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**DEPRAVITY, ABUSE AND HOMOEROTIC DESIRE  
IN *BILLY BUDD* AND ‘THE PRUSSIAN OFFICER’**

BETHAN JONES

In their resonant and evocative stories – *Billy Budd, Sailor* and ‘The Prussian Officer’ – Herman Melville and D. H. Lawrence adopt military settings for a personal drama. In both tales, two men come into close and dangerous proximity, resulting ultimately in their deaths. Michael Squires has argued that the Lawrence story, “revealing the secret origin of abuse, shows the Captain punishing what he cannot consciously desire”.<sup>1</sup> This comment could also be applied to Melville’s introspective and ambiguous novella (which has been subject to diverse interpretations), suggesting a motive for John Claggart’s persecution of the innocent Billy. Furthermore, secret abuse and subconscious desire are certainly prevalent within Benjamin Britten’s operatic version of Melville’s tale, with libretto by E. M. Forster and Eric Crozier. When it is considered that Forster had almost certainly read Lawrence’s controversial story of military insubordination, bullying, murder and repressed homoerotic desire, a fascinating and complex pattern of inter-connection begins to emerge. Below, I will attempt to tease out the most significant connections by examining both stories alongside the subsequent recasting of *Billy Budd* as an opera.

Before analysing the texts themselves it is necessary to establish a clear timeline and to give some indication of the complex web of interconnections existing between the five authors in question (namely Melville, Forster, Lawrence, Crozier and Britten).<sup>2</sup> The ‘Billy Budd’ story originated in verse form, as a 32-line ballad – ‘Billy in the Darbies’ – with prose introduction, drafted by Melville in 1886. Then, in 1888, he began revising the tale as a more substantial prose work (with the original ballad incorporated at its close): a novella titled *Billy Budd, Sailor* which was left

unpublished at his death in 1891.<sup>3</sup> It was not until 1924 that the novella was published for the first time, after Raymond M. Weaver (Melville's first biographer) retrieved a manuscript draft from Melville's granddaughter, Eleanor Melville Metcalf, who had received it from the author's widow. This edition, however, was compromised by errors in transcription and interpretation. Much later, in 1951, the novella was adapted as a stage play and performed on Broadway. In 1962 a film version appeared, while in the same year Harrison Hayford and Merton Sealts published an authoritative, scholarly transcription of the novella.<sup>4</sup>

The evolution of the opera version can be accounted for through considering a more complex and intricate process of influence and collaboration, and I will situate Lawrence's 'The Prussian Officer' in relation to its textual history. Lawrence had long admired Melville's writing and devoted two chapters to him in his critical work *Studies in Classic American Literature*, published in 1923 in the USA and in Britain the following year. One chapter focuses on Melville's first two novels – *Typee* and *Omoo* – while the second tackles *Moby Dick* (SCAL 334–57), and it is worth noting that Lawrence's interest in the latter predated the novel's burgeoning popularity through the 1920s. However, Lawrence could not have read *Billy Budd, Sailor* when he wrote 'The Prussian Officer' in June 1913 – Melville's manuscript had not been discovered at that stage – indicating conclusively that the striking similarities between the tales do not stem in this instance from direct textual borrowing.<sup>5</sup>

'The Prussian Officer' (originally titled 'Honour and Arms') was published in 1914, both in the *English Review* and then as the title story in Lawrence's first volume of short fiction.<sup>6</sup> In February 1915, following a period of correspondence by letter, Forster visited Lawrence at the cottage he was inhabiting at that time, on the Meynell family estate at Greatham, Sussex. The meeting between them stemmed from mutual admiration and began well; soon, however, it became more inflammatory and resulted in anger and irritation on the part of Forster when harangued by Lawrence about his books, his attitude to life and his homosexuality.<sup>7</sup> After

the meeting, Lawrence wrote that “[Forster] was very angry with me for telling me about himself” (2L 293), and many years later he received a “silly, funny little letter” from Forster telling him “à propos of nothing that he admires me but doesn’t read me” (7L 165). Nonetheless, it is clear that these two seminal authors did read each other’s works, and it is especially notable in this context that they actually discussed the recently issued *Prussian Officer* volume during their meeting; indeed, Forster passed on a “ghastly rumour of the *Prussian Officer*’s being withdrawn from circulation, by order of the police. God save us – what is the country coming to. But it probably is not true” (2L 280). John Worthen also alludes to a letter sent by Forster to Florence Barger during his visit to Greatham, in which he relays a story (probably stemming from Lawrence) regarding Sir Jesse Boot and his alleged refusal to distribute copies of the volume to his subscribers. Forster describes how “when pressed [Boot] sends it in a special binding with a note that this is the only copy in his library and that he sends it to show how disgusting it is” (PO xxxv).<sup>8</sup> Forster’s engagement with this topic and his vehemence regarding the rumoured censorship strongly suggest that he was familiar with the controversial material that had provoked such outrage.

After his meeting with Lawrence, almost three decades passed before Forster was to enter into a productive relationship with the composer Benjamin Britten. He first encountered Britten in person in 1937 and their subsequent correspondence resulted in plans for collaboration; by 1948 they were considering *Billy Budd* as the basis for a full-length opera. This work emerged over the following three years and in 1951 Britten’s opera was commissioned for the Festival of Britain and premièred at the Royal Opera House. It was subsequently revised as the two-act version most commonly performed and recorded today.<sup>9</sup>

Melville’s novella is deeply rooted in context: its historical and political specificity creates a unique backdrop for the unfolding events. Mervyn Cooke writes:

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A number of historical incidents provided Melville with a framework on which to hang his tragic final story. The most important was the affair of the US frigate *Somers* in 1842 when three seamen were convicted by a drumhead court-martial on a charge of mutiny and duly hanged from the yardarm.<sup>10</sup>

Melville's cousin was one of the officers trying the case and the verdict was controversial. Cooke also alludes to the story of a young seaman on the US *St Mary's* who was executed for striking his lieutenant off the coast of Mexico in 1846.<sup>11</sup> The novella's action takes place on a warship – HMS *Bellipotent* (becoming "HMS *Indomitable*" in the libretto, from an earlier draft of the story) – in the Royal Navy during the French revolutionary wars. The timeframe is highly specific, as the events take place in 1797, immediately following mutinies within the British fleet at Spithead and the Nore: "two insurrections within the British fleet that were a symptom of the political turmoil of the times".<sup>12</sup> Melville writes that: "Discontent foreran the Two Mutinies, and more or less it lurkingly survived them".<sup>13</sup> He highlights the questionable origins of many recruits, some of whom were "culled direct from the jails":<sup>14</sup> men referred to in the opera as "lackeys" and "pimps" who inevitably pose a threat to order and discipline onboard. This sense of discontent is pervasive in the libretto, in which the French influence is seen as pernicious and potentially destabilising:<sup>15</sup>

FIRST LIEUTENANT: Any danger of French notions spreading to this side, sir?

