

Vol. 4 No. 1 Spring 2025

# PIETAS

A Journal of Tradition, Place, and Things Divine



## Feature Articles

Love and Fear in Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*  
by Lewis Fallis

Old Rome versus New Rome:  
Unionist Discourse between the Thirteenth and Fifteenth Centuries  
by Charles C. Yost

Trewest Tricherie and the Corsedest Kyrk:  
Dichotomy in the Fallen World of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*  
by Aaron Thurow

The Counterrevolutionary Thought of C. S. Lewis  
by Joshua Paladino

## Book Reviews

Thomas P. Harmon's *The Universal Way of Salvation in the Thought of Augustine*  
David Beer

Bernard J. Dobski's *Mark Twain's Joan of Ark: Political Wisdom,  
Divine Justice, and the Origins of Modernity*  
Allen Mendenhall

David Hein's *Teaching the Virtues*  
Kevin Slack

David Rieff's *Desire and Fate*  
William Batchelder

## The Satirist and the Saint

Allen Mendenhall

Review: *Mark Twain's Joan of Ark: Political Wisdom, Divine Justice, and the Origins of Modernity* by Bernard J. Dobski (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024). 343 pp. Kindle, \$129.99; Hardcover, \$115.51.

It may seem extraordinary even to the discerning observer of American letters that Samuel Clemens, that inveterate satirist of the Mississippi, should have harbored such profound reverence for the Maid of Orleans—Joan of Arc—that he considered his pseudonymous work on her life his finest literary achievement. The paradox is positively delicious: that the American humorist celebrated for his caustic mockery of religious pretension should prostrate himself before the altar of a medieval Catholic saint.

Twain, with characteristic narrative ingenuity, employs the literary device of a fictional translator, one Jean François Alden, who presents to us the memoirs of Louis de Conte, Joan's page and secretary. This de Conte—a fictional construct of impressive verisimilitude—purports to offer his eyewitness account as Joan's childhood friend and later confidant during her meteoric rise and tragic immolation.

The structural conceit is rather brilliant in its execution. By framing the narrative through the eyes of de Conte, an octogenarian reflecting upon events of his youth, Twain achieves both intimate proximity to his subject and the nostalgic distance of retrospection. This literary legerdemain permits him to present Joan with a worshipful admiration that might have seemed cloying had it emanated directly from the pen of the author of *Huckleberry Finn*.

Twain's Joan emerges not merely as a historical personage but as an embodiment of transcendent virtue—a depiction that stands in marked contrast to the sentimentalism and naturalistic skepticism one associates with the American literary tradition of his era. Indeed, one detects in this work a fascinating tension between Twain's habitual American individualism and his evident capitulation to a medieval, hierarchical worldview in which divine providence manifests through chosen vessels.

The book divides itself into three acts of Joan's brief but incandescent life: her pastoral beginnings in Domrémy, her martial triumphs culminating in the coronation of Charles VII,

and her betrayal and martyrdom. Throughout these episodes, Twain's prose achieves a gravity and solemnity that one would scarcely have anticipated from his other works.

That Twain should have labored twelve years on this text, researched it with scholarly diligence, and published it initially as an anonymous serial speaks volumes about his personal investment in this most Catholic of subjects. One cannot help but conclude that in the pious peasant girl of Domrémy, executed before her twentieth year, Twain discovered a moral purity that served as a counterpoint to the venality and corruption that so often provoked his satirical ire.

The preceding backdrop proves indispensable should we wish to embark upon a judicious examination of Bernard J. Dobski's newly minted scholarly offering, *Mark Twain's Joan of Arc*, which announces its ambitious scope through the rather portentous subtitle: "Political Wisdom, Divine Justice, and the Origins of Modernity." The volume is part of Palgrave Macmillan's evidently aspirational series dedicated to "Recovering Political Philosophy"—a designation that prompts a certain raised eyebrow when one contemplates the inclusion of Twain within its purview. Indeed, the spectacle of Twain conscripted into the ranks of political philosophers occasions mild surprise, given that our Mississippi bard has traditionally been labeled as anything but a systematic political theorist.

The juxtaposition is, on reflection, quite marvelous: the raffish humorist and chronicler of riverboat America, whose pen typically dripped with satirical acid rather than metaphysical speculation, now enshrined alongside canonical political thinkers. One hesitates to imagine Twain's own sardonic reaction to finding himself thus elevated to the pantheon of political philosophy, he who so delighted in deflating the pretensions of the academically self-important. Yet Dobski's project suggests heretofore unplumbed depths in Twain's recounting of Joan—depths that resonate with significant implications for our understanding of political modernity.

Incorporating this text within such a scholarly enterprise invites us to reconsider our received understanding of Twain's corpus and intellectual concerns. If Dobski's analysis proves persuasive, we might be compelled to reassess the conventional wisdom regarding Twain's place in the American literary firmament—no longer merely as the frontier wit and social critic but as a contributor of substance to our understanding of politics, justice, and the seismic shift from medieval to modern conceptions of authority.

