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Charles Chesnutt's
Southern Black Jew:
Rena Walden's Masquerade
in *The House Behind the Cedars*

EARLE V. BRYANT

Chapter five of Charles Chesnutt's novel *The House Behind the Cedars* is devoted exclusively to the detailed description of the mock medieval tournament held annually in the small town of Clarence, North Carolina, where much of the novel is set. As Chesnutt himself points out in his authorial voice, the mock tournament at Clarence is staged in avowed imitation of the spectacular tournament at Ashby-de-la-Zouch that Sir Walter Scott describes so graphically in his classic romance *Ivanhoe*.

The influence of Walter Scott was strong upon the old South.... During the month preceding the Clarence tournament, the local bookseller had closed out his entire stock of "Ivanhoe," consisting of five copies. The tournament scene in this popular novel furnished the model after which these bloodless imitations of the ancient passages-at-arms were conducted, with such variations as were required to adapt them to a different age and civilization.¹

Appropriately titled "The Tournament," the chapter depicting the mock Clarence tourney is ostensibly important because in the chapter the novel's protagonist, Rena Walden, first meets George Tryon, the man who is to have so great an impact on her life. However, as important as the chapter may be *vis à vis* the novel's story line, its greatest significance—indeed, its dominant function—lies in the association it sets up between Rena Walden and one of the central female characters in Scott's *Ivanhoe*. Long over-

looked by critics of the novel, this association is important, adding depth and fullness to Rena's character and reminding us that one of African American literature's consummate literary craftsmen was an American literary realist every bit as accomplished as Howells or Cather.

Chesnutt initiates the link between Rena and the character whom Scott describes in *Ivanhoe* as "a rose of loveliness and a jewel of wealth"² by first linking Scott's tournament at Ashby-de-la-Zouche with the tournament he depicts in chapter five of his novel. Not only does Chesnutt explicitly state that Scott's tournament "furnished the model" (46) for the mock Clarence tourney, but a comparative look at both tournament scenes will reveal just how faithful Chesnutt is to his "model." Describing the mood of excitement at the tournament at Ashby, for instance, Scott writes: "While the trumpets sounded, while the heralds strained their voices in proclaiming honour to the brave and glory to the victor ... [the] ladies waved their silken kerchiefs and embroidered veils, and ... all ranks joined in a clamorous shout of exultation..." (145). Chesnutt's description of the excitement in the air at the Clarence tourney is intentionally similar: "The knights, having reached the end of the lists, now turned and rode back in open order.... The ladies in the grand stand waved their handkerchiefs vigorously, and the men clapped their hands" (49). Scott's and Chesnutt's descriptions of the entrance of the knights onto the field (Scott 101; Chesnutt 48) and each author's description of the jousts (Scott 102; Chesnutt 52) are also similar. Chesnutt, then, leaves no doubt about the influence of Scott's tournament on his own.

If Chesnutt is careful to make clear that the Clarence tournament is a "bloodless imitation" of Scott's more violent passage-at-arms, he is equally careful to connect his heroine, Rena, with one of Scott's most well-known romantic heroines. Chesnutt establishes this all-important connection between his heroine and Scott's as soon as Rena leaves home to begin her new life with her brother in South Carolina. Even before they arrive at his home in Clarence, John explains to Rena that he is placing her in a boarding school for a "year of instruction" designed to "improv[e] her mind and manners" (56) and thus prepare her for her new life as mistress of his house. With Rena's new life, moreover, comes a new name: "Henceforth she [would] be known as Miss Warwick, dropping the old name with the old life" (43). As Chesnutt reveals in chapter 5, the tournament chapter, Rena's new first name is to be Rowena. Viewed in isolation, the name Rowena is not unusual enough to draw attention to itself, but given that Chesnutt has made it a point to bring the chivalric world of *Ivanhoe* into the Southern world of his novel, Rena's new name demands that we recall the original bearer of that name, Scott's fair Saxon maiden in *Ivanhoe*.

