustrates, death is brought to Claggart as a moral offense. Captain Vere is relieved of the burden of

judging a man he has suspected to be homosexual. Captain Vere's threat of "a yardarm-end" is brought to Claggart by Billy's fist in a manner similar to the execution in British judicial records.

Gilbert notes that in the British Navy—the setting of this novel—when a captain judged certain behavior to be suspicious but was unable to assert that it was homosexual, he could make an independent judgment (Gilbert 72). Belkin and Bateman also examine the recent prison data from peacetime in the United States and demonstrate that the navy hardly incarcerated any sailors for sodomy and that individuals "suspected" of homosexual acts were often released as "suspicious" (13). Therefore, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the captains in the Royal Navy were able to conceal their crews' "suspicious" behaviors in the same manner as the administration of the American military was, through its DADT policy. Captain Vere never mentions homosexual desires aboard his vessel; his attitude is the one that is common to both the American and the British military. In general, authorities are tolerant of homosexual abuse and officers' sexual provocation toward boys, hesitating to take legal action on such matters. Thus, the topic of homosexuality in *BB* converges with past and present sexual problems in the military.

#### IV

Historically, in the military, some boys accused their officers of sexual misconduct, and their outspokenness led to demotions for the concerned officers. In *BB*, Billy's stammer prevents him from testifying for himself. However, at the end of the story, it is proved that his vocal defect does not reduce him to a mere helpless being. Above all, Billy's hanging scene demonstrates that he is not completely silent and powerless.

In this story, the seemingly obedient, powerless Billy is compared to a powerful historical figure: "the comely young David" (78; ch. 12). David was loved by Jonathan, son of King Saul, and was given clothing and

weapons. "Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was upon him, and gave it to David, and his garments, even to his sword, and to his bow, and to his girdle" (*Bible King James Version*, Sam. 1.18-4). Furthermore, Billy is not only compared with David but, to reinforce the parallel, Claggart's envy toward Billy is likened to that which Saul felt toward David. Saul commissioned David as a military officer, a position in which David was successful (*Bible King James Version*, Sam. 1.18-5). David also played music to alleviate Saul's torment by an evil spirit sent from God (*Bible King James Version*, Sam. 1.16-23). Thus, both Billy and David share the quality of attractiveness, and their attractiveness helps strengthen fellowship, especially during wartime. Considering such comparisons made to a biblical figure wielding considerable political power, Billy's image is not at all powerless, at least in the symbolic realm.

According to Sarah Cole, war literature presents such inexpressible matters as friendship in war along with the unfamiliarity, ineffability, and horror of war; therefore, writers require the cultural authority of the Greek and the Bible to create new and cryptic language (473). The impossibility of speaking about male intimacy is presented in *BB*, although the horror of war is not touched upon in this story. Given the Biblical images of the narrator that are attached to Billy, readers might interpret his beauty as a cause of Claggart's homosexual desire. With desire and admiration of Billy, war helps Billy's appearance gain political power over other shipmates.

Billy's hanging is associated with Christian self-sacrifice; his shipmates keep pieces of the spar from which Billy was suspended, like pieces of "the Cross." "The Cross" reminds "the fresh young image of the Handsome Sailor" (131; ch. 30). The yearning of his shipmates toward Billy is not at all sexual or erotic. However, the bond between the shipmates created by Billy is not weakened after his death, thanks to the images that remain of Billy and "the Cross." Since Billy's virtue is described in a rather mystical or supernatural way, Billy is able to separate

homosexuality from male bonds and denies the possibility of harmful homosexual desire among the shipmates. The bonds of his shipmates are not erotic, and their comradeship does not evaporate with the passage of time as Billy's image and the abiding memories remain in their minds, strengthening their bonds.

Billy occasionally exhibits his eloquence and dignity: as the narrator describes, "ashore he was the champion; afloat the spokesman" (44; ch. 1). Billy is said to be "illiterate; he could not read, but he could sing, and like the illiterate nightingale was sometimes the composer of his own song" (52; ch. 2). Even if he cannot appropriately articulate words, he can use alternative methods to persuade and influence his fellow crew members. The following lines express his dominating power and silent eloquence:

But Billy came; and it was like a Catholic priest striking peace in an Irish shindy. Not that he preached to them or said or did anything in particular; but a virtue went out of him, sugaring the sour ones. (47; ch. 1)

Billy calms down the irritable crew members; his presence has the result of "sugaring the sour ones" with wordless persuasive power. His silent virtue has a religious persuasiveness, similar to that of a Catholic priest. The following passage describes how his shipmates show their admiration of Billy:

