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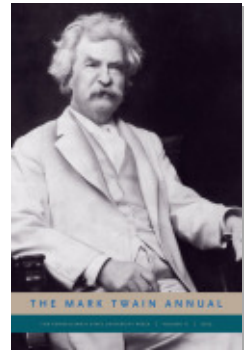
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“There’s Millions in It!”: *The Gilded Age* and the  
Economy of Satire

Tracy Wuster

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## “There’s Millions in It!”

### *The Gilded Age and the Economy of Satire*

Tracy Wuster

Beautiful credit! The foundation of modern society. Who shall say that this is not the golden age of mutual trust, of unlimited reliance upon human promises? That is a peculiar condition of society which enables a whole nation to instantly recognize point and meaning in the familiar newspaper anecdote, which puts into the mouth of a distinguished speculator in lands and mines this remark:—“I wasn’t worth a cent two years ago, and now I owe two millions of dollars.”

—Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner,  
*The Gilded Age*

With the introduction of the character of Colonel Beriah Sellers, Mark Twain created a rollicking satire of small-town speculators caught up in a newly nationalized economy that few, if any, truly understood. The advent of beautiful credit, and its foundation in the railroads that were rapidly expanding throughout the nation, put Sellers at the center of an American drama that Twain, and his coauthor Charles Dudley Warner, portrayed as a farce of national proportions. Published in 1873, *The Gilded Age* marks an important development in Twain’s career as a writer, and its topic—the current state of American life, or in the words of its subtitle “A Tale of To-Day”—represents Twain’s first and only attempt at a sustained satire of contemporary American life. *The Gilded Age* has been largely elided in Twain scholarship as a failed production sitting between his early sketches and travel books and his turn to the subject of the river with “Old Times on the Mississippi” and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. As a literary event and a literary curiosity, the book received substantial attention, and its promotion, reception, and transformations illuminate important facets of literary production in the era that it encapsulated, satirized, and ultimately named.

For Twain and Warner, a first foray into novel writing was fraught with conflicting ideas about how to create a success for their production. Both men had come to writing as a career later in their lives after pursuing other occupations, and both had recently settled in the Nook Farm section of Hartford to undertake careers as authors. The personality of the writer was central in the texts of both authors. Both men wrote portions of the novel, revised the other's work, and shared the results with their wives. Far from a genteel novel, the book's main feature was the satirical critique of American institutions far beyond what either author had produced previously—a focus that largely erased the personality of both authors. Released in the midst of Mark Twain's own period of financial expansion and business speculation, when his books, lectures, and other ventures allowed him to be one of the most financially successful authors of the era, the novel raised questions about the connection between art and commerce that were central to American letters but were often hidden by an ideology that separated the business of letters from belles lettres.

The novel produced a sensation both before and after its publication due to its conjunction of two well-known humorists. *The Gilded Age* was announced and prefaced by a considerable amount of press, making it “the event of the coming season” (“Home and Foreign Notes” 639). Published via subscription, *The Gilded Age* was a risk as a publishing venture. No novel had been published by a subscription firm, which tended to publish travel books, memoirs, and histories. Additionally, the book was in press when the Panic of 1873 hit with the failure of Jay Cooke and Company and the subsequent closing of the stock market for ten days, due largely to unregulated speculation on railroad expansion. The Panic represented the first national crisis of industrial and financial capitalism in the United States following the consolidation and incorporation of industry in Civil War–era America. The failure of railroad speculation, along with numerous corruption scandals in the Grant administration, truly made Twain and Warner's novel, in the words of its subtitle, “A Tale of To-Day.” By 1876, the phrase “The Gilded Age” was in use as a name for the era of political corruption (“The Gilded Age: Stripping Grantism of Its Superficial Coating”).

As a satire, the timing of *The Gilded Age* was perfect, yet these same factors damaged the book sales that were necessary for the Clemens family to recoup financial losses from investing with Jay Cooke and Company, which created a cycle of literary satire, real financial considerations, and literary speculation that magnified the tensions between art and commerce inherent in the book. Before the novel's publication, Twain and Warner attempted to control the promotion and the critical reception by soliciting notices and fretting over the impression those notices would leave for the reading (and buying) public.

Twain closely monitored both the sales of the book and the critical responses to the novel—using publicity to further promote sales of the book and fretting over how negative responses might affect the book as a business speculation. American reviews split between two main reactions: praise of the book's satire, despite notable faults in the book as a novel, and consternation, if not censure, of the humorists, who left some critics feeling "sold" by the book.

Twain blamed the drop in sales on the critical reception, but the production and reception of *The Gilded Age* point to a much more complicated economy of satire than Twain or his critics realized. In this cultural context, Twain and Warner's novel demands attention as both a satire of commerce and as a commercial product that attempted to sell satire during a period of great commercial expansion and tumult. Twain wrote his friend Dr. John Brown, a novelist from Scotland, in February 1873 and discussed the progress of the book:

The fearful financial panic hit the book heavily, for we published in the midst of it. But nevertheless in the 8 weeks that have now elapsed since the day we published, we have sold 40,000 copies—which gives £3,000 royalty to be divided between the authors. This is really the largest two-months' sale which any American book has ever achieved (unless one excepts the cheap edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*). The average price of our book is 16 shillings a copy—*Uncle Tom* was 2 shillings a copy. But for the panic our sale would have been doubled, I verily believe. I do not believe the sale will ultimately go over 100,000 copies (*Letters*, Vol. 6 53).