Having thus modeled the tournament at Clarence on Scott's tournament at Ashby-de-la-Zouche, and having also linked Rena to Scott's Rowena, Chesnutt neatly follows through and introduces George Tryon,

the character who serves as the analogue (however weak) to Scott's stalwart flower of knighthood, Ivanhoe. Rena's brother, John, crystalizes the George-Ivanhoe analogy. During the tournament, Rena accidentally drops her linen handkerchief, and George adroitly catches it on the pointed tip of his lance. Instead of returning it to her, however, he ties it around his lance and rides off to await his turn to "joust." To dispell his sister's puzzlement about her "knight," John identifies him for Rena and explains to her the significance of the handkerchief's being tied around the lance: "The incident is quite in accord with the customs of chivalry. If George were but masked and you were veiled, we should have a romantic situation,—you the mysterious damsel in distress, he the unknown champion. The parallel, my dear, might not be so hard to draw, even as things are" (52). John is right: the parallel is not difficult to see, and Chesnutt invites us to "draw" it. Once we do so, it becomes clear that the "romantic situation" that John mentions but leaves unspecified is in fact straight out of *Ivanhoe*, chapters 8 through 12. In those chapters, Scott describes "a most splendid spectacle" (100), namely, the exciting series of jousts—"the games of chivalry" (115)—that comprise the tournament at Ashby, from which Ivanhoe emerges the "victor knight" (116) and crowns the Lady Rowena Queen of Love and Beauty (115). In Chesnutt's novel, George's tying Rena's handkerchief around his lance, his victory over the other "knights," and his crowning Rena Queen of Love and Beauty (55) are all imitative of Ivanhoe's actions at the Ashby tournament. Additionally, Chesnutt's description of George—"He was mounted on a very handsome and spirited bay mare ... and displayed a marked skill in horsemanship" (53)—clearly echoes Scott's description of Ivanhoe: "He was mounted on a gallant black horse, and ... [t]he dexterity with which he managed his steed ... won him the favour of the multitude" (105). George thus becomes Rena's knight, her champion, the Ivanhoe to her Rowena.

By the end of chapter 5, then, Chesnutt has succeeded in establishing George Tryon as a nineteenth-century Southern Ivanhoe and Rena as his latter-day Queen of Love and Beauty, the fair Rowena. However, there is something wrong with this picture, and Chesnutt expects us to recognize it. If the George-Ivanhoe/Rena-Rowena association is followed through to its logical conclusion, then Chesnutt's novel should end with the marriage of George and Rena, since Scott's romance concludes with Ivanhoe's marriage to Rowena. But *The House Behind the Cedars* ends not with Rena's marriage but with her death. Midway through the novel, George discovers that Rena is black and discards her in a most unchivalric fashion. Having been spurned, Rena resolves to "stay with [her] own people" (181) and to devote her life to teaching black children. At the close of the novel, after being "lost in the woods in [a] storm, amid ... the pouring rain" (278), Rena dies of what appears to be pneumonia. The problem, therefore, is seeing Rena as a latter-day version of the fair Saxon maiden

who is crowned Queen of Love and Beauty in *Ivanhoe* and whose “nuptials ... [are] celebrated in the most august of temples ... [with] the King himself attend[ing]” (463) at the end of Scott’s romance. Clearly, Rena is not the exact analogue that Chesnutt led us to believe she was.

Given this puzzling apparent deviation from *Ivanhoe*, two questions arise: first, what reason does Chesnutt have for leading us to believe—as he has assuredly done—that Rena is an analogue to Scott’s Rowena, and second, since Rena is not exactly analogous to Rowena, exactly what character in *Ivanhoe* does she correspond to? The answer to the second question becomes clear once we recall that Scott’s *Ivanhoe* is a romance with two heroines, both of whom are in love with the same man, the eponymous hero of the romance. One heroine, Rowena, is blonde and Christian; the other, Rebecca, is dark-haired and Jewish. It is, fittingly enough, the latter of these two heroines—Scott’s Jewish Rebecca with “her sable tresses” (94), not his “exquisitely fair ... Saxon beauty” (61) Rowena—to whom Rena Walden actually serves as a more exact analogue.