## THE SATIRIST AND THE SAINT: A REVIEW OF *MARK TWAIN'S JOAN OF ARK*

In Dobski's analysis, Twain's portrayal of Joan of Arc transcends mere historical biography to become a profound meditation on the transition from medieval to modern consciousness. His interpretation positions Twain's work as far more philosophically important than commonly acknowledged, suggesting that *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc* may indeed represent the author's most intellectually consequential achievement.

At the core of Dobski's argument lies the assertion that "Twain, in dramatically portraying the emergence of modernity out of the Middle Ages, prepares his audience to adopt an older, pre-modern and pre-Christian conception of human freedom, one that has its roots in a sustained reflection on the soul's concern for justice" (1). This claim represents a remarkable intellectual pivot, positing that Twain's Joan facilitates a return to certain classical conceptions of liberty even while heralding modernism's dawn.

The work addresses one of the perennial tensions in Twain's literary body: the question of determinism versus moral agency. As Dobski observes, "Twain's interest in Joan gets at the heart of his interest in the tension between the conditions for moral agency and the evidence for psychological and material determinism, a tension that enlivens the bulk of Twain's *oeuvre*" (2). Joan herself becomes the crucial test case for Twain's supposed determinism, her extraordinary capabilities seemingly beyond environmental conditioning.

What results from Dobski's reading is a Joan who functions as a quasi-Machiavellian figure—a proto-modern political actor who deftly manipulates the medieval institutions she ostensibly serves. In this construal, "Joan's political and military leadership are informed by her marvelous study of human nature. Her uncanny powers of discernment allow her to read and understand the passions that inspire men and women to perform great acts of sacrificial devotion" (30). Through these talents, she effectively undermines the old medieval order while appearing to defend it.

The implications are substantial: "*Personal Recollections* presents Joan of Arc as the founder of modern France, and by virtue of that, in Twain's treatment, the very founder of modernity in the West" (30). This Joan becomes "a Machiavellian prince *avant la lettre*" (30), who initiates regime change by "intentionally exploiting the weaknesses inherent in the Church's insistence on being politically relevant to its believers" (31).

Yet Dobski identifies a profound irony in this transition. The freedom emerging from Joan's France "entails a radical break from the ethical and political authorities of throne and

altar in the name of the untrammelled will of the individual” (16). However, this nascent modernity “retains the same residual hope for a kind of wholeness or self-sufficiency that is promised by the spiritual and ethical virtues of the medieval Catholicism” it seeks to transcend (16).

This complex reading shows why *Personal Recollections* might indeed be Twain’s finest work; it neither simplistically champions youthful independence nor merely wallows in deterministic cynicism. Instead, it charts a middle path that “prepares its readers for how they might liberate themselves from those moral, political, religious, and philosophic opinions that demand the kind of coherence and intelligibility that eludes humanity’s grasp without also consigning them to epistemic despair or moral decadence” (16).

Accordingly, Twain is neither the simple humorist of popular imagination nor the brooding determinist of academic construct, but rather a subtle philosophical mind grappling with the fundamental tensions of human existence at a significant historical juncture.

Dobski reveals deeper philosophical tensions regarding authority, gender, truth, and the limits of human knowledge. He describes a symmetrical storm between these opposing forces: “What is true of Joan’s storminess is equally true of her rival: the Church storms against the Maid” (289). However, instead of “modern artillery” (289), the Church deploys “an army of scholiasts whose arsenal consists in religious texts, books of law, histories, court records, and all of the rhetorical traps and logical tricks that their learning affords them” (289). This battle of wills reveals how “speeches, which can build noble edifices for some, can also create stormy confusions for others” (289), demonstrating language’s capacity to both illuminate and obscure reality.

Central to Dobski’s exegesis is Joan’s transgression of gender norms through her male attire—a point Twain deliberately emphasizes beyond historical accuracy. As Dobski notes, “In drawing attention to Twain’s trebling of references to Joan’s male attire, we remind ourselves that Twain is deviating from the historical record of Joan’s trial” (261). This transvestitism represents a profound challenge to medieval categorization, suggesting that “nature might not support categories that are always and absolutely distinct and clear” (289). Here we encounter a nuanced position that neither denies natural differences between sexes nor suggests complete social construction: “To say that someone like Joan can effectively manifest the natural capacities thought to belong to men and women ... is not to say that there

## THE SATIRIST AND THE SAINT: A REVIEW OF *MARK TWAIN'S JOAN OF ARK*

are no qualitative differences between males and females or that these categories are simply the product of human agreement” (289).

Both Joan and the Church, in Dobski's reading, struggle against “an intransigent reality” (289) that resists their quest for completeness. The Church “insists on material and moral orders” contradicted by Joan's existence, while Joan attempts to “re-order the world in a way that elevates the needs of the body over the longings of the spirit” (289). In this struggle, “each seems to deny to humanity what the other would provide” (289).

