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# Culture, Counter-culture, and the Subversion of the Comic in Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*

*Porscha Fermanis*

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Theoretical interest in the relationship between literature and society is invested with particular purpose in the comic-parodic novel, as a form in which a recurrent oscillation of genres and narrative perspectives occurs only within a hierarchy where positioning is relational and perpetually contested, and where apparently “common” languages and values are revisited throughout the course of the novel.<sup>1</sup> The Middle Ages, as Umberto Eco reminds us, is a popular site of ironic revisitation for the comic-parodic novelist, providing the opportunity to “speculate about our infancy, of course, but also about the illusion of our senility” (69).<sup>2</sup> As Eco goes on to point out, however, writers such as Ariosto and Cervantes do not revisit the Middle Ages as antiquarians but rather as purveyors of a period already refashioned by the romance tradition. To this company he might have added Mark Twain, who has been described by more than one critic as the “American Cervantes.”<sup>3</sup> The sixth century Middle Ages to which Twain sends Hank Morgan, his nineteenth-century middle class American hero in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, is in fact the fictive Middle Ages of Malory—the “highly unreal and literary world of the idealistic, anachronistic romance” (Kordecki 338), itself a fifteenth-century revisitation of the “real” sixth century.

Responding to this romance/realism problematic, critical reactions to *A Connecticut Yankee* have generally fallen into one of two mutually exclusive schools: the first sees the novel as a farewell to the romance in American letters, a celebration of the vernacular, and

an acceptance of the value of nineteenth-century “progress”; the second emphasizes Twain’s life-long fascination with the romance form, his growing dissatisfaction with the limitations of the vernacular novel, and his ambivalence towards the emerging technologies of his time.<sup>4</sup> Both schools have tended either to focus their discussions of the novel on the concept of language and/or to consider generic and political/ideological issues separately, thereby neglecting the comic-parodic novel’s special relationship with extra-literary genres or with what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the genres of “everyday life” and “ideological” genres (*Dialogic* 33).<sup>5</sup> While a number of more recent works have supplemented this general critical trend with a new emphasis on the politics of humor, gender, and class, debates about the ultimate “meaning” of the novel remain largely unresolved.

Drawing on Bakhtin’s theories about how literary genres and conventions arise from social realities, this discussion of *A Connecticut Yankee* argues that the novel’s initial parodic objective can best be understood not through an analysis of the generic interaction between “two conflicting narrative forms” (Kordecki 242)—the American vernacular tradition of anti-romance and the fifteenth-century Malorian romance—but between “chronotopes” or time/space configurations representing elements of “culture” and “counter-culture” in nineteenth-century America. The novel provides the locus wherein collide the vernacular cultural tradition of progress and the reactionary counter-impulse of medievalism, and, by using both the Middle Ages and the nineteenth century as satiric butts, Twain initially manages to strike a blow against both, while at the same time affirming the lingering value of romantic medievalism in an increasingly compromised modern day America. The comic tension between these two cultures, as well as their perpetually oscillating status, gives the novel its sense of a world and a word that are in process rather than categorically demarcated and finalized: it seems that there is no stabilization of a single existing order, as even the increasing idealism with which Twain represents the Middle Ages is undermined by the ambiguous nature of the novel’s dream framework.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, however, the final cataclysm, in which Hank and his knights slaughter twenty-five thousand men, destabilizes this comic dialectic and subverts the original character of the novel’s humor, resulting in a much more radical and violent conception of laughter than is generally ascribed to Twain.

The connection between literature and the world in which it is produced is theorized most thoroughly by Bakhtin in the form of the chronotope or what he describes as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (*Dialogic* 84). Every chronotope is representative of an exclusive reader positioning in time and space, and is therefore similar to a bridge between actual and represented worlds. According to Bakhtin, a text will usually have several chronotopes that can at any given time interact with, oppose, or envelope each other (252). While the chronotope cannot be equated to genre, it “has an intrinsic generic significance. It can even be said that it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions...” (84-5). Both chronotopes and generic markers elicit and to some extent determine a response from the reader, stimulating a dialogic process between text and world. The emergence of new genres or of genre as historical force therefore draws attention to the emergence of new

conditions and relations of alterity in the world in which they are produced. Bakhtin sees comedy and the comic novel as one such historical force. In *Rabelais and his World*, he sketches a history and theory of laughter, representing the medieval “counter-world” of laughter as fundamentally dialogic by creating the “other” voice confronting authority; when two discourses interact or dialogize through laughter, language is “carnivalized” and its static sacredness removed.<sup>7</sup> Bakhtin argues that the Middle Ages was the high point in the history of laughter; the period’s decentralizing, centrifugal societal forces manifested themselves in the local fairs, buffoon spectacles, and heteroglossia of the clown.