VERE: Great danger, great danger. There is a word which we scarcely dare speak, yet at moments it has to be spoken. Mutiny... Ay, at Spithead the men may have had their grievances, but the Nore – what had we there? Revolution, sedition, the Jacobins, the infamous spirit of France...<sup>16</sup>

Fear of mutiny explains the reaction provoked by Billy's high-spirited outburst when he leaves his merchant ship for the man-of-

war. The genial salutation to his old ship – “And good-bye to you too, old *Rights-of-Man*” – highlights the allusion to Thomas Paine’s *The Rights of Man* (1791):<sup>17</sup> a response to Edmund Burke’s conservative *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790).<sup>18</sup> His outburst is magnified in the opera: Billy’s exclamatory phrase “Farewell, old *Rights o’ Man*” is given prominence through exuberant and vigorous musical accompaniment.<sup>19</sup> In both story and opera Billy’s actions provoke some outrage, though the lieutenant (in the former) and Captain Vere (in the latter) readily attribute this breach to youth and resilience. Nonetheless, Billy’s words are ambiguous and controversial because they could harbour a challenge to involuntary impressment and hint at dangerous “French” notions of democracy. In both story and libretto, Captain Vere emphasises the need to be “on our guard”, preaching a degree of vigilance evident particularly towards the tale’s close. When he has to call a drumhead court to try Billy immediately after the inadvertent murder of Claggart, the Captain fears revolt from his men. Melville evokes two waves of rising voices (accompanied ominously in the second instance by crying seafowl) after Billy is hanged, and Vere is acutely aware that he must diffuse a potentially volatile situation by rapidly engaging the sailors in habitual activity.

While the naval setting described above reflects Melville’s investment in sea travel and sea imagery (evident also in a number of Britten’s works), Lawrence’s tale, which enacts “the destabilization of military order”, situates his protagonists within the Bavarian Infantry Regiment just before World War I.<sup>20</sup> Squires identifies here the operation of historical forces in terms of military and class inequalities: the officer (also referred to as Herr Hauptmann or “captain”) is a “gentleman” while the orderly, with his “peasant endurance”, has “no access to power”.<sup>21</sup> Whilst Billy suffers from being yoked into close and unavoidable proximity with Claggart and his accomplices,<sup>22</sup> Lawrence’s *Schöner* is frequently confined to the lodgings he shares with his military superior. As the officer’s obsession with his orderly grows, the younger man’s sense of psychological and physical entrapment escalates, especially

when the officer commands him to give up his free evenings to stay in the house with him, instead of visiting his "sweetheart" (*PO* 5–6). Even when operating beyond the confines of the house, Schöner is oppressed by his awareness of the other man on horseback above him (*PO* 2) and his feeling that he is always moving in the officer's orbit. This is evident particularly when Schöner is unable to drink in the presence of the officer despite being tired, parched and extremely hot after marching. It is the resulting dehydration, coupled with sunstroke and post-traumatic shock after committing murder, which results in the "physical delirium" that precedes his death at the end of the story (*PO* 17).

The military hierarchy (within army and navy) creates a rigid system within which all characters of the two stories must operate. Their behaviour and relationships are defined and limited by their roles. Lawrence's officer has aristocratic origins but has failed to progress as he ought due to a history of gambling. Analogously, Claggart may have had "chevalier" status but is rumoured to have been involved in some "mysterious swindle".<sup>23</sup> This has resulted in his entrance into the navy relatively late in his career, forcing him to begin at the lowest level and to work his way up to his current position of master-of-arms. Nonetheless, the power of both over their subordinates is absolute, and Schöner knows that he cannot extricate himself from his superior until a further two-month period has passed and he is freed from his duties. While Schöner is tantalisingly close to release from the catastrophic circumstances which will cause his death, the turn of events in which Billy is "impressed" might be seen as analogously frustrating and unlucky. He is homeward bound on a merchant vessel but recruited in "arbitrary enlistment" by a passing warship, thus occasioning his transition from a relatively small and insular group to a much wider and more volatile community.<sup>24</sup> In Melville's story Billy becomes the sole recruit due to his clear superiority, while in the libretto he is one of three men who are press-ganged. His enthusiasm and lack of resistance to this change in his fortunes mark him out from his resistant, grumbling fellows, though Melville also highlights his

lack of choice: “any demur would have been as idle as the protest of a goldfinch popped into a cage”.<sup>25</sup> This image highlights the degree of entrapment experienced by both Billy and Schöner whilst incarcerated within the military machine, and also hints at the constraint of natural forces.

