Beneath the Veil: Clothing, Race, and Gender in Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*

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BENEATH THE VEIL: CLOTHING, RACE, AND GENDER IN MARK TWAIN'S *PUDD'NHEAD WILSON*

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> And thus in the land of the Color-line I saw, as it fell across my baby, the shadow of the Veil.
> —W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

> Now who would b'lieve clo'es could do de like o' dat?
> —Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*

The idyllic opening of *Pudd'nhead Wilson,* with its description of Dawson's Landing's modest dwellings with whitewashed exteriors and a cat asleep in a flower box, concludes with the description of the village bounded on the front by the Mississippi River and on the back by a row of high hills that, Mark Twain writes, were "*clothed* with forests from foot to summit."[1] Thus, unobtrusively and in the context of a tranquil landscape, he introduces what is to become one of the major subtexts of the novel: namely, clothes as markers of identity, race, and gender. The text is rich with masquerading, with layering of clothing, with cross-dressing and misleading gender markers, with foppery, veiling and unveiling, and with clothing as cues (and mis-cues) to sexual and racial identity. Yet across the novel's critical history, Twain's preoccupation with clothing in the text has been all but invisible.[2]

For the first generation of critics and reviewers of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, even the multiple acts of cross-dressing performed by both the slave heroine, Roxana, and her son escaped public notice. The reviewer for *Cosmopolitan,* for instance, called attention to a host of melodramatic elements in the novel, but made no mention of cross-dressing:

> exchanges of infants in the cradle, a hero with negro taint in his blood substituted for the legitimate white heir, midnight encounters in a haunted house between the false heir and

> his colored mother, murder by the villain of his supposed uncle and benefactor, accusation of an innocent foreigner, and final sensational acquittal and general unraveling of the tangled skein . . . .[3]

This reviewer goes on in familiar nineteenth-century terms to extol the virtue of the text's black language: "How deliciously rich, racy, and copious is, for instance, his negro talk. The very gurgling laugh and cooing cadence seems, somehow, implied in the text."[4] The reviewer for the *Spectator,* responding to the wry humor of the novel, wondered if Twain had "found Missouri audiences or readers slow to appreciate his jokes,"[5] while the *Bookman* focused on the novelty of fingerprint records that ultimately reveal the true identity of the false heir who murders his purported uncle.[6] These reviewers, as others across the work's critical history, responded to *Pudd'nhead Wilson's* deeply disturbing critique of racial categories, but none of them perceived how metaphors of clothing and cross-dressed performances complicate and complement the racial issues at the core of the novel.

More recently, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* criticism has taken two distinct directions. Scholars such as Hershel Parker have taken pains to understand how Twain composed *Pudd'nhead Wilson,* not being content to accept the author's flippant description of how he simply removed the Siamese twins from his original manuscript by Cesarean surgery once the slave Roxana and her son "took over" the text.[7] By delicate surgical procedures of their own, these scholars have reconstructed Twain's composing and revising processes that led to the ultimate creation of two texts, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and *Those Extraordinary Twins.* They note, for example, that in the original manuscript, now known as the Morgan Manuscript, there were no changelings; Tom Driscoll was white, not black; and the Italian twins were Siamese twins who were ultimately hanged by the good citizens of Dawson's Landing. (More accurately, only one of the twins was hanged; but as the citizenry deduced about Wilson's dog at the beginning of the story, killing one half of the animal would for all practical purposes also kill the other.)

A second strand of modern scholarship, as represented in Susan Gilman and Forrest Robinson's collection of essays, *Mark Twain's Pudd'nhead Wilson: Race, Conflict, and Culture,* reads the text historically and interprets late nineteenth-century culture through the text.[8] Critics such as Eric Sundquist and Shelley Fisher Fishkin recontextualize the novel in ways that emphasize the relationship be-

tween *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and the racial politics of the day, while Carolyn Porter and Myra Jehlen read the racial *and* gendered subtexts of the novel.[9] Susan Gilman explores the relationship between twins, duality, and identity in the novel, and positions the novel in relationship to Twain's late dream narratives.[10] Most of these critics, especially those exploring the intersections of race and gender, note that cross-dressing occurs at key crisis points in the novel and that it contributes to and highlights crises of race and identity, but none pursues this subject in depth. Nor has anyone yet noticed how relentlessly the text enacts more conventionally defined issues of dress and clothing.

