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## Mark Twain and May Isabel Fisk: Parallels in Comic Monologues

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May Isabel Fisk, born in New York City, was a popular vaudeville performer in New York, Boston, and London, a minor playwright, and the author and performer of comic monologues in the early 1900s, some of them published in *Harper's Magazine* (Leonard 293). One of her dialect monologues, "Mis' Deborah Has a Visitor," which appeared in the June 1903 issue of *Harper's*, displays many similarities to Mark Twain's "A Story of the Old Ram," the fifty-third chapter in *Roughing It* (1872).

No substantive scholarship exists on Fisk, save Julia Hans' recent article, "Lady Goshen! Here comes a whole troop o' them city boarders': May Isabel Fisk's Dialect Monologues," published in *Studies in American Humor* in 2010. Though forgotten today, in the early 1900s Fisk was known for her satiric monologues, some of which she collected in books—*Monologues* (1903), *The Talking Woman: (Monologues)* (1907), *The Eternal Feminine; Monologues* (1911), and *Monologues and Duologues* (1914). As a testament to Fisk's popularity, Hans notes that "four of her five books went into numerous reprints" (130). Many of Fisk's satiric monologues address issues of concern to women in the early 1900s and voice "women's discontent through a mask of humor at a time when popular writers," Hans writes, "idealized feminine felicity and passivity" (130). In employing the monologue form, Fisk "claim[ed] for women the right to voice antonymous [i.e., of opposite meaning] opinions in a public form" (130). A 1923 advertisement in the *New York Times* touting her book *The Silent Sex* lauded Fisk as the "funniest woman monologist in America."

My focus in this essay is not to reclaim May Isabel Fisk from obscurity but

rather to examine her first dialect monologue, "Mis' Deborah Has a Visitor," which, several years after its original publication in *Harper's* in 1903, was selected and reprinted in the Harper and Brothers 1906 edition of *Mark Twain's Library of Humor*. Issued in three separate volumes—"Men and Things," "Women and Things," and "The Primrose Way"—the expanded *Harper's* edition retained and reprinted about twenty-five percent of the 1888 Charles L. Webster edition of *Mark Twain's Library of Humor*. "Mis' Deborah Has a Visitor" appeared in "The Primrose Way" volume. This three-volume *Harper's* edition added many new authors, including such notable comic contemporaries as Finley Peter Dunne, George Ade, Josephine Daskam Bacon, and May Isabel Fisk, among many others (Blodgett 80). As was true for the first edition of the *Library*, when William Dean Howells and Charles Hopkins Clark, the latter a friend of Twain's and the editor of the Hartford *Courant*, principally decided on what to include and exclude, Mark Twain seems to have played no significant role in the selection process for the Harpers edition (McIntire-Strasburg 19; Blodgett 80).<sup>2</sup> In deferring to Howells's and Clark's judgments regarding the selections of the 1888 edition, Twain, Janice McIntire-Strasburg speculates, "allowed them to do it, submitting his own superior knowledge of what constituted American humor to the taste of Howells and Clark and what they believed would sell to the Eastern reading public" (23). Nor did Mark Twain instigate the new and expanded edition of the *Library*; this was done by Frederick Duneka, the general manager at Harper and Brothers. Burges Johnson was responsible for the actual compilation of contents (Blodgett 80). As Harold Blodgett described the 1906 edition many years ago, it "is not so much a second edition as it is a new compilation, made entirely this time entirely without the assistance of the man who gave his name the title" and should "have been accurately designated . . . as "The Harper Library of Humor" (80). In fact, Burges Johnson, the compiler, has verified that Twain had no involvement in the selection process (9). Johnson also reports that he was invited by newspaper cartoonists to a dinner honoring Twain at Reisenweber's in New York City, and that while Twain cursed him "with astonishing thoroughness" when he discovered the young man was editor of the *Harper's* edition, before their meeting ended Twain had forgiven him (9).

