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Mark Twain's "Remarkable Achievement": Effacing the South for Northern Audiences

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Mark Twain embarked on his "Twins of Genius" lecture tour in November of 1884. He toured alongside George Washington Cable, promoted as a "distinguished Southern novelist" and a kind of serious sidekick to the humorist Mark Twain, billed as "a reader of his own fun."¹ Both had new novels to promote—Cable's *Dr. Sevier* (1884) had recently been published, and Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was due out in December. During the tour Cable recited selections from *Dr. Sevier* and his popular novel *The Grandissimes* (1880) and sang Creole slave songs. Twain read from a variety of his publications, but most consistently performed "Tom and Huck's Remarkable Achievement," comprised of excerpts from what we now refer to as the "Evasion" chapters of *Huck Finn*. Newspaper reviews of the "Twins" performances describe Cable's tendency to hold his audience spellbound while he imitated Creole dialect onstage and Twain's ability to arouse a "roar of laughter" through his portrayal of Jim, the slave character in *Huck Finn*. In this paper, I will examine the role of each author—Twain as the funny twin and Cable as the serious one—and argue that this pairing effaced Twain's connection to the south. The lecture tour's intentionally ironic name, "Twins of Genius," did not merely highlight the men's distinctions, but exaggerated those distinctions to the extent that Twain and Cable were cast as each other's antithesis. Therefore, anything associated with Cable—Creole culture, Jim Crow laws in the south, and the Confederate army—seemed contrary to Twain's onstage persona. Furthermore, I contend that the "Twins of Genius" tour was instrumental in establishing Twain's reputation as an American humorist by distinguishing him from Cable, his southern sidekick. It was this tour that shaped Twain's reputation, not as a local color novelist, but rather as a great American writer whose reputation H.L. Mencken best characterized as "the most noble figure America has ever given to English literature" (157).

Cable's essay, "The Freedman's Case in Equity," was published during the tour and further emphasized the distinction between Twain as an American author and Cable as a regional personality. In the essay, Cable, a Louisiana native, incited controversy with his call to do away with the "purely arbitrary superiority of all whites over blacks" (412). Letters to editors began pouring into southern

publications like New Orleans's *Times-Democrat*, one of which questioned Cable's status as a true "son of the south." Cable's controversial stance on racial equality, published in the popular *Century Magazine* and circulated among national audiences, was surely on the minds of those gathered at the lecture halls to watch the "Twins of Genius." By contrast, Twain never spoke directly about his stance on the freedman's status while on tour, but his performance of the Evasion chapters of *Huck Finn* subtly hinted at his feelings about citizenship and the freedman's autonomy in the South. Performing Jim's role as the freed slave who remained in slavery because he "allowed [they] was white folks and knowed better than him; so he was satisfied and said he would do it all just as Tom said," Twain demonstrated the need for *both* white and black Southerners to disabuse themselves of notions of racial inequality (309). However, Twain's performance proved problematic, as evidenced by multiple reviews that remark on audiences' uproarious response, and by Twain's remark to Cable, "I am demeaning myself. I am allowing myself to be a mere buffoon. It's ghastly" (Railton, "Touring"). The audiences' misrecognition of Twain's intent in performing Jim's plight, versus Cable's clearly-stated, published views on the freedman's equality, served to solidify Twain's role as a witty American writer and Cable's role as a controversial southern figure.

While the debate over the freedman's status became more vicious in the South, Twain and Cable toured the North, performing their minstrel-like act that alternated between romanticizing and satirizing the African American for northern audiences. Newspaper reviews indicate that the Twins' performance was well received in most cities. Praising one of their earliest tour stops in Boston, the *Daily Advertiser* described the show as a "literary bridging of the bloody chasm" and a "rostrum of rapprochement of Louisiana and Connecticut" (Lorch, *Trouble* 164). A few days later in Philadelphia, newspapers used this same language to promote upcoming shows, stating that Twain would "clasp hands across the bloody chasm [of the Civil War] with Mr. George W. Cable." Frederick Trautmann asserts that the papers saw the "Twins of Genius" program as representing the renewed union between North and South, and argues that the public seemed to "forget that Mark Twain, a Missourian by birth, had served in the Confederate army" (217). Twain's regional identity was so muddled that throughout the tour reviewers associated him with almost every American region, in addition to the fact that many referred to him simply as a distinguished American humorist. An article in the *Dayton Daily Democrat* identified him as a former citizen of Buffalo, New York; a Missouri newspaper reported that he addressed the audience as "fellow townsmen"; one review cited Twain's connection with the "rowdy west"; and a reviewer from the

Brooklyn Daily Eagle seemed to believe Twain was born in the Northeast due to his “sharp New England features.”