This essay will focus in particular upon dress and clothing as markers of identity, race, and gender as played out in relation to two of the primary characters in the novel, Roxana and her son Chambers, also known as Tom. Representations of their clothing simultaneously confound the already problematic categories of race and make problematic the categories of gender.[11] Such confounding, we will see, further destabilizes the precarious social order of Dawson's Landing and the post-Reconstruction South of Twain's own time.

In our first introduction to Roxana, the slave woman who propels the major plot into motion, we do not see her, only hear her, as she exchanges witticisms with a slave named Jasper. We do not need to see her, however, to know by her dialect that she is "black": "Oh, yes, you got me, hain't you. 'Clah to goodness if dat conceit o'yo'n strikes in, Jasper, it gwyne to kill you, sho'. If you b'longed to me I'd sell you down de river 'fo' you git too fur gone" (8). The narrator immediately both confirms and contradicts our assumptions: "From Roxy's manner of speech, a stranger would have expected her to be black, but she was not: Only one-sixteenth of her was black, and that sixteenth did not show" (8). In Mark Twain's South—whether the antebellum era in which the story is set or the post-Reconstruction era in which it was written—"by a fiction of law and custom," Roxana is "black." In the text her otherwise ambiguous racial identity is marked, finally, by the fact that her "heavy suit of fine, soft [brown] hair" is concealed "by a checkered handkerchief" (8). Set against her "white" appearance, Twain chooses here one of the most powerful and persistent of racial markers with which to identify Roxana, her head rag.[12] From this moment on, Roxana *is* "black"—her race does "show." The head rag as a marker of racial identity is reinforced later in the text when Roxana becomes a fugitive slave, hotly pursued by her "master"; following the practice of the day, the master has a "wanted" poster made for Roxana: "The

handbill had the usual rude wood-cut of a turbaned negro woman running, with the customary bundle on a stick over her shoulder, and the heading, in bold type, '$100 *Reward*'" (89). In other words, the handbill evokes the stereotyped image of the escaped slave woman, and it pins that stereotype on Roxana. For her part, Roxana continually undercuts all racial stereotypes throughout the novel, and the patriarchal order as well.[13]

Two infant boys born on the same day are entrusted wholly to Roxana's care: Thomas à Beckett Driscoll, son of one of the "first" white families in Dawson's Landing, and Roxana's own son, Valet de Chambres, who like his mother looks white but by Missouri law is black and a slave. The infants can be distinguished from one another only by their clothing. Tom's clothes are described briefly, but in detail, calling attention to their fabric and their ruffles, while Chambers is dressed in the unmistakable clothing of a slave child: a "tow-linen shirt which barely reached to its [sic] knees" (9). The transformative event of the novel—Roxana's exchanging the babies' clothing and thereby altering their public identities and personal fortunes—begins quite simply when Roxana privately declares her intention to drown herself and her baby. She plans to do so not to save the two of them from slavery, but to save her son from the possibility of being sold down the river, a fate she sees as literally worse than death. However, her action is arrested as she catches "sight of her new Sunday gown," a chance event that sets the plot in motion in a different direction. She looks down at her own slave's clothing, her linsey-woolsey dress, and vows not to be "fished out" looking so "misable."

In the passage that follows, Twain displays his clear fascination with the details of female clothing, for nothing in the plot requires him to give so much attention to Roxana making her "death-toilet." Central to the process of preparing her death attire, Roxana sheds the marker of race, her head rag, and lets her "white" hair hang loose.

> She put down the child and made the change [into the dress]. She looked in the glass and was astonished at her beauty. She resolved to make her death-toilet perfect. She took off her handkerchief-turban and dressed her glossy wealth of hair "like white folks;"she added some odds and ends of rather lurid ribbon and a spray of atrocious artificial flowers; finally, she threw over her shoulders a fluffy thing called a "cloud" in that day, which was of a blazing red complexion. Then she was ready for the tomb. (13)

What Roxana sees when she looks in the mirror is her own beauty—that is, her constructed white self—in contrast to the equally constructed black image reflected back to her by Southern society. The faintly mocking tone of the narrator goes unheard by Roxana, who is clearly pleased by the image of herself that she creates. This image empowers her, just as later dressing as a man will empower her.