By the end of 1874, after a year in print, the American Publishing Company had printed just over 50,000 copies, a large sale by general standards, but a distinct drop in sales after the initial canvassing and publication.<sup>1</sup> Shortly thereafter, Twain's dramatization of his portion of the book, under the title of *Colonel Sellers*, became one of the most successful productions of the American theater, making the title character an American symbol and the author a significant amount of money. As *Colonel Sellers* was fond of saying, the history of *The Gilded Age* showed that "there's millions in it!"—even if the financial meanings of the book are more complicated than the initial speculations proposed.

## The Business of Letters

In the literary world of postbellum America, the success of a novel was not only, or even primarily, measured in monetary terms. The business of letters was a complicated field, and Twain and Warner's book highlighted the complexities

by mixing art and business—both in its subject and in its production, promotion, and reception. The commercial and the artistic were intimately connected for Mark Twain and other authors navigating the shifting literary marketplace of Gilded Age America, even if some critics tried to divorce art from commerce. That Mark Twain married art and commerce more frequently than many authors did, that he sold occasional works of inferior quality or padded his books for subscription sale, opened his entire career to criticism that the marketplace perverted his artistic abilities. Van Wyck Brooks argued, in his seminal work of Twain scholarship, that a religious veneration of material prosperity after the Civil War created “a vast unconscious conspiracy [that] actuated all America against the creative spirit,” which perverted Mark Twain’s entire career (45–46). A counter-thread of Twain scholarship, originating with Bernard DeVoto’s spirited repudiation of Brooks, has sought to redeem certain key works from the taint of commercialism. The tendency has been to look for the “real” Mark Twain lurking behind the “sell,” to focus on the works that have emerged from the commercial tumult of this period as lasting literature—especially *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and “Old Times on the Mississippi,” as well as parts of the travel books and a number of sketches.

While Mark Twain had made a popular and financial success as a humorist, his position as a “quality” humorous author was far from assured. For many critics and readers in the early 1870s, it was Bret Harte—not Mark Twain—who augured to become the great American humorist of post-Civil War America (Scharnhorst). Harte was the writer whose fiction had most captured the balance of pathos and humor that critics in both America and England viewed as characteristic of the best humor—that of James Russell Lowell, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Charles Dickens, and William Thackeray. But Harte, like Lowell and many American authors before him, had a difficult time balancing the aims of literary production with the needs of pecuniary success. While the literary marketplace had expanded following the Civil War, it was still difficult for authors to make a living on the fruits of their literary production. A raft of new magazines, the expanded opportunities of the lyceum circuit, and increased book sales extended the circulation of American authors, but most literary figures still required jobs as editors, publishers, or professors to support their writing.

The role of commerce and its relation to art was a key question for literary figures. As with most scholarly questions on Mark Twain, the question of commercialism was first scouted by William Dean Howells. In his 1893 essay for *Scribner’s Magazine*, “The Man of Letters as a Man of Business,” Howells looked back at the commercial situation of American letters stretching back to the age of Emerson. Howells attempted to separate literary production from business

by arguing that, in an ideal world, man would not have to live by art but would be able to produce literature separate from earning a living. Howells noted that people rightly feel that there is something profane or impious in taking money for a picture, poem, or statue, leading to his maxim that “Business is the opprobrium of Literature.” But since business is “the only human solidarity,” the man of letters is forced to operate in a “huckstering civilization” that violates the pure realm of art (429–30). According to Howells’s argument, the relationship between business and letters created a situation in which authors ideally wrote for artistic reasons and received their pay not only in money but also in prestige.

Howells’s created a hierarchy in which certain authors—whom he names “literary artists”—earn both enough money to live and a form of cultural capital that raises them above a second class of authors, who might earn more money but whose reputation is suspect. Authors of literary quality earned their money by selling to a magazine editor and then publishing their essays in book form, which may or may not have sold. The reward of the literary artist for publishing in a magazine was financial and intellectual capital, defined as access to a better class of readers. Authors who chose to publish a book first, or aimed for the higher pay of newspapers, tended to produce inferior quality work that might pay financially but catered to a public with crude taste and thus degraded the artistic quality of the work: “Many factitious and fallacious literary reputations have been made through books, but very few have been made through magazines, which are not only the best means of living, but of outliving, with the author; they are both bread and fame to him” (433). Fame, as opposed to popularity, “pays” the first-rate author longer dividends.

Here are the practical shoals on which Howells’s argument founders, and Twain’s example is the largest snag to be avoided. Several times in the essay, the counter-example of Mark Twain’s success bubbles to the surface, such as when the distinctions between book success and magazine fame might seem to exclude Twain. Howells at once makes Twain an exception and reintegrates him into the rule: “The most monumental example of literature, at once light and good, which has first reached the public in book form is in the different publications of Mark Twain; but Mr. Clemens has of late turned to the magazines too, and now takes their mint mark before he passes into general circulation” (433).

Mark Twain again rises to the surface when Howells discusses low-quality books published only for popularity with the “masses” uninterested in edification through fiction. He argued that:

if a book is vulgar enough in sentiment, and crude enough in taste, and flashy enough in incident, or, better or worse still, if it is a bit hot

in the mouth, and promises impropriety if not indecency, there is a very fair chance of its success; I do not mean success with a self-respecting publisher, but with the public, which does not personally put its name to it, and is not openly smirched by it (434).