How well May Isabel Fisk may have known Mark Twain is nebulous. Still,

she was acquainted with Twain well enough to be invited to his seventieth birthday at Delmonico's in New York City, on December 6, 1905. Fisk was listed in a *New York Times* article among the one hundred and seventy guests in attendance, including well-known writers of the time such as William Dean Howells, Charles W. Chesnutt, Willa Cather, Mary W. Freeman, Finley Peter Dunne, and Owen Wister ("Celebrate Mark Twain's Seventieth Birthday"). Like Twain, Fisk was a Harper's author; eleven of her fictional monologues appeared in *Harper's Magazine* between June 1903 and October 1907 (<http://harpers.org/subjects/MayIsabelFisk>), and Harpers also published several of her book collections of monologues. Interestingly, Twain had two of Fisk's books in his library—*Monologues* (1903) and *The Talking Woman (Monologues)* (1907)—though it is unknown whether or not he read either (Gribben 232).

As I hope to show, focusing on internal evidence, Fisk was probably familiar with Twain's "The Story of the Old Ram," either the rambling monologue sketch from Chapter 53 of *Roughing It* or a modified form of the tale Twain recited in his lectures. Fred Lorch, who has written authoritatively on Twain's lecture tours, points out that "His Grandfather's Old Ram," as Twain usually referred to the story, was one of the printed texts he transformed for the platform because it exhibited "flexible talk" and was better "suited to platform reading" (156. 157). Whether as the printed sketch or the variation Twain adapted for his lectures, there are facets of Fisk's "Mis' Deborah Has a Visitor: A Monologue" that closely resemble Twain's famous story.<sup>1</sup>

While Julia Hans generally observes that Fisk in her dialect monologues employs comic strategies similar to those used by the antebellum Southern frontier humorists, this claim is tenuous, and given the nature and content of this genre and Fisk's urban background, direct familiarity seems highly unlikely (131–32). Admittedly, in her dialect monologues, Fisk could have come across conventions of Southern frontier humor in some of the works of Mark Twain, most notably in the sketches in his 1872 travel book, *Roughing It*. Even so, there is little chance she read and was directly influenced by the antebellum Southern humorists. Mark Twain's early writings exhibit the rustic dialect, tall-tale-ish narrative in a framework, unusual and free-wheeling characters, hyperbolic visual descriptions, and peculiar oddities of common folk --all features that represent Twain's legacy from the South's antebellum humorists.

Twain's "The Story of the Old Ram" is a rambling dialect monologue, a shaggy dog story (actually a series of mostly unrelated anecdotes) what James Busskohl calls an "incoherent series of grotesqueries" (183), told unconsciously within a framework by a drunk miner named Jim Blaine and featuring a gallery of bizarre characters, most of whom he apparently knows. Jim, whose "face was round, red, and very serious" (Twain 361), employs the deadpan, which, Louis J. Budd points out, "is the most telling way to put across a joke: it holds off the listener's anticipatory smile, relaxing the psychic-physical tensions that the punch line should release suddenly" (476). In addition, Jim follows the manner of improvisation with "wildly colorful detours and stream-of-consciousness segues" (Wonham 363). Twain describes both strategies in "How to Tell a Story" (1895), where he distinguishes between the comic and humorous story. The latter, he notes, "may be spun out to great length, and may wander around as much as it pleases, and arrive nowhere in particular. . . . The humorous story is told gravely; the teller does his best to conceal the fact that he even dimly respects that here is anything funny about it" (391). Twain designates the humorous story as a national phenomenon, indicating that "to string incongruities and absurdities together in a wandering and sometimes purposeless way, and seem innocently unaware that they are absurdities, is the basis of the American art" (394). And this precisely describes the manner of Jim Blaine's embedded series of anecdotes. Moreover, the authorial narrator becomes the victim of a hoax, having been told by "the boys," as he notes in the introductory frame, that the only way to hear the story about Jim Blaine's grandfather's old ram is to wait until Blaine is drunk.

Fisk's "Mis' Deborah Has a Visitor," like Twain's "The Story of the Old Ram," is an extended and meandering dialect monologue, the speaker being Miss Deborah, a rural woman and a loquacious busybody who jabbars incessantly about the quirky behavior of her neighbors. In contrast to Twain's story, which has several listeners—the boys who set up the narrator for the hoax as well as the authorial narrator—Fisk's "Mis' Deborah" has only one auditor—Sarah Jane—a neighbor woman who unexpectedly stops at Deborah's house to see her. Unlike "Old Ram," the frame of Fisk's story is much shorter, concentrating exclusively on Miss Deborah. In fact, Fisk's frame serves a more limited purpose than Twain's, that being to set the scene and place for Miss Deborah's

