

PUDD'NHEAD WILSON: MARK TWAIN'S REJECTION OF COMEDY

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Pudd'nhead Wilson was Mark Twain's final look at American impostures, written in 1894 from the distant vantage point of Italy, nearly sixty-five years after the time of its setting. The distance factor is important, not only in geographical and temporal terms, but comedically as well; for it allowed Mark Twain to explore from the depths of depression the frightening degree to which human relations depend on the manipulations and interpretations of outward appearance. His debate over the slavery of men and women to their own uncertain identities, as well as to the world's posturings, is to a great extent a manifestation of Samuel Clemens's own preoccupation with the dual identity he shared with the comedic fabrication, Mark Twain. Although the final implications of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* are easily as grim (if not more so) than those of, say, *A Connecticut Yankee*, it is nevertheless the greater comedy; for rather than employing as ineffectual a mouthpiece as the blustering, failed confidence man, Hank Morgan, Mark Twain utilised the deadpan voice of a detached observer, embodied in both the omniscient narrator and the character of the outcast comedian, Pudd'nhead Wilson himself. These two personae combine into a mastery of controlled, ironic distance — and deception — that allow Mark Twain to present one of his bleakest fables as the effective comedy not attained in his next and final work of fiction, *The Mysterious Stranger*. As the outcome of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* suggests, however, the book is in spite of its own comic success Samuel Clemens's ultimate denial of comedy as an instrument of social criticism or change, and as such, his ultimate denial of Mark Twain.

Clemens's sense of imprisonment by his fabricated twin, the comic 'freak' Mark Twain, and his despair over it are well known. Hence his repeated treatment of twins as freaks, either with the joined Chang and Eng in 'The Personal Habits of the Siamese Twins' or the joined Capello brothers in 'Those Extraordinary Twins', out of which grew his rendering of the separated Capellos in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. Through all of these he as much confronts his own personal enslavement to what he saw as the comic

expectations of the buffoon, as the metaphysical question of human enslavement to fictions of identity.

When, in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, the twin Capello brothers arrive in Dawson's Landing, Angelo reveals the despair of a man forced, out of monetary necessity, to exploit his own seeming freakishness in order to get a laugh. The result for the brothers had been two years of "slavery" among "the attractions of a cheap museum in Berlin".¹ As he wrote *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Clemens himself was about to begin a world-wide lecture tour to regain his lost finances, after having frequently rebelled against the necessity of stepping onto the lecture platform, each time vowing never to do so again for any price. Notable in his complaints was his repugnance over the possessiveness of his audiences, so that his impression of his own enslavement to the identity of Mark Twain was exacerbated by the unmerciful grasp of public adulation. In *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, the twins' first appearance at the home of the widow Cooper and her daughter, Rowena, culminates with all the neighbourhood rushing in to see the new, fine, foreign birds, who are obliged to set about "winning approval, compelling admiration and achieving favour from all". The widow Cooper follows "the conquering march with a proud eye", while Rowena thinks to herself, "'And to think they are ours — all ours'" (93).

The narrator is ironically distant enough to prevent the same resentment that Clemens often felt towards his audience from appearing in its brutal immediacy on the page, a resentment which had once prompted fellow lecturer Oliver Wendell Holmes to write to him in commiseration, "These negative faces with their vacuous eyes and stony lineaments pump and suck the warm soul. They are what kill the lecturer."² Although Clemens readily concurred with this damning opinion, in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* the ironic narrator transforms his contempt into playful condescension for the widow and Rowena as they bask in the cheap thrills of hosting 'their' celebrities. Each of the women "recognised that she knew now for the first time the real meaning of that great word Glory, and perceived the stupendous value of it, and understood why men in all ages had been willing to throw away meaner happinesses, treasure, life itself, to get a taste of its sublime and supreme joy" (94). Sarcastic, yes; but nevertheless transformed and softened just enough through comedic pretence to suggest the narrator's indulgence. Similarly, when Judge Driscoll, wishing to be the first to display the twins in public, takes them on a whirlwind showing-off of the town's most stultifying landmarks — churches, gaol, Freemason's hall, slaughterhouse, and fire department — the sentiment expressed is an ironically softened echo of many vitriolic descriptions in Clemens's

1. Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 91. All quotations are from this edition.

