

## **Humanizing the Other**

### **Mark Twain, Bret Harte and the "Heathen Chinese": The Perils of Satire in 1877** **By Philip Chin**

Initially Samuel Clemens felt positive about working with Bret Harte on the play, *Ah Sin*. He wrote to a friend that, "This Chinaman is to be the character of the play, & both of us will work on him & develop him." In December 1876, he wrote effusively about Charles Parsloe, the man selected to play the title role:

Hart and I have written a play, the chief character in which, is a Chinaman, and we have leased it for life to a man who will play that part.

We give him sole right for the entire world. When he plays in England, his contract will bind him to pay to us our shares of the profit, & is our ample security that far. It would be well for him, & for us to have the play protected there by [copyright], but I hardly see how it is to be done. I think he is the best Chinaman that ever stepped on a stage. So I want no public representation of it in England, until he produces it there himself.

In his 1906 autobiography, Clemens described the arrival of Harte at his home in Connecticut in 1876:

The next morning after his arrival we went to the [billiard room] and began work upon the play. I named my characters and described them; Harte did the same by his. Then he began to sketch the scenario, act by act, and scene by scene. He worked rapidly, and seemed to be troubled by no hesitations or indecisions; what he accomplished in an hour or two would have cost me several weeks of painful and difficult labor, and would have been valueless when I got through. But Harte's work was good, and usable; to me it was a wonderful performance.

Then the filling-in began. Harte set down the dialogue swiftly, and I had nothing to do except when one of my characters was to say something; then Harte told me the nature of the remark that was required, I furnished the language, and he jotted it down. [After this [fashion] we worked two or three or four hours every day for a couple of weeks, and produced a comedy that was good and would act].

By February 1877, Bret Harte and Samuel Clemens had had an extreme falling out with each other over money that Clemens had apparently loaned to Harte and Harte failed to repay. According to Clemens this sum totaled about \$3,000. In a February 27, 1877 letter, Clemens wrote, "I was in a smouldering rage, the whole time, over the precious days & weeks of time which Bret Harte was losing for me..." By June 21, 1877 he was writing vehemently to oppose the proposed appointment of Harte as a diplomatic counsel of the United States:

You do know him; & I think your citizenship lays the duty upon you of doing what you can to prevent the disgrace of literature & the country which would be the infallible result of the appointment of Bret Harte to any responsible post. Wherever he goes his wake is tumultuous with swindled grocers, & with defrauded innocents who have loaned him money. He never pays a debt but by the squeezing of the law. He borrows from all new acquaintances, & repays none. His oath is worth little, his promise nothing at all. He can

lie faster than he can drivel false pathos. He is always steeped in whisky & brandy; he gets up in the night to drink it cold. No man who has ever known him, respects him.

You know that I have befriended this creature for seven years. I am even capable of doing it still—while he stays at home. But I don't want to see him made sent to foreign parts to carry on his depredations. He told me many months ago that he was to have a consulship under Mr. Tilden, but I gave myself no concern about the matter, taking it as a mere after-breakfast lie to whet up his talent for the day's villainies; & besides, I judged that his character was so well known that he would not be able to succeed in his nefarious design. But these newspaper items have an alarming look. Come, now, Howells, do a stroke for the honor of the guild. Put me under oath if you will.

By July 12, 1877, Clemens was still enraged about Harte writing, "It took Bret Harte & me 14 working days (long ones, too) to plot out that play of ours ("Ah Sin",) in skeleton; it took the two of us 8 days to write it after it was plotted out. We didn't trim & polish it at all—& we shall live to repent it, too. It was not my fault; it was wholly that of that natural liar, swindler, bilk, & literary thief, Bret Harte, son of an Albany Jew-[pedlar. I] shall shed no tears if that play should fail, in October. It ought to—I know that pretty well."

The first opening of the play was held in Washington D.C. in May 1877. The original version of the play hasn't survived to come down to us. What exists now is the revised version that Mark Twain prepared for the later New York Broadway premier in late July 1877. The New York World of August 1, 1877 (reprinted in the San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin of August 9<sup>th</sup>) reported after the play appeared in New York that, "It was originally produced at Washington in May last, but it ran only for a short time, for the reason that it was not then a playable play. Since then its authors (Mark Twain chiefly, we believe) have pruned and pared it, and rewritten a great portion of the dialogue, so that in its present shape the characters have to speak the language of real life for the most part, instead of, as before, the pedantic, stilted talk of dead books."