But they all love him. Some of 'em do his washing, darn his old trousers for him; the carpenter is at odd times making a pretty little chest of drawers for him. Anybody will do anything for Billy Budd; and it's the happy family here. (47; ch. 1)

Thus, Billy takes the place of his captain and is in control of his shipmates. He is an indispensable being for the maintenance of order. His shipmates' admiration is unrelated to eroticism, and does not require any secrecy. Hence, in this case, the men's affection for Billy is not a dangerous

destructive force endangering the military order. Rather, their affection for him becomes an indispensable source of strength for the ties between the men.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's argument in *Between Men* helps explain the relation between mere friendship and homosexuality. Claggart fully utilizes this relation in his plot for a silent mutiny. Further, following Sedgwick's argument helps us recognize the function of patriarchal leadership exerted by Billy on board.

We can go further than that, to say that in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (*including* homosexual) desire and the structure for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power: a relationship founded on an inherent and potentially active structural congruence. For historical reasons, this special relationship may take the form of ideological homophobia, ideological homosexuality, or some highly conflicted but intensively structured combination of the two. (25)

While Billy maintains "patriarchal" power through manipulating his shipmates' "homosocial" desires, Claggart's hatred toward Billy displayed in public space takes the form of "ideological homophobia," described among his shipmates as "queer" or "insanity." Sedgwick's theory explains how Claggart's provocation of Billy impedes the transmission of Billy's patriarchal power. Billy is made to be a convict or a mutineer, and shipmates are denied the ability to demonstrate their admiration of Billy in public. However, in their minds, his shipmates follow Billy despite his youth. Billy unconsciously succeeded in creating and maintaining what Sedgwick terms a "special relationship." Billy is thus an essential being, who maintains a bond among men. Similar to the way the biblical figure of David is taken care of by Jonathan, Billy is well taken care of by his fellow members.

Not only his fellow shipmates, but also the sailing master from the side



of authority cares about Billy. Billy's execution attracts sympathy from the authorities, and the sailing master asks, "Can we not convict and yet mitigate the penalty?" (112; ch. 21). When Reynolds compares *BB* to the Haymarket Affair in the United States, he refers to Illinois Governor, John Peter Altgeld's comment that "the defendants might be innocent victims of a biased judge" (27). The governor's comment reminds the readers of the sailing master's call for mercy. Officially, Billy is hanged to maintain discipline: the hanging is intended to silence and tame the sailors, the way the punishment in the Haymarket Affair quieted unrest. Ironically, however, Billy's punishment does not horrify the spectators, and the consequences Captain Vere expects do not follow. While the execution of the anarchist in the Haymarket Affair was cruel, Billy's hanging scene is extraordinarily beautiful. There is, therefore, a great difference in the result that follows Billy's execution. Billy bears some narrative and symbolic similarity to historical conspirators convicted of violence, but the difference in this case lies in Billy's obedience. He is totally obedient to his captain's authority, while the historical conspirators mentioned in the text exhibited dissatisfaction toward their respective authorities.

Billy's final words, "God bless Captain Vere!" (123; ch. 25), spoken without a speech impediment, demonstrates his eloquence and obedience to the captain, but at the same time, it indicates a non-violent protest. Through his own actions and words, Billy reduces the cruelty of his punishment. Unlike the punishment in the Haymarket Affair, which showed the complete victory of the state over anarchists, Billy acquires considerable power at his hanging scene. The following lines demonstrate how the cruelty is reduced by his words:

Syllables so unanticipated coming from one with the ignominious hemp about his neck—a conventional felon's benediction directed aft towards the quarters of honor; syllables too delivered in the clear melody of a singing bird on the point of launching from the twig—had a phenomenal effect, not unenhanced by the rare

personal beauty of the young sailor, spiritualized now through late experiences so poignantly profound. (123; ch. 25)

His words demonstrate his eloquence, reminding readers of the narrator's descriptions: "ashore he was the champion; afloat the spokesman" and "a Catholic priest striking peace in an Irish shindy." The comparison of his voice to the melody of birds enhances the effect of his words. His personal beauty is emphasized again, using images drawn from natural phenomena. Silently uniting the crew, Billy becomes spiritualized and acquires the power to refute the leader's authority and rules. In this context, the words, "God bless Captain Vere!" or "Syllables" contain several meanings. There is the possibility of different interpretations of his words both among spectators and readers. Captain Vere commits a sin by executing and betraying Billy for official reasons. Only God and Captain Vere know that Billy has made "the divine judgment on Ananias," and Captain Vere is at Billy's side when Claggart is struck dead.