2. Quoted in Justin Kaplan, *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), p. 13.

letters written during his exhausting lecture tours. The bitter resignation with which he had to ingratiate himself to well-meaning, thoughtless hosts — when at times all he wanted was a good night's sleep after a gruelling lecture without benefit of microphones and sound systems — is comedically transformed into the twins' responses to the judge's attentions. Spoken, they "admired his admiration, and paid him back the best they could"; unspoken, "they could have done better if some fifteen or sixteen hundred thousand previous experiences of this sort in various countries had not already rubbed off a considerable part of the novelty of it" (96-96).

That Clemens did feel a slave to his comedic identity, and a sort of freak or buffoon as well, is particularly evident in letters written in the fatigue of his globe-spanning lecture tours, or at other times when 'being funny' seemed a monstrously inhuman expectation. As early as 1871, when his financial troubles were nowhere near their magnitude as during the writing of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Clemens had despaired to his brother about the necessity of "seeing my hated nom de plume (for I do loathe the very sight of it) in print again every month."³ His other sufferings had also piled on, irrespective of the public demands upon the genial comedian. When they became too heavy, he resigned as a regular contributor to *Galaxy Magazine* with the public admission that after eight months of deathbed vigils and sickbed watches, with two of his family taken and two others nearly so, he was still "under contract to furnish "humorous" matter once a month" — some of which "could have been injected into a funeral sermon without disturbing the solemnity of the occasion."⁴ One of those funereal pieces had been "Mark Twain's (Burlesque) Autobiography", in which Clemens assigns his "hated nom de plume" to a direct ancestry of history's most famous criminals and outcasts, from Guy Fawkes to Nebuchadnezzar to Baalam's Ass. The hostility and hatred for Mark Twain that so pervades the sketch must have informed *Pudd'nhead Wilson's* later speculation — in one of his cynical aphorisms — that, as heaven is without sorrow, it must also be without humour.

As he wrote *Pudd'nhead Wilson* with the conscious intent of staving off bankruptcy, Clemens faced the realisation that he must again exploit his sorrow in the name of an alter-ego whose identity forever threatened to eclipse his own. Were the question of his own identity the sole inspiration for the book, he might not have been able to extend the dilemma into metaphysical, social, political, economic and moral spheres; but this he did do upon recognising that his own internal struggle might be embodied in the impostures of civilisation — not only in America but the world at large; not only in the nineteenth century but, possibly, since the dawn of human morality.

Clemens's agonies about his own identity were embodied on a universal scale

3. Ibid.

4. *Mark Twain's Contributions to The Galaxy*, ed. Bruce McElderry (Gainesville: Scholars' Reprints, 1961), p. 131.

during the 1890s in the questions of heredity and environment where formerly religious — and thus moral — certainties had held secure ground. In America at least, along with the increasing moral and spiritual uncertainties after Darwin came a seemingly heightened susceptibility and sensitivity to manipulations by confidence men, politicians, Robber Barons, carpetbaggers and land speculators — all of whom flourished to a large extent through the exploitation of a prevailing moral insecurity, as Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner had already shown in *The Gilded Age*. That was in 1876; eighteen years later, Clemens's ambivalence over whether morality itself was not just another socially acquired pretence caused *Pudd'nhead Wilson* to remain as unresolved as Clemens himself during his famous deathbed ravings about dual identity and "the laws of mentality."⁵ As a comedic deception which sets out to damn imposture, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is at once an apology for and condemnation of manipulations of appearance, morality and belief. The grim conclusion, however, is that such manipulations are inescapable, based as they are on slavery to both heredity and environment.

Thus could Pudd'nhead Wilson offer two equally caustic aphorisms in his calendar, one presenting the fickleness of the environment — "Training is everything. The peach was once a bitter almond; cauliflower is nothing but cabbage with a college education" (84) — and the other lamenting the incurable inheritance of human corruption: "Adam was but human — this explains it all. He did not want the apple for the apple's sake; he wanted it only because it was forbidden. The mistake was in not forbidding the serpent; then he would have eaten the serpent" (61). For this reason, whatever depravity Tom Driscoll betrays is due as much to his "native viciousness" as to the unavoidable circumstances in which he has been placed. Thus the underlying irony of the book places a hopeless determinism in a paradoxical alliance with that "training" which "is everything". The unmaking of Tom Driscoll hinges on the one piece of evidence that all his pretences — themselves beyond his control — could not disguise: his fingerprints.