That the revised play was mostly, if not entirely shaped by Mark Twain, rather than by Bret Harte was made clear in a letter that Clemens wrote on August 3, 1877, after the New York Broadway premier, "I have been putting in a deal of hard work on that play in New York, & have left hardly a foot-print of Harte in it anywhere. But it is full of incurable defects: to-wit, Harte's deliberate thefts & plagiarisms, & my own unconscious ones. I don't believe Harte ever had an idea that he came by honestly. He is the most abandoned thief that defiles the earth."

The Washington opening was held at Ford's National Theater. This theater was probably a successor owned by the same John T. Ford who'd owned the Ford's Theater where President Lincoln had been assassinated in 1865. The original Ford's Theater in Washington D.C. had been appropriated by the federal government and didn't see another performance until 1968.

The San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin of May 21, 1877 described the glittering crowd that attended the Washington D.C. premier. Among the luminaries attending was Mrs. Nelly Sartoris, the only daughter of President Ulysses Grant. General William Tecumseh Sherman, famous Civil War leader and then head of the United States Army, was there along with his staff. His sister-in-law also attended, she was the wife of the powerful Republican United States Senator from Ohio, John Sherman. "Near the front sat Senator Bruce of Mississippi and would-be Senator Pinchback of Louisiana, two stylishly-dressed, handsome men, who might be taken anywhere for a pair of wealthy Cubans, such as constantly frequent New York." United States Senator Blanche Bruce, Republican from Mississippi, was the first African American to serve a full-term as a United States senator. Pinkney Pinchback, was the first, and so far only African American Governor of Louisiana, temporarily holding the post for six weeks from 1872 into 1873. In 1873, he'd been

elected as the Republican United States Senator for Louisiana by the slight majority of Republicans that controlled the Louisiana state legislature (United States senators were appointed by their state legislative representatives, not by direct election by voters, until the 17<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1912). Rival Democratic representatives elected their own senator. The dispute became mired in Congress and the bloody end of Reconstruction. By 1877, the Democrats gained a majority in the United States Senate and decided to award the seat to the Democratic candidate.

That two of the most prominent African American politicians in the United States were attending the play was an interesting fact. At the time, Mark Twain was not known as a defender of African Americans, but as a leading satirist and wit who felt very strongly about defending the Chinese. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* had just been released in 1876, but his great statement about the humanity of African Americans, found in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* would not be written and released until 1884. For example, in an issue of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* on July 26, 1873, a cartoon depicted 'the new Heathen Chinees': Twain teaches the Shah (ed. of Persia) the American game of draw poker.

In 1879, knowing that he would soon be replaced by a Democrat, as white supremacists swept electoral offices across the South after the end of Reconstruction, Senator Blanche Bruce would speak out against the "Fifteen Passenger Act," one of the first pieces of anti-Chinese immigration legislation that would pass Congress over the next few decades, saying, "Mr. President, I desire to submit a single remark. Representing as I do a people who but a few years ago were considered essentially disqualified from enjoying the privileges and immunities of American citizenship, and who have been since been so successfully introduced into the body-politic, and having large confidence in the assimilative power of our institutions, I shall vote against the pending bill."

*Ah Sin*, to modern ears and sensibilities, is a horrible blunder of a play. The complete play, and additional addendums by Mark Twain can be found here.