Instead of remaining silent, those who have witnessed Billy's execution turn eloquent as they sing Billy's ballad at the end of the story. They demonstrate unity, which is interpreted as a disobedience of the military authority as they sing the ballad of the dead convict, Billy Budd. Although it is not at all the violent act of a rebel, it is regarded as a threat of violent rebellion in the future. The extraordinary execution scene indicates that Billy is not the victim of authority. Captain Vere's famous remark, "forms, measured forms" (128; ch. 27), is denied by Billy's deeds in the final scene. Captain Vere seemingly undermines his own authority by executing an innocent party, although he is not insightful enough to recognize his mistake. Through Captain Vere's error, Billy unintentionally becomes both a leader and an unintentional silent mutineer by showing his obedience to the captain with the cry of "God bless Captain Vere!" After seeing Billy's hanging, his shipmates "instinctively felt that Billy was a sort of man as incapable of mutiny as of wilful murder" (131; ch. 30). The

anger of his shipmates is not described in this story but this shows, at least, that they oppose the decision to justify Billy's guilt.

## V

Billy's stammering in the first half of the novella causes Captain Vere to misjudge him. If Billy had not said "God bless Captain Vere!" at his hanging, things would have been different. Captain Vere could have justified his decision and have maintained a level of trust among his crew by stressing Billy's violence and the possibility of mutiny. However, as Billy unexpectedly shows his great obedience in public, the level of distrust of captain rises. Although Billy cannot articulate an answer when asked to testify regarding his innocence, his innermost intentions are manifested to his shipmates through his "rare personal beauty." Billy's punishment seems less extreme when compared to the crucifixion of Jesus when "the fleece of the Lamb of God" appears and Billy ascends while taking "the full rose of the dawn" (124; ch. 25). Captain Vere's intention to demonstrate his power through a cruel punishment fails. His authority is denied by Billy's divinity that occurs at his execution. Billy becomes the object of everyone's gaze.

Sympathy for a hanged criminal was not unusual in pre-modern Europe. According to Pieter Spierenburg, in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, executions and punishments were routinely repeated rituals and unremarkable shows. Ironically, with the occurrence of riots, the executed would even sometimes garner public sympathy instead of the antipathy intended by the authorities; when rioters rebel against public authority, they also may garner public sympathy (51-52). In *BB*, his shipmates, as spectators of the execution, strongly sympathize with Billy even though they do not know the motive for his crime. Hence, the negative side of the public execution is partly reflected in this story. Captain Vere obscures the fact that Claggart may be homosexual, and that his erotic desire caused

a false accusation. Unable to provide proof of original guilt of Claggart, he covers up Claggart's suspicious provocative behavior by only referring to Billy's violence and shifting all blame to Billy, in principle at least.

Billy's execution is neither a violent public flogging nor a routine execution of a violent criminal. In general, spectators witness flogging and are reminded of the importance of the ethical correctness of the authority. However, in Billy's case, his own ethical correctness and the authority's failure to behave ethically are instead emphasized. Billy's execution demonstrates that he is not a violent plotter aiming to overthrow Captain Vere's authority. He is merely silenced by his captain to cover up an incident initiated by Claggart. The narrator describes this punishment as resulting in Billy "alone" "in their [shipmates'] hearts" and "in their eyes" (123; ch. 25). This implies that they would follow Billy and not their captain. Thus, Billy deprives Captain Vere of his leadership by showing an obedient attitude to his captain. Billy brings about distrust in authority among the rest of the crew, and Billy's handsome physical images, when he was alive, have the power to control his shipmates' emotions. Billy is admired by his shipmates even after his death.

Billy invalidates Captain Vere's "form" (128; ch. 27), or his discipline, which indicates a complete hierarchy. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes Captain Vere's discipline as associated with two methods of "physical elevation" (106). They are described as follows:

First, his preferred form of discipline depends, as we have seen, on positioning some male body not his own in a sacrificial "bad eminence" of punitive visibility, an eminence that (in his intention) forms the organizing summit of what thereby becomes a triangle or pyramid of male relations.... In another version of Vere's disciplinary triangle, however, his own seeing eye, not the looked-upon body of some other man who has been made an example of, makes the apex of the disciplinary figure. (106)