subsequent sustained verbal ramblings: “*Mis’ Deborah is seated by a table in her kitchen. Her elbow rests on the table, and her hand is pressed to her cheek as though in pain. A knock is heard*” (Fisk 156). Deborah’s opening words have nothing whatsoever to do with the series of anecdotes she subsequently recounts; instead, she announces: “I’m feelin’ pore—it’s the nooroligy again” (156). Though admitting she is not well and her memory fails her sometimes, still Deborah seems to have more conscious control of what she says and how she feels and is more outspoken and opinionated than Twain’s Jim Blaine, who, at the time he begins the story of his grandfather’s old ram (a story he never finishes), the authorial narrator notes is drunk. The intoxicated Blaine and neuralgic Miss Deborah are meanderers, whose seemingly random observations actually contain associational cues, which spark their memories of the various characters and events they describe.

The most significant parallel between “Old Ram” and “Mis’ Deborah” is the close similarity in details as well as comical strategy in the treatment of female rustic characters who sport glass eyeballs. In “Old Ram” Jim Blaine recounts an anecdote about Miss Wagner, to whom Miss Jefferson loans her glass eyeball because Miss Wagner “hadn’t any to receive company in.” Given her lack of certain natural body parts—an eye, a leg, and fashionable hair—Miss Wagner apparently feels insecure in certain social situations. “Considerable on the borrow” (Twain 364), as Jim puts it, Miss Wagner vainly covers her defects with the false parts belonging to others, the glass eyeball being the part Twain makes the centerpiece for the anecdote about her character. What follows is a combination of farcical and crude details that creates an amusingly outlandish spectacle of Miss Wagner and her hilarious mishaps with her ill-fitting and erratic glass eyeball:

[I]t [the eyeball] warn’t big enough, and when Miss Wagner warn’t noticing, it would get twisted around in the socket, and look up, maybe, or out to one side, and every which way, while t’other one was looking as straight as a spy-glass. . . .

She was always dropping it out, and turning up her old dead-light on the company empty, and making them oncomfortable, becuz *she* never could tell when it hopped out, being blind on that side, you see. [Somebody would tell her,] “Your game eye has fetched loose, Miss Wagner dear”—and then all

of them would have to sit and wait till she jammed it in again—wrong side before, as a general thing, and green as a bird's egg, being a bashful cretur and easy sot back before the company. (Twain 363–364)

A compound of sight gags accentuated by slapstick, Blaine's anecdote about Miss Wagner's glass eyeball is strikingly incongruous and exaggerated. The key elements that contribute to the cumulative humorous effect are these: Miss Wagner's social pretentiousness as her reason for wearing the glass eyeball, the size of the glass eyeball (it is not big enough to fit in Miss Wagner's eye socket), the eerie appearance it creates when she wears it, the eyeball always dropping out unexpectedly and Miss Wagner's lack of awareness when this happens, her replacing the eyeball with the wrong side facing out, and her real eye and the artificial one not having matching colors. These comic ingredients are important because many of them are repeated and employed similarly in Fisk's anecdote about Miss Dimmick and her glass eyeball in "Mis' Deborah's Has a Visitor."

Indeed, the best indication that May Isabel Fisk is traversing a path Mark Twain blazed first in "The Story of the Old Ram" is her analogous selection of elements and treatment of the artificial eyeball script in featuring Miss Dimmick in "Mis' Deborah Has a Visitor." In describing Miss Dimmick's new artificial eyeball and the ludicrous complications she has with it, Deborah relates to her listener, Sarah Jane: "Well, her sister's husband's nephew works in what you call an optician's store—somethin' to do with eyes; and he said he could pick her out a dretful nice eye that could do everythin' but see. Well, the eye come, but it didn't seem to fit real well—sorter small; but she was that proud of it she was set she'd wear it ter Sunday meetin,' whether or no. Durin' the hymn she got singin' pretty hard, and sez right then, "Pride goeth before a fall." Well, she must have bulged herself, for, flip! out it rolled onto the floor, and her little niece stepped on it and squashed it ter flinders" (Fisk 158). Like Twain's Miss Wagner, Miss Dimmick wears the artificial eye, which, too small for her eye socket, represents a visible emblem of her desire for social acceptance and prominence in the rustic community in which she lives. After all, for Miss Dimmick, what principally matters is a proper and dignified appearance, which to her means substituting an artificial eye for the real one she lacks, thereby creating for her a seemingly comfortable presence in community social circles. Given her social pretentiousness, Miss Dimmick