Mark Twain's conviction that "the skin of every human being contains a slave"⁶ motivates a plot as tortured as the conclusion that is drawn from it. Tom Driscoll is, on the one hand, a slave by virtue of his inherited, though minuscule, portion of African blood, while on the other hand he is designated a slave because his society had been trained into accepting the moral validity of slavery. Thus is he cast by an inescapable inherited condition into a bondage that is arbitrarily, because environmentally, imposed. The paradox is further represented by the fact that the only given depiction of Tom as a culpable being is as an impostor, since everything the reader knows about his character comes after Roxy has exchanged him in the cradle; but underlying all is

5. Kaplan, p. 388.

6. Quoted in James Cox, *Mark Twain: The Fate of Humor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 245.

the reader's knowledge that he is not in fact the "white" Tom Driscoll but the "black" Valet de Chambre. Then, in a further paradox, the reader is reminded that the standard designating the babies as "black" or "white" by virtue of the blood in their veins is merely "a fiction of law and custom" (64) since in all outward appearance Tom, Roxy, and Valet de Chambre are white-skinned.

In Pudd'nhead Wilson the training is no less sinister than the inheritance of "native viciousness." Roxy, Tom's mother, having exchanged him in the cradle for his master, ultimately convinces herself as well as those around her that she is no longer his mother, but his slave: "the mock reverence became real reverence; the mock obsequiousness real obsequiousness . . . and in her worship of him she forgot who she was and what she had been," (77). Thus "the dupe of her own deceptions," she displays an unavoidable susceptibility to impressions equal to that of Tom, who himself undergoes a change of moral landscape overnight when an outraged Roxy reveals to him his true African heritage. "Some of his low places he found lifted to ideals, some of his ideals had sunk to valleys, and lay there with the sackcloth and ashes of pumicestone and sulphur on their ruined heads" (118). With such alterations of character exposed by — and to — Roxy and Tom, Mark Twain creates a troubling ambiguity by depicting humans as hopelessly suspended in a hall of mirrors, their identities imperfectly defined by conflicting attributes of appearance and inherence. Thus the reader must ask whether Tom's reactions are those of a man born black, or a man later persuaded into thinking he is black: "it was the "nigger" in him asserting its humility, and he blushed and was abashed. And the "nigger" in him was surprised when the white friend put out his hand for a shake with him. He found the "nigger" in him involuntarily giving the road, on the sidewalk, to the white rowdy and loafer" (118-19).

The inability to conclude the source of our impressions, resulting in a plot depending equally on the pre-ordained and the arbitrarily imposed, establishes the one inescapable certainty of the book, that judgements based on outward appearance are both unavoidable and untrustworthy. This is demonstrated by the appearances of gentility in the Virginian aristocrats, in contrast with the barbarism that inspires them; similarly, the impressions of the townfolk that earn David Wilson the name "Pudd'nhead" are countered with the cleverness he reveals as the end; and the appearances of Roxy and Tom as white cannot prevent them from falling prey to the "fiction of law and custom" designating them as black slaves.

But if Mark Twain's intention is to attack the gullibility with which people depend on appearances, he implies no alternative lying between those of sheer credulity and cynical mistrust — a bleak prospect, validating the comedy's seemingly ironic designation as *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson*. Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar warns of the danger of relying on the evidence before our eyes: "Take the case of any pencil, sharpened by any woman; if you have witnesses, you will find that she did it with a knife; but if you take simply the aspect of the pencil, you will say she