Roxana may be "ready for the tomb," but her son is not. Having completed her toilette, she turns her gaze on her son, and is appalled by "his miserably short little gray tow-linen shirt and noted the contrast," not, as we expect at this moment, between her son's clothing and Master Tom's, but between his dress and her own. When she "noted the contrast between its pauper shabbiness and her own volcanic irruption [sic] of infernal splendors, her mother-heart was touched, and she was ashamed" (13). She was ashamed, that is, not of her own dress, but of her son's racially marked clothing, which she characterizes as "too indelicate" for the heaven to which they are bound. Ever resourceful (and spontaneous), Roxana dresses Chambers in the only fine clothing available, which is Tom's, and echoing her surprise at her own image in the mirror, she is now astonished at how "lovely" Chambers appears dressed in "white" clothing. Only then does she conceive the plan to exchange her "black" son with her "white" charge.

Roxana's exchange of the babies in the novel, as Carolyn Porter has so cogently argued, is a powerfully subversive act, one that challenges and disrupts the patriarchal order of Dawson's Landing. For Chambers to assume his new identity as Tom, however, he has to be stripped naked; only then can he don his "dainty flummery of ruffles" (14). Tom, too, is "stripped of everything" and dressed in tow-linen, which marks him in everyone's eyes as a slave. By this act, Tom is stripped of his name, his identity, his inheritance, his paternity (although both children have been fathered by two of the town's most distinguished citizens), and his freedom. Roxana stands back to view her handiwork and exclaims, "Now who would b'lieve clo'es could do de like o' dat?" (14).

In the early pages of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, then, Twain establishes that clothing and dress will carry the weight of race as it is performed (and deconstructed) in the novel. The expected, indeed purportedly "indelible" stamps of race, both black and white—facial features, hair, skin color—are unreliable from the beginning. Moreover, clothing codes, which we would expect to be the more mutable markers of race, are unfailingly enforced by social dictate. The supposedly "natural"

boundaries between the races were disappearing through racial mixing at the time of the novel's writing, leading to demands that they be reinforced by new boundaries and powerful markers. Yet Roxana's action demonstrates that these, too, are unreliable, even deceptive. Dawson's Landing, unbeknownst to its principal citizens, is in the midst of a cultural crisis; its socially constructed codes are unraveling before its very eyes.

As a young boy, the changeling Tom, who knows nothing of his identity as a changeling, is the master of Chambers, and he is spoiled by both Roxana and the white families with whom he resides. Pampered, undisciplined, indulged, he tyrannizes over Chambers and treats Roxana with contempt. Chambers, in contrast, is quickly taught his place as a slave. The relationship between the two boys is expressed in part through metaphors of clothing. Tom, who is cowardly and a bully, makes Chambers do all his fighting for him; consequently, Chambers earns a reputation as an accomplished fighter, until "by and by . . . Tom could have changed clothes with him, and 'ridden in peace,' like Sir Kay in Launcelot's armor" (19). There is no hint of irony in this passage, no sense that Twain is making a conscious joke about the exchange of identities that has already taken place, although the passage evokes in its readers that ever-present knowledge. The literal "armor" that Chambers wears is Tom's cast-off, worn-out clothes that are described ironically by Twain as "holy": "'holy' red mittens, and 'holy' shoes, and pants 'holy' at the knees and seat" (20).

Twain's exploration of the childhood relationship between Tom and Chambers comes to an end when Chambers saves Tom from drowning, which earns him only insults for his trouble. Their playmates tease Tom that Chambers is his "Nigger-pappy—to signify that he had had a second birth into this life, and that Chambers was the author of his new being." Infuriated by the taunting, Tom orders Chambers to attack the boys; when he fails to do so, Tom "drove his pocket knife into him two or three times before the boys could snatch him away and give the wounded lad a chance to escape" (21). And escape he does. After this scene, Twain has no more interest in Chambers until the end of the story; he slips out of sight while Tom takes center stage as the (wrongful) heir to the Driscoll name and fortune.