It is their raw, natural, innocent, animalistic qualities that link these two characters. Both men are youthful – in their early twenties – and seen as possessing untapped potential which, tragically, will never be fulfilled as a result of their early deaths. Billy is nicknamed “Baby” and his surname suggests his capacity for budding and ripening, while (as Cooke points out) the Celtic equivalent to Apollo is referred to as “Beli” or “Budd”.<sup>26</sup> Schöner is ironically described after his death as “so young and unused”, his body conveying the impression that he will awaken at any moment or “rouse” from sleep (*PO* 21). In addition, Billy is referred to by some as “Beauty” while the name Schöner is close to “schön”, meaning handsome or beautiful in German. Melville evokes a type of seaman defined by the label “Handsome Sailor”, opening his story with a depiction of such individuals standing out in a crowd. They are typically jovial, genial, generous, outgoing, popular and (of course) handsome, while possessing a kind of primitive mind that sets them apart from the more “civilised” or refined members of society. In conforming to this category, then, Billy is “Like the animals” in accepting his fate; he has little or no self-consciousness, and in his naïve simplicity is described as an “upright barbarian”.<sup>27</sup> Schöner analogously possesses the “blind, instinctive sureness of movement of an unhampered young animal” and “expressionless eyes, that seemed never to have thought, only to have received life direct through his senses, and acted straight from instinct” (*PO* 3). He shares with Billy a youth and vigour that leave them “free” and “unconscious” in their actions (*PO* 3), evident, for instance, in the orderly’s assured ease of movement and in Billy’s spontaneous farewell to his old ship.

While it is largely their beauty that provokes fascination in their military superiors, it is striking that both Billy and Schöner possess



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a flaw that is seen to compromise them in a significant way. Melville attributes such blemishes to the evil work of Satan – the “arch interfered” in the Garden of Eden – leaving his imprint upon each and every member of the human race.<sup>28</sup> The opera’s Prologue gives prominence to this idea, retaining some of the less explicit religious allusions: “There is always some flaw in it, some defect, some imperfection in the divine image, some fault in the angelic song, some stammer in the divine speech. So that the Devil still has something to do with every human consignment to this planet of earth”.<sup>29</sup> The stammer here is, of course, a direct reference to Billy’s “vocal defect” which compromises his otherwise melodious voice when “under sudden provocation of strong heart-feeling”.<sup>30</sup> Melville initially conveys this in the course of his disquisition on the nature of flawed human beauty more generally; later, however, we witness Billy struggling and stammering at the point where an afterguardsman – under Claggart’s instruction – tries to corrupt him by enticing him into mutiny: “If you d-don’t start, I’ll t-t-toss you back over the r-ail!”.<sup>31</sup>

In the opera, Billy’s stammer is dramatically and forcibly conveyed through the stuttering repetitions and broken musical phrases accompanying his words in the exchange below:<sup>32</sup>

CLAGGART: Where’s your home?

BILLY: Haven’t any. They say I was a... a... a...

FIRST LIEUTENANT: He stammers! That’s a pity! Fine recruit otherwise. Fine recruit all the same ...

BILLY: a... a... foundling! Ay, it comes and it goes... or so the chaps tell me. Don’t you worry. Foundling, that’s the word. Foundling. I’m a fou-ou-ou-ou-oundling.<sup>33</sup>

If we accept Melville’s assertion that Billy stammers when strongly moved or emotional, we might identify an element of trauma in the acknowledgment of his uncertain origins. (It is notable, however that in Melville’s original tale Billy is able to explain his foundling status without any such lapse.) Certainly, this moment marks an

uncomfortable and revealing hiatus in the flow of the opera, ensuring that the audience members take due note of this aspect of Billy's character. The full implications of Billy's vocal defect finally become evident in both novella and opera at the point where he is wrongly accused of mutiny by Claggart in front of his Captain and becomes utterly tongue-tied. It is the sheer frustration arising from his condition that unleashes a violent impulse, causing him to strike Claggart a fatal blow. Given that Billy's own death will inevitably follow this crime, it is arguable that Billy's defect kills him.

While Billy has "No visible blemish" or physical ugliness,<sup>34</sup> Schöner has the "slightest possible cast" or squint (*PO* 5) – and, more importantly, a scarred thumb described as both "ugly and brutal", marring his otherwise healthy and perfect appearance (*PO* 4). (In this respect, there is a closer correlation between Schöner and Melville's shipmate Jack Chase, to whom *Billy Budd* was dedicated and who influenced the portrayal of Billy: Chase had a missing finger.)<sup>35</sup> Scars tell stories: stories which may or may not be particularly significant within the military context. In *Billy Budd*, Melville highlights the connections between scars, stories, identity and military reputation when he describes "the Dansker": a seasoned, aging sailor in whom Billy confides when first aware that he is unwittingly being drawn into "petty trouble".<sup>36</sup> As a boarding-party member from his previous ship, *The Agamemnon*, the Dansker has received a "slantwise" cut resulting in "a long pale scar like a streak of dawn's light falling athwart the dark visage".<sup>37</sup> This scar, and the story behind its acquisition, results in the nickname "Board-Her-in-the-Smoke" by which this old Sailor is frequently known. This is just one among many "honourable scars" which testify to his laudable career at sea.<sup>38</sup>

Schöner's scarred thumb appears to have a more modest – even trivial – origin, but it bears the residual mark of a past story from which the officer is excluded. We are told that the latter has "long suffered from it" and – more controversially – that "He wanted to get hold of it and—. A hot flame ran in his blood" (*PO* 4). The dash

here serves as a textual absence hinting at unspeakable desires: desires which the officer cannot voice and cannot acknowledge even to himself. It points to a maelstrom of conflicting emotions, probably both violent and homoerotic in nature. Interestingly, this brief verbal absence is one which is emulated by the man who has provoked it, resulting in further correlations with Billy and his vocal defect. When the officer finally pins the thumb down with a pencil, demanding "'How did you come by that?'" Schöner's reply – "'A wood-axe, Herr Hauptmann'" (PO 4) – is characteristically evasive and infuriating for the older man. While Billy is rendered involuntarily wordless through his "sudden provocation of strong heart-feeling",<sup>39</sup> Schöner is sometimes wordless through choice: he resists contact by means of a self-defensive avoidance of verbal communication. This moment prefigures the later, horrific episode during which Schöner is brutally kicked from behind. During this altercation, he again evades a question he is unwilling to answer: "'And why have you a piece of pencil in your ear?'" (PO 7). In each of these pencil episodes, Schöner's unwillingness to respond stems from his instinctive desire to remain self-contained and resistant to any evolving, prying intimacy; later, this becomes a simple and urgent need to "save himself" (PO 10). Yet, ironically, after being brutally kicked, Schöner's wordlessness becomes involuntary and physiological – "The soldier worked his dry throat, but could not speak" – and he experiences a clicking in his throat that renders him "half articulate" (PO 8). After murdering the officer, Schöner again loses the ability to speak to a woman he sees nearby in a field (PO 19), while in the final, brief section of the story, conveying the aftermath of his death, we are given a vivid description of his open, black mouth. Arguably, then, bullying in both stories renders the victim mute.