In modeling Rena after Scott’s Rebecca, Chesnutt is ever aware of the other (most would say the major) heroine of *Ivanhoe*, Rowena. Chesnutt has not overlooked the love triangle in *Ivanhoe*. Indeed, it is precisely this triangle—Ivanhoe-Rowena-Rebecca—that Chesnutt is evoking in *The House Behind the Cedars*. By doing so, Chesnutt purposefully evokes the relationship not allowed to blossom between Jewish Rebecca and Christian Ivanhoe. Rebecca herself verbalizes the taboo affixed to her feelings for Ivanhoe. Near the close of the romance she proclaims: “There is a gulf betwixt us. Our breeding, our faith, alike forbid either to pass over it” (465).³ Predictably, Rebecca and Ivanhoe share a fate similar to countless other literary star-crossed would-be lovers. Even though Ivanhoe, in an act of supreme heroism in which he is almost killed, saves Rebecca’s life in the crucial trial by combat episode that climaxes the work, and even though they are temperamentally suited to one another, Ivanhoe and Rebecca do not ride off together and live happily ever after. They cannot. Society, religion, and culture will not allow them to. Accordingly, Ivanhoe and Rebecca go their separate ways, he to marry the Christian, hence acceptable, Rowena, she to care for the sick and the hungry in Moslem-held Spain.

Squarely against the backdrop of Rebecca’s “forbidden” love for Ivanhoe and her self-exile from England, Rena Walden’s plight is thrown into sharpest relief. The gulf Rebecca speaks of that stands between her and Ivanhoe also stands between Rena and George Tryon. In their case, of course, it is a racial gulf: she is black and he is white. And just as Rebecca’s and Ivanhoe’s “breeding ... [and] faith” force them apart, so too do the inflexible Southern “laws decreeing the separation of the races” (143) prohibit any possible union between Rena and George. In marrying Rena, George reminds himself, he would be “committ[ing] the unpardonable sin against his race...” (143). Like Rebecca, therefore, Rena loses the man she

loves because of a sociocultural taboo. Even Rena's self-exile of sorts after George discovers she is black parallels Rebecca's self-imposed exile from England at the end of *Ivanhoe*. Rebecca's resolve, we recall, is to devote her life to "tending the sick, feeding the hungry, and relieving the distressed" (467) among the Moslems in Spain. As one critic has so well put it, Rebecca retires into a world of good deeds and meditation "as if she were a sort of Jewish nun."⁴ Interestingly, it is also in religious terms that Rena views her decision to leave her mother and teach black children in a neighboring county: "Her zeal, indeed, ... was like that of an early Christian, who was more willing than not to die for his faith. Rena had fully and firmly made up her mind to sacrifice her life upon this altar" (246). Chesnutt's Rena and Scott's Rebecca are sisters in victimhood, the one faithfully modeled on the other.

It is part of the novel's irony and impact, however, that George does not recognize the nexus between model and analogue, between Jewish Rebecca and black Rena, even when such a connection is dangled before his very eyes. Chesnutt, in fact, full in the face of his latter-day *Ivanhoe*, alludes to Rena's true identity in a key scene a third of the way into the novel, a scene designed to underscore George's love-induced blindness and to reinforce our own recognition of Rena as a true analogue to Rebecca. Shortly after his engagement to Rena, George leaves his home on business and travels to Patesville, Rena's hometown. While there, he has lunch with Dr. Green and his family, distant relatives. During the meal the conversation swings around to George's impending marriage and his fiancée, Rena:

"And now, my dear George," exclaimed the doctor, "to change one good subject for another, tell us who is the favored lady?"

"A Miss Rowena Warwick," replied Tryon. ...

"A good, strong old English name," observed the doctor.

"The heroine of 'Ivanhoe'!" exclaimed Miss Harriet.

"Warwick the Kingmaker!" said Mary. "Is she tall and fair, dignified and stately?"

"She is tall, dark rather than fair, and full of tender grace and humility."