Hank Morgan, on first seeing Arthurian England, believes it to be either a madhouse or a circus (6-7), and he consistently represents the Middle Ages in terms of carnival, pageant and “spectacle” (10, 16), capitalizing on the destabilizing elements that Bakhtin has shown us are inherent to laughter: the Round Table is “as large as a circus ring” and around it are “a great company of men dressed in such various and splendid colors that it hurt one’s eyes to look at them” (17).<sup>8</sup> The medieval knights are described as “a childlike and innocent lot” (18) and as “great simple-hearted creatures” (30) who love festivals and pageantry, while the rest of the populace are compared to “big children” (105). Even Sandy, Hank’s eventual love interest, is initially described by Hank as “a perfect ass” (82), a symbol often invoked in medieval carnival. Throughout the first half of the novel, images of childhood are used to draw attention to the status of the Middle Ages as the childhood of modern civilization, while images of carnival portray the medieval in self-conscious awareness of its status as “other.”<sup>9</sup> Hank’s vernacular diction and pragmatic world-view, on the other hand, are established as the normative value system against which the medieval world is judged and deemed fundamentally lacking: “‘Camelot–Camelot’, said I to myself. ‘I don’t seem to remember hearing of it before. Name of the asylum, likely’” (9).

Two main chronotopes can therefore initially be isolated in *A Connecticut Yankee*. One, which may be described as “nineteenth-century time,” is at first idealized and normative, placing nineteenth-century America in a position of historical progress in comparison to the Middle Ages, which are characterized as childish and naive.<sup>10</sup> While not limited to a merely generic significance, the chronotope of “nineteenth-century time” encompasses the vernacular tradition of the American realist novel. The other—the chronotope of “medieval time”—is superstitious, backwards, “traditional, holistic, highly rhetorical, and stylized” (Kordecki 332), and its time/space nexus encapsulates the defining principles of the medieval romance. The initially privileged chronotope of “nineteenth-century time” (representing the voice of an idealized middle class nineteenth-century American society) is, however, at times interrupted both by the chronotope of “medieval time” and by a third chronotope—the “romance idyll”—which places King Arthur’s court at the center of historical time and presents a mythic single vision of the world. Initially the comedy in the novel reveals itself in the juxtaposition of the ideological and social values represented by the first two chronotopes, to the detriment of the Middle Ages: “I am attempting to contrast...the English life of the whole of the Middle Ages, with the life of a modern civilization—to the advantage of the latter, of course” (Twain, *Letters* 89). Gradually, however, the normalization of

“nineteenth-century time” is undermined, not only by Hank’s increasing susceptibility to the medieval values he initially deprecates, but also by the increasingly idealized and mythic vision of the Middle Ages represented by the “romance idyll.” This idyll, while itself presenting a unified vision of the world, tends to undermine the relative cohesion of the oscillating “nineteenth-century time”/“medieval time” dialectic, leaving the reader in the troubling no-man’s land of dream and myth, which in turn destabilizes the idyll’s own attempt to present a single world vision.

“Nineteenth-century time” is most obviously characterized by the distinctive and particularized voice of Hank, who, as the archetypal common man and “Yankee of the Yankees” (5), represents both progress on the individual level and the historical progress of nineteenth-century America:

My father was a blacksmith, my uncle was a horse doctor, and I was both, along at first. Then I went over to the great arms factory and learnt my real trade; learned all there was to it; learned to make everything: guns, revolvers, cannon, boilers, engines, all sorts of labor-saving machinery. Why, I could make anything a body wanted—anything in the world, it didn’t make any difference what; and if there wasn’t a quick new-fangled way to make a thing, I could invent one... (5-6)

Through Hank’s first-hand narrative perspective, the vernacular language system of middle class America initially presupposes the role of the common language in the novel, by which the average norm of the spoken and written language of nineteenth-century republican America is represented to the reader as the common point of view and value system. The time/space coordinates of “nineteenth-century time” therefore give rise to Twain’s initially predominant discourse of vernacular speech and narration—“barren of sentiment, I suppose—or poetry, in other words” (5)—which serves to deflate the mystique of the Middle Ages. When hearing a tale from a member of the Round Table, Hank notes only its “usual slovenliness in statistics,” disregarding its heroic and aesthetic qualities (78). He is equally as oblivious to the beauty of medieval tapestries and furnishings, instead compiling a list of all the conveniences missing in a medieval castle (48). For the first half of the novel, the values and standards of the Middle Ages are degraded by Hank’s vernacular world view and are re-evaluated against the value system of his own “real” home land of nineteenth-century America.