It is notable that Schöner has contravened military discipline through appearing on duty improperly dressed: he has a pencil behind his ear which he has left there after writing some poetry for his girlfriend. The "little, eager smile" that appears on the officer's face arises from the fact that this breach has provided him with a

justification for inflicting punishment (*PO 7*). In the opera – though not, interestingly, in the Melville story – Billy at one point appears on deck wearing a scarf and is chastised by Claggart for this inappropriate extravagance:

CLAGGART: This is a man-o'-war. Take off that fancy neckerchief!

[Claggart pulls off Billy's neckerchief.]

BILLY: Very good, sir.

CLAGGART: And ... look after your dress. Take pride in yourself, Beauty, and you'll come to no harm. Now fall in.<sup>40</sup>

This exchange serves the useful function of introducing some personal contact between the two men before Claggart's growing and increasingly destructive obsession really takes hold.

It becomes clear that careless and trivial mistakes made when performing simple tasks provoke extreme reactions in the men who persecute Billy and Schöner. When Billy spills a whole pan of greasy soup over a scrubbed deck and Claggart has to step over it, the latter's response is telling. Before realising who has spilt it, Claggart's instinctive reaction is to ignore the error; then, seeing that Billy is the culprit, he moves to chastise him. Checking this impulse, he proceeds to say "“Handsomely done, my lad! And handsome is as handsome did it, too!”".<sup>41</sup> (In the opera these words are sung by Claggart after Billy has beaten Squeak for meddling with his kit.) The nearby sailors interpret Claggart's words as jocular but Melville alerts us to the "involuntary smile" – also termed a "bitter smile" or "grimace" – that follows his remark.<sup>42</sup> While Claggart merely taps Billy "playfully ... from behind" with his rattan, he gives a passing drummer boy a "sharp cut".<sup>43</sup> His violent impulse towards Billy is displaced and given another outlet. By contrast, in Lawrence's tale Schöner is the sole focus of his superior officer's bullying and bears the brunt of every outbreak of violent anger.

While Billy spills a pan of soup over a clean deck, Schöner spills a bottle of red wine on a tablecloth. This is the first in a sequence of escalating incidents during which he is reprimanded or punished. The spillage results in an "oath" accompanied by an intense look in which the officer's "eyes, bluey like fire, had held those of the confused youth for a moment" (*PO* 3). Subsequently, the officer flicks Schöner with a belt, throws a military glove into his face, pins down his scarred thumb and finally kicks him brutally on the backs of his thighs. Like the use of the rattan as an intervening object, all these attacks avoid direct skin-on-skin contact between the bully and his victim. For the officer, they result in an intensity of physical reaction: immediate pleasure and gratification with a subsequent backlash of pain, shock and shame. This is evident in his reaction to kicking Schöner, involving yet another spillage:

The officer's heart was plunging. He poured himself a glass of wine, part of which he spilled on the floor, and gulped the remainder, leaning against the cool, green stove. He heard his man collecting the dishes from the stairs. Pale, as if intoxicated, he waited. The servant entered again. The captain's heart gave a pang, as of pleasure, seeing the young fellow bewildered and uncertain on his feet, with pain. (*PO* 7)

There is clearly a strong element of pleasurable sadism here, and the smile that accompanies his actions initially lights up his face "like a flame" (*PO* 8). Yet this smile soon becomes a "sickly smile" and seems akin to the "grimace" on Claggart's face after engaging with Billy over the spilt soup. The escalating gratification is short-lived and rapidly gives way to a heavy state of nausea and exhaustion:

The officer, left alone, held himself rigid, to prevent himself from thinking. His instinct warned him that he must not think. Deep inside him was the intense gratification of his passion, still

working powerfully. Then there was a counteraction, a horrible breaking down of something inside him, a whole agony of reaction. (*PO* 8)

The officer deals with this backlash through denial, alcohol and – subsequently – rationalisation. He staves off an awareness of his actions, becoming oblivious through drink until the following morning, at which time he is able to set these events at one remove, believing his inferior to be at fault for being “stupid” (*PO* 9). The term “rigid” is significant, conveying the stiffened, repressed nature of his bearing and emphasising the striking contrast between the office and his (previously) freely-moving subordinate.<sup>44</sup>

Melville’s Claggart, by contrast, possesses a nature that “never allows wine to get within its guard” and is “without vices or small sins”.<sup>45</sup> His persecution of Billy is more covert and distanced, yet it has the potential to be fatally destructive as he knows that if his story is believed and his victim is found guilty of mutiny, Billy will receive a death-sentence. Like Lawrence’s officer, Claggart is an “acutely *conscious*” individual,<sup>46</sup> who exerts cerebral control over strongly working, suppressed “passion” and is compromised by this “intellectuality”. It is his innate intelligence that enables Claggart to recognise the highly unusual “moral” quality of Billy’s innocence: we are told that the majority of his fellow sailors lack the subtlety to be aware of or understand this phenomenon.<sup>47</sup> Claggart’s response to Billy goes far beyond envy and antipathy, instead arising from the fact that while he reacts on one level to Billy’s innocence with “cynic disdain”, he is tormented by his own exemption from this “free-and-easy” state of being: “fain would [he] have shared it, but he despaired of it”.<sup>48</sup> While Schöner seems “to have received life direct through his senses” (*PO* 3) and lives in an unhampered, spontaneous way, Billy has “never willed malice or experienced the reactionary bite of that serpent”.<sup>49</sup> he is not merely innocent but also instinctively good. Claggart is an appropriate antagonist through possessing a “natural depravity” which Melville highlights as an innate, rather than environmentally-triggered, core

of evil. Melville explicitly derives this category of being from Plato's list of character types and defines the "type" as follows:

