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The Ties that Bind: Race and Sex in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*

Myra Jehlen

Literary fictions can no more transcend history than real persons. Though certainly not universally acknowledged, in the current criticism this truth has replaced the former truth that literature was a thing apart. Once banned from the interpretation of books for violating the integrity of the imagination, considerations of race and sex (and of class) have entered into even the most formalist readings.¹ Race and sex are now found organic to problems of organic form. As a result, those problems have become vastly more complicated than when a literary work was thought to invent its own sufficient language. For then the task of the critic, though complex, was also simple; it was to show how all parts worked together, in the conviction that coherence would be revealed. A poem or story was a puzzle for which critics could be sure they had all the pieces and that these dovetailed.

Now neither assurance is available; one cannot be certain a work seen as engaged in history is internally coherent, or that the issues it treats finally hang together. This development is not altogether congenial to literary critics who mean to analyze works, not to dismantle them. But if we take literature's link to history seriously, we will have to admit that it renders literature contingent, like history itself. My case in point is *Pudd'nhead Wilson* whose writing posed problems that the history of racial and sexual thinking in America made impossible to resolve. The ideologies of race and sex Mark Twain contended with in this novel were finally not controllable through literary form. They tripped the characters and tangled the plot. *Pudd'nhead Wilson* exemplifies the tragedy of the imagination, a literary kind that, ironically, only a historical criticism can fully appreciate.

Pudd'nhead Wilson builds its plot upon a plot. The subversive schemer is a young slave mother named Roxana (Roxy) who is thrown into panic one day by her master's casual threat

to sell some of his slaves downriver, deeper into the more hellish South. Reasoning that if the master can sell these, he can as readily sell her baby, Roxy first determines to kill herself and the child rather than lose it to the slave market. Then she finds another way. Not only a mother but the mammy of her master's child, she simply switches the infants, who look so much alike that no one suspects the exchange. In contrast to their perfect resemblance as babies, the two boys grow up totally unlike. The black child taking the white's name of Tom (for Thomas à Becket Driscoll), becomes a treacherous, cowardly thief, while the white child, assuming the black name, Valet de Chambre, shortened to Chambers, is gentle, loyal, honest, and brave. Tom's path of petty crime leads eventually to murder, and his victim is his putative uncle and guardian, the much loved benevolent Judge Driscoll. A pair of visiting foreign twins are wrongly accused of the crime and are about to be convicted when Pudd'nhead Wilson, a local sage in the tradition of shrewd Ben Franklin, uncovers the real murderer who is, coincidentally, the real black. The amiable foreigners are vindicated, the real white man is freed from his erroneous bondage and restored to his estate, and the murderer is punished. Since he is not really a gentleman but a slave, he has to be punished as a slave and is sold downriver.

Twain starts off simply enough with a farce whose characters' opportunistic prevarications expose established lies. The lie Roxy exposes when she successfully replaces her master's child with her own is that racial difference is inherent. As the basis for slavery, this racism is unambiguously false, its inversion of human truth dramatized in Roxy's dilemma: she can jump in the river with her baby or live in daily peril of its being sold. Given those alternatives, her stratagem appears righteous and even fair, despite its concomitant enslavement of the white baby. Without condoning this but simply by focusing on Roxy and her child, the story enlists the reader wholly on their side, since the failure of the scheme can mean only the separate sale of mother and child, or their common death.

But then things take an odd turn which will culminate in an about-face, the reversal ultimately going so far as to transform the exposure of Roxy and her son into a happy ending that rights wrongs, rewards the good, punishes the bad, and restores order all around. When, at the eleventh hour, Pudd'nhead Wilson un.masks Tom and justice is done, the reader is actually relieved and gratified. If by this intervention the story does not exactly celebrate the return of the escaped slave to

bondage or his sale to the demons of tidewater plantations, neither does it lament these events. Roxy's broken spirit and the double defeat of her maternal hopes are pitiable sights, but there is a consolation prize. In *Pudd'nhead Wilson's* finally rectified moral economy, Roxy's punishment is quite moderate. Not only are the legal authorities of the town of Dawson's Landing forbearing, but "The young fellow upon whom she had inflicted twenty-three years of slavery continued [the pension she had been receiving from Tom]" (114). Exemplary generosity, to be sure, and a startling turnaround: for Roxy, who once was so helplessly enslaved that her only recourse was suicide, is now being represented as herself an enslaver. Adding insult to injury, the pension her victim bestows upon her makes her appear still more culpable. Roxy and her baby exit as the villains of a story they entered as the innocently wronged.

