

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* is often considered the greatest American novel—a vast epic that combines deep philosophy and high adventure as well as rich comedy and profound tragedy. *Moby-Dick* also offers a particularly diverse array of characters of various types, personalities, and ethnic backgrounds, and its styles are as varied as the people it depicts. Full of humorous dialects and idioms and brimming with probing, impassioned, poetic speeches, Melville's novel explores the fascinating world of whale-hunting in the mid-nineteenth century, even as it also raises some of the most persistent questions about the purposes and meanings of human life. The final impact of the book—when enraged whale meets pursuing ship—is one of the most memorable episodes in all of American literature.

The present volume examines *Moby-Dick*, the novel (references to Moby Dick the whale have no italics and no hyphen), from a variety of points of view. Indeed, a special focus of this volume involves the many different kinds of critical perspectives that can be—and have been—employed when examining Melville's masterwork. In particular, the present volume emphasizes how the novel was received by many of its earlier readers; the variety of ways in which it can be interpreted by readers today; and a number of the most up-to-date approaches, such as ecocriticism and connections between Melville's novel and modern art.

The volume opens with an essay by Joseph Csicsila, author (among much else) of an important book concerning the “canonization” of literary classics in anthologies of American literature. In other words, Csicsila is interested in the ways texts are received and transmitted from one generation to the next, and particularly in the ways some texts become celebrated as masterpieces. In his present essay, he focuses particularly on the “Melville Revival” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, emphasizing how *Moby-*

*Dick* went from being a book that had once been largely forgotten (in the decades immediately after it was first published in 1851) to being a book that was celebrated, by the 1950s, as perhaps the greatest of all American novels. Csicsila discusses why, how, and by whom this transformation was promoted.

Next, Jonathan D. Wright offers a deliberately brief overview of the facts of Melville's life, concentrating especially on the years before and after the publication of *Moby-Dick*. Wright suggests some of the ways in which Melville's early life influenced the kind of author he had become by the time he came to write his greatest novel. Mary K. Bercaw Edwards, author of two important book-length studies of Melville's sources, here adopts a biographical approach that complements the overview offered by Wright. She is particularly concerned with Melville's experiences as a sailor and with the ways those experiences affected the composition and content of *Moby-Dick*. The essay by Bercaw Edwards is designed to place *Moby-Dick* within some of its historical contexts.

In a chapter intended to offer an example of a comparison/contrast essay, Robert C. Evans and Kelhi D. DePace explore both the similarities and differences between *Moby-Dick* and Joseph Hart's novel *Miriam Coffin*. Hart's book has long been recognized as an important "source" for Melville's work, and Melville himself acknowledged his familiarity with Hart's text. However, the resemblances and dissimilarities between the two books have not been as fully explored previously as they are here. DePace provides a very helpful chapter-by-chapter overview of Hart's lengthy novel, and the essay, in general, especially emphasizes the contrasts between Melville's harsh, self-centered Captain Ahab and the genial, generous whaling captains Hart depicts. The essay also argues that Melville seems, sometimes, to have tried to make his book deliberately different from Hart's, especially in its depictions of blacks and Native Americans.

Brian Yothers, author of the definitive book-length survey of Melville criticism, here outlines some of the many ways in which *Moby-Dick* has been interpreted over the past century and a half. He especially highlights "modernist" reactions, biographical approaches,

the appropriation of Melville as a particularly “American” author, and the transformations of Melville criticism from the 1960s to the 1990s. Finally, Yothers offers an especially helpful discussion of the most recent approaches to *Moby-Dick*, bringing his survey well into the twenty-first century. He argues—rightly—that criticism of Melville’s novel has been not only extremely diverse but also unusually rich.

Continuing the emphasis on multiple critical perspectives, Robert C. Evans makes a case for “critical pluralism” as a valuable way of thinking about *Moby-Dick* in particular and literature in general. Pluralism treats different critical theories as simply different kinds of analytical tools. No single tool is necessarily “better” than others, just as a hammer is not necessarily “better” than a screwdriver or wrench. Each theory, like each tool, may do one kind of job particularly well, but there are lots of different kinds of jobs to be done. To illustrate this argument, Evans selects a single paragraph from Melville’s novel and briefly highlights many of its different facets by employing a number of critical perspectives.