When he is nineteen, Tom is sent off to Yale, where he learns to "tipple," gamble, and affect "eastern fashion." Upon returning to Dawson's Landing, he particularly offends the young people of his social set by wearing gloves. He also "brought home with him a suit of

clothes of such exquisite style and cut and fashion—eastern fashion, city fashion—that it filled everybody with anguish and was regarded as a peculiarly wanton affront" (23). In a scene rich with foreshadowing, the young people of Dawson's Landing set about to cure Tom of his affectations by mocking his style of dress. They tailor a suit that burlesques Tom's and fit it to the town's "old deformed negro bellringer." He follows Tom through the streets, "tricked out in a flamboyant curtain-calico exaggeration of his finery, and imitating his fancy eastern graces as well as he could" (24). The mockery works: "Tom surrendered, and after that clothed himself in the local fashion" (24).

In commenting on this scene, Myra Jehlen rather enigmatically asserts that "it is unclear just what is being satirized: is it simply foppish pretensions, or rather some absurdity of black foppery? Because the characters are unaware that their parody of Tom possesses this additional dimension, it becomes a joke shared by the narrator and the reader, a joke with a new target."[14] Eric Lott reads the incident as "a sort of minstrel gag in reverse; the black man burlesques Tom's acquired graces, and does so at the behest of an audience of village white boys . . . it also suggests that Tom's whiteness is itself an act, a suggestion that is truer than either the bell ringer or Tom can know since Tom's identity is precisely a black man's whiteface performance."[15] Both Jehlen and Lott raise important points, but both critics quickly slip past the specific image of the "flamboyant curtain-calico exaggeration of his finery." Jehlen's focus is on who is the target of the joke, while Lott's is on the performance of race. More fundamentally, we might wonder why this scene has such a haunting quality about it. We are left with the image of the black bellringer shadowing Tom through the streets of Dawson's Landing, mirroring Tom in a distorted mirror that reflects both his costume and his manners. Tom has been perceived by his contemporaries as feminized, as suggested by reference to his "fancy eastern graces." Later, as we shall see, when Tom cross-dresses as a young girl and like Huck Finn practices *being* a girl, this same language is echoed in the text. By then he will know that by society's definitions, he is really a black man, and he will assume a series of masquerades only to deceive. The bellringer, by contrast, is a figure used to re-establish, at least temporarily, Dawson's Landing's social order, which its young male citizens believe has been disrupted by Tom's putting on airs. In Bakhtinian terms, the scene is carnivalesque, with the most lowly member of the community, the deformed Negro bellringer, dressed in clothing intended to mock a

member of the town's most privileged class. While the black bellringer is not protected by the customs of a festival as he would be in Bakhtin's ceremonial world, he is protected by the cover of the white youths on whose behalf he performs.[16] Nothing in the text suggests that the black bellringer is himself foolish or absurd, and to assume the joke is somehow on Tom because he is "really" black but does not know it misses the point. Lott's notion that Tom's whiteness is itself a performance comes much closer to the mark; nonetheless, his analysis stops with this observation, thereby missing the opportunity to investigate the convergence of a racialized *and* gendered performance.

Cured of his worst pretensions, Tom nonetheless continues to commit offenses against the social order. He accrues a sizable gambling debt that will, if revealed, cause him to be disinherited, so he resorts to theft and deceit to pay off his creditors. In order to steal from the villagers of Dawson's Landing, he assumes a series of disguises to mask his identity. Most powerfully and most successfully, he cross-dresses as both a young girl and an old woman. The first time we see him cross-dressed as a girl, we watch him through Pudd'nhead Wilson's eyes, although neither the reader nor Wilson knows at that moment that the "girl" we are watching is Tom. The scene is in fact represented twice in the text, first from David Wilson's perspective and then from Tom's.

In the first instance, Wilson chances to look out of his window across a vacant lot into Tom's bedroom window in Judge Driscoll's house. There he sees a girl in a pink and white striped dress "practicing steps, gaits and attitudes, apparently; she was doing the thing gracefully, and was very much absorbed in her work" (32). Wilson wonders what a girl is doing in Tom's bedroom, and for some time tries unsuccessfully to discover her identity. Three chapters later, Twain repeats the same scene, but this time from Tom's point of view. This second time the scene is dramatized much more fully and more elaborately, and we do not know at first we are witnessing what we have seen before. Until close to the end there is no mention at all of David Wilson.