predictably secures a new eyeball, though it does not match her natural one, when her original one is “squashed . . . ter flinders,” for, as Deborah interjects, “she was bound to have it fer the Dobbins christenin” (Fisk 158). But this one (black in color rather than blue), which neither Miss Deborah nor the others in the community believe Miss Dimmick will wear, she dons anyway, Deborah noting her friend is “so set on style” (158). Her differently colored eyes are not only a weird mismatch but the new glass eyeball, which fits no better than her first one did, “swum right down her face and onto the floor” (158) when she starts to cry at the christening. Adding to her risible misfortune, a dog swallows the loose eyeball, and Miss Dimmick insists that the dog be killed so she can retrieve it.

In treating an ill-fitting glass eyeball, both Twain and Fisk depict a visually imaginable travesty, one that undermines the readers' expectations regarding social grace and behavior and that employs brazen physical comedy to create a hilariously uninhibited impression. Whereas Twain uses the glass eyeball as a prop to create an absurd demonstration of the grotesque reversal of expectation, one intended primarily to entertain, Fisk seems to employ glass eyeball hijinks as a vehicle for social commentary, every detail mocking a pretentious woman whose intent to appear fashionable backfires at her expense. Always judgmental and displaying a strong social consciousness, Fisk's raconteur Miss Deborah, through both her word choice and tone, makes her satiric treatment of Miss Dimmick's mishaps with her capricious artificial eyeball readily obvious. Another explanation for the differing authorial purposes might be the contrasts between men's and women's humor in nineteenth-century America. As anyone familiar with nineteenth-century humor is aware, one of the most prominent forms among men the tall tale, a genre, Nancy Walker observes, that “was suited to the lives and/or imaginations of men” (*Agelaste* 116). There is a notable exception, however. Frances Miriam Whicher authored numerous newspaper columns and books, using the popular pseudonym, the Widow Bedott. Employing the Widow Bedott persona, Whicher wrote rambling dialectic accounts of her family and neighbors, many collected in the *Widow Bedott Papers* (1856) that anticipate both the narrative manner and subject matter of Jim Blaine's meandering account in Twain's “Old Ram.” But generally, as Walker points out, women “did not normally inhabit the environments



where such stories take place: mining camps, riverboats, hunting trips” (*Very Serious Thing* 48). Jim Blaine’s account of Miss Wagner and her glass eyeball is a modified tall tale, accentuating the ridiculous but lacking the “outrageous boasting” so common to the oral tradition of the frontier (Walker, *Agelaste* 116). Jim, an old miner, in fact, does not ever let on that he is spinning a series of tall yarns or that there is anything at all funny about them. Being drunk enables him to introduce extemporaneously a gallery of bizarre characters and to recount freely and unconsciously a series of random, preposterous events but in so doing to withhold any editorial judgment. In making social commentary her emphasis in the Miss Dimmick episode, Fisk through Miss Deborah exposes human folly and weakness, employing the glass eyeball as a tool to lay bare Dimmick’s conspicuous social affectation. Moreover, Fisk does this within a venue suited to women’s humor. Noting that the principal site of American women’s humor was the domestic scene, Nancy Walker explains that the “scope” tends to be, not the outdoor frontier world associated with the tall tale, but the “more narrowly confined” and private places that have “far more to do with neighbors, pies, . . . child-rearing . . . the family, male/female relations, church and social groups” (*Agelaste* 116). Indeed the world of Fisk’s Miss Dimmick is closely tied to church activities, one of the familiar and acceptable venues for American female involvement at the time. Added to this, the key focus of the satire is on Miss Dimmick herself, and Fisk employs the gossipy Miss Deborah, the author’s opinionative arbiter of respectable behavior, as her mouthpiece.