The third major section of the book opens with a comprehensive digest by Sarah Fredericks, Stephen Paul Bray, and Robert C. Evans that details the earliest published reactions to *Moby-Dick*, with special focus on reviews from 1851–52. An astonishing number of reviewers discussed Melville’s epic when it first appeared, but tracing and making coherent sense of their reactions has hitherto been difficult. The chapter on critical reception in this volume tries to offer the most detailed listing so far attempted of the early reviews, and it also tries to efficiently summarize the kinds of reactions the novel provoked. The chapter amounts to a kind of analytical index of the earliest published responses to *Moby-Dick*.

Continuing this emphasis on early reactions to the novel, Evans, in the next essay, collects a number of nineteenth-century responses to the book that seem not to have been reprinted before, including one especially long and enthusiastic British review from 1862. The publication of this piece suggests that *Moby-Dick* had not (as has sometimes been claimed) dropped off the critical radar screen in England after its initial publication there. Also interesting are the

number of reviews published in late nineteenth-century America that celebrate *Moby-Dick* as a “boys’ book.” Several reviewers recall reading the novel in their youths and being forever affected by it.

Different possible critical reactions to the novel are also the subject of the next essay, also by Evans, which advocates for a “historical formalist” approach to *Moby-Dick*. This essay claims that most of the earliest responses to the work tended to focus on the craft and artistry of the book rather than on its themes or meanings. Formalism—the twentieth-century theory that concentrates on artistry and is often accused of anachronism—therefore seems hardly anachronistic at all. Indeed, as Evans claims, formalist criticism perfectly accords with the ways most of Melville’s contemporary readers reacted to his novel. Formalism may, in fact, be one of the recent theories with the best claims to being “historical.”

Ways of reading continue to be a concern of the present volume, this time in Robert Klevay’s essay. Klevay is interested, however, less in readings *of* the novel itself than in the kinds of reading depicted *within* the novel, especially Ishmael’s “readings” or responses to the various literal or metaphorical “texts” he encounters. Klevay shows that reading is one of Ishmael’s (and the novel’s) main preoccupations, but that Melville’s book (paradoxically) warns against mere bookishness: through Ishmael Melville issues a warning to be aware of our own perspective in reading and to embrace the tonic provided by encounters with the world outside of books.”

Reading remains a main concern in the volume’s next essay, in which Brian Yothers offers a splendid discussion of Ishmael’s responses to various religious texts and various religious ideas. Ultimately, as Yothers concludes, “Ishmael establishes that his skepticism and faith are linked: he is prepared to doubt everything in his own tradition and in those of others, but he is also prepared to embrace the intuitions that are suggested by all of the traditions of faith and doubt with which he is in contact.” Ishmael, then, seems a kind of pluralist in all the best senses of that term.

Jonathan A. Cook, who has himself written very valuably about Melville’s religious ideas, discusses, in this volume’s essay,

a significantly different kind of reading that interested both the novelist and his contemporaries: reading about nature. “*Moby-Dick*,” Cook contends, is “deeply enmeshed in the remarkable popularity of natural history at a time when amateur naturalists, like Melville’s alter ego Ishmael, were active in the task of collecting, classifying, describing, and publishing their findings before formal professionalization of the field took place later in the century. By examining Ishmael’s “cetological lore”—that is, his own and others’ ideas about whales—“in the context of this remarkable efflorescence of interest in the natural world, we can better appreciate the cultural and scientific context out of which *Moby-Dick* emerged.”

Whales—and especially whaling—are also a central interest of Jennifer Schell’s essay. Schell examines nineteenth-century writings about these subjects and argues that early “whaling narratives and their observations about the environmental impact of the fishery raise at least two important questions. Why were most authors averse to the possibility that American and European hunters were causing global cetacean populations to diminish? And why does Ishmael so stubbornly insist that whales will never go extinct? The answers to these questions,” Schell believes, “are complex, and they require an examination of nineteenth-century attitudes toward ecological abundance and scarcity.” Schell suggests that “many nineteenth-century writers were influenced by certain fantasies of ecological abundance that promoted the idea that the world’s oceans were filled with an infinite supply of natural resources. These fantasies were immensely popular with authors because they palliated their fears about environmental degradation and animal extinction.”