> He [Tom] arrived at the haunted house in disguise on the Wednesday before the advent of the Twins,—after writing his Aunt Pratt that he would not arrive until two days later—and lay in hiding there with his mother until toward daylight Friday morning, when he went to his uncle's house and entered by the back way with his own key and slipped

> up to his room, where he could have the use of mirror and toilet articles. He had a suit of girl's clothes with him in a bundle as a disguise for his raid, and was wearing a suit of his mother's clothing, with black gloves and veil. By dawn he was tricked out for his raid. (46)

While Wilson had seen only a girl in a striped summer dress in Tom's room, we now see Tom cross-dressed not once but twice, first in his mother's clothing, then as the young girl Wilson sees. The added detail of the second female identity assumed by Tom is further intensified by the new information that he had slipped into his own room at his uncle's house so that "he could have the use of [a] mirror." While David Wilson is watching Tom, not knowing who he is, Tom is gazing at one of his female selves in the mirror. He is in the act of performing a gender as surely as his life has become an act of performing a race. Further, the scene and imagery recall his mother's act of looking at herself in the mirror just before she chances upon the scheme to exchange the babies, turning the "black" Chambers into the "white" Tom. That is to say, Tom's identity as a "white" man began with his mother's glance in the mirror, just as one of his identities as a woman is likewise reflected in a mirror.[17]

The scene is filled with images of performing, posturing, mirroring. Just after this passage, Tom notices that Wilson is watching him from his house. The two men, in Twain's words, "caught a glimpse" of each other peering through their respective windows. Far from being upset by his discovery that Wilson is watching him, Tom "entertained Wilson with some airs and graces and attitudes for a while" (46). Tom deliberately performs for Wilson as a girl, and as a girl he is apparently wholly convincing. Only after Wilson is confronted with other, overwhelming evidence that Tom is an impostor does he "see" beyond the female masquerade: "Idiot that I was! Nothing but a *girl* would do me—a man in girl's clothes never occurred to me." (104). This is the admission of one of the two founders of the Society of Free Thinkers in the town; in spite of his reputation as being a Pudd'nhead, David Wilson is a shrewd and discerning man. If he is unable to see beyond Tom's cross-gendered disguise, who can?[18]

After his performance, however, Tom is not entirely confident that he has thrown Wilson off track and so changes back into his mother's clothes before leaving the house. Just as Twain had repeated the performance scene twice, he now repeats twice in three sentences the same information about Tom's changing into his mother's clothing, under-

scoring the intensity of his preoccupation with cross-dressing in this text:

> Then [Tom] stepped out of sight and resumed the other disguise, and by and by went down and out the back way and started downtown to reconnoitre the scene of his intended labors.
>
> But he was ill at ease. He had changed back to Roxy's dress, with the stoop of age added to the disguise, so that Wilson would not bother himself about a humble old woman leaving a neighbor's house by the back way in the early morning, in case he was still spying. (46)

Tom's cross-dressing in order to commit burglaries sets the scene for even more complex gendered and racial crossing that follows. It is both a symptom and a cause of the category crisis that is at the heart of the novel.

As the story progresses, Tom's debts mount; he is disinherited by his uncle, written back into the will, then threatened with being disinherited again. In as ugly an action as the story holds, Tom knowingly sells his own mother into slavery, and down the river, to pay his creditors. Some months pass before Roxana shows up again in the story, now as a fugitive. To escape detection in St. Louis, where she has fled from the deep South, Roxana has cross-dressed as a man, putting on men's clothing and "an old slouch hat," and blackening her face. That is to say, she has altered all the visible markers of her former identity: the planter from whom she escaped is looking for a "white" black woman, so she turns herself, ironically, into a "black" man. Her disguise is so effective that it fools even Tom, whom she tracks down in St. Louis. When Tom first sees her, he notices only "the back of a man"; when the man turns around, he sees only "a wreck of shabby old clothes sodden with rain and all a-drip . . . " Then the man says, "in a low voice—'Keep still—I's yo' mother!'" (84–85).