In addition to showcasing the eccentric and outlandish Miss Wagner and Miss Dimmick and their hijinks with glass eyeballs, both “Old Ram” and “Miss Deborah” feature other amusing anecdotes about rural characters notable for idiosyncratic attitudes and behavior. Both Twain’s Jim Blaine and Fisk’s Miss Deborah describe these characters in such detail that the reader has no trouble creating mental images and impressions of them. According to Louis J. Budd, Mark Twain employed visual humor frequently in his writing. “Like every attractive writer (and talker), Twain,” Budd observes, “—from his personal letters to novels and especially travel books—evokes persons and events that raise a smile or chuckle when visualized mentally” (471). May Isabel Fisk in “Miss Deborah” similarly relies on visual details, sometimes unexpected

and bizarre ones, to precipitate humor. Julia Hans notes that Fisk employs “sight gags,” “funny visual image[s] that the monologist supplies through her speech alone,” these sight gags creatively “expand[ing] the bounds of the comic monologue, taking it into the realm of visual comedy through miming” (134). Every verbal anecdote of Jim Blaine and of Miss Deborah centers on incongruous and sometimes offbeat visual images, many embellished to the point of the preposterous.

In accentuating the visual to generate humor in “Old Ram” and “Mis’ Deborah,” Twain and Fisk feature similar characters, scenes, and activities. Drinking to excess is one such parallel, though Twain depends significantly on slapstick whereas Fisk’s exposes hypocrisy. In “Old Ram,” Jim Blaine matter of factly tells about a man named Filkins, the suitor of Sarah Wilkerson. Filkins not only shows up unexpectedly at a prayer meeting intoxicated, “hooraying for Nixon, becuz he thought it was a primary,” but also is thrown out the church window by deacon Ferguson, “lit[ting] on old Miss Jefferson’s head, poor old filly” (Twain 362–363). The drunken Blaine delivers a perfectly timed and unexpected incongruity as a farcical climax. In Fisk’s story, Miss Deborah, who is suffering from neuralgia, describes another neuralgic—Ephraim Phipps—Miss Phipps’s “husband’s brother—sech a nice man, strictly temperance and a good provider” who, as it turns out is hardly a teetotaler:

Well, after he went to the city he got the nooroligy so bad he took on dretful. Mis’ Phipps says while she was down there visitin’ his folks she woke up very late one night—’bout ten o’clock—and heard a kind of moanin’ sound. Course she thought it must be burglars, at that hour, and up she got to an’ hunt. Well, she went out to what they call the dinin’ room (they have a sep’rate room to eat in—the kitchen ain’t good enough fer ’em). There was Ephraim a-drinkin’ out of a black bottle. He said it was his nooroligy had tuck him so bad again, and their hired girl had et up all the pork, and so he had jest found this med’cine he’d had put away in a trunk. He was sufferin’ awful, Mis’ Phipps said; he could hardly stan’ up. She says he was tuck with a spell ‘most ev’ry night while she was there. Terrible sad. (Fisk 156)

What Miss Deborah does not directly admit in her semi-deadpan account and seems to be ignorant of is that Ephraim has been imbibing whiskey, and his difficulty in standing can be attributed to his excessive drinking. In the

*Harper's Magazine* version of the story, there is even an accompanying illustration suggestively revealing Ephraim's unsteadiness after drinking too much from the black bottle. Not only is this scene visually comical, but also it exposes Ephraim's covert drinking (he gives the excuse that he is taking medicine for his neuralgia) and hypocrisy. Since the perceptive reader sees beneath the façade to the reality of the scene, the ridiculousness of the occasion, although escaping both Miss Phipps and Miss Deborah, generates laughter, the result of audience superiority.

Disclosing social pretention provides another shared connection between "Old Ram" and "Mis' Deborah." In "Old Ram" Jim Blaine's elaborate portrait of Miss Sarah Wagner creates an amusing caricature and burlesques the vanity of a woman too much consumed with appearances. An obsessive borrower (but not of items one might normally expect), Miss Wagner often obtains other women's false body parts for social occasions. Furthermore, she is excessively pretentious, always hoping to create the impression of what in actuality she is not, donning Miss Jefferson's glass eyeball as well as Miss Higgins's wooden leg and Miss Jacops's wig.

While not as extreme as the eccentricities of Miss Wagner's social affectations in Twain's "Old Ram," which the inebriated Jim Blaine recounts unconsciously, Fisk employs Miss Deborah to expose pretension more deliberately and opinionatively. In fact, Miss Deborah tends to say what is on her mind. She is blatantly judgmental of young Susie Tucker, who, after visiting the city, has returned to her rural neighborhood sporting social airs. Using Miss Deborah as a mouthpiece, Fisk burlesques Susie's recently acquired social pretensions, carrying them to the point of ridiculousness in Susie and her accommodating parents but at the same time unwittingly disclosing her own provincialism and ignorance.