In an essay that moves away from socio-historical contexts and back to the features of *Moby-Dick* as a work of art, Robert C. Evans argues that “*Moby-Dick* would be even more popular than it already is, and would intimidate far fewer potential readers, if more people knew how genuinely and consistently funny it is.” Evans considers the novel “arguably one of the great comic masterpieces of American literature. It is far, far funnier,” he believes, “than most other American novels usually ranked among the very best. Yet most people, when they think of *Moby-Dick* before actually reading

it, think of it as mainly a very serious book, full of grand adventure; lofty speeches; elaborate metaphysical speculation; a memorable, tragic ending; and much extraneous and tedious information about whales.” Evans argues that if “more prospective readers realized just how comical and even hilarious the book often is—how regularly it provokes smiles and even outright laughter—fewer people would steer clear of reading it.”

Finally, in another essay concerned with the enduring popularity of Melville’s novel, the noted Melville scholar Robert K. Wallace recounts his years of teaching courses in “Melville and the Arts” and, in the process, reveals not only how he has helped promote and widen Melville’s impact on students, but also how numerous artists using numerous media (such as painting, sculpture, and music) have responded creatively to the enormous stimuli provided both by *Moby Dick* and by *Moby-Dick*. Wallace’s essay concludes with a response by Emma Rose Thompson, one of his students, who discusses the impact of Wallace’s approach to pedagogy not only on her, but potentially on other students elsewhere. The volume thus ends, appropriately, with a focus on the future of *Moby-Dick* studies and on future students of *Moby-Dick*.

# Ishmael's Doubts and Intuitions: Religion in *Moby-Dick*

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Brian Yothers

Ishmael oscillates. *Moby-Dick* is a novel built around a version of religious experience that can touch extremes without either embracing or rejecting them. Throughout his greatest novel, Melville allows his narrator to touch upon questions of faith and doubt, free will and determinism, monotheism and polytheism, and indeed an enormous range of human religious beliefs, traditions, and practices without either committing to one or condemning the others. Even the tone of these oscillations is elusive: When is Ishmael (and beyond him, Melville himself) in earnest? When is he pulling our leg? What does all this earnestness and levity regarding sacred matters mean? The questions remain unresolved, although attempts to provide resolution have been plentiful. The following pages provide a map to the various ways in which religion operates in this richly ambivalent novel.

## Ishmael's Introductions

The character whom we meet as the narrator in the opening sentence of "Loomings" is a personified riddle. As has been frequently noted, "Call me Ishmael" is not a statement of his name, but a command: we have a character in the first line who is both revealing himself and concealing himself using a name derived from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. In its biblical resonances, his name suggests someone who is both of noble lineage and an outcast from his own family: the Ishmael that readers of the Bible meet in Genesis is the son of Abraham, the central figure in the history of the monotheistic religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but he is also the son who is driven out with his mother, Hagar, when the preferred son, Isaac, is born. In a further twist, while Ishmael is the paradigmatic outsider in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures that Melville grew up reading and hearing interpreted from the pulpit, he

is a revered prophet and a true insider in the Islamic faith, of which Melville also had knowledge. Throughout the novel, Ishmael guides Melville's readers through an intricate series of allusions to what Melville's contemporary Henry David Thoreau called "the bibles of mankind" (76), scriptures both within and beyond the Protestant tradition, in which Melville was brought up. From the early days of Melville scholarship, Melville's use of biblical models within the Hebrew and Christian traditions has been acknowledged (especially in Nathalia Wright's *Melville's Use of the Bible* [1947] and Lawrance Thompson's *Melville's Quarrel with God* [1952]), with increasing attention appearing recently in the work of Ilana Pardes, Jonathan A. Cook, and Zachary Hutchins. The scriptures of the great religious traditions of Asia and North Africa have likewise been recognized as influences on *Moby-Dick* by Dorothee Metlitsky Finkelstein, H. Bruce Franklin, and H. B. Kulkarni in the 1960s, as well as through more recent work by Arthur Versluis and Timothy Marr.