"She should have been named Rebecca instead of Rowena," rejoined Miss Mary, who was well up in her Scott. (137)

Miss Mary's observation that Rena "should have been named Rebecca instead of Rowena" goes entirely unregarded by the others at the table, yet it is an observation both insightful and accurate: through George's loving description of his fiancée, Mary easily identifies Rena as the analogue to Scott's Jewish heroine. Unlike Mary, however, George and the other white characters in his circle make no such identification. They see Rena, instead, as the embodiment of her namesake, as the romantic heroine whose name

her brother has invested her with: Rowena the Fair. And on the surface that is precisely who Rena appears to be—the Saxon (which is to say white) beauty, “the fairest among a thousand” (148), who wins the heart of her gallant chevalier. The surface appearance of whiteness is deceptive, for while everyone believes that Rena is Rowena the Saxon, she is in truth Rebecca the Jew. In fine, Rena is passing for Rowena.

The real Rowena in the novel (and Chesnutt has named her ever so aptly) is Blanche Leary. It is she who, like her counterpart in *Ivanhoe*, is the acceptable one. Like Scott's Rowena, after whom Chesnutt has deliberately patterned her, Blanche is “a demure, pretty little blonde, with an amiable disposition” (191). Her strong love for George (191) parallels Rowena's fervid love for Ivanhoe. It is Blanche, too, whom George turns to when he discovers that Rena is black, and it is she whom he ultimately marries, just as it is Rowena whom Ivanhoe weds. What Plato, one of Rena's young pupils, says about George *vis à vis* Rena applies with equal validity to Blanche. Rena, Plato muses, “was a great woman, no doubt, and looked white; but Mars Geo'ge was the real article” (266). In the color-conscious world of Chesnutt's novel, Blanche too is “the real article.”

Rena's Cinderella-like masquerade as “the real article” provides the answer to the first of the two questions posed earlier: what reason does Chesnutt have for leading us to believe that Rena is an exact analogue to Scott's fair Saxon maiden Rowena? Black Rena Walden, the “stately beauty” (7) from the little house behind the cedars, is passing herself off as white Rowena Warwick, the Southern belle from “a fine old family mansion” (138), and that pretense is paralleled and highlighted by Rena's brief reign as *Ivanhoe's* Lady Rowena, when in truth “[s]he should have been named Rebecca instead” (137) in conformity with who she truly is. Rena is pretending to be the Saxon Queen of Love and Beauty just as she is pretending to be white. In both instances—as Rowena Warwick, John's “white” sister, and Rowena the Fair, Ivanhoe's ladylove—she is playing a role or passing.

Rena's masquerade also reminds us of what several Chesnutt critics have seen as the real point of the novel: it is absurd and unconscionable that Rena should have to pass herself off as Rowena in order to enjoy what Chesnutt has elsewhere referred to as “the rights and dignities of citizenship.”⁵ In the great tradition of American literary realists such as Mark Twain, George Washington Cable, and William Dean Howells, the latter of whom held Chesnutt in extremely high regard, Chesnutt does not shrink from placing the blame where he believes it should be placed. Accordingly, the root cause of Rena's misery, Chesnutt contends, lies not with Rena or her crossing the color line, but with white society's laws and customs governing race relations, especially miscegenation.

Charles Chesnutt, like his character Miss Mary, was “well up in [his] Scott” (137) and recognized all too keenly the similarities between his

beloved Rena and Scott's timeless creation Rebecca. Ever the consummate literary craftsman, Chesnutt also recognized how incorporating the figure of Rebecca into *The House Behind the Cedars* would enhance the novel's artistry and vivify his portrait of Rena as, in his own words, "a fine figure forced into a false position."⁶

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Notes

1. Charles W. Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1988), pp. 45–46. All subsequent references are cited parenthetically.

2. Sir Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe* (New York: Signet, 1983), p. 148. All subsequent references cited parenthetically.

3. Although Rebecca tells this not to Ivanhoe but to Rowena, who has suggested that she remain in England, there is little doubt that she has in mind, and is alluding to, the impossibility of any relationship between her and Ivanhoe.

4. John Lauber, *Sir Walter Scott* (Boston: Twayne, 1989), p. 95.

5. William Andrews, *The Literary Career of Charles Waddell Chesnutt* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1980), p. 143.

6. Andrews, p. 143.