Well, what do you think o' Susie Tucker sence she come back from visitin' her city kin? Sech airs! I can't understand Anne Tucker's lettin' her go so. Soon's Susie got home, nothin' would do but her pa'd got ter buy her a real hand painted picter ter go in their best room. . . . I knew you'd think 'twas terrible. But that ain't all—jest wait. They've got a store carpet for the settin'-room! They're awful set up 'bout it. Anne took me in ter show me, and, land sakes! she wouldn't open the blinds till she spread *The Farmer's Guide* all over the floor

so's the sun couldn't tech it for a minnit. . . . Yes, 'twas han'some—sorter dark plum color with wreaths of yeller roses on it. That ain't all yet. Miss Susie had to have two books and a red plush album to go on their marble-top centre-table. Her pa hitched hitched right up and went up-street and jest told 'em he wanted two of the best books in the shop ter go on their table in the parlor. . . . One of 'em I never heard of before—'bout a man called Dant—D-a-n-t-e. It's all 'bout the internal regions and hell-fire. I don't think it's 't all the proper kind o' book to have in the house with a young girl 'round; but they seemed set a sight o' store by it at the book place. (156–157)

Twain and Fisk also similarly address the belief of special providences of some of the characters they describe. In “Old Ram” the most telling instance of providential causation that Jim Blaine recounts in his monologue-- what Henry Nash Smith aptly labels a “caricature of the doctrine of special providences” (66–67)—occurs when an Irish hod-carrier, toting bricks, falls from the scaffolding and injures Jim's Uncle Lem. Though most people would see this as an unfortunate accident, Blaine unequivocally interprets it as an act of divine Providence: “If he hadn't been there the Irishman would have been killed. Nobody can ever make me believe anything different from that. Uncle Lem's dog was there. Why didn't the Irishman fall on the dog? Becuz the dog would a seen him a coming and stood from under. That's the reason the dog warn't appinted. A dog can't be depended on to carry out a special providence. Mark my words it was a put-up thing” (Twain 366). Blaine 's narrowly dogmatic interpretation of the cause of Uncle Lem's misfortune as a providential act does not offend as much as it amuses. Blaine carries the incident to the extreme, accounting for it as being divine Providence, which, in his liquor-affected mind, is the only way to justify such a happening. The same is true when Blaine mentions a missionary who was “et up by the savages” (Twain 365). According to Blaine's casual but bizarre explanation of the missionary's death, it served a purpose: “Everything that people can't understand and don't see the reason of does good if you only hold on and give it a fair shake; Prov'dence don't fire no blank ca'tridges. . . . That there missionary's substance, unbeknowns to himself, actu'ly converted every last one of them heathens that took a chance at the barbecue. Nothing ever fetched them but that. Don't tell me it was an accident that he was biled.

There ain't no such a thing as an accident" (Twain 366).

Though not apparently under the influence of any mind-altering substances (as was Jim Blaine), Miss Deborah also interprets certain happenings as being providentially induced, exaggerating what she presents to create an amusing, outlandish impression as in her tall-tale-ish description of the miraculous transformation of young Si Watkins' nose. As she tells her auditor Sarah Jane, "Yer remember his nose always bein' bent ter one side, 'count o' that kick he got from the ox he was yokin'? Talk' bout the unscrutable workins' o' Providence! Yer won't b'lieve it, but las' week that same ox kicked him t'other side o' the nose, an' now it's straight again's ever. Yer'd never know it hed been teched, 'cept it trembles a little when he stands in a draught" (Fisk 157). One of the interesting things about the way Fisk presents this incredible incident is that, like Jim Blaine, Miss Deborah maintains a deadpan demeanor, never giving any indication in her manner of delivery that her account seems ludicrous or bizarre. A second point is that Fisk ventures into territory usually not traversed by American women humorists: the realm of the tall tale, a mode incompatible to an American woman's circumscribed world and experience in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Furthermore, the expectations of genteel society of this era "dictated that women's writing be characterized by a delicacy of language and subject matter to which the tall tale did not conform" (Walker, *Very Serious Thing* 48).