Twain recognized that this about-face required explanation. One reason Tom turned out so badly and Chambers so well, the narrator suggests, is because they were brought up in opposite ways. "Tom got all the petting, Chambers got none. . . ." The result was that "Tom was 'fractious,' as Roxy called it, and overbearing, Chambers was meek and docile" (18–19). Slavery is made to counter racism here in much the way it does in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and not to any better effect. Here the black man made Christlike by his sufferings is really white, so that, in the absence of real blacks similarly affected, the case is not fully made. All that these distortions of character argue is the evil of human bondage, not the equality of master and slave. For Stowe countering racism was incidental; indeed, she had only a limited interest in battling it, needing only to establish the humanity of the slaves in order to prosecute her central case, which was against slavery. But this was not Twain's situation when he published *Pudd'nhead Wilson* in 1894, thirty-two years after Emancipation. This novel, and its story of the baby exchange, has little to do with slavery: the plot does not follow Chambers the white slave to depict the horrors of his condition; instead, it settles on Tom, the black master, and the crimes he has all his freedom to perpetrate. In appropriate contrast to Stowe's novel, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is only peripherally concerned with the atrocities of the slave system. Although Chambers is sadly disadvantaged by his years of servitude, his debility has too little force to motivate the novel and nothing much comes from it or is expected to. On the contrary, everything comes from Tom's ascension to power—all of it bad.

Nothing in the original premise of the story predicts this

sad development, so the obvious question is *Why does Tom, the former slave, turn out so villainous and dangerous a master?* The most congenial explanation—that Tom has been fatally corrupted by his translation into the class of oppressors—omits too much of the story to serve. Twain offers it only halfheartedly, presenting the real white planters as a decent lot, absurd in their chivalric poses, inadequate to their ruling tasks, but men of integrity, faithful to their “only religion,” which is to be gentlemen “without stain or blemish.” Even their slave owning seems less evil than careless. The description of Pembroke Howard as “a fine, brave, majestic creature, a gentleman according to the nicest requirements of the Virginian rule” mingles affection with mockery, and while his dash is balderdash, there are worse things, like Tom. His sale of Roxy treacherously and symbolically downriver is presented as transcendently evil, an act so wicked as to brand him an unnatural son and a denatured man. To underline the exceptional quality of this betrayal, Twain shows him prepared to sell his mother twice over, for when she escapes and seeks his help against pursuing slave hunters, only her threat to repay him in kind prevents him from turning her over.

It is more than a little perverse that the two characters actually seen trafficking in slavery are both black. Percy Driscoll’s threat to sell his misbehaving slaves is the novel’s original sin that leads to Roxy’s desperate deed. Having the sale itself take place offstage and specifying that, unlike Tom, the Judge only sells to his relatively humane neighbors and not to the Simon Legrees of the Deep South, serves to attenuate our sense of the planter’s guilt. Yet the story pointedly reports Tom’s plan to sell his boyhood companion Chambers, a plan foiled by Judge Driscoll who buys Chambers to safeguard the family honor; “for public sentiment did not approve of that way of treating family servants for light cause or for no cause” (22); Tom’s corrupting environment, therefore, does not explain why the disguised black is both more deeply and differently corrupted than his fellow slave owners, a development that is the more startling because it reverses the initial expectations of virtue inspired by his first appearance as a hapless babe.²

But if no explanation emerges directly from the novel, consider its historical context. 1894—the year of its publication—was the eve of McKinley’s election and a period of accelerating racism marked by the bloody spread of Jim Crow. The formative experience of *Pudd’nhead Wilson*’s era was the defeat of Reconstruction, not the end of slavery. In that context

the story of the replacement of a white baby by a black one has a local urgency we may miss at this distance. The progress from a good thing to a bad as the black boy grows up to murder the town patriarch who is his uncle, and to rob, cheat, and generally despoil the whole village, as well as plunging his mother into a worse state than before, makes as much sense in history as it fails to make in the story.