<http://twain.lib.virginia.edu/onstage/playscripts/ahsinhp.html>

The play is a satirical farce. The character of *Ah Sin* is a parody that is pushed so far that he becomes ludicrous. In every scene he enters, he steals everything that isn't nailed down, while talking incessantly in pidgin or made-up Chinese. Typical dialog has him repeatedly saying things like, "You wantee washee-washee." Every single Caucasian character finds a reason to lie, and lie repeatedly, to each other and to Ah Sin, except the completely besotted main character, who remains innocent and clueless. Ah Sin is repeatedly beaten by umbrellas, lady's fans, or whatever else is handy, by the other characters. He engages in comic pratfalls and stunts at every opportunity. In the end it is the cleverness and ultimate goodness of Ah Sin, that not only provides physical evidence (the dialog repeatedly reminds the audience that Chinese can't legally testify in court against whites) that saves the innocent and clueless Caucasian from harm at the hands of a lynch mob. The evidence also convicts the real villain who is about to be lynched himself as a result. Then Ah Sin saves that villain's life by producing the supposed murder victim whose life Ah Sin has secretly saved. That victim has somehow been hidden away for several weeks and completely recovered from near death without anyone else having a clue. The play ends with the improbable scene of all the white miners of the lynch mob cheering Ah Sin, whom they'd heretofore horrendously abused and threatened with a lynching.

The San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin was scathing saying:

So much for the plot of the new play. You see that there is enough of it, such as it is. But when you find that it is not only clothed but piled with "talkee," "talkee," you are made aware that by a sense of extreme fatigue there is too much of it. Life must be very agreeable to us to be willing to take even pictures of it in large quantities. But when the life we see

depicted is not only vulgar but essentially brutal, we should not be called to look upon any more of it than is absolutely necessary. The shouts from the peanut gallery over the coarse puns and the more brutal scenes proved that this play is likely to prove a delight to the portion of the community that would be most easily influenced and most utterly harmed by pictures of just such a life as this. It is not that it is rude only, for rude life may be strong and pure--but that, being rude, it is also depraved. That such modes of life exist on the frontier we are very well aware, but who is to be benefited by their being reproduced on the stage of Eastern cities? They are certainly not edifying--they are not even amusing. Mark Twain is removed by wealth too far above the bread-and-butter struggle to be compelled to build up so coarse a caricature of "Mrs. Malaprop" as "Mrs. Plunkett" shows herself to be, or to wrestle with such toilsome jokes and far-fetched puns as were many of those produced so profusely last evening.

The article writer was perceptive though in seeing that Ah Sin was the true hero of the play, "I am not abusing this play. I am writing of it as I do for the reason that it holds in itself the capacity for such great improvement. As I watched it slowly unfold last evening, I asked, what is its object, and concluded that its crowning purpose was to display 'Ah Sin.' It was written for him--a new type of man in the American fabric, political and social--a creature at once shy and sly, reticent and talkative, cunning and amiable, weak, yet powerful, subtle as air, acute as quicksilver--a servant, a pariah, a thief, yet child of the oldest civilization on our earth--nothing short of absolute genius can depict him as he..."

"So we seemed to see last night in Charles Parsloe [sic], the clown, and promise of the perfect Heathen Chinese. Then why not give us more Ah Sin and less of the bungling story; less cumbersome, coarse people; less vulgarity and more keen wits? Then those dreadful puns! Of all cheap things, what is mentally so cheap as a cheap pun, far-fetched and lugged into dialogue? It is an awful test, one that no mortal can survive more than half a dozen years at the longest to have the reputation of being very funny. Up to that time if sufficiently perennial he may give us fresh flowers of humor and wit; afterward it seems one endless effort to resuscitate the old, and to sustain his reputation."

The Daily Rocky Mountain News of Denver, Colorado also praised Parsloe's depiction of Ah Sin saying:

"Ah Sin," the hero of Bret Harte, comes on, the most complete Mongolian ever born outside the Celestial Kingdom. It seems hardly possible for any white man to make such a perfect Chinaman as Parsloe does; but from felt shoes to pig-tail, he is faultless. The slant eyes, the innocent smile, the child-like sing-song voice and the peculiar gait are all there, and the first sight of him set the audience into roars of laughter. The plot is ingeniously constructed to bring "Ah Sin" in at every scene and step.

Samuel Clemens hadn't attended the Washington opening. A message was read by Charles Parsloe, still in his Ah Sin costume, from Mark Twain saying, "I am on the sick list, and therefore cannot come to Washington, but I have prepared two speeches--one to deliver in the event of the failure of the play, and the other if successful. Please tell me which I shall send. May be better to put it to a vote."

The San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin recorded that the "...immense audience unanimously voted the play a success."