Another close similarity between "Old Ram" and "Miss Deborah" is that Twain and Fisk both exploit the macabre. The incident in "Old Ram" that Jim relates about Robbins' dying spell when everyone, including the coffin peddler Jacops, "a ratty old buzzard" who "used to go roosting around where people was sick" (Twain 364), is one of the tale's "macabre flourishes" (Smith 67). On one occasion when Robbins was dying or supposedly dying (the first time he "got well" and the peddler did not get to sell him a coffin), Robbins buys a coffin from Jacops for ten dollars. According to the terms of the agreement, should Robbins not die, Jacops would have to pay back not only the cost of the coffin but an additional twenty-five dollars "if Robbins didn't like the coffin after he's tried it" (Twain 365). As Jim humorously relates when Robbins supposedly dies: "At the funeral he burst off the lid and riz up in his shroud and told the parson to let up on the performances, becuz he could not stand

such a coffin as that. You see he had been in a trance once before, when he was young, and he took the chances on another, cal'ulating that if he made the trip it was money in his pocket, and if he missed fire he couldn't lose a cent. And by George he sued Jacops for the rhino and got judgment; and he set up the coffin in his back parlor and said he 'lowed to take his time, now" (Twain 365).

While one would not be surprised to find such a hyperbolized account in the work of Mark Twain or the tales and sketches of his antebellum southern frontier humor forebears, conversely a reader would not expect to encounter death spells or trances carried to a ridiculous extreme in a text authored by an American female humorist of the early 1900s. But May Isabel Fisk does include such a scene in "Miss Deborah." Assuming a pose of uncertainty regarding the exact day when the dying spells of Si Watkins occurred, Si, the father of young Si who experienced a providential straightening of his nose, Miss Deborah cannot initially recall if it took place on a Tuesday or Wednesday. Recollecting this memory just after she had disclosed her own provincial narrow-mindedness in condemning Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Deborah shares Si's dying spell with her auditor Sarah Jane, whom she bluntly criticizes for "never . . . seem[ing] to know nothin'" (Fisk 157): "Si'd gone up ter bed enjoyin' the same pore health he always does. . . . Well, Mis' Lattimer said he had a light supper—only six flannen cakes and some fried pork and two cups o' coffee and a few fried cakes. He hadn't had much of an app'tite lately, and he couldn't eat hearty 'cept he was hungry. He said as he went out to feed the chickens, he felt a sorter weight on his chest. "Si said he went up ter bed 'bout dark, and pretty soon he was tuck with the worst spell of dyin' he ever had. . . . Die? No. I won't say they wished he would, but it's pretty hard ter have a man o' his years up an' dyin' ev'ry now and then 'thout its ever comin' ter nothin'" (Fisk 157). Unlike Jim Blaine's graphic account of Robbins's dying spells in "Old Ram," presented in sufficient visual detail for the reader actually to imagine the idiotic scene, Miss Deborah draws more attention to herself—or rather her matter-of-fact manner of ironically insinuating that Si's overeating likely precipitated his death trance. Moreover, she unexpectedly closes the description of Si with a comically callous nub, stating "it's pretty hard ter have a man o' his years up an' dyin' ev'ry now and then 'thout its ever comin' ter nothin'" (157). Whereas Mark Twain accentuates the preposterous by means of Jim

Blaine's visual vernacular, May Fisk, through Deborah's unexpected comment reflecting her flippant indifference to Si's dying spell, transforms a potentially serious moment into a transgressive and darkly risible one.

Another connection between "Old Ram" and "Miss Deborah" is that both Twain and Fisk undermine the typically reserved and sacred associations of the funeral. Twain's deviation from the expected norm of what a funeral is supposed to be is more grotesquely tall-tale-ish and audaciously irreverent than Fisk's funeral account In "Mis' Deborah," which has a more noticeable socio-critical thrust. The funeral in "Old Ram" is that of William Wheeler, who died when he "got nipped by the machinery in a carpet factory and went through in less than a quarter of a minute" (Twain 292). Jim Blaine does not give his auditors the gruesome details of Wheeler's unfortunate accident (Blaine in his drunkenness is getting drowsy and slurring his words), and the points he does share of the funeral are astonishing and exaggerated to such incongruous extremes that they tend to amuse rather than horrify. Wheeler's widow, we are told, "bought the carpet that had his remains wove in [fourteen yards of material], and people come a hundred mile to 'tend the funeral" (Twain 367). The rest of the funeral scene abruptly ends as Jim's description trails off into an anticlimax, Jim falling asleep, the consequence of his drunkenness.