Though the man's even temper and discreet bearing would seem to intimate a mind peculiarly subject to the law of reason, not the less in heart he would seem to riot in complete exemption from that law, having apparently little to do with reason further than to employ it as an ambidexter implement for effecting the irrational. That is to say: Toward the accomplishment of an aim which in wantonness of atrocity would seem to partake of the insane, he will direct a cool judgement sagacious and sound. These men are madmen, and of the most dangerous sort, for their lunacy is not continuous, but occasional, evoked by some special object ...<sup>50</sup>

The chaotic "riot" of emotion within the "heart" echoes the maelstrom of destructive, subversive impulses within the officer when reacting to Schöner. Significantly, though, because his pent-up feeling does not find equivalent moments of release, the "pleasure" element is generally lacking. Arguably it is hinted at with the "involuntary", "bitter" smile following the soup incident – but this reaction is characterised principally by exclusion and distance. Schöner and his officer are yoked together even through violence as the bullying escalates; Claggart merely torments Billy at one remove: through bribing others to disrupt his belongings or to tempt him into a mutinous scheme for monetary gain. If not personally gratifying, however, this approach proves useful in allowing Claggart to rationalise his otherwise unpardonable actions. When Squeak strategically invents defamatory remarks that the young sailor is supposed to have made against the master-at-arms, Claggart latches onto his words and turns them to his own purposes. Claggart also seizes on the soup incident as the officer does upon the spilt red wine or the pencil behind Schöner's ear. Through creative interpretation Claggart is able to see the spillage as expressing the "sly escape of a spontaneous feeling on Billy's part

more or less answering to the antipathy on his own".<sup>51</sup> The power of suggestion underlying these words may lend credence to a homosexual reading in which the liquid's "escape" represents ejaculation.<sup>52</sup> On the one hand this incident provides a justification for Claggart's continuing and escalating bullying; on the other, it could be seen as reflecting a desperate need for reciprocity, rather than (on Billy's side) no feeling at all.

It is in considering the motives underlying the bullying in each story that the correlations become more striking. There is clearly an obsessive, restless, homoerotic element to the desire experienced by the officer, and – unlike Claggart, who mostly gives the impression of composure and "sang froid" – his appearance betrays the extent to which Schöner has affected him:

The Captain grew madly irritable. He could not rest when the soldier was away, and when he was present, he glared at him with tormented eyes. He hated those fine black brows over the unmeaning, dark eyes, he was infuriated by the free movement of the handsome limbs, which no military discipline could make stiff. And he became harsh and cruelly bullying, using contempt and satire. The young soldier only grew more mute and expressionless. (*PO* 4–5)

For the officer, envy certainly plays a part: as a stiff, repressed, cerebral type he is compelled by the spontaneous, instinctive, animalistic movement and being of his orderly, just as Melville's Claggart feels the "charm" of Billy's innocence and instinctive goodness. Nonetheless, there are clearly other impulses at work that escalate and become more violent and sadistic as the tale proceeds. While Keith Cushman celebrates the story as a "highly achieved embodiment of Lawrentian metaphysics" and highlights the author's "dualistic vision", he also states that "The homosexual implications of the tale seem to be purposive".<sup>53</sup> Squires sees Herr Hauptmann as "wedged between the discipline he prizes as an officer and the crumbling sexual mores of a modern era",



highlighting the repressed desire that propels him into an increasing lack of self-control.<sup>54</sup> Hugh Stevens also emphasises the sexual charge underlying their connection but argues that it is inextricably rooted in the "institutional relation" that has yoked them into such close proximity: "This is not just a story of repressed homoeroticism spilling over into violence ... The eroticism derives both from the palpable attraction of the young man's free brown body and from the bond of authority which brings the two men together".<sup>55</sup> He points to the mutual "psychic life" and shared intimacy through secret shame that binds the men and prevents the orderly from breaking away.

A homosexual interpretation might be strengthened through reference to the key moment in which the officer kicks Schöner "heavily again, and again" when the latter is crouching with his back turned (*PO* 7). This could be seen as a sublimated rape scene in which the anal region is targeted for assault. The psychological aftermath might support such a reading: Squires suggests that the story "registers the orderly's rage –and despair – in such eloquent detail that the reader suspects the boy has been violated".<sup>56</sup> The officer's attack leaves debilitating bruises on the backs of the orderly's thighs, making walking painful. Figuratively, he brands Schöner with the imprint of his foot, as though making new scars or "put[ting] his name on the soldier's body".<sup>57</sup>

Homoerotic language is even more prevalent at the point where Schöner murders the officer and experiences the gratification of assuming power over him. There are many divergences from the *Billy Budd* tale to note at this point. Billy's murder of Claggart is a single, spontaneous blow to the forehead, springing from utter frustration at his inability to speak and defend himself. His blow is delivered while eye contact is preserved between the men, whereas Schöner is only able to strike at the moment when sight-lines are broken as the officer drinks, exposing his strong jaw and throat: "the instinct which had been jerking at the young man's wrists suddenly jerked free. He jumped, feeling as if he were rent in two by a strong flame" (*PO* 14). Billy has previously shown himself

capable of rage-fuelled, spontaneous moments of aggression,<sup>58</sup> but – given that he has been unaware of the origin of his persecution – this is the first time that violent instincts have been catalysed by Claggart. Conversely, Schöner – reacting to a relentless, escalating series of bewildering attacks – experiences heightened gratification and pleasure in pressing back the fallen officer’s head over a tree stump “with all his heart behind in a passion of relief”:

And with the base of his palms he shoved at the chin, with all his might. And it was pleasant too to have that chin, that hard jaw already slightly rough with beard, in his hands. He did not relax one hair’s-breadth but, all the force of all his blood exulting in his thrust, he shoved back the head of the other man, till there was a little ‘cluck’ and a crunching sensation. Then he felt as if his heart went to vapour. Heavy convulsions shook the body of the officer, frightening and horrifying the young soldier. Yet it pleased him too to repress them. It pleased him to keep his hands pressing back the chin, to feel the chest of the other man yield in expiration to the weight of his strong, young knee, to feel the hard twitchings of the prostrate body jerking his own whole frame, which was pressed down on it. (*PO* 15)