did it with her teeth“ (202). Looking beyond the sexism of the example, one still finds no recourse to do other than take “the aspect of the pencil”; for even the viewpoint of another witness is not conclusive, as shown in the twins’ opposing visual perceptions of Tom at their first meeting. To Angelo, he has “a good eye”; to Luigi there is “something veiled and sly about it.” To Angelo, his manner of speech is ‘pleasant’ and “free-and-easy”; to Luigi it is “more so than . . . agreeable”. Angelo thinks he is “a sufficiently nice young man”; Luigi isn’t sure (123-24). Tom in fact displays all these qualities in the course of the novel, some of which are calculated, some of which show themselves in spite of his pretences. The trouble for the twins comes not in determining the existence of such incongruous attributes, but in determining which are genuine and which are not. While the reader is often privy to the omniscient narrator’s guidance in making a judgement, the implication remains that in life we are without such guidance.

For this reason concern is justified over the gullibility of the townsfolk in their blind reverence of York Driscoll, Pembroke Howard, and the aristocratic code of the Virginian First Families. The religion of these austere figures is that of polite gentry “without stain or blemish,” and so the community deems them. The narrator can ironically reveal how far from the truth their impressions are as he depicts Pembroke Howard’s readiness to “explain” his honour and courtesy “with any weapon you might prefer from brad-awls to artillery”(58). Thus in the same manner in which he treated Colonel Grangerford in *Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain presents the contradictions between York Driscoll’s blood-lust and his outward show of gentility. Sometimes he does this solely through ironies inherent in the dialogue, as when Driscoll, himself a judge, vents his rage on Tom for settling an assault case off the duelling ground: “‘You cur! You scum! You vermin! Do you mean to tell me that the blood of my race has suffered a blow and crawled to a court of law about it?’”(141). And, just as Colonel Grangerford ironically revealed his barbarity by chiding his son for shooting from behind a bush instead of in the open road, the Judge reveals the same by lamenting over the shame of his having met a confessed assassin in a duel: “‘That this assassin should have put the affront upon me of letting me meet him on the field of honour as if he were a gentleman is a matter which I will presently settle — but not now. I will not shoot him until after the election’ ” (171).

Another description of the aristocrats reveals a particularly important example of Mark Twain’s narrative deceptions — important not only because it is upon this sort of irony that a valid interpretation of the book frequently rests, but also because it suggests Mark Twain’s difficulty in comedically distancing himself from the objects of his scorn. In a marked difference from his handling of the aristocrats in *Huckleberry Finn*, the narrator employs blatant sarcasm in a description of Percy Driscoll, who resolves to sell three slaves down the river for an unsolved petty theft. First described as “a fairly humane man towards slaves and other animals” and “an exceedingly humane man toward the erring of his own race,” Driscoll relents at the last moment

when all three, in terror, confess. He withdraws in private to reflect upon his magnanimity and the "noble and gracious thing" he had just done; "and that night he set the incident down in his diary, so that his son might read it in after years, and be thereby moved to deeds of gentleness and humanity himself" (68). This is not the only instance of the narrator's sarcasm at the expense of the petty aristocracy of Dawson's Landing; and James Cox has noted that the failure to recognise this is the failure to understand the irony of the entire novel, as F.R. Leavis apparently did in saying that "Mark Twain unmistakably admires Judge Driscoll and Pembroke Howard."⁷ Sarcasm, of course, brings the narrator closer to the object of description, and as such indicates Mark Twain's growing impatience with the demands of distance and the comic mask.