It is an arresting moment. While Tom "gasped" out a few feeble "incoherently babbling self-accusations" about why he has done such a terrible thing, Roxana takes off her hat, and her hair "tumbled down about her shoulders." Now she stands before Tom, and before us, as a "white" woman in blackface, dressed in men's clothes. At this critical moment in the text, Roxana embodies us all, black and white, man and woman. She is "every man" and "every woman." For this woman who has already been a forceful actor in her own life, this moment repre-

sents the most powerful embodiment of her strength. Roxana then proceeds to tell her story of enslavement, one that invokes and re-enacts the genre of slave narratives—stories of brutal physical treatment, of ultimately striking back at the overseer (Roxana "snatch[ed] de stick outen his han' en laid him flat" [86]), and of escape. Roxana's story, seemingly a long and moving digression from the main plot of the novel, propels the novel inexorably toward the tragedy that it becomes.

With Roxana back on the scene (and in near total command of her son), Tom becomes more desperate in his efforts to steal money both to pay off his debts, and thus ensure his inheritance, and to buy his mother's freedom, as she demands. Desperate, he ultimately plots to steal from his uncle. Taking his cue from his mother (and evoking the tradition of minstrel theatre with its complex socially constructed images and enactment of blackness),[19] Tom also blacks up to commit the robbery. Surprised by his uncle in the act of stealing from his safe, Tom thrusts a knife into him, killing him instantly, then flees upstairs to his own room. There, still in blackface, Tom disguises himself as a girl to escape from the house. The scene is represented in only one sentence, but it is crucial:

> Tom put on his coat, buttoned his hat under it, threw on his suit of girl's clothes, dropped the veil, blew out his light, locked the room-door by which he has just entered, taking the key, passed through his other door into the back hall, locked that door and kept the key, then worked his way along in the dark and descended the back stairs. (95)

That is to say, Tom commits the murder in his own clothes (minus his coat), and in blackface. Then he puts on his "girl" clothes over his male clothes, drops a veil over his blackened face, and flees from the house. What is the meaning of the layering here? Is it, perhaps, a mistake, a glitch in the manuscript such as those remnants of the Siamese twins carelessly left in the *Pudd'nhead Wilson* story? All evidence suggests that it is not. Twain had hinted at just such layering before the murder. In preparing to commit the robbery, Tom "laid off his coat and hat . . . unlocked his trunk and got his suit of girl's clothes out from under the male attire in it, and laid it by. Then he blacked his face" (93). The male clothes in the trunk have concealed the female clothes, while after the murder, Tom's female clothes hide his male clothes (and identity). In a move that mirrors his mother's triumphant moment of embracing white and black, male and female, Tom puts on layers of

identities over the layers he already "wears." The whiteness of his skin hides his blackness; passing for white hides his true relationship to Roxana; blacking up hides his whiteness; female clothing covers up his maleness; a veil covers his blackface. Tom, *aka* Chambers, murderer of his benefactor and purported uncle, collapses all categories of socially constructed identities.

Marjorie Garber, in discussing briefly the transvestite theme in *Pudd'nhead Wilson,* draws a connection between Twain's use of the "veil" and Du Bois' image of the veil in which to be "within the veil" meant to be "under the burden of blackness." According to Garber,

> when Tom dresses as a woman, he disguises his *gender* because he is ashamed of his *race*. To "drop the veil" is to pull it over his face, to voluntarily veil himself. Inadvertently, then, read backwards through Du Bois' compelling image, Tom's disguise, the woman's veil, becomes a signifier of that very blackness he is so anxious to conceal. The irony of Tom's desperate ploy—to pass as a woman because he has been passing as white, and then to obliterate the damning evidence, burning both male *and* female clothes—is that it marks him unmistakably, if only for a moment, as a black transvestite, the true son of the mother he despises and sells down the river.[20]

This is a provocative observation, but one that is ultimately based on a misreading of the text. Garber fails to notice that Tom "drops the veil" over his blackface—the blackness he is so anxious to conceal is twice represented here—while the literal veil he wears is a socially encoded, unambiguous marker of gender.

