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The General and the Maid: Mark Twain on Ulysses S. Grant and Joan of Arc

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Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 61, Number 1, Spring 2005

pp. 41-56

10.1353/arq.2005.0012

ARTICLE

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

FORRESTG. ROBINSON The General and the Maid: Mark Twain on Ulysses S-Grant and Joan of Arc ark twain's most deliberate and sustained attempt to tell the unvarnished truth about his own life is preserved in the nearly 250 autobiographical dictations that he competed with a stenographer between 1906 and 1909. In order to encourage complete veracity, Twain decided from the outset that the dictations would be set aside for posthumous publication. Despite such good intentions, however, the Autobiography that resulted is singularly tame and unrevealing, most especially about its subject's interior life. This truth was not lost on the earnest but frustrated penitent. "I have been dictating this autobiography of mine daily for nine months," he observed on April 6, 1906; "I have thought of fifteen hundred or two thousand incidents of my life which I

am ashamed of, but I have not gotten one of them to consent to go on paper yet."1 "As to veracity," he told William Dean Howells, the autobiography "was a failure" (Howells 316). Twain thus found in practice that the conscious commitment to personal candor worked paradoxically to produce its exact opposite. It is a kindred paradox that he came closest to revealing the truth about himself in his travel and fiction writing, when the pressure to tell the personal truth was much reduced. Indeed, it was precisely because he assumed that he could not open himself in fiction that he so frequently—and without knowing it—did so. It is this inadvertently revealing autobiography—the candid self-revelations that always eluded him when he set out on purpose to unveil them, but that turned up, *Arizona Quarterly* Volume 61, Number 1, Spring 2005 Copyright © 2005 by Arizona Board of Regents ISSN 0004-1610 M42 Forrest G. Robinson often obliquely, when the censors were off guard—that concerns me here. Like most people, I suspect, but only more so, the Lincoln of our literature felt compelled to confess what he perceived to be his sins even as he answered an equally powerful impulse to conceal the same things. By his own account, and by unanimous consent among informed observers, the humorist's special curse was guilt. His conscience was a hive of wasps that took flight at the slightest provocation and delivered stinging assaults on his consciousness and fragile self-esteem. "Remorse was always [his] surest punishment," observes Albert Bigelow Paine. "To his last days on earth he never outgrew its pangs" (1:65). Indeed, it is not altogether misleading to say that Mark Twain felt guilty about everything. "If on any occasion," wrote his daughter, Clara, "he could manage to trace the cause of some one's mishap to something he himself had done or said, no one could persuade him that he was mistaken. Self-condemnation was the natural turn for his mind to take, yet often he accused himself of having inflicted pain or trouble when the true cause was far removed from himself" (6-7). Such promiscuity notwithstanding, Twain's conscience gravitated with marked frequency and intensity to a number of flash-points in his memory. He was unable to forgive himself for the deaths of those closest to him, especially members of his family—his brother Henry in 1858, his son Langdon in 1872, his daughter Susy in 1896, his wife Livy in 1904, and his daughter Jean in 1909. He felt inordinately responsible for the suffering of childhood friends, and for the ghastly end of the tramp who incinerated himself in the Hannibal jail with matches that Twain, a well-meaning child, had given to him. He could not reconcile himself to what he remembered of his part in the duel that prompted his departure from Virginia City in 1864. Nor was he ever comfortable with his youthful involvement in slavery. Because he felt compelled at once to reveal and to conceal these guilty memories, they frequently surfaced in his writing, quite often obliquely, in ways that at least partially veiled or otherwise mitigated the painful truth. As an illustration of this general pattern, consider Mark Twain's guilty memories of his role in the Civil War. "The Private History of a Campaign That...

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Mark Twain, Volume 61, Number 1, Spring 2005
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ISSN 0014-1801



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