The most striking aspect of this vivid depiction of the murder is the combination of pseudo-sexual enjoyment with sadomasochistic violence. Indeed, Stevens highlights the irony of a situation in which: “Resistance can only take a form which mimics the initial act of violent, erotic subjection”.<sup>59</sup> Schöner relishes the novel sensation of the officer’s stubbly face between his hands, and – even more disturbingly – the death throes of the body, perhaps emulating sexual spasms. The gratification stemming from this physical contact and relief is twinned with an awareness of horror and fear, while the phrase “he felt as if his heart went to vapour” prefigures his subsequent inability to function due to “physical delirium” and trauma. Lawrence’s scene is made vivid through sensory imagery and descriptive detail: Schöner has his underlip

between his teeth, the jaw is "slightly rough with beard", the body is convulsed with "hard twitching", and finally: "the nostrils gradually filled with blood. The red brimmed, hesitated, ran over, and went in a thin trickle down the face to the eyes" (*PO* 15). A similarly horrific detail is evident in Melville's tale after the murder of the master-at-arms: "On Claggart's always pallid complexion, thick black blood was now oozing from nostril and ear".<sup>60</sup> Yet while Schöner straightens and tidies away the officer's body, laying the corpse out straight and covering the mutilated face, Claggart's corpse simply slides back down like a "dead snake" when Vere and Billy try to raise it to a sitting position.

While the homoerotic aspect of Lawrence's tale is undeniable, there is considerably less evidence in Melville's text to support an equivalent reading. We are told that Claggart's breed of depravity "partakes nothing of the sordid or sensual" and functions symbolically within a good/evil dichotomy.<sup>61</sup> Nonetheless, Cooke does suggest that sexual imagery in Melville's tale is "not always subtle", highlighting the prevalence of the terms "erect" and "ejaculate" in the narrative.<sup>62</sup> There are also repeated uses of the ambiguous term "passion" in the story to convey the workings of deep emotion within the antagonist. When denouncing Billy in front of Vere, "Claggart deliberately advanced within short range of Billy and, mesmerically looking him in the eye, briefly recapitulated the accusation".<sup>63</sup> Unlike in the Lawrence story, this unique moment of proximity and intense connection is intended by Claggart as the culminating point after which Billy will be condemned to death; ironically, of course, the close proximity puts him within range of Billy's fatal blow.

The most convincing argument for some feeling that exists within Claggart, other than the hatred stemming from evil antipathy, lies in Melville's sole description of him as a "man of sorrows".<sup>64</sup> On seeing Billy laughing with the other young sailors on deck, Claggart acquires a "settled meditative and melancholy expression, his eyes strangely suffused with incipient feverish tears".<sup>65</sup> Melville follows this by describing how the melancholy

expression “would have in it a touch of soft yearning, as if Claggart could even have loved Billy but for fate and ban”.<sup>66</sup> This is dismissed as merely an “evanescence” and is succeeded by a “pinching” and “shrivelling look” that turns his face into a “wrinkled walnut”. Nonetheless, the phrase “fate and ban” is an interesting one, as it hints at desired but prohibited feeling that could exist between the two in other circumstances.

It is highly likely that both Forster and Britten were attracted to Melville’s story principally as a result of the perceived homoerotic implications and that Forster saw Claggart’s motives as predominantly sexual.<sup>67</sup> The fleeting suggestion of suppressed or potential love is one that is developed in the opera – particularly in Claggart’s aria at the end of Act I but evident earlier too. Whereas in Melville’s tale Claggart does not so much as catch a glimpse of Billy when he is first impressed, in the opera he sees the new recruit instantly and is forcibly struck by his quality, describing him as: “A find in a thousand, your honour. A beauty. A jewel. The pearl of great price ... Your honour, there are no more like him. I have seen many men, many years have I given to the King, sailed many seas. He is a King’s bargain”.<sup>68</sup> This unfettered expression of admiration occurs after Billy’s stammering attempt to convey his foundling status: it is therefore a reaction purely to Billy as he stands (regardless of wealth or status), and seems to arise principally from aesthetic appreciation. This is the only time in which Claggart’s response to Billy is guileless, possessing the kind of innocent spontaneity that characterises the man he describes. It is also significant that the librettists soon follow this with the neckerchief scene, in which the former symbolically removes clothing from the latter while referring to him as “Beauty”.

The full extent of Claggart’s growing obsession with Billy is expressed most powerfully in his aria, which contains musical echoes of Iago’s Credo in Verdi’s *Otello* and reflects the Shakespearean resonances within Melville’s tale.<sup>69</sup> It contains an explicit reference to his own “depravity” and to his “own dark world” in which he has found a kind of peace and “established an

order such as reigns in Hell".<sup>70</sup> Melville's suggestion that Claggart is shrewd enough to appreciate Billy and is therefore tormented by the qualities he can never possess is articulated through a biblical echo: "But alas, alas! The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness comprehends it and suffers". There is also a strong sense of hatred fuelling the desire to "wipe [Billy] off the face of the earth", alongside his use of the terms "destroy", "destruction" and "annihilate". More interestingly still, the libretto either picks up on Melville's assertion that Claggart could have loved Billy (quoted above) or independently introduces phrases in which the term "love" is made both prominent and ambiguous. The line "With hate and envy I am stronger than love", coupled with "For what hope remains if love can escape?", could be interpreted in a number of ways. The first phrase could simply suggest that while Claggart personifies "hate and envy", Billy personifies the antithetical love-principle. Alternatively, it might imply that the emotions of hatred and envy combine to produce in Claggart a force more powerful than the emotion of love, so that he is using strong negative feelings to suppress hidden desire. The second quotation might suggest that Claggart would lose hope through Billy evading his wrath and flourishing, or that his greatest fear is any outward, visible expression of the inadmissible love he feels for the young sailor. The idea of secret, repressed love – perhaps evoking Melville's use of "ban" – is further developed in "If love still lives and grows strong where I cannot enter": a line which again seems to conflate Billy as love-principle with Billy as love-object. Repressed, prohibited, growing desire seems to be the fearful prospect that could result in Claggart's "torment too keen". The exclamatory "No! I cannot believe it!" conveys the kind of confusion we witness within Herr Hauptmann when attempting to combat his growing obsession with Schöner through visiting an unwanted woman for sex: confusion that renders him wordless when he is transfixed by the sight of Schöner's scarred thumb.