In his parody of the Middle Ages and his endorsement of Hank’s vernacular value system, Twain’s viewpoint in the opening of the novel seems firmly located in the rational republican tradition most famously distilled in Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. This apparent hard-headed republicanism is, however, at times off-set by a competing strain of democratic community, on the one hand, and of romantic nostalgia on the other, resulting in a humor of radical discrepancies and incongruities;<sup>11</sup> the narrative persona in *A Connecticut Yankee* adopts so many various and conflicting roles that it is notoriously difficult to tie the novel down to any single interpretation.<sup>12</sup> Louis D. Rubin has usefully located the basic American humorous situation in “the gap between the cultural ideal and the everyday fact, with the ideal shown to be somewhat hypocritical, and the fact, crude and disgusting” (12), and his paradigm goes some way in explaining the incongruities in the novel’s humor: Twain’s debunking voice parodies not only the discrepancies between the idealized and the real sixth/fifteenth century but also between the idealized and the real

nineteenth century; however, the way in which these discrepancies interact and co-exist in the world of the novel deserves closer attention.

As many critics have noted, Twain is initially concerned to reveal the vast disparity between the sixth/fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, and he does so largely through a comic comparison of language or, more accurately, narrative constructs and language systems. The meeting of Sandy and Hank is an obvious example, with one critic calling it a "direct confrontation between...two orders of language" (Duncan 205), the empirical (where language is fundamentally referential) and the ideal (where language is fundamentally conceptual). Sandy comes before King Arthur's court to complain of an injustice. Her tale, which is an altered version of a Malorian tale, puts Hank to sleep and on awakening he attacks the lack of individualization between characters in her romance, as well as its inflated style and archaisms: "The truth is, Alisande, these archaics are a little *too* simple; the vocabulary is too limited, and so, by consequence, descriptions suffer in the matter of variety..." (114). Yet in the next chapter, Hank appropriates the archaic idiom himself or at least a burlesqued version of it: "La Cote was much depressed, for he had scored here the worst failure of his campaign ... Wherefore I said: 'Forbear to grieve, fair knight, for this is not a defeat. We have brains, you and I; and for such as have brains these are no defeats but only victories'" (122). By chapter twenty-two, Hank acknowledges the merit of Sandy's language and world-view, and even utters four long, multi-syllabic German nonsense words after his miracle at the Holy Fountain (205). He has, as he finally recognizes, "undergone a considerable change without noticing it" (247).

Twain therefore initially "creates in Hank Morgan a comical opposite to medieval literary artifice" (Kordecki 332), but during the course of the novel, Hank undergoes changes in diction and values, adopting the late Middle English idiom and finally wishing to return to Camelot. Similarly, while at first presenting Hank's point of view and value system as normative, many of Twain's concerns about nineteenth-century society emerge from the behavior of his hero. Hank frequently points out how much he depends on his own common sense and technical expertise, and his exaggerated characterization corresponds closely to De Tocqueville's portrayal of obsessive republican individualism in *Democracy in America*.<sup>13</sup> To some extent, Hank reflects the American myth of the autonomous, non-conformist subject, but his naive meditations on "training" versus "nature" are ultimately an ironic indictment of cultural hegemony:<sup>14</sup> "Training—training is everything; training is all there is *to* a person" (143); "Inherited ideas are a curious thing, and interesting to observe and examine. I had mine, the King and his people had theirs. In both cases they flowed in ruts worn deep by time and habit, and the man who should have proposed to divert them by reason and argument would have had a long contract on his hands" (59).<sup>15</sup>

Hank also frequently engages in the conspicuous consumption and social climbing of the burlesqued self-made man: "Look at the opportunities here for a man of knowledge, brains, pluck, and enterprise to sail in and grow up with the country" (56). When he refuses to quest for the Holy Grail because there is no monetary recompense, he reduces to the economic all the spiritual, moral, and aesthetic virtues to which chivalry aspired (70). Similarly, when the well of holy water is discovered to be dry, Hank turns the church into an industry, seeing in it a reflection of the nineteenth-century business world: "How odd to find that even this industry has its financial panics, and at times sees its assignats and greenbacks languish to zero, and everything come to a standstill" (174). Hank's blatant manipulation of the medieval religious system and his rhetorical showmanship indicate his aggressive capitalist exploitation of the medieval system: "You can't throw too much style into a miracle. It costs trouble, and work, and sometimes money; but it pays in the end" (203-4). Over the course of the novel, Hank assumes a number of social roles, but it is notable

that these roles are all essentially performative: he survives in Arthurian England because of his ability to manipulate an audience.<sup>16</sup> His cynical manipulation is taken to ridiculous excess in his use of a hermit's movement at prayer to run a sewing machine, an episode which ultimately serves as much as a commentary on the exploitation of workers in the nineteenth century as in the Middle Ages (196): the kind of commercial value system which deflates all values to the level of business is one without a spiritual center. Similarly, Hank's attacks on the feudal foundation of sixth-century England—"a privileged class, an aristocracy, is but a band of slaveholders under another name" (225)—are also a critique of the slaveholding American South.<sup>17</sup> Hank often presents Arthurdom in terms of the South; in the opening of the novel, the picturesque and legendary Camelot resembles an impoverished Arkansas village (10-11), hinting at the feudal and agrarian qualities that made the South susceptible to the medieval revival.