Twain’s regional identity was skewed via the tour’s focus on Cable’s southern identity. Cable served as the southern specialist entertaining his audience with stories of Creole culture and his days in the Confederate army, while his controversial stance on the status of the freedman in the south served as political backdrop for his performances. Compared to Cable’s hyper focus on southern culture and politics, any association Twain might have had with the south was diminished, even erased. Additionally, anything that one “twin” did on stage would be automatically viewed as the antithesis of the other, thanks to tour promoter J.P. Pond’s efforts to sell the performances as “divided between [the two authors], so that the pathos of the one will alternate with the humor of the other, and the genius of both will be presented in a rapidly changing programme” (Turner, *Biography* 171). As a result of these promotional efforts, many reviewers saw Twain as “almost the opposite of Mr. Cable.” One *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reporter described his experience standing between Twain and Cable as “that beautiful legend which provides a human being with two attendant spirits, one of them of diabolical mien always urging them on to commit felonies and misdemeanors, the other, of angelic aspect, constantly coaxing him to give up his criminal ways.” The devil, of course, was the perpetual gambler, swearer, and smoker Mark Twain, while Cable was the angel whose pious nature and refusal to travel in public conveyances during the Sabbath never failed to irk Twain during their travels. In a letter to William Dean Howells during the tour, Twain remarked that traveling with Cable “has taught me to abhor and detest the Sabbath and hunt up new and troublesome ways to dishonor it” (Twain, *Letters* 250). The men’s differences that surfaced during the tour served as a screen upon which Twain’s identity was projected, which ultimately resulted in the erasure of his southern identity.

Twain’s and Cable’s physical differences further animated these personal and cultural differences in audiences’ imaginations. When the two men walked on stage together to open the show—Twain robust and disheveled; Cable, small and neatly dressed—the audience immediately broke out in laughter. The expectation of twins disrupted by the odd pair that had just appeared on stage was often noted in the next day’s reviews. Newspaper reviews solidified the men’s differences by characterizing Twain as masculine and Cable as feminine. The *Quincy Daily Journal* depicted Cable as “a small weak, affected, effeminate-looking man with a womanish voice. He is affected in dress and affected in voice,” and then noted that Twain is “quite another sort of man . . . sizeable, substantial, sensible, manly-looking and manly-spoken fellow; a man cut after the pattern of a man, and with

the speech and action of a man.” The *Cleveland Leader* observed, “Mark Twain is his companion’s opposite in every particular. The latter is small and graceful; Twain tall and awkward,” and the *Buffalo Express* noted:

Had a search been made for two men of letters more unlike in appearance than ‘Twain’ and Cable, the result would have been a total failure. The Southern novelist is the precise, alert, brisk man of style, keenly alive to his part in the entertainment . . . On the other hand, ‘Mark Twain’ is the man from way back, who has sat down by the stove at the corner grocery, gathered his cronies about him and telling a story as only he can tell it. The one is of the dapper sort, as polite as a dancing master, the other is ponderous and heavy.

Twain, “sizable,” self-assured, and “manly speaking”—a Whitmanesque character that contained multitudes—stood in stark contrast to his small, southern counterpart with the funny dress and high-pitched voice. The newspapers’ feminine characterizations of Cable, the southern gentleman, ensured “manly-looking” Twain’s disassociation with the south.

Although Cable’s portion of the program often received good reviews—sometimes even better than Twain’s—each evening’s performance was executed in a way that ensured Cable remained the curious sidekick. Twain was the main event and always had the audience laughing, while Cable served as a quirky interpreter of a “foreign” culture that he performed during Twain’s breaks. Many evenings Twain would take on an aloof, bewildered persona to introduce Cable, feigning ignorance of the southern culture that Cable would be dramatizing. In a performance in Buffalo, New York, Twain began the show by introducing Cable as “one whom I regard, the world regards, and you regard as the greatest modern writer of ancient fiction, and likewise the greatest ancient writer of modern fiction.” This humorous, albeit unfavorable introduction prescribed two possible ways to view Cable: as the strange little twin who writes outdated fiction in a modern world, or as a relic of the irrelevant past who writes “modern” fiction about the obsolete South. Twain’s bemused attitude toward Cable onstage, as well as his impatience with Cable’s strict religious observances offstage, cast Cable as an antiquated anomaly whose performances were puzzling and often irrelevant.

Despite audiences’ lack of familiarity with Cable’s subjects, his recitations often drew positive reviews, and many newspapers noted his skillful performance of the Creole dialect. Still, Cable’s expertise set him apart as a regional author who reported on the peculiarities of southern life and Creole culture. The Janesville, Wisconsin *Daily Recorder* remarked of Cable’s performance: “Those who have read Mr. Cable’s novels of Southern life, and have fancied they have struck the exact chord, even to the peculiar Creole *patois* and Creole life, need to hear the man who conceived the works to find that, no matter how careful may have been

their study, they are somewhat mistaken.” Cable offered an interesting glimpse into what seemed to be a foreign culture, so foreign, as this reviewer noted, that northern audiences needed to look to Cable as an interpreter. As a result, Cable stood as a strange yet interesting southern man, and Twain, his “opposite,” became the all-American humorist to whom audiences could relate. When Twain came on stage after Cable’s recitations, he provided comic relief for an audience that could not fully relate to Cable’s stories of the south and the political and social issues underlying those stories. For instance, the duo’s performance in St. Paul, Minnesota included Cable’s “The Sound of Drums,” a reminiscence of the Civil War from a Confederate soldier’s perspective. In the recitation, Cable exclaimed, “Soon [the Civil War] will be a quarter of a century ago!” and asks, “And yet, do you not hear them now, coming down the broad, granite-paved, moon-lit street, the light that was made for lovers glancing on bayonet and sword soon to be red with brothers’ blood?” (Railton, “*Dr. Sevier*”). Taken from *Dr. Sevier*, this performance illustrates Cable’s belief that the Northern cause in the Civil War was just, and that “we of the south” can now admit it.