For in the story Tom's villainy appears only arbitrary. As much as Twain justifies Roxy's revolution by appealing to the transcendent motive of maternal love, making her insurrection finally inevitable and in no way a sign even of inherent rebelliousness, he damns Tom from the start as "a bad baby, from the very beginning of his usurpation" (17). So the good black is a woman; the bad, a man. The good woman, complicated enough within herself to act for the bad, while remaining good, is black; the black, lacking interiority and simply expressing a given identification which is barely an identity, is a bad man. With this formula, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* emerges as a remarkable exploration of the anxieties aroused by a racist social structure, as a literary locus classicus of one modern (in its integrating of individualist concepts of identity) paradigm of race, and perhaps most strikingly, as the exposition of the relation between the paradigm of race and a modern one of gender. The conjunction of race and sex is more often pictured as an *intersection* but here it is an *interaction*. Moreover, this interaction does not simply join but combines them so that in certain pairings they are more stringently limiting than when taken separately.

When Twain associates the black race with the female sex, he represents racism in the uncontroversially repugnant form of slavery. Roxy's force and shrewdness work to disprove stereotypes of servility. Her sovereignty over the children extends naturally to the story of which she is a sort of author. She achieves the highest status available to a fictional character when she and the narrator are the only ones who know what is going on and can truly identify the participants. The white baby's mother is dead and his own father fails to recognize him. Roxy alone knows who and what he is. Furthermore, the way she knows this bears its own antiracist implications; since both babies have flaxen curls and blue eyes, her discrimination can have nothing to do with physical characteristics. Thus as she identifies them, *who* Tom and Chambers are is entirely independent of *what* they are: they embody the American ideal of individualism, the belief that a man is what he makes of himself, potentially anything he determines.

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Consonant with this liberal view, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* initially defines black character in universal traits as benign as Roxy herself. If Roxy at times succumbs to the lure of unattended objects, "Was she bad?" Twain muses. "Was she worse than the general run of her race?" "No. They had an unfair show in the battle of life, and they held it no sin to take military advantage of the enemy—in a small way." Twain insists, "in a small way, but not in a large one" (11). Even as he writes this, Roxy takes the very large military advantage of exchanging the infants. But the petty thievery, in this case not even her own, that has called down the wrath of her master and thus precipitated this ultimate transgression *was* a very small crime. If Roxy's pilfering turns to pillage, the novel suggests that this is not her fault, hardly even her doing, but that of a criminal society that monstrously deforms both marginally guilty relations and purely innocent ones.

The night of the exchange, Percy Driscoll, whose threat to punish any theft by selling the thief has raised for Roxy the specter of her child's own commodity status, sleeps the sleep of the just. By contrasting the white master's smug oblivion to the black slave's anguished wakefulness, the one scene in which she becomes the story's consciousness, Twain condones and even endorses her crime. The novel continues to side with her when it is not Roxy but Percy Driscoll who enforces the children's inequality by permitting the ostensibly white boy to abuse the child whom the father fails to recognize as his son. In this representation of the political economy of slavery in terms of the family, the author's voice speaks against the regnant patriarchy, espouses the oppressed, applauds subversion. Fathers in Mark Twain are not a nice lot, and boys are frequently abused. A black woman enslaved by white men is the natural ally of white boys. Would that all boys had mothers like Roxy!

Tom's becoming a man, however, rearranges this scheme radically. His passage into manhood, marked by his return from Yale, seems to start the story over. At Yale he has been a desultory student but has acquired a number of grown-up ways that pose unprecedented grown-up problems. His indifferent intellect has prevented any deeper penetration, but Tom has acquired the superficialities of elite culture, its dainty dress and its mannered ways. The local youths naturally scorn such refinements, but when they set a deformed black bell-ringer dressed in parodic elegance to follow Tom about, the young popinjay is debunked more profoundly than anyone in the story suspects. It is unclear just what is being satirized: is it simply Tom's

pretensions or some special absurdity of black foppery? Since 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.

Twain had already mocked black dress when he described a despairing Roxy adorning herself for her suicide. Her ribbons and feathers, her wondrously gaudy dress, are certainly meant to reflect on her race, but the butt of the joke is not race per se. Being black is not given as ridiculous, though blacks may behave ridiculously. In the later episode being black is itself absurd: the private joke we share with the narrator is the very fact of Tom's negritude, that while pretending to be a highfalutin gentleman, he is really a "Negro." The novel begins here its turnaround from the initial view implicit in the identical babies, that human beings are potentially the same, to the final dramatization in the Judge's murder, of black duplicity and violence as inherent racial traits.