Here, again, Howells used Mark Twain as the exception to prove the rule, arguing that Twain was the only author to succeed in this form and that almost by accident:

No book of literary quality was made to go by subscription except Mr. Clemens's books, and I think these went because the subscription public never knew what good literature they were. This sort of readers, or buyers, were so used to getting something worthless for their money, that they would not spend it for artistic fiction, or indeed for any fiction at all, except Mr. Clemens's, which they probably supposed to be bad (434).

Howells's assertion that the readers wanted to purchase something of poor quality and accidentally received good literature dismissed any serious thought into what reading subscription books actually meant for readers—as does his condescending note that “Mr. Clemens himself no longer offers his books to the public in that way.”

Despite his idealism, Howells was keenly focused on the implications of literary production as a business. Howells was also fascinated with the lavish life that subscription publishing and lecturing allowed Twain in Hartford, and their correspondence is shot through with as much talk of business as with talk of letters. In his memoir of Twain, Howells recalls an 1874 visit to Hartford during which Twain bragged of the “army” of agents across the country selling his books, with *The Innocents Abroad* selling along “just like the Bible.” The comfortable facade of Twain's life in Hartford tempted Howells and other *Atlantic* authors to consider subscription publishing, with Warner and Harte eventually publishing books with the American Publishing Company, of which Twain was part-owner. Twain wrote encouraging his publisher to negotiate with Howells on a history of Venice, in addition to the books by several other friends: “I would like to see them *all* quit the ‘trade’—still, if they prefer to stick to the ‘trade,’ nobody is much damaged but themselves. I hope you will sell a pile of Howells's book when it comes out—& Harte's. The effect will be good” (*Letters*, Vol. 6 260). Howells resisted Clemens's personal magnetism, and he never published by subscription, taking his extra pay in literary prestige as editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* and in his growing role as “Dean of American Letters.”

## Puffing the Production

Twain's life as a business speculator—in books and articles, in publishing and book production in machines and contraptions—placed him squarely within the cultural milieu of the era, in which the boom-and-bust cycles of capitalism based on speculation and expansion were central factors of American life. *The Gilded Age* took part in the cycle of financial boom, crash, and recovery that defined the era, both satirizing the dangers of speculation and taking part in them. The activity leading up to the release of *The Gilded Age* clearly demonstrated the authors' eagerness for the financial success of the book. In February 1873, Twain informed his publisher that a book of collected sketches could wait: "Can get sketches ready any time, but shall wait awhile, as I have good hopes of finishing a book which I am working like a dog on—a book which ought to outsell the sketches, & doubtless will. It will make a pretty lively sensation I bet you" (*Letters*, Vol. 5 301). The combined product of two humorists was a speculative investment that might boom or bust, but Twain bet that it would succeed and he worked with his publisher and coauthor to assure its success before its publication.

In April 1873, as the composition of the novel progressed, Twain and Warner began a publicity campaign for a planned fall release, although the publication was delayed until late December. Twain wrote a letter to the editor of the New York *Daily Graphic* announcing the book, claiming that Warner provided the fiction and he "hurled in the facts." In a fit of parodic self-puffery, Twain wrote that "I consider it one of the most astonishing novels that ever was written. Night after night I sit up reading it over & over again and crying" (qtd. in French 11). At the same time, Twain solicited a notice from Whitelaw Reid of the New York *Tribune*, where he had published occasionally. Written by the humorist John Hay, the initial notice of April 19 was flippant, ending with the lines: "It is no holiday work. It deals with every aspect of modern society, and we are authorized to announce that the paper on which it is written cost eleven dollars" (qtd. in French 12). Twain complained to Reid that by noticing the book facetiously, rather than seriously, the *Tribune* would give the other newspapers the wrong impression. Twain wrote:

And now you give us a notice which carries the impression to the minds of other editors that we are people of small consequence in the literary world, & indeed only triflers; that a novel by us is in no sense a literary event. Half the papers in America will not see that you were meaning to say a pleasant word for us & simply chose an unfortunate way of doing it: they will merely see that you give us a stickful of pleasantry down in a



corner—& every man of them will take his cue from you, (as they all do) & will act accordingly (*Letters*, Vol. 5 346).

Acknowledging that such a statement made him sound egotistical, Twain hurled half-joking invective at his friend and occasional editor, noting to Reid that the “voluntary” subscriptions to his next book are in the thousands before it is announced, that his books continue to sell well, and that *The Innocents Abroad* had “entered permanently into the literature of the country.” “These things all mean this:” Twain thundered (or possibly whined, depending on how you read his tone), “that I have a good reliable audience in this country—& it is the biggest one in America, too, if I do say it myself. So a novel from me alone would be a good deal in the nature of a literary event, & the Tribune, to be just, should have made it so I appear, I think” (*Letters*, Vol. 5 347). Twain appeared to equate literary reputation with popularity and sales, without considering the other factors that determined literary reputation.