Buoyed by the apparent success of Ah Sin in Washington D.C., Clemens wrote additional dialog for the play for the premier in New York City.

Just before the fourth and concluding act of the New York opening, Samuel Clemens stepped out onto the stage to address the audience. Among the things he said was this, "Whoever sees Mr. Parsloe in this piece sees as good and natural and consistent a Chinaman as he could see in San Francisco. I think his portrayal of the character reaches perfection. The whole purpose of the piece is to afford an opportunity for the illustration of this character. The Chinaman is going to become a very frequent spectacle all over America by and by, and a difficult political problem, too. Therefore, it seems well enough to let the public study him a little on the stage beforehand. The actors, the management and the authors have done their best to begin this course of public instruction effectually this evening."

The New York Times of August 1<sup>st</sup> offered faint praise for the play saying, "The representation of the play called 'Ah Sin' at the Fifth Avenue Theatre yesterday evening afforded frequent gratification to a very large audience. The fact that a good many spectators grew perceptibly weary as the performance approached an end, and the still more significant fact that the audience left the house without making the slightest demonstration of pleasure when the curtain fell upon the last scene, may imply that the piece, as a whole, is scarcely likely to secure a really strong hold upon the favor of the public."

"If Messrs. Harte and Twain had handled all their material as deftly as in the first act, "Ah Sin" would have been a very praiseworthy effort. Although the longest of the four divisions of the play, the first awakens interest and closes with an ingenious surprise. The second act, concluding with an attempt to arrest Ah Sin on a charge of murder, and with the flight of the "vigilantes," who are routed by Ah Sin expectorating water upon them as though he were dampening linen in the Chinese fashion, is tedious, and the third drags sadly. The vicissitudes of a trial before a "border jury" enliven the fourth act, which would round off the piece very neatly if something besides a scene of extravagant joy worthy a burlesque prefaced the fall of the curtain. 'Ah Sin' was capitally acted, last night, and admirably placed upon the stage. Mr. Parsloe's Chinaman could scarcely be excelled in truthfulness to nature and freedom from caricature."

The play soon failed afterwards. Although it is impossible to tell exactly why the play failed to catch on with audiences of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, it may have been that Twain had fallen into the satirist's trap of making the character he wanted the audience to sympathize with so stereotyped, so surrounded by corny and improbable events and jokes, that the audience just grew bored and lost the point of the play.

The only lasting success enjoyed by anyone involved from the play was by Charles Parsloe, who successfully parlayed his yellow-face role into basically the same act for the rest of his life, "After performing Hop Sing in Harte's drama and the title role in Ah Sin, Parsloe played Washee Washee in The Danites. According to his obituary, Parsloe next "toured in 'My Partner.' For 1,300 nights he played the role of Wing Wee [sic], the Chinaman, and his share of the profits amounted to over \$100,000."

In his 1906, autobiography, the still bitter Clemens blamed the entire failure of the play squarely on Bret Harte, saying, "[Once he wrote a play with a perfectly delightful Chinaman in it]—a play which would have succeeded if any one else had written it; but [Harte had earned the enmity of the New York dramatic critics by freely and frequently charging them with being persons who never said a favorable thing about a new play except when the favorable thing was [bought] and paid for beforehand. The critics were waiting for him, and when his own play was put upon the stage they attacked it with [joy,] they abused it and derided it remorselessly. It failed, and Harte believed that the critics were answerable for the failure]. By and by [he proposed that he and I should collaborate in a play in which each of us [should] introduce several characters and handle

them. He came to Hartford and remained with us two weeks]. He was a man who could never persuade himself to do a stroke of work until his credit was gone, and all his money, and the wolf was at his door; then he could sit down and work harder—until temporary relief was secured—than any man I have ever seen."

Ironically, both men are memorialized together in Tuolumne County, California, with the Mark Twain Bret Harte Trail, to commemorate their writings about the California Gold Rush.

<http://www.marktwainproject.org/xtf/view?docId=letters/UCCLo1397.xml;query=Harte;searchAll=;sectionType1=;sectionType2=;sectionType3=;sectionType4=;sectionType5=;style=letter;brand=mtp#1>  
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