Tom's grown-up inferiorities make his spoiled childhood irrelevant. He cannot have acquired his fear of dueling, for instance, from being raised a southern gentleman. While his overexcited peers in Dawson's Landing fall to arms at the least imagined slight, Tom turns tail at the first sign of a fight. This is only one of a constellation of traits defining Tom as a different sort of beau ideal, the very type of the upstart Negro of post-Reconstruction plantation fiction: cowardly, absurdly pretentious, lazy and irresponsible, a petty thief but potentially a murderer. Born the generic, universal baby, Tom has grown into a very particular sort of man, unlike both his white and his black fellows, because on the white side, he is not capable of being a master, and on the black, he has been dangerously loosed from the bonds that keep other black men in check.

I want to stress the next point because it is central to the racial/sexual paradigm developed in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. The white man who has taken Tom's place might have been expected, in the context of the novel's increasingly essentialist view of race, also to manifest an essential nature. He does not. "Meek and docile" in adaptation to his powerless state, Chambers yet does not become a white man fatally misplaced among blacks, as Tom is a black man fatally misplaced among whites. This asymmetry embodies a typing that applies only to the inferior race. The superior race, when defining itself in the terms of modern individualism, claims not a better type, but the general norm—universality, or the ability to be any type and all of them.

Unhappily for Chambers, however, universality imparts only potential, a capacity to become rather than an already defined (therefore limited) being. That is, what characterizes the norm embodied in the superior race, instead of a particular set of traits, is universal potential. Such potential realizes itself in relation to environment: ironically, the white “Chambers” is far more vulnerable to the shaping force of the exchange, for had Tom remained a slave he would have unfolded into essentially the same man, though a crucially less powerful one and for that reason a less harmful one. So Chambers, unlike Tom, adapts to his sad situation and is shaped by it. In one important respect his adaptation represents one of the novel’s most basic, though unacknowledged issues. I suggested earlier that while in Roxy, Twain endorses a black woman’s subversion of the white patriarchy, in Tom he rejects a black man’s takeover. The fate of Chambers begins to explain why Twain distinguished so sharply between mother and son by revealing the stake in his relation to the latter.

That stake is manhood. Through Tom’s usurpation, the white community of Dawson’s Landing risks losing its manhood. A black woman exercising the authority of motherhood in a white society may call in question the domestic ideology of white womanhood. In *Pudd’nhead Wilson* this domestic ideology means the genteel sentimentalism of aunts and widows. Had it been only a question of Roxy’s passing off her child as the child of a white lady, the baby switch would have been a disturbing but limited affair. But the far more encompassing event of a black man occupying the place of a white man, wielding the same power, usurping (Twain’s repeated term) the authority of white fatherhood, connotes a global reversal: instead of being emancipated, the iconoclastic boy who typically articulates Twain’s abhorrence of genteel culture is emasculated. The subversion in Tom’s usurpation of white identity turns Chambers into a woman, for feminization is the lasting result of that unfortunate man’s slave upbringing. Once a black slave, he can never take his place among his real peers: “The poor fellow could not endure the terrors of the white man’s parlor, and felt at home and at peace nowhere but in the kitchen” (114). Note that Chambers’s loss of manhood is clearly regrettable only because he is white. A black man may be improved by the attenuations of femininity, as Twain’s motherly Jim is elsewhere. One stereotype of the black man threatens violence and uncontrollable sex. The other has him contemptibly effeminate. Black men are seen simultaneously as excessively male

and insufficiently masculine. Entangled in these ideological contradictions, Tom is incoherently both. While his final act is a stabbing, at an earlier point in the story he robs houses disguised as a woman. The witnesses who fail to recognize in a dress the man they know as a white gentleman are actually seeing the real Tom, who thus shows himself not to be a real man.

By the logic of the different *kind* of identity that real men develop, a black mother can be the ally of rebellious boys, but a black father would rob them of their very identities as heirs to the mantle of universal (white) manhood. We stand with Roxy when she defies the social order to save her son. But when this child grows up, he embodies a revolution which has displaced the erstwhile ruling children, usurping their manhood. Once this implication has been realized by the story's unfolding, even the benignity of Roxy's crime seems retrospectively less certain. On the last page of the novel, the story finally represents the exchange not as freeing the black child but as enslaving the white.