In order to escape detection, and literally to escape from the house, Tom thus goes forth, as his mother did in St. Louis, as both man and woman, as both black person and white. Like his mother's blackface cross-dressing, this represents a very powerful moment in Tom's life—he has acted, and he has acted decisively—but with two crucial differences. Although Roxana wears layered gender and racial identities, she pulls off her slouch hat and reveals her long, flowing hair; she strips off one layer to reveal herself. Tom, by contrast, piles on his layers only to deceive, to cover up the shame of his deed. And so his act, unlike his mother's, is an act of cowardice that puts him beyond the pale of human redemption.[21]

It has been clear to generations of readers that for all its vexing statements about the role of race in determining Tom's character (and

by extension Chambers'), *Pudd'nhead Wilson* exposes the absurdity and arbitrariness of the very racial categories upon which the slave society depended. As both Eric Sundquist and Shelley Fisher Fishkin have demonstrated, the novel critiques as well the racial divisions of the 1890s, the era of the enactment of Jim Crow laws and the bolstering of racial boundaries where they were clearly threatened.[22] This essay has argued that the text is even more radical than these critics have suggested, for it also calls into question the socially constructed definitions and meanings of gender markers. In other words, in *Pudd'nhead Wilson,* the gender disguise is as hard to read as the racial disguise, and both reinforce the deconstructing of the other.

Pudd'nhead Wilson culminates with the trial of Luigi, one of the Italian twins, for the murder of Judge Driscoll. In the course of formally defending Luigi, David Wilson accidentally discovers the "true" identities of Tom and Chambers, and simultaneously reveals Tom to be the murderer of his uncle. The patriarchal social order has been thus only temporarily subverted by Roxana, for her worst fears are realized in the end as her son is deemed too valuable a piece of property to shut up in prison for life and he is sold down the river into slavery. From Roxana's perspective, the ending is like a Greek tragedy in which the very fate she had sought to escape is visited upon her son. Nonetheless, the social order has clearly been dealt a blow from which it is unlikely to recover fully. In a novel glutted with ironies, the ultimate irony may be that the one utterly reliable marker of identity that *cannot* be altered—finger prints—reveals nothing whatsoever about either the gender or the race of the individual. The community's carefully drawn and constructed racial and gender lines have been challenged and exploded. This is signified subtly, but forcefully, by the re-introduction into the text of the man called Chambers, the "white" man who had been condemned to a lifetime of slavery by the treachery of his "mammy" but who is ostensibly set free by Wilson's discovery of his "true" identity:

> The real heir suddenly found himself rich and free, but in a most embarrassing situation. He could neither read nor write, and his speech was the basest dialect of the negro quarter. His gait, his attitudes, his gestures, his bearing, his laugh—all were vulgar and uncouth; his manners were the manners of a slave. Money and fine clothes could not mend these defects or cover them up, they only made them the more glaring and the more pathetic. (114)

The issue of gender, which seems not to play any role at all in Chambers' transformation back to being the white Tom, is hinted at after all in the language describing his "vulgarity": "His gait, his attitudes, his gestures." This is the language, we will recall, used to describe Tom when he performs his female gender for David Wilson. The fact that Chambers is at home only in the kitchen evokes not only race but also the female gender, or a feminized male identity.[23]

A novel propelled into motion by the exchange of two babies, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* makes no effort, dramatically, to make the exchange reciprocal. Twain shows almost no interest in the white baby who is raised as a slave; most of his attention is focused on the black baby raised as white. In the terms of the novel, "really" being white does not mean much at all, or, as Lott puts it, "to be imitation black is to *be* black, to be imitation white is to be [a] mere mimic."[24] Nevertheless, Chambers, who has been absent from the novel for much of its duration, is left in the end on center stage. His clothes, taken from him at six months, are symbolically returned to him, but the power they had to undo him at the outset is not matched by a corresponding ability to restore him in the end. In this sense, the social order has not been restored in the end. Even the whitest of black men can be sold into slavery, but a white man, once "crossed by the shadow of the Veil," cannot ever be fully white again. While the old categories seem to be reinstated, they are now confounded to such a degree that the old order is shaken to its core.