Sedgwick illustrates how spectators become subordinate to the man forming the “summit” and how Captain Vere exercises his power from the top of a triangle. However, Captain Vere’s misjudgment prevents him from perfecting his “preferred form of discipline,” the triangle. Billy is placed at the top of the triangle as a mere sacrifice. However, Billy is not degraded to a mere sacrifice. Captain Vere is also at the top of the triangle, expecting that everyone will observe how Billy pays for his crime; however, everyone’s eyes are not on Captain Vere but on Billy. Therefore, even if Captain Vere looks down from the apex of his triangle after the public flogging, no one feels his political power. Billy’s own seeing-eye forms the apex, and physically, Captain Vere is only a witness of the hanging and is not as important as Billy. Billy is at the highest place on the naval ship at the moment of his hanging, not only physically but also metaphorically. Billy’s final moment is so impressive that his shipmates forget the existence of the navy’s strict rules for a moment. Hence, Billy invalidates the laws and rules that control the spirit and behaviors of the shipmates, and his shipmates superficially return to a disciplined order after the execution.

According to Sedgwick, “the last third of the novella, the shockingly quick forced-march of Billy to the mainyard gallows and his apotheosis there: wholly and purely the work of Captain Vere, these represent the perfect answer to a very particular hunger” (109). Sedgwick does not discuss further the function of Billy’s apotheosis; however, Captain Vere does not intend to make an apotheosis of Billy in his execution. Billy’s articulation of the words “God bless Captain Vere!” is incidental to his plan; they are the “syllables so unanticipated.” Their spontaneous nature grants Billy his omnipotence.

Captain Vere’s preferred triangle does not work as he expected because the crew do not follow the strict structure of naval rules. Colin McGinn mentions that “the ideas of an inversion of the usual laws of interpersonal feeling” are reflected in *BB* (64). McGinn raises questions regarding

malevolent motiveless action and the character from which such action springs, concluding that Captain Vere “must exact the required punishment on Billy for striking an officer, namely death, all the while knowing that Claggart had evilly plotted against him” (64). Captain Vere neglects to understand the interpersonal feelings of Billy and Claggart. He never asks whether Claggart has an erotic desire toward Billy or whether Billy took his provocation to be sexual or erotic. Neither Claggart nor Billy conveys what caused them to do some particular actions. While each character has their own motives, Captain Vere pretends ignorance of their innermost emotions. As the failure of the DADT policy indicates, silencing expression of sexual preference and motives may possibly cause the breakdown of the military system or the military members’ distrust in their leaders.

Captain Vere makes a crude decision. Clare L. Spark compares Captain Vere’s quickness and carelessness with the insensitive Captain Delano in “Benito Cereno,” stating that “Vere lacked insight into the psychology of the unshackled lower orders” (399). However, these two leaders are not exactly the same. Captain Vere is more sensitive and considerate than Captain Delano, and he confesses his personal feelings to his subordinate, Billy. Captain Vere spares time for “the closeted interview” for “less than an hour and a half” (116; ch. 23). This can be interpreted that Captain Vere needs private space and time with Billy to disclose his emotional struggles. The captain’s struggles are originally caused by the suspicious behaviors of Claggart, and his struggle or “the agony of the strong” (115; ch. 22) is witnessed by the senior lieutenant when leaving the closet-like compartment. At this point, Captain Vere is careless and incapable. Originally, his inability to deal with the potential homosexual man, Claggart, causes his agony, and his agony makes him less impassive. He consequently neglects to deal with homosexual desires in the navy and blurs Claggart’s motives in the same way as the recent American captains under the DADT policy did.

Furthermore, the article "News from the Mediterranean" maintains a complete silence regarding the facts of Claggart's sexual preference and motives, similar to the DADT policy. The article reports that Claggart "was vindictively stabbed to the heart by the suddenly drawn sheath knife of Budd" (130; ch. 29). Billy's fist is changed into a "knife," and the incident is changed into a "plot" by the "ringleader," Billy (130; ch. 29). However, obviously, none of Billy's shipmates believe this. Crew members become united in their belief that Billy is apotheosized. They carry "the Cross" at all times, indicating that Billy is living in their minds.

The shipmates who believed in Billy's innocence sing "Billy in the Darbies" (132; ch. 30), a ballad to remember Billy in their hearts, which indicates how poorly they trust the authority of Captain Vere. Thus, Billy unifies the crew and exercises leadership even after his death. Although Spark refers only to the shipmates' distrust, this distrust becomes a silent distrust, which may be an omen of the beginning of a violent mutiny like the Nore or Spithead mutinies. Therefore, the act of singing Billy's ballad indicates the close bonds among shipmates, and is an omen of a violent mutiny signifying Captain Vere's lack of leadership. Captain Vere cannot step into the matter of interpersonal feelings such as the suspicion of homosexual desires on board. Historical leaders in the military have had similar interpersonal problems.