*A Connecticut Yankee* not only alludes to the similarities between the cultures of the nineteenth century and the Middle Ages, but also at times seems to recognize that in certain ways, nineteenth-century American culture is inferior to the cultures that preceded it. Hank's attempts to control sixth-century politic economy, for example, draw attention to the fundamental division between his republican rhetoric and practical tyranny, and hence to one of the fundamental problems of capitalist society: the economic policies he employs are in fact free-trade neo-imperialist strategies dressed up in the language of enlightenment and emancipation.<sup>18</sup> Despite his early commitment to theories of historical progress, Twain's difficulty in reconciling his historical optimism with his basic pessimism about human nature reflects what William Decker has called the "nineteenth century crisis of historicism—the recognition that history entails change without necessary progress, that it is not self-evidently, much less optimistically, teleological" (185).<sup>19</sup>

In spite of the novel's initial parody of the Middle Ages, "nineteenth-century time" largely gives way to the "medieval time" chronotope when Hank's own credibility is undercut. The implied author supports Hank while he dismantles the inequalities of the past but ridicules him when he begins to establish controlling mechanisms of his own. The authorial method of the novel accordingly involves a continual oscillation of authorial identification, and Twain certainly "holds back from full identification with the narrator" and the vernacular tradition embodied by "Sir Boss" (Smith, *Fable of Progress* 33).<sup>20</sup> This debate over narrative authority in the novel draws on the Southwestern yarn-spinning community's interpretive transaction between innocent and experienced perspectives, invoking the rhetorical strategy of the tall tale as a means of dramatizing endless permutations.<sup>21</sup> As the personality seduced by romance, Hank would seem to be the ultimate butt of Twain's joke, but as the novel progresses, the reader is not entirely certain who or what is being parodied. The oscillating nature of the authorial perspective results in a hybrid novel of burlesque and mimicry, undermining the readers' ability to assess exactly where reverence ends and ridicule begins.<sup>22</sup>

Bakhtin argues that "in parody two languages are crossed with each other, as well as two styles, two linguistic points of view, and in the final analysis two speaking subjects." According to Bakhtin, only the language being parodied is presented in its own right; the other is "present invisibly, as an actualizing background for creating and perceiving" (*Dialogic* 76). *A Connecticut Yankee* initially presents a clear division between the implicit and the explicit of the text: the chronotope of "nineteenth-century time" is presented to the reader as the common language and cultural experience, but this parodic structure eventually breaks down as the chronotope of "medieval time" intrudes and the medieval parodied voice begins to speak with its own authority, eventually overwhelming and reprocessing the normative and actualizing background of "nineteenth-century time." Bakhtin sees the comic

novel as “a form for appropriating and organising heteroglossia” in a way that involves the “comic-parodic reprocessing of almost all the levels of literary language” and form (*Dialogic* 274, 301). In the case of *A Connecticut Yankee*, the effect of the time travel mechanism is quite literally to demolish the distance between the parodied and the parodying object, establishing instead a zone of “maximal proximity” (23) which eventually destroys any sense of hierarchical and valorizing distance, and makes both rhetorical and conceptual instability a consistent strategy for Twain.<sup>23</sup> By refusing to confine Hank to consistency of character or to allow his nineteenth-century voice to remain unambiguously normative, Twain manages to critique both the vernacular and the medievalist impulse in American society without fully endorsing or rejecting either.<sup>24</sup>

The tension between these two impulses most obviously manifests itself in Twain’s desire simultaneously to satirize and idealize.<sup>25</sup>

At last I ventured a story myself; and vast was the success of it. Not right off, of course...but the fifth time I told it, they began to crack in places...and at the fifteenth they disintegrated, and I got a broom and swept them up. This language is figurative. Those islanders—well, they are slow pay at first, in the matter of return for your investment of effort, but in the end they make the pay of all other nations poor and small by contrast. (189)