Twain consistently referenced the ability of the *Tribune* to set the tone of literary discussion and to advance the prospects of the book in terms of sales, ironically echoing the cloying speculations of Colonel Sellers in the book. Reid responded by printing another notice on April 23 announcing, for the first time in print, the book’s name and praising its authors:

It is an unusual and a courageous enterprise for two gentlemen who have already won honorable distinction in other walks of literature, to venture upon untrodden paths with a work so ambitious and so important as this is likely to be. In one sense there is nothing to fear. An immense audience is already assured beforehand; and it is fair to conclude that writers who have displayed so much wit, insight, and delicate and fanciful observation, in former works, will not be unprovided with the equipment which is necessary to successful fiction. The new novel will be eagerly looked for and enormously read, and we hazard little in predicting that it will contain as much food for thought as for laughter.

Written by Reid himself, Twain responded that it was “bully!” and, if the notice deceived the public, they would be deceived in “the happy direction” (*Letters*, Vol. 5 352). Twain seems to have not noticed, or ignored, the ambivalence of Reid’s notice, which raised the question of whether the humorists could succeed in fiction and then dismissed this concern by pointing out that it would sell either way.<sup>2</sup>

The next stage of publicity was focused on selling the book door-to-door via a sales prospectus or “dummy”—a physical artifact that presented Twain and Warner to a public stretching across the nation. For the 1,362 sales prospectuses that went to canvassers, Bliss selected excerpts and illustrations from the book and wrote (or had written) an advertising puff that focused on the combination of two humorous authors, of different styles and reputations. The piece addressed this novelty as both a selling point and a possible cause for concern for readers who appreciated one or the other of the authors:

The announcement some months since that such a book was to appear, created a marked sensation in literary circles and called forth much comment from the press; great expectations have been raised regarding it, and an unparalleled eagerness exists in the minds of the people to see and read it.

The book will be found to be unique and original in all things, and while ostensibly still a novel, will differ from books generally known as such: the peculiar and opposite styles of its authors, being so interwoven and blended on every page, as to produce the most charming effect. The readers of Mark Twain’s “INNOCENTS ABROAD,” and “ROUGHING IT,” and of Warner’s “MY SUMMER GARDEN,” and “BACK LOG STUDIES,” will find in this volume, pages, on which will seem to be concentrated the force and humor of all those books, and its satire, although directed against prominent persons and things, will be found not to be misplaced.

If the book was met both with eagerness and a touch of anxiety, the prospective reader was meant to be reassured that there would be something for everyone: “the superficial reader will find abundant entertainment in this volume, the careful studious one an ample supply of material for afterthought, while the scholar will discover something upon which to exercise his ingenuity.” The imagined audience for *The Gilded Age* was less clearly defined than it had been for Mark Twain’s first two subscription books. As a novel, *The Gilded Age* was both a new venture in subscription publishing and erased the “character” of Twain and Warner, each of whom had relied on a unique narrative presence as the center of their humorous writings.

Holding the theory that all reviews would repeat the praise or censure of the first review, Twain had solicited favorable early reviews to set the tone for the book’s reception. Their aim was to send review copies to as many as sixty leading periodicals and up to five hundred newspapers, as stipulated by the

authors' contract with the American Publishing Company (Hill 287, n. 93). Twain's friend Edward H. House proposed reviewing the novel for the New York *Tribune* but was rebuked by Reid. Twain took House's side and wrote Warner not to have any more to do with Reid: "He is a contemptible cur, and I want nothing more to do with him. I don't want the Tribune to have the book at all. Please tell Bliss *not to send a copy there under any circumstances*."<sup>3</sup> In his impetuous manner, Twain turned his back on an influential, and largely friendly, outlet due to a perceived slight, which turned out to be exaggerated. In the realm of periodicals, Warner asked his friend E. C. Stedman to review the book for *Scribner's*, and Twain solicited a review from William Dean Howells. Both men declined to write a review praising their friends' work, and the book was only reviewed in one major American literary periodical—*The Galaxy*, where Twain had been a contributor.

It is a telling omission that the *Atlantic* failed to mention a novel written by Warner and Twain, two of Howells's favorite humorists and friends. The book met with private critique from Howells, who wrote to Twain: "Up to the time old Hawkins dies your novel is of the greatest promise—I read it with joy—but after that it fails to assimilate the crude material with which it is fed, and it becomes a confirmed dyspeptic at last. Still it is always entertaining; and it kept me up till twelve last night, though I needed sleep. I was particularly sorry to have Sellers degenerate as he did, and none of the characters quite fulfill their early promise" (Arms and Lohmann 46). He then offered to withhold his public opinion. Howells's response here is illustrative for two reasons: first, it shows the criteria he used to judge a book's value (assimilation of material, character development) that matter despite a book's entertainment value, and second, that he was willing to forgo his critical role in shaping the reading public in favor of his role as supporter and friend (Smith and Gibson 12–13). Twain remembered the situation differently.

Without the influential critical voices of the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Tribune*, negative critical reactions helped stifle the book's sales, or so Twain remembered. He later claimed that he had sent a copy of the book to Howells to review, but that the New York *Daily Graphic*, the illustrated paper in which he had first announced the book the previous April, issued a negative review that soured the press against the novel before Howells had a chance to review it (*Autobiography of Mark Twain* 339–40). In Twain's recollection, the *Graphic* had published a review accusing Twain of dishonesty in his "moral attitude toward the public" and charging him with swindling the public. The newspaper had, in Twain's recollection, asserted that "I had used my name to float it and give it currency; a currency—so the critic averred—which it could not have

acquired without my name, and that this conduct was a grave fraud upon the people” (339). Twain’s facts are skewed, but his frustration with critical power, and his anxiety with the “currency” of his reputation, is clear.