There are clearly some fundamental discrepancies between the texts under consideration. One, of course, is the pivotal role of the

benevolent Captain Vere in the opera, and the emphasis on the lifelong suffering and soul-searching he experiences due to his failure to save Billy. In Melville's tale he is injured and subsequently dies quite soon after the events relayed in the narrative; he is also portrayed with greater ambivalence and less sympathy. In the opera he lives to old age, his retrospective musings opening and closing the action. Like Conrad's Marlow he functions as a framing device:<sup>71</sup> the opera relays the story of his redemption and at the end he finds some peace through recalling Billy's blessing. Further significant differences are evident in the aftermath of the murders: Billy is dignified and peaceful, his last words "God bless Starry Vere!" revealing his characteristic lack of bitterness and "animal" acceptance of his fate. Schöner, by contrast, enters an altered state of consciousness in which he is dislocated from humanity and perceives nature in an odd and distorted way. He falls in a paroxysm, yearns for the distant mountains, is discovered unconscious and dies without reawakening. At the end of the Lawrence tale the two corpses are represented lying side by side on mortuary slabs while in *Billy Budd* the bodies are committed to the ocean. Perhaps there is a shared suggestion here that a destructive connection binds the bully and victim within varying degrees of physical proximity. In each case the younger man has been drawn in and caught, with devastating consequences.

The Claggart/Billy relationship is one of covert persecution and guile, pitted against the childish innocence of a young man who simply cannot believe that his superior officer is "down on [him]".<sup>72</sup> The officer/orderly connection is one of simmering intensity, brutal bullying, sadomasochism and homoerotic charge, explicable through reference to Lawrence's letter to Edward Garnett, written in November 1912:

Cruelty is a form of perverted sex ... And soldiers, being herded together, men without women, never being *satisfied* by a woman, as a man never is from a street affair, get their surplus

sex and their frustration and dissatisfaction into the blood, and love cruelty. It is sex lust fermented makes atrocity. (*IL* 469, Lawrence's emphasis)

Perverted sex as a motive for cruelty remains only a faint implication in Melville's tale but is powerfully and disturbingly evident in 'The Prussian Officer'. The librettists – constrained perhaps by their adherence to Melville's story and aware of possible censorship – introduce only hints that homosexual desire may underlie Claggart's violent obsession with Billy. However, Forster's own words regarding Claggart's Aria within a letter to Britten dating from December 1950, shed fascinating light on his intention: "I want *passion* – love constricted, perverted, poisoned, but nevertheless *flowing* down its agonising channel; a sexual discharge gone evil. Not soggy depression or growling remorse" (Forster's emphasis).<sup>73</sup> The correlations between Lawrence's "perverted sex" and Forster's "love ... perverted", as well as "surplus sex" alongside "sexual discharge", are undeniable. Forster's words indicate that he has departed from Melville's archetypes, suggesting instead that – like Herr Hauptmann – Claggart's evil stems from tainted or repressed sexual impulses. In reconceptualising his antagonist in this way (albeit subtly and ambiguously), it is arguable that Forster makes him more human, more complex and certainly more Lawrentian.

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I am extremely grateful to Professor Mervyn Cooke for his insightful comments on a late draft of this article, and for providing page references from the 1951 edition of Forster and Crozier's libretto. I am also very grateful to Dr Jason Lawrence, as the principal idea for this article arose during a discussion with him about possible connections between *Billy Budd* and 'The Prussian Officer'.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Squires, 'Modernism and the Contours of Violence in D. H. Lawrence's Fiction', *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 39.1 (spring 2007), 84–104, 86.

<sup>2</sup> I will be focusing on Forster rather than Crozier here, as a result of the Lawrence-Forster connection. There is evidence to suggest that Forster was principally responsible for the dramatic material while Crozier initially focused on the songs; Forster was certainly responsible for Claggart's aria which will provide the foundation for my comparative argument. Indeed, he believed this aria to be his most significant contribution to the opera: see Mervyn Cooke and Philip Reed, *Benjamin Britten: Billy Budd* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 53, 61. See also Hanna Rochlitz, *Sea-Changes: Melville – Forster – Britten* (Göttingen: Universitätsverlag Göttingen, 2012), which explores the evolving relationship between these collaborators, insightfully situating Forster's libretto in the context of his other works.

<sup>3</sup> Cooke identifies three distinct "phases" of composition: see Cooke and Reed, *Benjamin Britten: Billy Budd*, 18–19.

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this process of textual evolution see *ibid.*, 16.

<sup>5</sup> Humma believes it to be "quite a curious coincidence" that Lawrence should have conceived the "precise situation" of the story without having read Melville's tale: John B. Humma, 'Melville's *Billy Budd* and Lawrence's "The Prussian Officer": Old Adams and New', in *Essays in Literature*, vol. 1.1 (1974), 83.

<sup>6</sup> For the textual history and evolution of this story see John Worthen, 'Introduction', *PO* xix-li.

<sup>7</sup> See Mark Kinkead-Weekes, *D. H. Lawrence: Triumph to Exile 1912–1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 191.

<sup>8</sup> Worthen highlights Lawrence's concerns regarding the controversial nature of the stories within this collection and the impact these concerns had on the order of the stories within the volume. He also refers to some hostility amongst reviewers, balanced by more appreciative reactions (*PO* xxx and xxxiii).

<sup>9</sup> For the evolution of the two-part version see Cooke and Reed, *Benjamin Britten: Billy Budd*, 74–84. I have chosen here to focus on the four-act opera as it provides the fullest text and reflects the librettists' original intentions. Reed emphasises the "personal" motives underlying some of the revisions, such as the cutting of the grand operatic scene at the



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end of Act 1 which may have stemmed partly from a hostile reviewer's comparison of the set piece with Gilbert and Sullivan's *HMS Pinafore*. Equally, certain cuts made to Vere's part may have arisen from Peter Pears's reservations about his ability to execute the lines appropriately.