## VI

Billy displays his nobility to his captain through his silent protest and his cry of "God bless Captain Vere!" When Billy cries out, everyone stares at Billy with admiration. All eyes are on Billy and not Captain Vere. Billy's extraordinary hanging scene was not created intentionally by Billy; however, ironically, what Sedgwick termed "Vere's preferred form of discipline" collapses. The spectators confirm Billy's attractiveness once again, strengthening their bonds by worshipping him. There is no further

reference to Billy's physical attractiveness by the narrator until the end of the story. Harmful homosexual desires are removed from men's comradeship as both Claggart and Billy disappear. In this way, ill-planned punishment leads to the distrust of their leader. Another mutiny may occur if the shipmates remained dissatisfied with Billy's verdict and direct their anger toward their captain.

Subsequent events occur because of Captain Vere's failure to explain both Billy and Claggart's motivations in public. Looking back at contemporary political arguments over DADT, Captain Vere, similar to recent American military authorities, intentionally refrains from investigating Claggart's sexual preference to smooth things over. Ironically, this leads to the exposure of Captain Vere's lack of leadership. He eliminates personnel important for the strengthening of men's bonds. At the same time, Billy's physical image when he was alive attracts his shipmates and gains him political power.

Overall, Billy unconsciously becomes a silent mutineer without any clear intention of being one. Hence, *BB* shows that erotic homosexual desires become a cause of instability in authority, or even great mutinies. Incapable historical leaders and the captain in *BB* cannot speak openly about suspicious erotic desires, which are harmful to the organizations, and they have failed to eliminate those desires. Occasionally, what Sedgwick termed "homosociality" works effectively to create a family-like relationship within the navy, if the term "homosociality" does not include homosexuality. Therefore, *BB* presents to us persistent sexual problems throughout the military, all of which result from maintaining silence about Claggart's sexual preference and Billy's stammering. Thus, the novella reminds us of the past and the recent incidents of homophobic abuse, disorder, and lack of leadership displayed by military officers in both Britain and America, all of which are caused by silence about sexual preferences within forces.



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## Synopsis

Silent Mutineers in Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor*  
Shiho Hayashi

Herman Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor* (*BB*) is a story of men's bond, which is sometimes regarded not as a mere friendship, but as a homosexual or erotic relationship. Historically, the British and the US militaries have faced the problems of sexual offense, and both countries have struggled to solve the problems by either controlling homosexuality in a strict way or keeping silence about the members' sexual preference. Usually, the officers higher in rank provoke the boys, as we can see in the protagonist Billy and his superior, Claggart. The authorities' struggle is reflected in the story. When comparing the historical cases on judicial records, readers can find the similarities in Captain Vere's process of judgement and the way of punishments.

Historical cases show that victimized boys' accusation often brought their officers down from their positions. Therefore, homosexuality on board is regarded as a serious offense and brings disorder within the navy. Boys were thought to have subversive power over the officers and the authority. However, some boys are afraid of speaking out that they are the victims of their officers' provocative behaviors. In *BB*, boys' hesitation and fear are reflected in Billy's voice defect when he is asked to testify his innocence in front of Claggart and Captain Vere.

Considering that homosexuality is a destructive force for the navy, Billy and Claggart could be interpreted as silent plotters in this story. Claggart presumes that the crew shows great admiration for Billy, and the men's admiration for a boy possibly destroys the order in the navy. Claggart contrives a plot by implying the homosexual desires on board, and it weakens Captain Vere's authority. On the other hand, Billy tries to bring justice and moral correctness to the ship. Though he could not defend himself with words, he claims his innocence by showing royalty to his

captain. His royalty ironically changes the cruel hanging scene into a beautiful show-like moment, and invalidates the power of punishment and law.

Overall, Billy's body has a silent power to control the crew members. His silent body has more controlling power than Captain Vere's authority as Billy is apotheosized through the hanging scene and crew members worship Billy as they carry "the Cross," a piece of the spar that Billy is suspended. Although the great mutinies and the incident caused by homosexual desires have totally different nature, Captain Vere deals with the case in the same way. His misjudgment causes distrust among the crew members, and it might be the beginning of a mutiny. Billy unintentionally becomes a ringleader or a plotter after his death, winning the trust of his shipmates. Hence, Captain Vere's misjudgment is caused by miscommunication with Billy, and Billy, a cause of Captain Vere's misjudgment, unintentionally shakes his authority with his virtue.