Dobski draws a fascinating parallel between Joan and Eve, suggesting that Twain “doesn't so much emphasize her sexuality as he points towards the original erotic temptation befalling man, namely the desire to know human good and evil for oneself” (274). Like Socrates, Joan demonstrates a commitment to truth that challenges established authority. She is willing to face death rather than abandon her principles. This comparison with Eve elevates Joan's struggle to a profound philosophical plane concerning human autonomy and the limits of knowledge.

The Church's failure to discredit Joan reveals another dimension of Twain's narrative strategy. Unable to prove her voices demonic—which “would not wipe out her very real political accomplishments” (250)—and unable to establish her as a fraud without acknowledging her remarkable prudence, the Church resorts to attacking her cross-dressing. This strategic failure underscores Joan's political triumph even in defeat. Joan's execution, described in poignant terms—“Wearing only a simple robe, weakened by persecution, pale from her sunless prison, and stripped of power” (78)—transforms her into a figure whose final words remarkably “urge them to think of the cause of France and to absolve the King who abandoned her” (78). This selfless death completes her political mission while exposing the Church's dilemma.

Dobski argues that “in Twain's hands, Joan's challenge to the Church becomes essentially a political one” (98), forcing an impossible choice: either abandon political engagement and risk losing adherents who “look to the Church for the satisfaction of the demand for an earthly power capable of acting on behalf of a divinely ordered cosmos” (98), or remain politically engaged but develop “a rational justification for customs like divine right of kings” (98) that might render divine authority “superfluous” (98). Through this conundrum, “Twain highlights the primacy of politics over faith” (98).

Arising from Dobski's analysis is a view of Twain's Joan as a figure who illuminates the inherent tensions between medieval categorization and natural complexity, institutional authority and individual conscience, and political necessity and spiritual aspiration. Her life and death reveal the birth pangs of modernity and the persistent human quest for wholeness that crosses historical periods—a quest that nature itself consistently frustrates.

One comes away from Dobski's ambitious book with the distinct sensation of having wandered through intellectual precincts rarely associated with Twain. The cumulative effect—this painstaking excavation of Joan as harbinger of modernity, as philosophical provocateur, as sly underminer of medieval certainties—produces a startling reappraisal of a figure heretofore consigned to the less rarified domain of American humorists.

Dobski's analysis reveals a Twain engaged in nothing less than a profound meditation on the transition between epochs—medieval to modern—wherein Joan functions as both catalyst and embodiment of this progression. Through a medieval Catholic saint, Twain articulates a vision of political modernity that challenges religious and secular orthodoxies. We are shown a Joan who exploits the Church's political vulnerabilities while simultaneously demonstrating the inadequacy of purely material determinism.

The chapters, it must be conceded, occasionally suffer from a certain episodic discontinuity that risks fragmenting the overarching argument. One detects in the organization a mild scholarly indiscipline that recalls the meandering Mississippi River rather than the architectonic precision one might prefer in literary analysis. The academic reader must occasionally ford turbulent waters connecting otherwise illuminating insights.

To be candid: this volume will find scant readership beyond the hallowed quadrangles of university humanities departments and the more recondite philosophical seminaries. The casual admirer of Twain's frontier wit will discover here no rollicking tales of riverboat gamblers or homespun aphorisms. Instead, one encounters dense thickets of analysis concerning "categorical 'crisis'" (275), the limitations of natural taxonomy, and the "pluripotential universals evidenced by the career of Joan" (289). Such terminology, while perhaps unavoidable in serious scholarly discourse, effectively restricts the audience to those already conversant in the particularities of political philosophy.

Yet despite these limitations—or perhaps because of the very intellectual ambition they represent—Dobski's fundamental assertion proves surprisingly persuasive: that in Twain we

## THE SATIRIST AND THE SAINT: A REVIEW OF *MARK TWAIN'S JOAN OF ARK*

find not merely a satirist but a genuine political theorist grappling with the most consequential questions of authority, freedom, and the human condition. By positioning Joan's transvestitism as a challenge to rigid categorization, by illuminating the symmetrical "storms" of both Joan and Church against an "intransigent reality" (289), and by revealing how both protagonists "pursue a wholeness that the world refuses to grant" (289), Dobski convincingly elevates Twain to the company of those who have thought deeply about the foundations of political order.

One closes this volume with reluctant admiration for the case Dobski has assembled. Despite its occasionally labyrinthine argumentation and its decidedly academic tenor, the work succeeds in its fundamental aim: to rescue Twain from the reductive classification as mere humorist and to establish him, against all expectation, as a momentous voice in our understanding of political modernity. For the patient student willing to navigate these intellectual waters, Dobski offers a compelling reframing of Twain's masterpiece—one that reveals the Dean of American Humorists to be, after all, a political philosopher of astonishing depth and enduring relevance.

Allen Mendenhall

*Allen Mendenhall is Associate Dean and Grady Rosier Professor in the Sorrell College of Business at Troy University, where he is Executive Director of the Manuel H. Johnson Center for Political Economy.*