That was all along implicit in a situation whereby the only way to free Tom is to enslave Chambers. This unhappy reciprocity, however, is not manifest in the story as long as it focuses on mothers and children. The maternal economy in this novel is a welfare state. Its central concern is not production but distribution, and even when it is unfair, it has primarily to do with giving: allocating privileges and goods among the more or less undifferentiated members of a group who seek more not from each other but from the mother/state. Production, not distribution, is the chief care of the market/capitalist economy of the US in the late nineteenth century; and in that context, distribution is a matter of competitive acquisition.

Much has been written about the relation of these two economies which in some respects confront and in others complement each other.³ The peculiar slant of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* comes from presenting them not, as usual, synchronically, as simultaneous dimensions of one society, but diachronically, the market economy following the maternal. Thus sequentially related, with each one in its time defining the fictional universe, their contradictions emerge more sharply, along with the way that the hierarchy of family and state, private and public, gives the market the last word. It certainly has the last word in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. While a mother may take something from one child and give it to another who needs it more but not deprive the former, in an economy in which personally recuperable profit is the bottom line, taking away and giving has ultimately

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to show up on the ledger. And when self-sufficient individuals—which means men and fathers—possess unequal amounts of power or wealth, reallocation, however equitable, means deprivation: one gets only by taking away from the other. At the point at which the story of Tom and Chambers leaves the nursery and enters the marketplace, Tom, once the innocent and even rightful recipient of the freedom he unjustly lacked, becomes a usurper, while Chambers is seen to have been robbed.

The maternal and market economies which in their turn dominate the plot of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* coexist to a degree. Though the story starts out in Roxy's control, the market wields overwhelming force from the first since the power of whites to sell blacks to other whites inspires the exchange of the babies. But at this point, even though slavery functions as a harsh necessity in Roxy's world that will ultimately deprive her of all power, the market as such is not yet the primary setting. Indeed, when this necessity first manifests itself, she resists successfully, temporarily returning her world to its prior order and keeping both babies. All through their infancy and childhood she administers her welfare system, taking care of both of them as fairly as she can under the circumstances, despite the fact that her own child is in the master position and would be favored if she were to implement fully the unfairness of the slave system. When Tom is no longer a mother's child but his own man, however, he takes over the fictive universe and administers it his way. His administration participates directly in the patriarchal economy, and in this new context the baby exchange realizes its meaning in the trade of Chambers's white manhood for Tom's black impotence, and vice versa.

Because the asymmetries of race and of sex are parallel, Roxy's innate character as a mother is congruent with being a black woman. Paradoxically, even ironically, this very limit permits Twain to endow her with a considerable potential for transcendence, the way that Flaubert, say, endows Emma with much of his own sense of self without ever questioning the nontranscendence of female selfhood.⁴ So Roxy, a black woman, actually approaches individualist selfhood, while her son is denied it altogether and is depicted as capable of achieving self-creative powers only by the outright usurpation of whiteness. On the other side, Chambers's failure to achieve manhood, in dramatizing the transcendence of white identity which defines itself by going beyond nature, also points up a terrible vulnerability that springs from the very quality that makes white men superior. For to be capable of making oneself and one's world

is a very fine thing, but it has its price. The price of white men's power of self-creation is the risk of failing not only to achieve but to be, while women (though not always as fictional characters) and blacks are essentially, and thus invulnerably, what they are born. This inequality of vulnerability counterbalances racial inequality, coming first, in the ideological and psychological world of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, to equate the plights of blacks and whites, then finally to make blacks appear stronger or at least more threatening.

An essentialist identity requires, for the good of the community, more social control. An essentialist identity is too little vulnerable to be allowed as much freedom as selves that are constrained by their own vulnerability. It is generally recognized that the ratio of self-making to being determines the status of modern individuals, so that the more a man is his own author, the higher he ranks and the more authority he wields. The converse is less often articulated; an essentialist identity not only brands the socially inferior but necessitates their submission. In one scene of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* this logic very nearly justifies slavery.