### **The Hebrew Bible and the New Testament**

The Hebrew Scriptures, which constitute the Bible for Judaism and the Old Testament for Christianity, are abundantly present in *Moby-Dick*, most notably through the figures of Job and Jonah, as well as through Ishmael himself. Melville devotes several chapters to a consideration of Jonah in *Moby-Dick*, most notably Father Mapple's sermon, but also to satirical asides on the historicity of the biblical book of Jonah. In Father Mapple's sermon, Jonah is, of course, central: Father Mapple inserts a young nineteenth-century sailor, who, not unlike Ishmael, is fleeing from something on land, into the story of Jonah's disobedience, punishment, and eventual submission to God. Mapple is likely based on two main figures: Enoch Mudge, the minister at the Seaman's Bethel in New Bedford, and Edward Taylor, a minister who was extremely popular with sailors in New England, and was known popularly as Father Taylor. Mapple's use of homely examples drawn from the lives of sailors themselves has been a central feature that leads scholars to identify him with Taylor. In his sermon, Mapple provides a "two-stranded lesson" (the metaphor is drawn from the ropes that made up an important

element within sailors' working lives), emphasizing the necessity of submission to God and of the minister's uncompromising devotion to his vocation. As Dawn Coleman has noted, Mapple's sermon draws on one of the most popular literary genres in nineteenth-century America by virtue of being a sermon, and Mapple exploits sermonic tropes, like a rousing peroration, storytelling, and intense emotional rhetoric (Coleman 129–55).

From the initial description of Jonah as a type of the nineteenth-century American who runs off to sea, Mapple moves through a dazzling series of allusions and rhetorical modes in order to communicate his “two-stranded lesson” through the sermon. In the concluding paragraphs of his sermon, Mapple's eloquence reaches a crescendo when he calls for absolute obedience to God, paired with what might seem like a recklessly antinomian attitude toward human authority:

Delight is to him—a far, far upward, and inward delight—who against the proud gods and commodores of this earth, ever stands forth his own inexorable self. . . . Delight is to him who gives no quarter in the truth, and kills, burns, and destroys all sin, even though he pluck it from under the robes of Senators and Judges (Melville 60).

In a passage like this, Melville shows that the sublime rebelliousness of Captain Ahab is intimately connected to the Protestant religious culture from which he springs: the orthodox Mapple and the heterodox Ahab can sound surprisingly similar.

The later references to Jonah in the novel cast Father Mapple's verbal pyrotechnics in an ironic light: Ishmael refers wryly to the physical impossibilities in the story, suggesting a series of increasingly absurd solutions to the problems with the plausibility of the Jonah story as science or history. Perhaps, Ishmael suggests, the whale that swallowed Jonah has managed to traverse the southern cape of Africa, thus providing an instance of the extremes to which Christian apologetics could go in resolving apparent contradictions (Melville 328).

Jonah's counterpart as a central figure throughout *Moby-Dick* is Job. Ahab and his crew chase a “Job's whale with curses” around the

world. In *Inscrutable Malice* (2012), Jonathan A. Cook has discussed, at length, the role of theodicy, or the problem of positing a just God in the face of evil, throughout the novel in relation to Job, and Ilana Pardes' *Melville's Bibles* (2008) also begins with a consideration of the role of the biblical book of Job in the background of *Moby-Dick*. The very fact that Melville uses the term "leviathan," which is drawn from the book of Job, so frequently to describe the whale throughout the novel is indicative of the degree to which the biblical narrative of suffering and doubt is woven into Melville's novel.