This passage shows up both the Yankee’s self-centred egotism and the impoverished intellectual climate of the Middle Ages, whilst also praising the Yankee’s intrepidity and the islanders’ eventual response. Although Twain’s initial purpose is to demystify Camelot and he “appears to hate the reality of the Middle Ages,” he also loves “the ideality of it” (Kordecki 339), continually contrasting in the novel the actual historical period of the Middle Ages, which was marked by what he considered to be social, political, and religious evils, and its mythic, literary construct, which he either gently burlesques or explicitly celebrates. Although one could argue that Twain’s “real” Middle Ages bears little relationship to the actual sixth century, the frequent tonal shifts in the novel from satire to celebration are nonetheless a function of Twain’s dual vision both of the Middle Ages and of the nineteenth century, and his affiliation with what is ideal in each culture.<sup>26</sup>

This dual vision is structurally embodied in the novel in the form of the dream vision narrative framing device.<sup>27</sup> The novel opens with the imagery of enchantment and reverie, blurring the distinction between dream and reality, and suggesting that what is to come could as much be wish-fulfillment as fantasy: “All that evening I sat by my fire at the Warwick Arms, steeped in a dream of the olden time...” (2). Even within the tale proper, the parodied “medieval time” at times gives way to the dream-like and mythic elements of the “romance idyll.” Bakhtin explains that the chronotope of the idyll is “characterized by a technical abstract connection between time and space, by the reversibility of moments in a temporal sequence, and by their interchangeability in space” (*Dialogic* 100).<sup>28</sup> In “Slow Torture,” initially a burlesque of knight errantry and the discomfort of wearing armor, Sandy and Hank eventually move “like spirits, the cushioned turf giving out no sound of footfall; we dreamed along through glades in a mist of green light ...,” in effect becoming like mythic questers in a romance (87). King Arthur is also at times presented as a mythic figure. In his role as a representative medieval ruler, he is satirized; in his role as a mythic figure, he sheds his usual stance of the buffoon. Even Hank is ultimately affected by Arthur’s occasionally heroic stature, in spite of his criticisms of the monarchy: “...well, really there *is* something peculiarly grand about the gait and bearing of a king, after all” (365-66). The intrusion of



the “romance idyll” also operates on the structural level of the novel, which, at least in relation to the Camelot text, can in many structurally essential ways be seen as a romance.<sup>29</sup> Aside from utilizing the episodic structure of a medieval French romance, *A Connecticut Yankee* also evinces many straightforward borrowings from Malory, including personal and place names, incidents, archaic diction, and even extended quotations.<sup>30</sup>

Far from being a “farewell” to romance in American letters, as some critics suggest, the workings of the novel would seem to correspond to Jameson’s conception of the mythic role of the romance in modern times, leading one critic to argue that Twain’s novels are better understood as romances than as novels.<sup>31</sup>

The problem raised by the persistence of romance as a mode is that of substitutions, adaptations and appropriations, and raises the question of what, under wholly altered historical circumstances, can have been found to replace the raw materials of magic and Otherness which medieval romance found ready to hand in its socioeconomic environment. (Jameson 130)

Jameson’s argument implies the value of the romance for modern fiction, and his notion of “substitutions, adaptations and appropriations” can be used to explicate both the reflexive nature of *A Connecticut Yankee* (which is, to some extent, a novel concerned with modern fiction’s relationship with the traditions of the past) and its structural oscillation between value systems.<sup>32</sup> This idea is supported by Steven Scheer’s distinction between two kinds of magic in the novel: Merlin’s false magic of the “mere unproven word” and Hank’s “real” or “true” magic of science (106-24). Hank’s magic, while being in the strictest sense “real” and “true,” is just as performative and self-consciously manipulative as Merlin’s magic.<sup>33</sup> Most importantly for the present discussion, however, the distinction between true and false magic hints at the difficulties Twain faced in finding or resurrecting the “real” magic with which to imbue his novel in the modern technological age. While the Yankee at first attempts to do away with medieval structures and by implication the values of the romance altogether, his task eventually becomes an attempt to replace in the modern world the medieval magical otherness to which he is finally drawn.

The function both of the “romance idyll” and the dream-framework is, however, ambiguous and problematizes a straightforward reading of the novel as essentially a romance. Bakhtin points out that the materialization of the idyll, in its various forms, “makes of it an ideal for the future” and sees in it above all “the basis, a norm, for criticizing the current state of society” (*Dialogic* 231). From one perspective, therefore, the “romance idyll” could be said to be the ultimate norm against which nineteenth-century society is critiqued. On the other hand, the “unreal” and mythic quality of the idyll, like that of the novel’s dream framework, leads the reader to question the veracity of its perspective. For some critics, the dream vision suggests that Hank’s entire story might be a delirium, drawing attention to the ambiguity of dreams, as well as to their resistance to interpretation and the possibility of their lack of consequence. Other critics have argued that Twain ultimately presents the dream as having the same (or greater) veracity as the “reality” experience, so that “Hank’s dream-self experiences a more acute awareness of its own veracity than does his historical self” (Hoffman 124). Maria Marotti suggests that Twain’s experiments with fantasy are explorations “of the powers of the imagination” leading “eventually to the assertion of the power of dream over reality” (137). The aesthetic experience of history in *A Connecticut Yankee* could therefore paradoxically be said to be a moment of stasis outside history as Twain attempts to escape the moral and aesthetic implications of the conflict

between his progressive view of history and his pessimistic view of human nature through the transcendent dream and the timeless zone of myth.<sup>34</sup>