In his *Autobiography*, Twain claimed that he sent all of his books to Howells to shape critical reception:

Therefore, more than once I took the precaution of sending my book in manuscript, to Mr. Howells, when he was editor of the “Atlantic Monthly,” so that he could prepare a review of it at leisure. I know he would say the truth about the book—I also know that he would find more merit than demerit in it, because I already knew that that was the condition of the book. I allowed no copy of it to go out to the press until after Mr. Howells’s notice of it had appeared. That book was always safe. There wasn’t a man behind a pen in all America that had the courage to find anything in the book which Mr. Howells had not found—there wasn’t a man behind a pen in America that had spirit enough to say a brave and original thing about the book on his own responsibility (Kiskis 36–37).

Twain goes on to define criticism as “the most degraded of all trades,” based on the average man’s lack of independent thought: “He is not interested in contriving an opinion of his own, by study and reflection, but is only anxious to find out what his neighbor’s opinion is and slavishly adopt it.” Twain ends his reminiscence with a swipe at critics, along with several other professions:

However, let it go. It is the will of God that we must have critics, and missionaries, and Congressmen, and humorists, and we must bear the burden. Meantime, I seem to have been drifting into criticism myself. But that is nothing. At the worst, criticism is nothing more than a crime, and I am not unused to that (340).

The major “crime” committed by critics, according to Twain’s later memory, was on *The Gilded Age*, which had been murdered, or so Twain thought, by the critics. The case was not so clear.

### Satire or Fraud?

The actual publication of *The Gilded Age* in December 1873 presented a product to the reading public that seemed to meet few expectations of style,

tone, and subject while inspiring conflicting views of the book's literary and commercial value. While the book was widely noticed and then reviewed by newspapers and smaller magazines, the lack of attention by the "quality" magazines might reflect the difficulty that critics had in making sense of the joint production.<sup>4</sup> Reviews largely agreed that the book was different than what had been expected from the two humorists, but reviewers largely split on whether the resulting production was a valuable satire on American life or whether the authors had "sold" the public a poor product. If critics thought that readers would see the satire as a corrective to social ills, then the book was largely praised as satire, but if critics focused on the poor quality of the novel, then the reviews focused on how the authors had used their reputations to "sell" the public.

As a satire, *The Gilded Age* aimed at several targets—most pointedly, political corruption in Washington and speculative capital, largely in relation to railroads, but also sensational fiction, the jury system, and the insanity defense. The *Graphic's* review appeared on December 23, the official release date, and did not accuse Twain of fraud, as he later remembered. Instead, it noted that the book had disappointed the high anticipation of its creation, calling it an "incoherent series of sketches" lacking Twain's "characteristic fun" and Warner's subtle humor. The review speculates that each author wrote separate parts, edited them together, and then each struck out what was characteristic of each other's humor, concluding, "And so it has come to pass that the two most brilliant humorists in America . . . have written a book in which we look almost in vain for the traces of either's pen." The paper also hinted that the incoherence might have been a joke on Twain's part, a trope that appeared in later criticism.

Reviews in the New York *Herald* and the Boston *Transcript*, from December 22 and 23 praised the satirical thrust of the book, with the *Herald* calling it "a clever though rude satire upon certain customs and institutions, many of which deserve contempt and reprobation, it will scarcely be too highly praised." The Hartford *Courant*, of which Warner was coeditor, reviewed the book on December 23, noting the main thrust of critical contention:

Perhaps the first thing to strike the attention of the reader will be that *The Gilded Age* is by no means a comic work. There is an abundance of dry humor and quiet wit, and caustic satire, but underneath it all, and perceptible to everyone is a serious purpose, an evident desire to hold up the mirror of truth to the eyes of a nation which greatly needs to recognize the truth.

Reviews that praised the book largely focused on the quality of its satire, while judging the humor and the writing to be of lesser quality. The *Boston Globe*, in a Christmas day review, opined that the book was amusing but lacked the “characteristic raciness” of both authors while being crude in artistic construction. Nevertheless, the review praised the book’s satire, holding that “the moral taught by the book is excellent. That it is exceedingly entertaining the mere names on the title-page are sufficient assurance.” The *Springfield Republican* framed the issue as a critical puzzle, writing that “to apply the usual canons of criticism to such a book would, of course, be absurd.” And while the story as such did not amount to much, the review opined, it was one of the best satires of current life that had been printed. Numerous newspapers commented on the power of the satire from the early reviews in December through March, as commentary spread. Hamlin Hill points out that Twain’s publisher collected a number of the positive reviews into an advertising broadside to supplement the publisher’s dummy, presumably to help canvassers with sales and reviewers with public sentiment (81, n. 26).