The other major character from the Hebrew Bible who plays a major role in the novel is Ahab, and he is paired tellingly with a minor, but important figure, Elijah. As Ishmael and Queequeg prepare to board the *Pequod*, they are confronted by a man who appears to be mad, but whose words forecast much of what is to happen in the novel. Warning them against shipping with *Pequod*, Elijah, the apparent madman, asks whether in Ishmael and Queequeg's contract to sail aboard the *Pequod* there is "anything down there about your souls?" (98) and reveals Captain Ahab's blasphemous history, hinting that by shipping with him, Ishmael and Queequeg have made a deal with the devil. The fact that the warning comes from "Elijah" calls attention, of course, to Captain Ahab's biblical name, as King Ahab, in the Bible, is Elijah's great antagonist. Ahab is condemned in the Bible for his compromises with the idolatry of Canaanite religious traditions, and Ahab in *Moby-Dick* has likewise formed alliances with religious traditions outside of his own Quaker heritage, as becomes apparent once the ship has left harbor and his shadow crew is revealed (Melville 213).

The centrality of the Hebrew Scriptures, or the Old Testament as they are known within various Christian traditions, has been acknowledged in *Moby-Dick* almost from the start. Melville makes nearly as extensive use of the Christian New Testament, however, in a range of instances throughout *Moby-Dick*. In "Loomings," the chapter that sets the tone for all that is to follow, Ishmael asks "What of it, if some old hunks of a sea captain order me to get a broom and sweep down the decks? What does that indignity amount to, weighed, I mean, in the scales of the New Testament?" (Melville 23).

As I have discussed elsewhere, Melville's markings in his own copy of *The New Testament and Psalms* are highly suggestive relative to Ishmael's reference here to the "scales of the New Testament." The indignities to which Ishmael ought logically to submit himself, in order to be obedient to Jesus' teachings in the New Testament, far surpass those that he experiences as a sailor before the mast. When Ishmael worships Queequeg's idol Yojo, he likewise employs the ethics of the New Testament against the doctrinal adherents of the religion drawn from the New Testament, arguing that "Now Queequeg is my fellow. What do I wish that this Queequeg would do to me? Why unite with me in my particular Presbyterian form of worship. Consequently, I must unite with him in his; ergo, I must turn idolator" (Melville 63). Ishmael thus adroitly turns the New Testament's status as an ethical document against its status as an expression of dogma. Father Mapple's sermon brings together the language of the Hebrew prophets and the New Testament when he declaims against all those who lack the courage of their convictions: "Woe to him whom this world turns from his gospel duty! Woe to him who seeks to pour oil on the waters when God has brewed them into a gale!" (59). The role of the New Testament in *Moby-Dick* is often, ironically, to provide a countertext to Christian orthodoxy and American cultural norms, and one of the things that Melville seems to find attractive about the Hebrew and Christian scriptures is their tendency to foster self-criticism within the very institutions associated with them.

A figure drawn from the New Testament who plays a parallel role to that of Elijah, Job, Jonah, and Ishmael in the novel is the archangel Gabriel, who appears in the form of another madman. Gabriel is a member of a marginal religious minority within Protestantism, the Shakers, about whom Melville read in several books that he owned: *A Summary View of the Millennial Church* and *A History of the County of Berkshire, Massachusetts*. Like Elijah, Gabriel is mad, but also like Elijah, Gabriel speaks a kind of truth that his listeners are unprepared to accept. His warning to Ahab, while framed in the service of a weirdly idiosyncratic variation upon Shaker doctrine, is

also to the point: “beware of the blasphemer’s end”—an end that, however mad Gabriel may be, still awaits Captain Ahab (286).

### Alternative Religious Traditions

Melville is not limited by the predominantly Christian, Protestant culture of his time and place in *Moby-Dick*. Throughout the chapters on whaling, Melville invokes Catholicism, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, indigenous traditions in the Pacific Islands, and the varieties of skepticism that were developing out of modern historical study and science. This appears even in the “Extracts” that begin *Moby-Dick*. The quotations catalogued draw heavily upon the Bible and other biblically-oriented works, like John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, but they also draw upon the natural sciences and upon the workaday business of whaling. If the readers of *Moby-Dick* encounter the Puritans in the form of a reference to *The New England Primer*, they likewise encounter references to the young Charles Darwin and to such quotidian matters as the size of a whale’s liver. The material and spiritual worlds of *Moby-Dick* are in almost constant dialogue: when Ishmael, Ahab, Father Mapple, Starbuck, Stubb, Flask, Fleece, and Pip reflect on theological and ethical questions, they always do so in relation to the physicality of the ocean, the whale’s body, and the human body.