The transformative power of Hank's particular dream is undermined by its subsequent nightmarish quality, but by making all of these options a possibility, the dream framework, along with the circular nature of the time-loop plot structure, introduces a sense of simultaneity and co-existence to the novel which corresponds in many respects to Bakhtin's "chronotope of the threshold" (*Dialogic* 248)—a chronotope in which all time zones are in effect the present. The dream vision fuses the different time/space coordinates that intersect in King Arthur's Court—the real and ideal nineteenth century, and the real and ideal sixth/fifteenth century—and struggles against the form-generating time/space nexus of each of the novel's chronotopic elements which would like to reduce the novel to a single generic category: romance, vernacular novel, myth. By proceeding as if all time were the present, *A Connecticut Yankee* manages to inter-animate and dialogize the chronotopic elements of the novel. The dream vision is therefore a decomposition device, generating laughter both at what is different and, more importantly, what is the same about the novel's chronotopes, and making the oscillation between them a structural attribute of the novel by positing a series of competing visions of the world. The possibility of the hero's madness, in particular, "permits a whole series of carnival crownings and uncrownings, of travesties and mystifications" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 104).

But the final cataclysm in the novel, in which "Sir Boss" and his technocrats slaughter twenty-five thousand knights and destroy all of the technological advances Hank has introduced, blows away all sense of dialectic and seems inadequately accounted for by Bakhtin's theory of laughter, which emphasizes its universal, essential relation to freedom.<sup>35</sup> Twain's final "joke" is neither positive carnival laughter nor the polite, "negative, rhetorical satire of the nineteenth century" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 42, 45). The cataclysm has been read as a function of Twain's ambiguous attitude towards technology, particularly when used for military purposes, and accordingly as "a critique of the Enlightenment as a flawed dialectic of freedom and control that generates totalitarianism" (Howe 164), but it is so extreme as to undermine even the position which it logically and ostensibly supports: that the technological paradise of the nineteenth century is an ambivalent blessing.<sup>36</sup> Alternatively, to refer to the slaughter of twenty-five thousand men as "a conventional mode of frontier hyperbole," as some critics have done, is to disregard the satanic or demonic pole of laughter (Carter 419). As Georges Bataille reminds us, there is often an encounter with horror hidden in the experience of laughter: on the one hand, laughter is frequently a response to repugnance—"the sign of aversion, of horror"; on the other, it can be a "compromise attitude" or defense mechanism for warding off horror: "it is indeed in laughter that we find the justification for a form of castigation, of obloquy" (*Bataille Reader* 224). The dramatic shift in tone at this point in the novel and the destructiveness of its humor would seem to suggest an encounter with horror and, along with it, the subversion of all previously endorsed points of view and ideological identifications.

It is for this reason that much criticism of the ending of the novel revolves around the idea of failure. The traditional response is that novel's formal glitches are signs of Twain's failed artistry—he "fails in writing either a cohesive romance or a burlesque of one" because "[t]he modern Twain cannot find a literary avenue in his approbation of and affiliation with medieval tenets" (Kordecki 330, 333). We can therefore see the Battle of the Sand-belt either as representative of Twain's failure to stick to one strategy or another—that is, to maintain a consistent philosophical point of view—or of his failure to maintain some sort of dialogue or balance between competing views. More recently, however, some critics have maintained that Twain's "failure" is meaningful: it is not a creative lapse but rather a constitutive flaw caused by a collision of literary, social, and economic forces; in other words, the novel's failure reflects the larger cultural failure of American society in the nineteenth century and in particular the failure of imperialism.<sup>37</sup>

The notion of failure—constitutive, formal, aesthetic or otherwise—has at its core the idea that Twain was somehow not in control of his material. At the other end of the spectrum,

some critics have argued that Twain is deliberately manipulating his audience. Scheer suggests that the hoax structure of the novel makes *A Connecticut Yankee* “a performance about a performance,” a set of lies whereby the manipulator becomes the victim of its own fiction and where a thesis about the fact/fiction hierarchy is used to undermine its own thesis (106-7). The cataclysm, along with the continual reversals of identification in the novel, is certainly suggestive of a satirical confrontation between text and reader and his or her over-investment in what might essentially be the ravings of a mad-man.