Aunt Liza's funeral in "Mis' Deborah" is not carried to the grotesque lengths that Jim Blaine takes William Wheeler's. In keeping with her manner of benign or "genial" humor (Hans 133), Fisk does not hyperbolize Liza's funeral to accentuate ridiculousness. Rather, she emphasizes Deborah's self-righteous view of the funeral arrangements, having her point out: "'twas a shameful display o' money" (Fisk 158). One thing that bothers Miss Deborah is the extravagance of Aunt Liza's coffin with "silver handles" "marked with the gentleman's name that made 'em—"Sterling" (Fisk 159) which, in her view, is unnecessarily gaudy and pretentious. Unlike Jim Blaine who, because of his drunkenness at the time he is recounting William Wheeler's funeral, inadvertently rattles off a barrage of ludicrously stark, incongruous details, Miss Deborah is more restrained and deliberate in what she says and also more noticeably ridiculed for her smug and tasteless disclosures about the deceased. What Deborah says and how she feels belittle her character and detract somewhat from the humor of the physical scene she describes. For example, in her description of the corpse

of Aunt Liza, Miss Deborah's attitude, which is curt and malicious, seems to create the dominant impression:

I say it was sinful, her bein' all tricked out an' looked so gay at her own funeral. Plain black was good enough while she was alive—and bein' dressed up as though she was goin' ter a party! . . . Well, yes, Sarah Jane, there is some truth in that—it was her own party, in a way. And what do yer think of their takin' the glass cover off the wax flowers? Jest ter show money wa'nt no object ter *them!* They didn't care, like common folks, if they did get dust on 'em. If that ain't temptin' Providence! Yer noticed the corpse had on that red carnelian ring? I think you'll be s'prised when I tell you 'bout that. Well, the day before she went, she divided up all her things and give 'em away. There was some dissatisfaction, I b'lieve. I think myself t'would have been more 'proprate to have given little Mary Ellen her stuffed parrot, an' Mis' Babcock her best black silk. 'ceptin' vicy versey. But you know she always was sot. Well, when it come to that carnelian ring, she said she'd given up ev'rything else but that ring, and that she was goin' ter take with her! (Fisk 159)

While it seems clear Aunt Liza was eccentric, supercilious, and probably even irritating when alive, the funeral scene does not emphasize the comic and visual incongruities that Fisk employs elsewhere so effectively in other sections of the monologue. Instead, Fisk ridicules Miss Deborah's narrowly dogmatic views about what is proper at a lady's funeral. In doing this, she not only exposes Aunt Liza's and her family's conceit but also Miss Deborah's ignorance and narrow-mindedness. In condemning Aunt Liza's family for purchasing a showy coffin with sterling silver handles as a needless and "shameful display o' money" (Fisk 158), Miss Deborah becomes an object of Fisk's satire in erroneously thinking that the "Sterling" name on them refers to the manufacturer. The reader can laugh at Miss Deborah's expense, feeling comfortably superior at such moments because we know and understand what Miss Deborah does not.

Extensive internal evidence in "Mis' Deborah Has A Visitor: A Monologue" suggests that Fisk may have read "The Story of the Old Ram" or even attended a lecture where Mark Twain recounted the story or a variation of it. Parallels between "The Old Ram" and "Mis' Deborah" abound. These include dialect narrators who recount extended and uninterrupted monologues about unusual rustic characters, closely comparable subjects (drinking and drunkenness,



providential occurrences, dying spells, amusing funeral scenes, and women and their capricious glass eyeballs), and like comic devices and strategies. One key difference, however, is that Fisk employs her dialect speaker Miss Deborah as a conscious moral voice, a character disdainful of her neighbors for their questionable and quirky behavior and/or poor judgment. In this capacity, Miss Deborah, as Fisk's narrative persona, functions to make sure the reader does not lose sight of her satiric agenda in the story. While May Isabel Fisk's dialect monologue lacks the inventiveness and vitality of Twain's "The Story of the Old Ram," it nevertheless represents an American female humorist's attempt, conscious or otherwise, to enter a similar literary terrain and in so doing to employ comedic conventions that Mark Twain had popularized first.

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