When Chambers reveals to Roxy that her errant son is a dissolute gambler, who at the moment owes the huge sum of two hundred dollars, Roxy is stunned: "Two—hund'd—dollahs! . . . Sakes alive, it's mos' enough to buy a tollable good second-hand nigger wid." Now the irony here is that the two hundred dollars Tom has gambled away are two hundred dollars *he* would fetch, being himself "a tollable good second-hand nigger." Thus the possibility of buying and selling human beings, which up until now has implied such intolerable violations of natural law as the separation of mothers and children, has become, astonishingly, a way to measure and *preserve* genuine value: Tom's worthlessness as a white man is measured by his gambling away his worth as a slave. Lest we not grasp this point fully, Twain spells it out in the ensuing dialogue. Chambers's report that Tom has been disinherited for his scandalous conduct infuriates Roxy who accuses her supposed son of lying, calling him a "misable imitation nigger." Chambers retorts, "If I's imitation, what is you? Bofe of us is imitation white—dat's what we is—en pow'full good imitation, too . . . we don't 'mount to noth'n as imitation niggers" (35). But Chambers is an "imitation nigger," since he is really white. He is also really honest and good, as he shows by openly declaring his purported blackness, unlike the true blacks in the story who lie about race. Once again the reader of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* understands a

scene by knowing better than the characters and that better knowledge is the reality, the truth, of racial difference.

This scene plays directly to the concealed switch of Tom and Chambers and exactly negates its original thrust that whites and blacks can be exchanged because in *fact* blacks can be essentially white—read: universally human. However exchangeable the mistakable physical characteristics of blacks and whites, they represent how apparent likeness can mask real and profoundly different beings. Initially, clothing and social status are seen as hiding real human resemblance. These same superficial differences have come to mask real difference, and the bodily likeness of Tom and Chambers that first expressed their common humanity now renders their total opposition invisible. People may *appear* equal, it says, but they are really not.

What matters in this scene is the real difference between Tom and Chambers, while what had mattered about them at the start was their real likeness. Coincidentally in the same episode, Roxy herself sadly dwindles as the narrator ascribes her anger at Chambers (for reporting Tom's disinheritance) to her fear of losing "an occasional dollar from Tom's pocket" (35). This is a disaster she will not contemplate, the narrator laughs. But earlier Roxy defined herself in relation to a larger disaster, not the loss of a dollar but the sale of her baby. And when two pages later Tom actually does refuse his mother a dollar, the novel's shift of perspective is complete: where the injustice of racial inequality was first measured by the violation of Roxy's natural motherhood, now inequality will be justified by the spectacle of the emancipated and empowered Tom's unnatural sonhood. Roxy's subsequent threat to expose him is directed at his falseness; for the "truth" about Tom is that he is false, not really who he is or should be. Henceforth the story of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is not about interchangeable babies irrationally and unjustly rendered master and slave, but about a black man who has taken a white man's place. Roxy herself, who first identified Tom as a universal baby—who revealed him as "white" as any baby—now calls him a "nigger."

The first name she had bestowed on her child was the name of a servant, Valet de Chambre. The fine sound of it appealed to her, Twain explained, though she had no notion what it meant. But we do, and when we first laugh at it we do so out of affectionate condescension. When later Roxy exchanges this name for that of a lord, Thomas à Becket, we begin to see that both names have their serious implications: they project spurious identities that yet determine what each man becomes. In

the end, however, we find that we have been wrong twice, first when we took the names lightly, but second when we took them as seriously damaging misnomers. Valet de Chambre was all along the correct identification of a man born a servant and for a time dangerously misnamed a master.

Roxy's final renaming of Tom does not merely exchange one name for another but redefines the very nature of his identity. When she called her son Tom and thereby made him the equal of whites, it was on the grounds that he was indistinguishable from whites. Scrutinizing his golden babyhood dressed in white finery, she marveled: "Now who would b'lieve clo'es could do de like o'dat? Dog my cats if it ain't all I kin do to tell t'other fum which, let alone his pappy" (14). When babies are fledgling individuals, one as good as another in anticipation of each one's self-making, fathers cannot tell one from another—paternity is irrelevant. But when race enters into identity, paternity becomes all-important.

Roxy announces Tom's blackness to him by saying "You ain't no more kin to old Marse Driscoll den I is!" With this she claims him—"you's my *son*" (41)—but the grounds for this claim is a renunciation. Even as she demands that he recognize her maternal authority—"You can't call me *Roxy*, same as if you was my equal. Chillen don't speak to dey mammies like dat. You'll call me Ma or mammy, dat's what you'll call me" (42)—she abdicates the transcendent authority that earlier enabled her to name *him* into an identity she had more than borne: created. Henceforth he may call her "Ma or mammy" and accede to her orders, but for both this will ratify subjection, even servitude. Yet the reclamation of this maternal authority is limited, bounded by the surrounding patriarchy. "You'll call me Ma or mammy," Roxy storms, "leastways when dey ain't nobody aroun." For him to recognize her as his mother in public would reveal his real identity as a slave, whereupon Roxy would lose him to the authority of his father, and to the paternal authority of the slave system. Roxy had been able to make Tom free, when she was in charge and nature and race were in abeyance, but making him a slave requires her to invoke white patriarchal authority. For Tom may be black through his mother, but he is a slave through his father.