<sup>10</sup> Cooke and Reed, *Benjamin Britten: Billy Budd*, 17.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Milder, 'Introduction and Explanatory Notes', Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor and Selected Tales*, ed. Robert Milder (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), 404, note to 290. The mutiny at Spithead – an anchorage near Portsmouth – was essentially a non-violent protest for better pay and working conditions. The Nore – an anchorage in the Thames estuary – witnessed a more troubling and violent insurrection in which sailors took command of their ships, blockaded London and even planned to sail their ships to France. These protests were partially successful, remedying poor food, brutal discipline and the withholding of pay. Yet they were also indicative of a turbulent political situation, resulting in restlessness and resentment among the sailors.

<sup>13</sup> Herman Melville, 'Billy Budd, Sailor', in *Billy Budd, Sailor and Selected Tales*, ed. Robert Milder (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), 294.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 301.

<sup>15</sup> In Britten's music, the key of B minor is used to represent the ominous threat of mutiny (see Cooke and Reed, *Benjamin Britten: Billy Budd*, 92). For a further discussion of the significance of 'B' keys within Britten's music, see Mervyn Cooke, 'Be Flat or Be Natural? Pitch Symbolism in Britten's Operas', Philip Rupprecht, ed., *Rethinking Britten* (New York: Oxford UP, 2013), 102–27.

<sup>16</sup> E. M. Forster, *Billy Budd: music by Benjamin Britten; libretto by E.M. Forster and Eric Crozier; adapted from the story by Herman Melville*, libretto only (London: Hawkes & Son Ltd, 1951), 27.

<sup>17</sup> Melville, 'Billy Budd, Sailor', 285.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 403; Milder's note to 284.

<sup>19</sup> Forster, *Billy Budd*, 17. Benjamin Britten, *Billy Budd: an opera in four acts*, vocal score (London: Hawkes & Son, c.1952), 45–6.

<sup>20</sup> Squires, 'Modernism and the Contours of Violence in D. H. Lawrence's Fiction', 86.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Cooke indicates that the music reflects the claustrophobic nature of the autonomous floating community, although he also considers the ship as a

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microcosm of the wider world and a metaphor for life itself: Cooke and Reed, *Benjamin Britten: Billy Budd*, 21, 87.

<sup>23</sup> Melville, 'Billy Budd, Sailor', 300.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>26</sup> Cooke and Reed, *Benjamin Britten: Billy Budd*, 19. The correlation between "Beli" and "Bellipotent" is also striking.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 285, 288.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

<sup>29</sup> Forster, *Billy Budd*, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Melville, 'Billy Budd, Sailor', 289.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 316.

<sup>32</sup> Britten, *Billy Budd*, 39–40. Later, irony is introduced through the music at the point where Claggart fails to speak when he first approached Vere (see Cooke and Reed, *Benjamin Britten: Billy Budd*, 37).

<sup>33</sup> Forster, *Billy Budd*, 15–16.

<sup>34</sup> Melville, 'Billy Budd, Sailor', 289.

<sup>35</sup> See Cooke and Reed, *Benjamin Britten: Billy Budd*, 16. Jack Chase (with his missing finger) appears as a key character within Melville's fifth novel *White-Jacket* (1850).

<sup>36</sup> Melville, 'Billy Budd, Sailor', 303.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

<sup>40</sup> Forster, *Billy Budd*, 22.

<sup>41</sup> Melville, 'Billy Budd, Sailor', 306.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 306–7.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> This episode might usefully be compared with the scene in *Women in Love* where Lawrence describes Hermione's experience of striking Rupert Birkin with a paperweight, as well as the psychological aftermath (*WL* 106).

<sup>45</sup> Melville, 'Billy Budd, Sailor', 309–10.

<sup>46</sup> Humma, 'Melville's *Billy Budd* and Lawrence's "The Prussian Officer"', 85.

<sup>47</sup> Melville, 'Billy Budd, Sailor', 312.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 310.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 312.

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, Cooke and Reed, *Benjamin Britten: Billy Budd*, 25–6.

<sup>53</sup> Keith Cushman, *D. H. Lawrence at Work: The Emergence of the 'Prussian Officer' Stories* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1978), 170.

<sup>54</sup> Squires, 'Modernism and the Contours of Violence in D. H. Lawrence's Fiction', 86.

<sup>55</sup> Hugh Stevens, 'Sex and the Nation: "The Prussian Officer" and *Women in Love*', in *The Cambridge Companion to D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Anne Fernihough (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), 55.

<sup>56</sup> Squires, 'Modernism and the Contours of Violence in D. H. Lawrence's Fiction', 86.

<sup>57</sup> Stevens, 'Sex and the Nation', 56.

<sup>58</sup> See Melville, 'Billy Budd, Sailor', 283.

<sup>59</sup> Stevens, 'Sex and the Nation', 56.

<sup>60</sup> Melville, 'Billy Budd, Sailor', 332.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 310.

<sup>62</sup> Cooke and Reed, *Benjamin Britten: Billy Budd*, 27.

<sup>63</sup> Melville, 'Billy Budd, Sailor', 330.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 321.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 320–1.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 321. See Roger Austen's article 'But for Fate and Ban: Homosexual Villains and Victims in the Military', in *College English*, vol. 36.3 (1974), 352–9.

<sup>67</sup> See Cooke and Reed, *Benjamin Britten: Billy Budd*, 27, 33.

<sup>68</sup> Forster, *Billy Budd*, 16.

<sup>69</sup> Cooke discusses this more fully, highlighting the way in which Claggart's response to Billy evokes Iago's jealousy of Cassio: see Cooke and Reed, *Benjamin Britten: Billy Budd*, 21.

<sup>70</sup> Forster, *Billy Budd*, 33. Subsequent quotations in this paragraph from this aria can be found on 33–4.

<sup>71</sup> In Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899).

<sup>72</sup> Melville, 'Billy Budd, Sailor', 305.

<sup>73</sup> E. M. Forster, *Selected Letters*, eds Mary Lago and P. N. Furbank, vol. 2 (London: Collins, 1985), 242.