

September 1976

The Derelict Slave Ship in Melville's *Benito Cereno* and Defoe's *Captain Singleton*

Arthur H. Scouten

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 12, no.3, September 1976, p.122-125

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.

The Derelict Slave Ship in Melville's Benito Cereno and Defoe's Captain Singleton

by ARTHUR H. SCOUTEN

BY NIGHT SHE DRIFTED like a derelict, her topsail yard gone, her sails blown to shreds." So begins William Owens' account of the appearance of the slaver *Amistad* off the Long Island shore.¹ With the great number of ships involved at the height of the slave trade, one might expect to hear tales of mutinies; and indeed references to ship-board uprisings run through the four volumes of Elizabeth Donnan's *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America*.² However, one consequence of a successful mutiny was that the African slaves, who often lacked the experience to navigate and handle a regular sea-going vessel, suffered new distress as the ship and cargo floated desolately on the ocean. Chance encounters with derelict slave ships came to be reported,³ and I wish to examine two of them. The first is Daniel Defoe's *The Life, Adventures, and Pyracies of the Famous Captain Singleton* (1720), in which Defoe expands an incident from Exquemelin's *Bucaniers*.⁴ The second is Melville's celebrated psychological study *Benito Cereno* (1856).

It must not be supposed that Defoe's novel was in any way a source for *Benito Cereno*, as Melville took his material directly from Captain Amasa Delano's *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres* (1817). Melville had read both *Robinson Crusoe* and *Roxana* but he never mentions *Captain Singleton*.⁵ I am not hinting at any kind of influence; instead, I want to show how these authors, representing two distinct stages in the Puritan tradition, treated essentially the same theme.

Both authors inject an air of mystery, but their methods of organizing their material are radically opposite. Melville begins his tale quietly, even casually. Delano's men see a strange ship, without any flag, making its way uncertainly into the harbor. Apparatus in the stranger's masts appears in "sad disrepair," and everything about the ship seems in neglect and decay. Its habitants are chiefly blacks, frantic with thirst,

1. *Black Mutiny* (Philadelphia, 1953), p. 3.

2. (Washington, 1930-35).

3. See D. P. Mannix and Malcolm Cowley, *Black Cargoes* (New York, 1962), and the index to Elizabeth Donnan's work cited above.

4. Oliver Exquemelin, *Bucaniers of America* (1685), part III, p. 93; see A. W. Secord, *Studies in the Narrative Method of Defoe* (Urbana, 1924), pp. 112-64.

5. *The Melville Log*, ed. Jay Leyda (New York, 1951), 2 vols.

having "a common tale of suffering." Save for Benito Cereno, no white officers can be seen. Melville does not at first emphasize the significance of this odd condition, but continues with a steady, detailed presentation of a sinister situation. Four elderly slaves in one place and six black men polishing hatchets in another seem to have a position of authority without exercising it, as the great crowd of blacks mill about in a confused and disorderly state. Hence a high proportion of the description has been given before Captain Delano finally inquires about the absence of white officers. The suspense is now mounting, as Melville spins out one of the most remarkable narratives in American literature.

Herman Melville is concerned with the presence of evil in the recesses and depths of man's nature, with the meaning of sin and suffering, and with the paradox of appearance and reality. It will be remembered that Melville makes no explicit denunciation of slavery. Instead, his focus is on the psychological states of his main characters, the amazing innocence of Captain Delano, and the agonized shame of the Spanish captain, in a context of decay, treachery, and moral guilt.

There is no suspense in Defoe's version. His narrator, a pirate captain, starts at the peak of surprise and excitement: "I leave any Man that is a Sailor," he exclaims, "to judge what a Figure this Ship made when we first saw her, and what we could imagine was the Matter with her. Her Main Top-Mast was come by the Board . . ." A multitude of details follow, such as "The Mizen Topsail" was "spread over Part of the Quarter Deck like an Awning." Then, "In a Word, the Figure the whole Ship made, was the most confounding to Men that understood the Sea, that was ever seen; she had no boat, neither had she any Colours out." When Singleton boards the vessel, he finds "600 Negroes . . . and not one Christian, or white Man, on board."

"I was struck with Horror," reports the pirate captain, for he instantly concludes that "these black Devils . . . had murdered all the white Men." The savage buccaneers are so enraged that they would have immediately proceeded to cut the defenseless slaves in pieces (we later learn that the blacks have thrown all firearms into the sea, supposing them a cause of evil), had not Singleton's companion, Quaker William, intervened, in the first of three apparently humanitarian episodes. William halts the angry sailors with a calm, reasonable appraisal of the situation, in which he denounces slavery and justifies the mutineers: ". . . the Negroes had really the highest Injustice done them, to be sold for Slaves without their Consent; and that the Law of Nature dictated it [the uprising] to them."

