

# Reviews

***Mark Twain, American Humorist*, by Tracy Wuster. University of Missouri Press, 2016, Paperback 2019; 483 pages. ISBN-13:978-0826220561**

“High and fine literature is wine, and mine is only water; but everybody likes water.”

--Mark Twain, Letter to William Dean Howells, 15 February 1887

Classic: a book which people praise and don't read.

--Mark Twain, *Following the Equator*, Pudd'nhead Wilson's New Calendar

Mark Twain often spoke about the virtues of his work as seeking to entertain the masses rather than educate the masses. And yet his place in the tradition of American humor transcended a division in the American humor tradition. A number of influential studies have dealt with one or another aspect of his career; to cite just two, James Caron's *Mark Twain, Unsanctified Newspaper Reporter* looks at the emergence of Mark Twain as an irreverent writer on deadline for Western newspapers, and Judith Yaross Lee's *Twain's Brand: Humor in Contemporary American Culture* considers Mark Twain's deliberate shaping of his persona as a comic identity as a trademark that paved the way for a kind of branding of American humor even today. Tracy Wuster's *Mark Twain, American Humorist* joins the ranks of this distinguished scholarship by focusing on the pivot from Mark Twain's early comic newspaper squibs and hoaxes to his entry into the Eastern literary establishment. As Wuster explains, this transition was not without its challenges, in large part, because of the dynamics of nineteenth-century print culture and the hierarchy of American humor that those dynamics informed.

The forces at work in print culture were both social and economic. At its root, the humor that Mark Twain practiced was vernacular humor, though he tended not to indulge the kinds of jokes that rested on orthographic distortion that a number of his contemporaries had popularized. His early success was primarily aimed at entertainment rather than the social virtue that

the Eastern literary establishment championed. Thus many of his Eastern critics found his brand of humor to fall short. This distinction became a point of dispute when the lyceum lectures began to expand their programs beyond serious speakers to include him and other humorists. Breaking into the hierarchy that distinguished New England literary humorists such as Oliver Wendell Holmes and James Russell Lowell from the popularity of pseudonymous, lowbrow, comic writers proved to be a challenge. Thus, the story of how Mark Twain overcame the perception that he was a lesser humorist to become America's foremost comic figure as well as its most widely known writer is an intriguing one, and Wuster tells it with nuance and attention to the texture of cultural history.

Although the importance of William Dean Howells in Mark Twain's rise has been frequently noted, Wuster offers a fuller explanation based on careful research of Howells's published praise of Mark Twain's writing, first in his review of *Innocents Abroad* in the *Atlantic Monthly*, the most important highbrow periodical of the day, and Howells continued his support by featuring Mark Twain's short work in this prestigious magazine. One of most significant chapters in *Mark Twain, American Humorist* holds its title figure temporarily aside in order to detail the tension in the culture of humor and the influence of the *Atlantic* on that culture. As Wuster points out, Howells took considerable risk in championing Mark Twain. Although the two men enjoyed mutual admiration during their lives, the relationship was at times tested, most notably by the often misunderstood joke that Twain delivered at the Whittier Birthday dinner. Twain's performance at this banquet is familiar to most Twain scholars; however, again, Wuster's exhaustive research provides significant context that is often left out of the discussion of the joke, the setting in which it occurred, the divergent public response to it, and the embarrassment that Twain and Howells personally endured. Moreover, Wuster's account goes beyond the particular event to include Twain's well received humorous speech at a testimonial breakfast for Oliver Wendell Holmes several years after the Whittier banquet. Twain's inclusion on the program for the Holmes event—in fact, his place as the closing speaker—indicates that he had remained in high regard despite his fear that he had disqualified himself in the earlier appearance.

While Mark Twain was concerned about his position in the humor hierarchy, the economic aspect of print culture was just as important to him, if not more so. His magazine appearances were not limited to the *Atlantic*; a series of columns in the *Galaxy* in 1870 helped to establish his footing,

and he would later appear in the *Century* and *Harper's Monthly*. All the while he was very attentive to his rate of compensation in comparison to other writers of the day. When Twain entered the book market, he chose subscription publishing, which, though more lucrative than trade publication, was often viewed skeptically as an avenue for literature of a lesser quality. The prospect of financial reward edged out his concern for prestige. Wuster details Twain's careful attention to every aspect of how his work was marketed, including how it was advertised and reviewed. He was often disturbed by critical slights, and here, again, Howells was instrumental, along with David Gray and Charles Dudley Warner, on whom Twain came to "trust to say the good thing if it could be honestly said; or be & remain charitably silent" (362, Mark Twain letter to Howells 24 March 1880). This strategy was born of his perception that weak reviews led to lackluster sales of his first novel, *The Gilded Age* (1873). In a detailed chapter on this foray into satirical fiction, Wuster puts that disappointment into perspective by laying out the history of the book's reception and its adaptation to the theatrical stage, earning Mark Twain a return of more than \$85,000, comparable to more than two million dollars in today's value. Other chapters dealing with Mark Twain's travels to Europe in the 1870s and 1880s shed light on the ways in which American humor came to be seen as a distinctive literary contribution to Western culture. Mark Twain's profile as a global ambassador of American humor has been frequently noted though not as substantially explained as it is in Wuster's account.

Unlike most works of Mark Twain scholarship, *Mark Twain, American Humorist* does not offer interpretations of his texts. But as a work of literary history, it provides not only an account of Mark Twain's reception in his own time but also a cultural analysis of the trajectory of American humor, its social assumptions and its economic consequences. Scholars of Mark Twain and of American culture in the formative decades of his career will find an illuminating account that goes beyond critical and biographical commonplaces, and resituates much of our conventional wisdom.

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