It is for this reason that Bruce Michelson claims that Twain’s humor is driven simply by a “subversion of seriousness” with no other obligations, in effect arguing against the long tradition of finding affirmation in Twain’s humor or a point and a limit to his jokes (*Twain on the Loose* 7).<sup>38</sup> The novel’s subversive quality is indeed located in the extent to which it fails to conform to any of the chronotopes that attempt to assimilate it but, as Michelson suggests, this is not a novel which “dynamites its own meaning” (“Dynamite” 631). On first reading, the novel’s comic-parodic elements do seem evasive and “without consequence” (Bataille, *Selected Writings* 176), its point lost among the “homogenous protoplasm” (417), the fragments of knights and hardware and horses, but the apparently destructive nature of the cataclysm can also be seen as a means of warding off exactly the horror it represents. By presenting the destruction of everything Hank has anachronistically introduced to the Middle Ages as a joke, Twain’s humor is both an encounter with horror—a sign of aversion for the excesses of modern technology and capitalism—and a means of warding off that horror by preemptively taking the joke as far as it can go. The idea of redemption through horror is reinforced by Hank’s final reversal of the entire fictive frame of his story, which suggests that his belief is no longer in real life but in the dream:<sup>39</sup>

Have I been sick long? It must be so; it seems months to me. And such dreams! such strange and awful dreams, Sandy! Dreams that were as real and reality – delirium, of course, but *so* real! Why, I thought that the king was dead, I thought you were in Gaul and couldn’t get home, I thought there was a revolution; in the fantastic frenzy of these dreams, I thought that Clarence and I and a handful of cadets fought and exterminated the whole chivalry of England! But even that was not the strangest. I seemed to be a creature out of a remote unborn age, centuries hence, and even *that* was as real as the rest! (432)

Hank’s denial in this passage that the Battle of the Sand-Belt ever occurred tends to reaffirm the idea that the whole story is a dream but, as Scheer points out, this in turn is complicated by the idea that the novel’s original premise—that Hank is a nineteenth century Yankee dreaming of adventures in Camelot—is now a nightmare (119). The reversal of the reality hierarchy of the novel is closely linked to the cataclysm: both are destructive but neither is pointless or meaningless. The world of the novel explodes because Hank has attempted to do away with the medieval otherness that Jameson sees as essential for the modern romance. The cataclysm and Hank’s eventual reversal of dream and reality suggest that, however technologically advanced and progressive a society, annihilating a belief in magic and dreams is counter-productive.

# Notes

<sup>1</sup> On the highly specific treatment of "common language" or the average norm of the spoken and written language of a given social group in the comic novel, see Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 301-2.

<sup>2</sup> On the oedipal implications of *A Connecticut Yankee*, see Sewell 27-49.

<sup>3</sup> See Sloane 63 and Fraser 4-5. Schleiner persuasively suggests that Twain read Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* and Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, and was therefore well-versed in the genre of ironic revisitation, 330-47.

<sup>4</sup> On this divide in critical opinion, see Zlatić 453. For treatments of the novel as technology run wild, see Smith, *Mark Twain's Fable of Progress*, and Cox, "The Machinery of Self-Preservation" 89-102. On the ethical questions surrounding technology, see Fulton, *Mark Twain's Ethical Realism*.

<sup>5</sup> On readings of the novel as essentially a question of language, see Zlatić 453. As a notable exception to this general trend, Zlatić argues that the novel can usefully be read as a clash between literary and oral culture. See also Mitchell 230-48, who argues that the novel can be read as a series of conflicts between linear and circular modes.

<sup>6</sup> For a reading that also emphasizes Twain's dislike of fixity, see Michelson, "Realism, Romance, and Dynamite" 609-32 and *Mark Twain on the Loose* 151-71.

<sup>7</sup> See Bakhtin, *Rabelais* Ch.1.

<sup>8</sup> All references are to Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee*. For the electronic version of the above edition, see <<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/TwaYank.html>>

<sup>9</sup> On the significance of childhood in Twain and for the argument that Hank Morgan is an "innocent eye," see Stone 168-72. On the idea of play and boyhood, see Banta 487-520.

<sup>10</sup> William Hartpole Lecky's *History of European Morals*, which Twain read carefully, described the medieval period as "lower than any other period in the history of mankind," cited in Moreland 33. For a detailed analysis on Twain's reading of Lecky's histories and their influence on his view of the Middle Ages as an era of superstition and corrupt religious power, see Fulton, *Mark Twain in the Margins*.

<sup>11</sup> While Twain's comic sources have been traced to the republican Southwestern folk humorists and their technique of the tall-tale, he was also influenced by the jokes, ironic inversions, and burlesques of the nineteenth-century American literary comedians, who expressed the democratic ethics of the rising northern and Midwestern middle class. On this point, see Sloane 45.