By a consummate irony, the revelation of his real white father seals Tom's status as a black son: a chastened Tom surrenders to his new status by asking timidly, "Ma, would you mind telling me who was my father?" The final link connecting Tom to his mother—identifying him as a slave—is her knowl-

edge, her ability to call on the name of a white man. And through the medium of Roxy's pride as she tells him that his father was "de highest quality in dis whole town—Ole Virginny stock, Fust Famblies," the authority of Cunnel Cecil Burleigh Essex parodically but surely reaches forward from that past all-generating moment when he could command Roxy to bear his son, to declare that son now a black slave. "Dey ain't another nigger in dis town dat's as high-bawn as you is," she ends, proffering an identity that is the fatal opposite of the one she had conferred on him at the start of the story. "Jes' you hold yo' head up as high as you want to—you has de right, en dat I kin swah" (43).

One sign of Roxy's demotion to the status of just another fond mother is that she is wrong about this: Tom has neither the right nor the capacity to hold up his head. Despite his excellent white descent, he is simply not of cavalier mettle. On the occasion when he runs away from a challenge to duel, Roxy herself sadly draws the inevitable conclusion—not even his superior white sire can redeem his fatal flaw: "It's de nigger in you, dat's what it is. Thirty-one parts o' you is white, en on'y one part nigger, en dat po' little one part is yo' soul. 'Tain't wuth savin'; 'tain't wuth totin' out on a shovel en tho'in in de gutter. You has disgraced yo' birth. What would yo' pa think o' you? It's enough to make him turn in his grave" (70).

Roxy's racism is comically undercut certainly, but in the service of what alternative view? We are the more at a loss for a proper liberal riposte in that Roxy's parting shot travels directly to the end of the novel and its definitive return of Tom to the now unproblematical status of "nigger." "Ain't nigger enough in him to show in his finger-nails," she mutters, "en dat takes mightly little—yit dey's enough to paint his soul" (70). It was because of his white, thus raceless or race-transcendent fingernails that she could raise him to the status of master. Now it turns out that his fingernails did not accurately represent the case. Rather, as all discover, his identity lies in his fingerprints, and no one transcends his or her fingerprints.

Pudd'nhead Wilson's resort to fingerprints to establish Tom's true identity solves more than the Judge's murder. It provides a more encompassing resolution of the novel as a whole, for his astounding revelation restores both racial and sexual order. Indeed, in that any satisfactory ending would require that the truth be revealed and, since only Roxy could reveal it, it is not easy to imagine how else Twain could have ended his story. For Roxy to solve the mystery would not con-

stitute an ending, not so much because her confession would be dramatically unlikely but because by identifying Tom and Chambers accurately, she would reassert precisely the power to identify that has so badly compromised Dawson's Landing. For Roxy to name her son and his white counterpart a second time would confirm her authority, thus perpetuating the racial dilemma of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. Reconstruction would continue.

In *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, however, Twain finds an alternative truth teller. Male to a fault in his entire self-sufficiency, Wilson counters, then surpasses Roxy's authority: to the babies' identical fingernails which enabled Roxy to declare them identical, Wilson opposes fingerprints representing the apotheosis of difference, uniqueness. Fingerprints are individually distributed, not racially, so they cannot testify to Tom's race, only to his personal character. Nevertheless, in the courtroom scene, Wilson invokes the telltale fingerprints categorically, to identify the individual miscreant as himself the representative of a category.