Similarly, Hinduism, like Judaism and Christianity, comes to the fore in Melville’s considerations of whales and whaling. After invoking Jonah from the Bible and Perseus from classical mythology, Ishmael asserts that whaling’s noble lineage includes actual deities by way of Hinduism in that Vishnu can be claimed as a “whaleman,” a status that relies on a bit of a pun: he was not a hunter of whales, but rather “incarnate in a whale” (326). One reading of Melville’s use of Hinduism in *Moby-Dick* has been to assume that it is largely satirical or comedic; H. Bruce Franklin made this case in *The Wake of the Gods* on the way to his groundbreaking exploration of Egyptology in *Moby-Dick*, and this has often operated as a default assumption for many scholars. However, other critics, notably H. B. Kulkarni, have argued that Hinduism is, in fact, central, not peripheral to *Moby-Dick*. For Kulkarni, the shifting perspectives

# Chronology of Herman Melville's Life\_\_\_\_\_

- 1814** Marriage of Allan Melvill and Maria Gansevoort.
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- 1815** Birth of Gansevoort (died 1846), a son and their first child.
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- 1817** Birth of Helen Maria, their first daughter (died 1888).
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- 1819** Birth of Herman, their second son and the future author (died 1891).
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- 1821** Birth of Augusta, their second daughter (died 1876).
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- 1823** Birth of Allan, their third son (died 1872).
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- 1825** Birth of Catherine, their third daughter (died 1905). Herman attends school in New York City until 1829.
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- 1827** Birth of Frances, the Melvills' fourth daughter (died 1885). Herman visits his father's parents in Boston (and also in 1829).
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- 1829** Herman attends Grammar School at Columbia College in New York (until 1830).
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- 1830** Birth of the Melvills' fourth son and final child, Thomas (died 1884). Allan Melvill's commercial importing business fails in New York; in October, the family relocates upstate, to Albany.
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- 1832** Allan Melvill dies in Albany, in debt, after becoming sick while returning from a winter trip. Herman works as a clerk at a bank in Albany (until 1834). His mother moves the rest of the family to Pittsfield,
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# Works by Herman Melville

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## Novels

*Typee*, 1846

*Omoo*, 1847

*Mardi*, 1849

*Redburn*, 1849

*White-Jacket*, 1850

*Moby-Dick*, 1851

*Pierre*, 1852

*Israel Potter*, 1855

*The Confidence-Man*, 1857

*Billy Budd*, 1924

## Short Stories

“Cock-a-Doodle-Do!,” 1853

“Bartleby,” 1853

“Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs,” 1854

“The Happy Failure,” 1854

“The Lightning-Rod Man,” 1854

“The Fiddler,” 1854

“The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” 1855

“The Bell-Tower,” 1855

“Benito Cereno,” 1855

“Jimmy Rose,” 1855

“I and My Chimney,” 1855

“The ’Gees,” 1856

“The Apple-Tree Table,” 1856

“The Piazza,” 1856

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In 1982, he was awarded the G. E. Bentley Prize and, in 1989, was selected Professor of the Year for Alabama by the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education. At AUM, he has received the Faculty Excellence Award and has been named Distinguished Research Professor, Distinguished Professor, and University Alumni Professor. Most recently, he was named Professor of the Year by the South Atlantic Association of Departments of English.

Evans is one of three editors of the *Ben Jonson Journal* and is a contributing editor to the John Donne *Variorum Edition*. He is also the author or editor of nearly thirty books on such topics as Ben Jonson, Martha Moulsworth, Kate Chopin, John Donne, Frank O'Connor, Brian Friel, Ambrose Bierce, Amy Tan, early modern women writers, pluralist literary theory, literary criticism, twentieth-century American writers, American novelists, Shakespeare, and seventeenth-century English literature. In addition, he has authored roughly three hundred published or forthcoming essays or notes (in print and online) on a variety of topics, especially dealing with Renaissance literature, critical theory, women writers, short fiction, and literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.