Notes

[1] Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins* (New York: Norton, 1980), 3. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

[2] Two notable recent exceptions include Marjorie Garber's brief consideration of the text in *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992), which notes that "questions" of clothing and "the exchange of clothing" are part of the story from the beginning (289), and Eric Lott's "Mr. Clemens and Jim Crow: Twain, Race, and Blackface," which explores the relation of blackface and identity in the novel. Although issues of dress and disguise inform Lott's argument, his primary and provocative thesis focuses on racial performance. In *The Cambridge Companion to Mark Twain,* ed. Forrest G. Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press,1996), 129–52.

[3] Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen, quoted in Susan Gilman, *Dark Twins: Imposture and Identity in Mark Twain's America* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989), 53.

[4] *Cosmopolitan,* 18 (January 1895), 379.

[5] *The Spectator,* 74 (March 17, 1895), 367–68.

[6] *The Bookman* 7 (January 1895), 122.

[7] Hershel Parker, *Flawed Texts and Verbal Icons: Literary Authority and American Fiction* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1984), 115–46; Daniel McKeithan, *The Morgan Manuscript of Mark Twain's Pudd'nhead Wilson* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1961).

[8] Susan Gilman and Forrest G. Robinson, *Mark Twain's Pudd'nhead Wilson: Race, Conflict, and Culture* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1990).

[9] Eric Sundquist, "Mark Twain and Homer Plessy," in *Pudd'nhead Wilson: A Collection of Critical Essays,* ed. Eric Sundquist (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1994), 169–83; Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Race and Culture at the Century's End: A Social Context for *Pudd'nhead Wilson,*" *Essays in Arts and Sciences* 19 (1990): 1–27; Carolyn Porter, "Roxana's Plot," in Sundquist, ed., A *Collection of Critical Essays,* 154–68; Myra Jehlen, "The Ties that Bind: Race and Sex in *Pudd'nhead Wilson,*" in *Mark Twain's Pudd'nhead Wilson: Race, Conflict, and Culture,* 105–20.

[10] Gilman, *Dark Twins.*

[11] Susan Gilman argues that in the novels following *Pudd'nhead Wilson* Twain questions traditional categories of gender identification: "If 'male' and 'female' are as readily interchanged as 'black' and 'white,' then gender difference may prove to be as culturally constituted as much 'a fiction of law and custom' as racial difference." Gilman, *Dark Twins,* 79. A recent article by Laura Skandera-Trombley focuses on cross-gendered shorter works Twain wrote in the late 1890s and 1900s: "Why Can't a Woman Act More Like a Man? Mark Twain's Masculine Women and Feminine Men," *OVERhere* 15 (1995): 49–57. In the same issue of *OVERhere,* John Cooley writes about Twain's "heroic but also tragic maidens and inadequate males" (34–47). None of these scholars, however, addresses the relationship between gender and race in the major works.

[12] See Patricia Turner, *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1994). Of particular interest is the chapter "Back to the Kitchen," 41–61.

[13] See Porter, "Roxana's Plot."

[14] Jehlen, 110.

[15] Lott, 145.

[16] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World,* trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington:

Indiana Univ. Press, 1984).

[17] On female identity and being seen see, for instance, Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16 (Autumn 1975): 6–18.

[18] Carolyn Porter is less patient with Wilson, saying that he "is remarkably dull-witted when it comes to reading his evidence. Most noteworthy is his persistent and blundering confusion over the identity of the 'young woman' in Tom's room, 'where properly no young woman belonged'" (164).

[19] In addition to Eric Lott's "Mr. Clemens and Jim Crow," see also his *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993).

[20] Garber, 290–91.

[21] Eric Lott characterizes Tom's going forth in female dress as "an element of blackface revenge for the master's rape of slave women, one of whose issue is Tom himself." "Mr. Clemens and Jim Crow," 149.

[22] Eric J. Sundquist, "Mark Twain and Homer Plessy"; Shelly Fisher Fishkin, "Race and Culture at the Century's End."

[23] See Myra Jehlen, who argues that "the subversion in Tom's usurpation of white identity turns Chambers into a woman, for femininization is the lasting result of that unfortunate man's slave upbringing." But Jehlen never makes clear precisely how Chambers is feminized, except to suggest that the black man, in white men's stereotypes, is either an over-sexualized, threatening being or "contemptibly effeminate" (112). Chambers clearly is not the former.

[24] Lott, "Mr. Clemens and Jim Crow," 147.