Wilson, who represents the category of authoritative white men commanding both law and language, begins by announcing this authority to the community: "I will tell you." This is what he tells them: "For a purpose unknown to us, but probably a selfish one, somebody changed those children in the cradle." So far is the story from casting doubt on any aspect of this emerging elucidation, its miraculous verity is reinforced when the narration turns briefly to Roxy, who thinks, pathetically, that "Pudd'nhead Wilson could do wonderful things, no doubt, but he couldn't do impossible ones," and that therefore her secret is safe. But what is impossible to her is as nothing to Wilson. Having named the exact time of the exchange (thus returning to the crime's origin to master it whole) and having identified the perpetrator, he continues in the irrefutable idiom of scientific formulas: "A was put into B's cradle in the nursery; B was transferred to the kitchen, and became a negro and a slave . . . but within a quarter of an hour he will stand before you white and free!" He controls time and place. "From seven months onward until now, A has still been a usurper, and in my finger-records he bears B's name." And now the coup de grace: "The murderer of your friend and mine—York Driscoll, of the generous hand and kindly spirit—sits among you. Valet de Chambre, negro and slave." Roxy's response is poignantly telling. Before the miracle of white masculine omniscience, she can only pray: "De Lord have mercy on me, po' miserable sinner dat I is" (112–13).

Wilson's godlike authority has appropriated the story, rav-

eling the order of the white community as he unravels the case. In the process, the story redraws its characters and issues in stark blacks and whites and is also rewritten with a new beginning, one that brushes Roxy's motive aside with the casual conclusion that whatever her reason, it was just selfish (in context, a stunningly ironic term that the text leaves uninflected).

And what about Pudd'nhead himself, the instrument of resolution? What is his relation to the order he restores? In the first place, while he embodies the authority of the white patriarchy, he is not himself a father but a bachelor, a lone, even an outcast figure whose own authority the village has only this moment recognized and then only because of his trick with the fingerprints. While he rescues the established order, he is acutely, at times bitterly, aware that those who administer it are not often worthy of their power. The joke that earns him the nickname "Pudd'nhead" has turned out more serious than it seemed. On his first day in town, Wilson became a fool in the eyes of his neighbors when he declared that he wished he owned half of a loudly barking dog so that he might kill his half. Now he has saved half a dog, while the other half dies. There is nothing joyous in restoring the status quo of Dawson's Landing. Twain may have been reluctant to see black men acquire the power of whites and may have viewed their bid for a share of power as outright usurpation. He did not vindicate white society. This is a familiar dilemma in his works, which frequently end, as does *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, in a stalemate between radical criticism and an implicit conservatism expressed in the refusal, or the inability, to imagine significant change. The stalemate here seems particularly frustrating: change must be defeated yet nothing of the established way of life appears worth preserving.

Pudd'nhead Wilson's concluding depression also sounds the depth of the most profoundly embedded images in the American mind, those of race and sex. Separate yet interacting, these images sometimes activate the imagination, and sometimes disable it, trapping it as Mark Twain's seems to have been by the impossible adjuncts of racial equality and white authority, of maternal justice and patriarchal right. When in the end Twain reestablishes by the fiat of law the rule of the white fathers, he does not do it gladly. Pudd'nhead Wilson, an outcast and a failure, playing out his charades alone in his study, represents the writer as outcast and failure. If he also represents the writer as lawgiver who defends the system he hates even from its victims trying to overcome their oppression, this is not

a productive paradox but a paralyzing contradiction. As an expression of his author's anguish, Pudd'nhead Wilson would really have liked to kill his half of the dog, but was afraid finally of leaving the house unguarded.

Notes

1. I use the term "sex" instead of "gender" not to reject the argument that sexual identity is a social construction but to sidestep it in order to evoke the material condition itself, the way sex is interpreted into gender being precisely the subject of the essay. I am aware that one view holds that there exists no material condition as such, or none we can apprehend, so that the language of gender (gender as a language) is all we know of sex and all we need to know. To this my response is implicit in what follows, that gender, like any ideological construction, describes the interactions of several realities at least one of which is not the creature of language but material—the world out there. Gender is all we know of sex but not all we need to know. The essay also depicts the inadequacy of ideological knowledge.
2. The first description of the two children distinguished only by the "soft muslin and . . . coral necklace" of one and the "coarse tow-linen shirt" of the other recalls the similarly contrasting costumes of the Prince and the Pauper. In that story, however, the little pauper fulfills all sentimental expectations and, far from usurping the throne, returns it more secure to its rightful owner. Are there implications in the virtue of this poor boy, versus the vice of the black boy, for different authorial attitudes toward class and race?
3. Here I would mention specifically that portion of the literature which has reevaluated the sentimental tradition as a female, sometimes feminist critique of the male ideology of the market. See especially Tompkins and Ammons.
4. I have discussed this phenomenon more fully in "Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism."

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