After this recitation from Cable’s most controversial novel, Twain completely changed the tone of the evening’s performance with a routine that the *Minneapolis Tribute* described as “the funniest thing of the evening . . . from the advance sheets of his new book, entitled, ‘Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer’s Brilliant Achievement’ in releasing the negro prisoner, Jim, from the log cabin where he is incarcerated.” Twain’s humorous performance precludes the possibility of serious reflection—on both the story of Jim’s imprisonment and Cable’s Civil War story that preceded it. Stephen Railton observes: “To modern readers, who are usually uncomfortable with the novel’s ending, there is seldom any question that in the ‘Evasion’ chapters Tom mistreats Jim, but all the evidence from the reviews of Mark Twain’s performances about how the piece was received, tells us that contemporary white audiences loved the episode” (“Freeing”). Jim’s suffering, whether as a slave or a freeman, was not to be taken seriously in Twain’s performance. The comedic relief provided by the Evasion performances ensured Twain’s disassociation with Cable’s controversial politics and the serious nature of his performances

While Cable spoke against the antiquated ways of the south, the tour paradoxically served to intensify his connection to the south. Many of Cable’s southern readers were infuriated with his controversial views on the equality of the freedman in the south, and questioned his status as a true southerner, but this rejection did not serve to align him with a larger, northern audience. He was still seen as a strange southern man because of his and Twain’s roles in the “Twins of Genius” performance and through their divergent visions for the tour.

In addition to following Cable's serious recitations about the South with comedic performances, Twain undermined Cable's presence onstage by ensuring that Cable always went on stage first. As Twain explained in a letter to his wife:

We've got a new plan, & it *works*. Cable goes on at the very stroke of the hour & talks 15 minutes to an *assembling* house, telling them not to be concerned about *him & he* won't be troubled. . . . And privately, *another* thing—only half the house hear Cable's first piece—so there isn't too much of Cable any more—whereas heretofore there has been a thundering sight too much of him" (Twain, *Love Letters* 231).

As the letter to Olivia indicates, the "Twins of Genius" tour and its performances were a work in progress. The twin dynamic was not Twain's deliberate orchestration, but rather the fortuitous result of the trial-and-error method by which the tour was run and the shows were performed. Additionally, the initial pairing of Twain and Cable was not intentional. Twain planned a "grand tour" in which he would travel around the country in a private Pullman railcar with a group of celebrity authors, including Cable, William Dean Howells, and Thomas Bailey Aldrich. Howells and Aldrich fell through, as did the Pullman car, and Twain and Cable—the unlikely duo—ended up traveling together as the "Twins of Genius." Therefore, Twain did not deliberately shed his southern identity by touring with Cable, but their identity as complete opposites that was cultivated during the tour forced the southern spotlight solely upon Cable.

Twain's performances did subtly point to the dynamics that catalyzed the tensions over the freedman's status in the South, despite the appearance that the "Twins of Genius" tour prescribed comic relief for the issues Cable addressed in "The Freedman's Case in Equity." Twain's *Evasion* performances provided troubling commentary on whose perspective was privileged in antebellum America and the danger that comes from assuming, in Jim's words, the "white folks" point of view is the only one that matters. While the narrative of Twain's performance was clearly centered on personal relations between Jim and his captors (Tom and Huck), this focus on the pre-war world on a personal level does not preclude Twain's consideration of the lingering consequences of the Civil War. Instead of directly taking the Civil War and its aftermath as his subject, Twain's performance examined the assumptions and inclinations that laid the groundwork for such an event, and that continued to haunt the nation after the war. Twain's performance exemplified the dynamics that shape personal relationships—between rich and poor, enslaved and free, young and old, smart and ignorant—and portrays a country whose foundation rests on these problematic relationships. It is through this subtle message that Twain avoided any regional affiliation and promoted himself as an

American humorist. Moreover, with Twain as the central act and Cable as the unusual southern sidekick, the “Twins of Genius” tour effaced Twain’s regional identity, and reinforced this reputation as an American humorist, ensuring that *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* would avoid any “local color” or regional fiction designation, and instead come to be regarded as “The Great American Novel.”

Notes

¹All editorial and newspaper reviews cited in this article are archived on Stephen Railton’s website, *Mark Twain in His Times*.

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