But to a degree such confusion is understandable, for another problem in grasping Mark Twain's comedic treatment of the corrupt elite — and one with unhappy implications — is that he offers no opposing faction or model of good for the reader's approbation. Although ridiculing the aristocrats and their preposterous code of honour, it is no worse than the bigotry of the townspeople themselves. It is an indictment of the entire community when the local newspaper reports the unwitnessed murder of Judge Driscoll, known to be an enemy of the Capello twins, though in fact killed by his own "nephew," Tom: "Judge Driscoll, an old and respected citizen, was assassinated here about midnight by a profligate Italian nobleman or barber, on account of a quarrel growing out of the recent election. The assassin will probably be lynched" (197). The "quarrel" between the Judge and the twins is actually the duel over Luigi's assault on Tom. The townspeople are criticised for their admiration of the duel as much as the aristocracy are condemned for their participation in it. The community's subsequent farcical democracy is no alternative to the remnants of the aristocracy's feudal code; not only are the participants deified by the community on the morning after the duel, but so are their seconds: "wherefore Pudd'nhead Wilson was suddenly become a man of consequence" (163). It is no compliment to Pudd'nhead Wilson that the townspeople choose him as mayoral candidate, for it is not due to his merits, but rather to his foolhardy participation in a barbarous ritual. So Pudd'nhead Wilson's value lies not in his capacity to stand as an alternative worthy of praise. He is generally aloof from the happenings in town throughout the book, withdrawn under the reputation of a fool because of his obscure jokery. While he might be the most rational and good natured character in the book — and very much the comedian figure — he nonetheless takes no pains to dismiss either the absurd democracy or the feudal code; his best friend is in fact Judge Driscoll. Pudd'nhead's main role is as the agent who exposes the false identity of Tom through his mastery at law and fingerprint detection; thereby does he reveal the slavery of humanity to predetermination in the form of a fingerprint, and to environment in the form of Tom's

7. *Ibid.*, p. 237.

legal status as a slave. His courtroom revelation exposes both the untrustworthiness of appearance and the inescapable dependence upon it. This more than anything else justifies the naming of the book after him, even if this justification is compromised by the fact that Pudd'nhead notices Tom's fingerprints only through a lucky accident in a moment of distraction.

One might think that the character to attract the greatest narrative sympathy would be Roxy. Her actions are at least understood, under the circumstances: "Was she bad? Was she worse than the general run of her race? No. They had an unfair show in the battle of life, and they held it no sin to take military advantage of the enemy" (67). Roxy embodies the only clear potential of threat to the complacency of Dawson's Landing, described as "the heir of two centuries of unatoned insult and outrage" (109). Yet for all her potential of acting as an opposing force to a decadent society, Mark Twain attaches to her the same mindless conditioning as to the community itself, thus again compounding the slavery of blood with that of environment. In the search for justification in committing the deceptions on behalf of her son, she repeatedly emulates her aristocratic masters. It begins the moment she debates her decision to exchange the babies in the cradle, recalling an old fable about such a trick by the queen of England: "'Dah, now — de preacher said it his own self, en it ain't no sin, 'ca'se white folks done it . . . en not on'y jis' common white folks nuther, but de biggest quality dey is in de whole bilin!'" (73). Roxy later shows a ridiculous inhumanity equal to that of the Judge or Colonel Grangerford when she berates her only son for refusing to risk his life in the duel with Luigi. Tom is the product of an affair between Roxy and Colonel Cecil Burleigh Essex, a heritage which Roxy inflates into including Captain John Smith, Pocahontas, and an African king — "'en yit here you is a-slinkin' outen a duel en disgracin' our whole line like a ornery low-down hound! Yes, it's de nigger in you!'" (158). Roxy's pretensions and bogus pride at being one of "de Smith-Pocahontases" reduce her from being a potentially powerful adversary and representative of justice to the demeaned status of a darky minstrel. Her emulation of the corrupt white aristocracy gives validity to the words of Driscoll's real heir, exchanged into slavery, who responds to Roxy's angry taunt of being an "imitation nigger": "' If I's imitation, what is you? Bofe of us is imitation white . . . we don't amount to noth'n as imitation niggers'" (103).

With no one in the world represented by Dawson's Landing to act as the sort of model alternative precariously embodied in Huck Finn, it is apparent that Mark Twain had succumbed to profound disillusionment over the irreconcilable and unchangeable forces of human nature that manifest themselves as greed in moral terms and 'survival of the fittest' in social Darwinist terms. Even Roxy's apparently unselfish motives in sacrificing all for her son attract a critical eye when one considers her obsession, at the possible risk of her son's life, with keeping alive her dubious aristocratic heritage. Each major character carries out his or her plans with no sense of internal division or conflict, with no little space of undeformed morality, as Huck Finn had, in which an

alternative might germinate. Mark Twain's apparent lack of faith in the hopes of altering this inescapable state gives a caustic ring to the blanket pronouncement in *Pudd'nhead Wilson's* Calendar over all displays of faith: "April 1. — This is the day upon which we are reminded of what we are on the other three hundred and sixty-four" (211).