Reviewers focused on the novel’s direct and often fervent denunciation of corrupt politicians and financiers while raising the possibility that satire might not need to be funny in order to be effective. The reactions of critics to Twain and Warner’s novel points to the possibility of satire being direct, non-humorous, and yet still possibly effective at inspiring reform. The Unitarian magazine, *Old and New*, reviewed the work in March 1874, responding to those critics who found the satire too veiled or too serious. Instead, the review argued that the satire is of a type with the deadpan humor of both men, who never smile at their own jokes. “The result is,” the review notes, “*that you see it yourself*; and *that* is what makes men laugh.” The satire of the book, then, is marked by the absence of both humorists’ personalities and from their judgment of the corruption portrayed. The reader must see the satire, and like deadpan humor, respond properly, although the result for this satire is not a laugh, but action to “PURIFY THE SUFFRAGE” (“The Gilded Age” 387). Like most reviews, this found little literary merit in the story or characters. Reviewers who valued the book’s satire of contemporary life looked past the book’s flaws. Other reviewers found those flaws to be the sign of a defective product.

The reaction of some in the press toward the novel’s apparent status as a product seemingly marketed for mass sale indicates that the link between literature and business was a fraught topic. Twain’s satire of speculative capital was itself a business venture that its authors hoped would both make money and satirize those aimed for easy millions. This paradox bode poorly for the authors since the more respectable literary figures of the day largely insisted

on a theoretical separation between literature as art and literature as business. Negative reviews largely found it in poor taste to sell the public on such a poor product based on the reputation of its authors.

*The Literary World*, a magazine devoted to the book trade and publishing news, argued that the “buffoon” could not lead to reform, but saved most of its criticism for the commercial aspects, writing: “The book has a strong savor of lucre; it was evidently written to sell, and in the hope of gaining a liberal heap of that money, whose worship it purports to ridicule” (“Literary News” 126). The “savor of lucre” that critics discerned about the book threatened to damage the reputation of both authors, which were themselves a form of property to be guarded. *The Literary World* wondered why a man with Charles Dudley Warner’s literary reputation would “lend his name to such cheap and feeble stuff.” On March 7, 1874, the San Francisco *Daily Evening Bulletin* noted that authors and publishers had as much right to the “tricks of the trade” of publicity as patent medicine sellers in order to attract attention, and that the production clearly demonstrates the power of “Printing-house Square” to bank on the reputations of authors, rather than the quality of work. It reads: “Literary reputation in these days is as merchantable as any other copy-righted manufacture; suffers damage, has its protection in law, rises and falls with the changes of fashion, may be bequeathed for the support of a family.” Twain, Warner, and their publisher had taken advantage of the curious circumstances of the book to circulate the novel, which would sink or float under its own merits, which were, according to this review, rather thin.

Twain remembered the negative press and ascribed the supposed failure of the book to the negative review of the *Daily Graphic*, although Bryant French assumes that the negative review he referred to in his autobiography was actually from the *Chicago Tribune* (French 16–17). This review, more than any other, excoriated the authors for perpetrating a fraud on the reading public by circulating inferior goods based on their reputations. If the authors hadn’t have been well-known, with a reputation for quality entertainment, then the book would have found an audience based on its merits and would not require “severest censure”: “when the two have condescended to trifle with their honorable reputation and with the confidence of the public, indignation is justly excited and outspoken.” The review recites the reputations of the authors—Warner as purveyor of “refined and delicate beauty” and Twain’s humor as “quaint and fertile,” deserving “even a trans-Atlantic popularity.” The indignation is palpable and repeated:

When, therefore, a book so utterly bald, so puerile, so vicious even . . . appears with the signatures of Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner to give it passport among respectable readers, wrath and disgust may rightfully inspire the critic to chastise them with mercy.

. . . Their names had become a sort of certificate to high character. It is a fraud to the reading public to append them to a trashy book like the mongrel before us. Stupidity can be forgiven, but deliberate deceit—never (“The Twain–Warner Novel”).

This review appeared in a paper that had staunchly defended Grant, and other negative reviews appeared in Republican-leaning papers. The growing scandals of the administration, especially the exposure of the Crédit Mobilier scandal the year before, which had mixed railroad speculation and congressional corruption, would surely have resonated with the book’s satire. The political dimensions of the book’s interpretation adds to the complexity of evaluating its reception by pointing out the possibility that critics (and readers) approached the book with both literary and political prejudices in mind. As a political satire, the book raised the fraught subject of representing American society as an object of ridicule and correction.

The sales of *The Gilded Age* dropped precipitously in the spring of 1874, the time when the *Chicago Tribune* and other newspapers were debating whether the book might be a fraud. Later newspaper comments took a perverse pleasure in mocking the failure. An early April article in the *St. Louis Democrat* argued that the book was actually a “gigantic practical joke” played by the authors (reprinted in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 5, 1874, and the *Laramie Sentinel*, April 4, 1874). Little else was said about the book, although the *Chicago Tribune* took one more swipe at the text on September 11, 1874, jokingly hoping that a reported Mark Twain impostor had written *The Gilded Age*, and suggesting the real Mark Twain find the villain and pin the “monstrous sketch” on him.

### **Colonel Sellers as Speculative Investment**

By late spring 1874, the boom-and-bust cycle of literary speculation had largely consigned *The Gilded Age*, as a book, to a failed speculation despite the rather large sums it had earned both authors. At the same time, Mark Twain was in the



process of transforming his portion of the literary property into one of the most popular plays of the age, which would become one of the most financially lucrative productions of his career. The stage version of *The Gilded Age*, renamed *Colonel Sellers* soon after its run began, was a hit—it played in New York for 119 nights, from September 1874 to January 1875. It then toured around the country, playing in Chicago, Boston, and New Orleans, and was revived almost every year from 1876 to 1888. The play made Twain as much as \$70,000, the equivalent of between \$1.3 and \$1.6 million in 2010.

Relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to the role of the stage version of *The Gilded Age* in Twain's career, possibly since it is of questionable quality or because its monetary importance might cast a shadow on Twain's artistic value.<sup>5</sup> In the context of the novel's quick decline in sales, the success of the play was truly remarkable. Twain and Warner had copyrighted the dramatic rights to the book in 1873, but seem to have had no plans to dramatize the book until Twain learned of an unauthorized production being staged in San Francisco. Written by the theater critic for the San Francisco *Golden Era*, the play had proven a success with the comedian John T. Raymond in the role of Colonel Sellers. The San Francisco *Figaro* noted that Raymond "presented one of the best hits of character acting ever seen. If he does not make 'The Gilded Age' his star piece, he will miss the tide which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune" (qtd. in the New York *Daily Tribune*, August 5, 1874). Twain soon purchased the rights to the play for \$200—later giving the author \$200 more. He also convinced Warner to relinquish dramatic rights to each other's characters, cutting Warner out of any profits from the play, a situation that may have contributed to their eventual falling out.

As a play, *Colonel Sellers* was mainly a vehicle for the title character. Sellers had been the most highly, and sometimes the only, character praised in reviews of the novel. Twain viewed the character's mixture of humor and pathos to be key, and he feuded with Raymond over aspects of the portrayal he found clownish. He later fumed that "the real Colonel Sellers was never on the stage. Only half of him was there. Raymond could not play the other half of him; it was above his level" (*Autobiography* 207). The half Raymond lacked was the character's heart, and since Twain thought Raymond had no heart, he failed to capture Twain's vision.<sup>6</sup>

Reviews noted that the play as such was not as well constructed as it could be, that Raymond's portrayal of Sellers was the high point and a marked success, and that the work might auger something new for American drama.<sup>7</sup> The New York *Tribune*, which had not reviewed the novel due to Twain's feud with

its editor, reviewed the play on September 18, 1874, saying that “Mark Twain’s play goes a great way to solve the problem of the possibility of the American drama, resting not on the piles driven into the mud and slime of French sensationalism, but founded on American society and manners. It is to a certain extent a success.” The play’s success rested not on the story but on the character of Sellers and the acting of Raymond, which “shed a bright light of humor over the whole.” The reviewer’s conclusion highlights the general thrust of reviews, which the *Tribune* may have, in fact, helped set the tone for: “Mr. Raymond has won a genuine success, and certainly Mr. Clemens’s drama is not a failure.” In a widely reprinted piece from the Cincinnati *Commercial* from late 1875, a reporter noted the impact of the play: “But the book as a novel, though eminently successful, has been fairly eclipsed by its career in dramatized form. It has even been said by critics that our national drama consists of this single play. None other, perhaps, smacks so thoroughly of the soil of America, the ‘Land of the free’” (Hill 71).

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The enhanced quality of *Colonel Sellers* over its source material was widely noted, including by Howells in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Howells dedicated the entirety of the “Drama” section in June 1875 to the play, praising both Raymond, calling him one of the “realistic actors,” and Twain, for creating “character-material [that] is simple, natural, and good” (“Drama” 749). The play, he argued, was only a sketch for its characters, which is the necessity of good “acting-plays” in a way wholly unlike good novels, a slight nod to the failures of the book as such. But as a play, the judgment must be different:

Yet any one who should judge it from the literary standpoint, and not with an artistic sense greater and more literary, would misjudge it. The play is true, in its broad way, to American conditions, and is a fair and just satire upon our generally recognized social and political corruptions (750).

Focusing on the portrayal of character as key to the realistic thrust of the play, he praised Twain and Raymond for allowing the audience to feel “the worth of his worthlessness,” a type of pathos intermixed with the humor that was key to the character of Sellers. The play had the effect of cutting out much of the more direct, less humorous, satire of the novel in favor of the more humorous satire found in the character of Sellers, who had resonated most frequently with

critics of the book. The success of the play solidified the character of Colonel Sellers as a lasting fictional creation of the era of speculative capital, the comic icon of the Gilded Age.

The continued success of *Colonel Sellers*, as it toured the country, sending (relative) millions back to Twain, helped Twain recover from the Panic of 1873, which had proven the satire of both book and play prescient, despite the fact that Twain himself often could not resist the lure of the speculative endeavors his work satirized. Howells later remembered Twain's reaction to his nightly reports of profits, which came in the form of a postcard from an agent whom Twain had hired to travel with the play:

The postals used to come about dinner-time, and Clemens would read them aloud to us in wild triumph. One hundred and fifty dollars—two hundred dollars—three hundred dollars were the gay figures which they bore, and which he flaunted in the air before he sat down at table, or rose from it to brandish, and then, flinging his napkin into his chair, walked up and down to exult in (*My Mark Twain*, 22–23).

Howells's desire to separate art from commerce surely would have been tested as he saw the financial windfall Twain reaped, and the comfort it provided him in Hartford. And Twain later lured Howells into cowriting a play featuring Sellers that would become another failed literary speculation.