This admirable flourish having stayed the avengers, a search of the vessel is made, in which several wounded Negroes are found. One of these is near death from gangrene. William now proceeds to treat the wound, against the strong objections of the surgeons from the two pirate ships, who insist on amputation of the leg, saying "the Mortification had

touched the Marrow in the Bone." However, William quietly continues with his own plan. "I would cure him if I could, without making a Cripple of him," he says. He then cuts away "mortified Flesh," sets the leg, and in a few days effects a complete cure.

Meanwhile, Singleton and his officers want to learn about the insurrection itself, and one officer is ready to start torturing the slaves to extract a confession. Again, Quaker William is in vehement opposition, and he begs Captain Singleton "not to put any of these poor Wretches to Torment." Eventually the language barrier is overcome and the full story of the revolt is told. After this account, Defoe quickly ends the narrative by having William take the captured slave ship along the Brazilian coast, selling the Africans in small or large lots to planters, evading the Portuguese men-of-war (on the watch for pirates), and returning in triumph with sixty thousand pieces-of-eight and a vast quantity of provisions. Quaker William is highly praised for his ingenuity in quietly and unobtrusively disposing of the slaves, as Singleton and his men had been raiding the coast and were apprehensive about the Portuguese navy.

At this point, the critics laugh, they denounce Defoe as a hypocrite, and they invoke Tawney and Max Weber.⁶ In commenting upon this entire episode in his essay "The Paradox of Trade and Morality in Defoe," H. H. Andersen considers William's conduct as a prime example of Defoe's expedient approach to life, in which the economic good must overrule all moral objections.⁷

Actually, Defoe is a much more complex novelist than Andersen suggests. What interests Defoe in the story of the derelict slave ship is *successful workmanship*. As we read through his works, we see that what appeals to him, for example, is the technique used by a thief to steal a gentlewoman's watch from her side during a church service, and he tells the story with relish in *Moll Flanders*. Great emphasis is placed on Robinson Crusoe's skill in erecting an impenetrable hedge or wall — on an island where he is the only inhabitant. In *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, he lavishes the highest praise on the efficiency of the management of the booths for woollen trade at Sturbridge Fair. He is fascinated by the way in which the highwayman Nicks, after robbing a man at Gad's Hill, rode to York the same day and wagered on bowls with the Mayor to establish an unimpeachable alibi. Even Charles I, generally an arch-enemy in Defoe's eyes, comes in for praise at his efficient removal of his artillery in front of the victorious Commonwealth army at the first Battle of Newbury. Such anecdotes of precise and skillful behaviour appear throughout all of Defoe's writings, whether fictional or historical. So it is with the episode of the

6. R. L. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*; Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

7. *MP*, XXXIX (1941), 23-46.

derelict slave ship. The greatest care in detail and emphasis in narration are devoted to William's technique in saving the grievously wounded slave. Defoe carefully highlights the purpose: Quaker William wants to cure the man without amputating a leg. But this optimistic intention is of no avail without medical expertise, since gangrene has already set in. Consequently, Defoe provides a detailed, step-by-step account of the treatment used.

Nevertheless, from this explanation we can observe that Defoe's primary emphasis is upon a rational approach to a problem. If we re-examine the several episodes which I had earlier labelled as "humanitarian," we will see that they really belong under the category of *reason*. It is reasonable that persons sold as slaves without their consent might rise up against their oppressors. It is irrational to torture a person who cannot understand the language in which the questions are put.

To conclude, Melville and Defoe see a world of evil, the world of fallen man. In one aspect of the Puritan tradition, Melville shows that Benito Cereno cannot *recover* from the shadow of "the ancient burden of crime, guilt, and death."⁸ In another outgrowth of Puritanism, man can use his reason to labor in the vineyard, and Defoe sees a recovery through skillful workmanship. Defoe is not saying that man will be redeemed by "good works," but rather, as Paul Zweig suggests in *The Adventurer*, by the "activity, as much as by the results of labor."⁹ What Defoe has shown in the story of William's healing of the wounded slave is redemptive labor. The slave recovered to become "an able Seaman," Defoe assures us, while his savior William and the rest of the pirates continue their adventures. Redemptive labor has cleared up the mystery of the derelict slave ship; larger matters are in God's hand, who fore-knows all.

The University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia

8. Richard Chase, "Introduction" to Herman Melville, *Selected Tales and Poems* (New York, 1950), pp. v-vii.

9. (New York, 1974), pp. 122-23.