Mark Twain's faithlessness is cast in another way, besides these maxims worthy of an embittered Poor Richard; he also demonstrates it in the fate of the two changelings. Having usurped his master's identity so as not to be sold down the river, the false Tom Driscoll is convicted of his 'uncle' Judge Driscoll's murder and exposed as a slave. Sentenced to be hanged, he is saved because the creditors of his ostensible father's estate argue that, had his true identity been known, he would have been sold with the other slaves. "Everybody granted that if "Tom" were white and free it would be unquestionably right to punish him — it would be no loss to anybody; but to shut up a valuable slave for life — that was another matter" (226). So Tom is pardoned and sold down the river. Indicative as it is of a metaphysical absurdity from which there is no escape, this final ironic reversal of Tom's fortune might not seem so unjust since all along he had been shown acting with his "native viciousness"; the implications for the brainwashed society that transmuted his sentence could conceivably be camouflaged by the impression that Tom got his just deserts (uncharitably assuming that native anything is a just cause for punishment). Yet in presenting the fate of the real Tom Driscoll, consigned since infancy to the identity of Valet de Chambre, Mark Twain depicts the same ironic bondage of those who have done nothing in particular to deserve it. It is not an expression of judgement or justice, but merely the presentation of a cruelly indifferent reality, when the attempt is made to restore the innocent man's identity after decades of conditioning: "The poor fellow could not endure the terrors of the white man's parlour, and felt at home and at peace nowhere but in the kitchen. The family pew was a misery to him, yet he could nevermore enter into the solacing refuge of the "nigger gallery" — that was closed to him for good and all" (225).

Thus the real Tom Driscoll is still a slave. As the one most tragically duped by Roxy's confidence game and an inescapable metaphysical paradox, *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* pertains more to him than to anybody, for his fate expresses the knowledge that the same absurdity will bind the undeserving as well as the deserving. The question remains of how the irredeemably cynical Mark Twain could depict such a hopeless conclusion in an undeniable comic success. He does go to the extent of including isolated comic effects as if to remind the reader that this is a comedy in spite of its title. Various bits of slapstick and diversion, the burlesque appendix of "Those Extraordinary Twins" and Mark Twain's own admission therein of being "a jackleg novelist" almost beg the reader to take it all as a joke. But the novel succeeds as comedy in spite of these efforts, depending for the most part on a calculated narrative distance and the refusal to pronounce judgement. In choosing the perspective of an unruffled, impartial observer, the narrator is in the elevated position of viewing as a

whole the ironic relationships between humanity, fate and chance; he or she can see humans as both agents and victims of their own confidence games, and describe the situation with an indispensable deadpan.

What is troubling for the comedian, however, is Mark Twain's implicit suggestion that the comedy depends more on the ironic relationships within the world than on his own efforts as a comedian; for in Pudd'nhead Wilson the comedian suffers a grave defeat. The townspeople brand David Wilson a 'pudd'nhead' and an outcast because of his jokes — to which Clemens had devoted his entire professional life. At the end of the book, the only way for Wilson to gain respect from the community is to prove himself a master of the most serious profession, the law. In doing so, as George Toles notes, Wilson effectively takes back his jokes.⁸ He drops the comic mask, succumbs to the will of Dawson's Landing and as a lawyer actually executes it, making no effort to criticise or undermine it. His comic utterances are reduced to the private, cynical grumblings of Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar, with which Mark Twain forecasts his own abdication from the comic stage: within five years Clemens would write to William Dean Howells of his refusal and inability to "write gaily" anymore.⁹ He might even write, with no little pomposity, "Against the assault of Laughter nothing can stand"¹⁰ — but he would already have admitted otherwise in Pudd'nhead Wilson's abandonment of jokes for the law.

8. George E. Toles, 'Mark Twain and Pudd'nhead Wilson: A House Divided', *Novel* 16 (1982), 55-75 (74).

9. *Mark Twain-Howells Letters*, ed. Henry Nash Smith and William M. Gibson, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), II, 689.

10. Mark Twain, *The Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts*, ed. William M. Gibson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 405.