<sup>12</sup> See Zlatić 456, Hoffman 81-6, and Gillman. For a more theoretical analysis of the nature of multiple and contradictory meanings in literary texts, see Smith, *The Locus of Meaning*.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., De Tocqueville 120. On this point, see Kravitz 108.

<sup>14</sup> See also the paradox at the heart of time-travel in which ostensibly free agents are inevitably caught in cycles of repetition and are controlled by what has gone before, Mitchell 232. On the related debate as to whether man was a mere atom drifting purposelessly through space or whether he had some control of his destiny, see Cummings.

<sup>15</sup> On this point, see Michelson, "Realism, Romance and Dynamite" 626-8 and Traber 24-5. On the idea of training as a neo-Lamarckian premise that inherited and acquired traits are transmissible, see Camfield 151-64.

<sup>16</sup> On this point, see Carton 162, 168-70. For a focus on Twain's theatrical interests, see Knoper.

<sup>17</sup> That the novel is as much a critique of the nineteenth century as the Middle Ages is generally agreed upon. See, e.g., Harris 44-46.

<sup>18</sup> On this point, see Rowe, "How the Boss Played the Game" 175-92, and *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism*. See also Hoffman 123-142.

<sup>19</sup> On this point and for the argument that Twain's early optimism about history turns to pessimism, see Salomon 108.

<sup>20</sup> On this point, see also Kordecki 331-2. Everett Carter classifies critical responses as "hard" (Hank is speaking as Twain) and "soft" (Hank's voice is not necessarily Twain's), 418-40. Carter tends towards the "hard" view, as does Budd 112. On the "soft" side is Berthold 52.

<sup>21</sup> The American commodity of tall humor was influenced by C. S. Peirce and Josiah Royce, whose new schools of philosophy insisted that the self is always an interpretation rather than a fixed and knowable point of reference, and that truth is only an interpretation agreed upon by a community of insiders, Fraser 32.

<sup>22</sup> On this point, see Kordecki 330.

<sup>23</sup> On comic genres and the concept of "distance" more generally, see Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 23-7. For the argument that instability amounts to a coherent vision of society for Twain, see Carton 163.

<sup>24</sup> Some critics argue that this is the novel in which Twain embraces idealism—see, e.g., Duncan 208—but this idea is undercut by the inconsistent impulses within Hank himself. In chapter eight there is a shift in Twain's strategy as Hank for the first time employs direct invectives against medieval institutions, precluding to some extent the reader's interpretive collusion with his immersion in the medieval. Any simple reading of the novel is also frustrated by Hank's own increasing repulsiveness which prevents our investment in his medieval persona. On this point, see Hoffman 89-90.

<sup>25</sup> Alan Gribben 39 suggests that with Twain the urge to burlesque a literary work was sometimes the surest sign of his regard for its literary merits, and more than one critic has argued that Twain's overt and self-conscious hostility to medievalism disguised his life-long fascination with it. See also Moreland 56.

<sup>26</sup> Baetzhöld 131 concludes that the Middle Ages of the novel "represent most of the ages of Western history from Roman times until his own."

<sup>27</sup> On this point, see Kordecki 330.

<sup>28</sup> See also Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 151-57.

<sup>29</sup> Schleiner 335.

<sup>30</sup> See Wilson 185-96.

<sup>31</sup> Kravitz 113. Howe 6.

<sup>32</sup> On the idea that the novel's subject is the nature of story-telling, see Michelson, "Romance, Realism and Dynamite" 617.

<sup>33</sup> Scheer 22-31 argues that the very notion of romance interrogates the paradoxes of truth-telling in fiction, suggesting the impossibility and perhaps the undesirability of telling the "truth."

<sup>34</sup> Mitchell 234. Without going so far as to suggest that the entire novelistic premise of *A Connecticut Yankee* is "a test of the genre's critique of the authority of history," the novel's use of dream and myth is a radical fictionalization of history which threatens the authority of history, the notion of historical reliability and realism itself, Howe 119. Hoffman 124 argues that even the "real" Middle Ages exists as allegory rather than history in the novel. On history as a product of the mind, a place we create to determine our own limits, see Hoffman 191.

<sup>35</sup> Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 236. See also *Rabelais* 5-6, 88-89.

<sup>36</sup> Carter would see this view as "soft," although even he admits that in the final pages of the novel Twain's rage is out of hand.

<sup>37</sup> On failure in the novel generally and its failure to achieve social change, see Howe 2-4 and Hoffman 136.

<sup>38</sup> For a more traditional account of Twain's humor, see Cox, *Mark Twain: The Fate of Humor* 14-16. For the idea that Twain's destructive humor is in fact conservative—he turns the world upside down only to “keep it right side up”—see Krauth 10.

<sup>39</sup> On this point, see Scheer 114.

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