The success of *Colonel Sellers* as a play, much like the success of *The Innocents Abroad* as a subscription book, set Mark Twain up with financial expectations for subsequent productions that were almost uniformly disappointing in financial terms. Twain's shift from the Western vagabond of *Roughing It* to the semi-settled author of Hartford did not change his focus on the business aspects of his career. Unlike Colonel Sellers, some of Twain's speculations had paid, and handsomely, but following the unprecedented successes of his travel books and his play, Mark Twain's commercial success declined with subsequent books and plays. Twain responded with a frenzy of activity aimed at supporting his level of spending—plays, novels, sketches, inventions, and lectures. The financial success of the play led Twain to try to repeat his boom times as a playwright for decades, inspiring “more than twenty-five years of unsuccessful intermittent endeavor in the theater” (Walker 185).<sup>8</sup>

The successes and failures of *The Gilded Age* and *Colonel Sellers* point to the importance of these works in understanding Twain's relation to his times and the centrality of the business of letters in the development of American

literature. With *The Gilded Age* and *Colonel Sellers*, Mark Twain discovered the difficulty of satirizing the very economic system on which the success of his own products relied. As Hamlin Hill writes, Twain's continued focus on business "cluttered up his life and energy during the 1870's and 1880's with so many projects for making himself a stereotype Horatio Alger that his work suffered" (71). It might be more fitting, considering the circumstances, to compare Twain to his own fictional creation, for in the business of letters there was no busier speculator than Mark Twain. And like Colonel Sellers, "Mark Twain"—as both man of letters and man of business—embodied the mixture of humor and pathos that makes a character worth investing in.

## Notes

1. In a one-year span, the book had sold 15,000 fewer copies than *Roughing It* and 20,000 fewer copies than *The Innocents Abroad*, each of which outsold the book yearly after this point. In 1879, when the publisher's records end, only 56,484 copies of the book had been printed, the steepest drop-off of Twain's early books in terms of continued sales year after year (Hill 85). Nevertheless, *The Sun* of Baltimore noted that, by March, Twain and Warner had each received \$15,000 in profits from their "racy literary work," a significant amount ("Literary Profits").

2. The notices in the *Daily Graphic* and the *Tribune* got literary gossip stirring. In a letter to Reid dated April 22, Twain enclosed a notice of the book from the Springfield *Republican* announcing the book, which was drawn directly from the *Tribune*'s first notice. Twain noted on the scrap: "Brief, but mighty good." The Auburn, New York, *Daily News* on April 25 cited the *Tribune* in discussing the "literary Siamese twins." Notices appeared in papers throughout the summer and fall, testifying to the continued interest in the book (French 13–14).

3. *Letters*, Vol. 5 367. This incident ended Twain's relations with Reid and the *Tribune* for at least a dozen years and made Reid an object of Twain's wrath. He later learned of Reid's version of their kerfuffle—that he disliked House and would not work with him—and took a different view of the situation. See French, p. 15, n. 69.

4. Without the influence of Howells's *Atlantic* or Reid's *Tribune*, newspaper reviews varied widely in their reviews of *The Gilded Age*, which was more widely reviewed than *Roughing It* but significantly less than *The Innocents Abroad*. French claims that the book was more widely reviewed than any other of Twain's books (21). Budd lists only fifty-one reviews, plus four papers that probably reviewed the book, but which haven't been found. This is approximately half the reviews of *Innocents Abroad* but double that of *Roughing It*. Unless noted, the reviews of the novel can be found in Budd.

5. For discussion of Twain as a playwright, see Fishkin, esp. pp. 148–49; and Schirer.

6. French, p. 249, n. 60. This reminiscence took place after the two men had fallen out and Twain had consigned him to the permanent status of enemy. Twain's reaction to the play may also be traced to his jealousy that Raymond received credit for the character's success. Twain acknowledged the play's faults and strengths to Howells shortly after its opening: "I believe it will go. The newspapers have been complimentary. It is simply

a *Setting* for the one character, Col. Sellers—as a *play* I guess it will not bear a critical assault in force.” *Letters*, Vol. 6 233.

7. While a full examination of the reviews of the play, both its first run and subsequent tours, is out of the scope of this article, it should be noted that the initial reviews seem to have established the major themes of subsequent reviews. The play had gone through previews in Buffalo, and the reviewer there had also hit the high points of subsequent criticism: “As a production of Mark Twain, the humorist, the play will undoubtedly be received by the public with considerable favor. There are numerous good things in it, and the character of *Colonel Sellers* is particularly strong in a humorous sense. The language of the part indicates plainly the originality and wit of the famous humorist. Dramatically the play is weak and unsatisfactory.” “The ‘Gilded Age,’” *Buffalo Express*, September 8, 1874, p. 1.

8. More exactly, the unexpected success of the play led Twain to try to replicate his stage success with a series of failed plays: *Ah Sin* (cowritten with Bret Harte and produced in 1877), *Cap’n Simon Wheeler*, *The Amateur Detective* (written 1877, not produced), *Col. Sellers as a Scientist* (a collaboration with Howells in 1883), *The American Claimant* (Twain’s revision of the previous, produced in 1887), adaptations of *Tom Sawyer* and *The Prince and the Pauper* (not produced), and *Is He Dead?* (published in 2002 and produced in 2007). Schirer lists Twain’s involvement in eleven plays, ten collaborations, and three translations (105).

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