CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“THE FRENCH BARBER”: CALVIN AS A SOURCE OF BURLESQUE IN MARK TWAIN

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Whence had idols their origin, but from the will of man?
—John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

When I visited Clemens on the 17th of last month, the morbid horror with which he had come to regard the countenance of John Calvin had worked itself into desperate recklessness, and it was in my presence that he seized the tongs and smashed the eminent theologian into a thousand little pieces.

—anonymous, 1876

INTRODUCTION

According to several 1876 newspaper articles, a preacher that Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens) became acquainted with aboard the *Quaker City* during his trip to Europe and the Holy Land presented him with a bust of John Calvin. The bust was a wedding present, and an appropriate *objet d’art* for a minister to give a young couple. Twain dutifully placed the bust on his writing table, fixed a top hat on it, and then drew “a pair of spiral moustaches and a fanciful goatee” to make Calvin look “like a French barber.” Later, Twain tossed the bust of the theologian out of a second-story window. Finally, Twain “smashed the eminent theologian into a thousand little pieces” with iron fireplace tongs.

The sad case of Calvin’s bust illustrates the creative place Calvin occupies in Twain’s work and American literature generally. Calvin is often credited with providing the literary forms typical of American literature. From early captivity narratives, the development of Protestant

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spiritual autobiography, to the emergence of the providence tale and Sunday school books as popular genres, Calvin’s commentaries and theology provided the literary structures that developed in America from earliest colonization. Most writers employed the genres in straightforward ways, while Mark Twain, on the other hand, responded to Calvin’s influence with burlesque by invoking and distorting Calvin’s image for comedic purposes. Narrowly defined, parody uses a particular literary text but then deviates from it with comedic results; burlesque is a comedic use of a group of texts. More broadly, however, burlesque is the comedic distortion of any recognized text or image. Just as the bust of Calvin provided the opportunity for poking fun at the theologian’s dour image, the image of Calvin generated burlesque in Twain’s literary works. While Twain could destroy the actual bust of Calvin, the “French barber” remained a potent force in Twain’s writing.

To understand Twain’s burlesque images of Calvin, one has to understand the power of Calvin’s image in American culture. Depending on one’s denominational affiliation, he was held in contempt or reverence, but was always viewed with some awe. Within the Reformed tradition, or in specifically Presbyterian churches like the frontier church Twain was raised in, so reverently was Calvin’s image beheld that it became in some instances an example of the idolatry the theologian himself condemned. “[W]e know too well from experience,” Calvin wrote in the Institu tes of the Christian Religion (1536), “that the moment images appear in churches, idolatry has as it were raised its banner; because the folly of manhood cannot moderate itself, but forthwith falls away to superstitious worship.” Many who criticized the position Calvin occupied in American religion targeted specifically this kind of idolatry that elevated a system over—so it seemed to them—the central teaching of Christ himself: “Love thy neighbor.” In his study of the image of Calvin in nineteenth-century history textbooks, religious historian Thomas J. Davis demonstrates convincingly that the image of Calvin was being reimagined in the mid-1800s. Calvin had become an idol, and his graven image summoned the specter of theological concepts he distilled for generations of Americans: providence, innate depravity, and election. “In the history schoolbooks and in the common language

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2 Cf. the chapters by R. Bryan Bademan, R. Scott Clark, Thomas J. Davis and Stephen S. Francis elsewhere in this volume.