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EARLE V. BRYANT

Blue Veins and Black Bigotry: Colorism as Moral Evil in Charles Chesnutt's "A Matter of Principle"

Although Charles Chesnutt's short story "A Matter of Principle" is not as well known or as frequently studied as some of his other stories—"The Wife of His Youth," for example, or "The Goophered Grapevine"—the tale is nonetheless one of Chesnutt's crowning jewels, a story as serious-minded and moralistic as it is humorous and charming. It is perhaps its very humor and charm that have obscured the story's more serious level, what Sylvia Lyons Render has recognized as its caustic layer.[1] A closer look at "A Matter of Principle," with particular emphasis on Chesnutt's subtle use of scriptural allusion in the tale, reveals that the story, despite its engaging humor and the seemingly light touch with which it treats a serious issue, is arguably Chesnutt's harshest condemnation of intraracial skin color prejudice.

Intraracial racism, of course, is a subject that surfaces in several of Chesnutt's works. Indeed, the world of his fiction is peopled by a goodly number of biracial, light-skinned characters who view other, dark-skinned blacks with disdain and who strive to distance themselves from these (in Chesnutt's words) "genuine Negro[es]."[2] There is, for example, the color-struck Molly Walden in *The House Behind the Cedars* and the eponymous heroine of *Mandy Oxendine,* as well as Mr. Ryder (before his "conversion") in "The Wife of His Youth" and even Uncle Solomon Grundy in "The Sway-Backed House."[3] In his depiction of each of these characters, Chesnutt illustrates how reprehensible their intraracial color prejudice is, and his condemnation of that prejudice is certainly clear enough. Nowhere else in his fiction, however, does he indict colorism[4] as scathingly as he does in "A Matter of Principle," and certainly no other of his characters does he condemn as unsparingly as the bigoted Cicero Clayton, the tale's protagonist, whose

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color prejudice backfires on him and his equally bigoted daughter. Like many of Chesnutt's characters, Clayton is a mulatto "of olive complexion, with slightly curled hair" and "features [that] approached the Cuban or Latin-American type."[5] Clayton prides himself on his light skin color and Caucasian features, so much so that "The fundamental article of [his] social creed was that he himself was not a negro" (94). Coupled with this pride and denial of his racial identity is a strong aversion to darker-skinned black people, whom he regards as beneath him. Additionally, he is so at ease speaking the vocabulary of racism that he spouts racial epithets as effortlessly as, say, George McBane in *The Marrow of Tradition* or the colonel in "The Doll," two of Chesnutt's most thoroughgoing white racist characters. Fittingly enough, Clayton is a member of the Blue Vein Society, a social group composed of very light-skinnned blacks, middle-class and culturally refined, whose tacit policy is to exclude other blacks "whose complexions and callings in life were hardly up to the standard which [the Blue Veins] considered proper."[6] A major objective of the Blue Veins is to distance themselves as far as possible from blackness while advancing steadily toward whiteness. Their credo is perhaps best summed up by Wallace Thurman's Maria Lightfoot, a prominent member of another Blue Vein Society, the one Thurman depicts in his novel *The Blacker the Berry:* "Whiter and whiter every generation."[7] It is a credo that Chesnutt's Blue Veins—especially Cicero Clayton—heartily espouse.

Clayton's colorism is shared—and almost surpassed—by that of his daughter, Alice, a young woman so light-skinned that "She was nearly white [and] . . . frankly confessed her sorrow that she was not entirely so" (97). As Chesnutt makes clear in the story, Alice's biggest problem is finding a suitable husband, for she recognizes all too keenly that in her hometown of Groveland "the supply of eligible men [has run] short" (99). Alice's chance for a suitable match comes when Hamilton Brown, a black United States representative whom she had met and impressed on a trip to Washington, pays a visit to Groveland. A major problem arises, however, when Alice cannot remember if the congressman is light or dark complexioned. Alice's memory lapse sets off the story's ensuing comedy of errors, for when her father goes to meet the congressman's train, he mistakes the congessman, who actually *is* light-skinned, for his dark-skinned traveling companion. Refusing "to take that negro to [his] house" (119), Clayton lies and says that his home is under quarantine because of diphtheria, thereby preventing the congressman from calling on Alice and hence unwittingly losing her the "catch" of her life.

Clayton's punishment, it might be argued, lies in the fact that his colorism has robbed his daughter of what both of them would consider the ideal

husband for her—a successful, light-skinned political figure. But Chesnutt is not content to let Clayton off with a mere finger-shaking reprimand of *it-serves-you-right.* His treatment of Clayton and Clayton's "sickness"[8] is decidedly more stringent than this, for in addition to illustrating how Clayton's colorism results in his daughter's loss, Chesnutt goes on to identify colorism as a moral evil in which Clayton has enmeshed himself and indicates the astonishing degree to which Clayton has given himself over to that evil. This he does through the subtle yet highly effective use of scriptural allusion. And again, it is largely because of the humor in which Chesnutt couches his condemnation of colorism that the condemnation itself is often overlooked.

Appropriately, Chesnutt's identification of colorism as a moral evil and Clayton as morally sick comes immediately after Clayton has just uttered one of his characteristically racist statements. Believing that the visiting Representative Brown is light-skinned (as he does before the identity mistake he makes at the train station), Clayton instructs Alice to arrange a lavish reception for the congressman. He concludes his instructions to her by boasting, "We will show the darkeys of Groveland how to entertain a Congressman" (111). It is at this point that Chesnutt issues his denunciation of Clayton's moral sickness: "But some allowance must be made for [Clayton's] atmosphere; he could no more escape from it than the leopard can change his spots or the— In deference to Mr. Clayton's feelings the quotation will be left incomplete" (111). The passage is a delicious one, humorous and serious at the same time. Neither the humor nor the seriousness, however, can be appreciated unless we recognize, as Chesnutt wants us to, the scriptural allusion around which the passage is built. The allusion is to Jeremiah 13: 22–24: "And if you say in your heart, 'Why have these things come upon us?' it is for the greatness of your iniquity that your skirts are lifted up and you suffer violation. Can the Ethiopian change his color or the leopard his spots? Then also can you do good who are so accustomed to do evil." Read in light of these verses, Chesnutt's remark about Clayton and his inability to escape from his "atmosphere" does indeed prove to be humorous, for of course the last person Clayton would like to be compared to is an Ethiopian. Certainly what makes the passage all the more humorous is that Chesnutt never mentions *Ethiopian;* instead, he leaves the quotation incomplete, as he phrases it, expecting us to fill in the blanks with that part of the passage he has deliberately omitted. More important, though, Chesnutt's reference to Clayton's being unable to escape his "atmosphere" takes on a more serious note once we reexamine the passage from Jeremiah and recall its context.

In the passage, the prophet Jeremiah is admonishing the southern kingdom of Judah for its moral transgressions—among them, apostasy and idola-

try, hypocrisy and deceit, slander and treachery[9]—and is predicting that the wrath of Yahweh will befall Judah because of its wickedness. In his diatribe, Jeremiah laments that Judah is so mired in iniquity—"so accustomed [are you] to do evil" (verse 23)—that it cannot change its ways. As Old Testament scholar Frederick Wood has remarked, "Jeremiah was pessimistic about Judah's moral condition," even "close to cynicism."[10] To Jeremiah, his people were "a race of hardened sinners,"[11] so incorrigible that "Evil, not only fitting them like a glove, not only deep-dyed, was by now something they could no more change or wish to change than the color of their skin."[12] It is, then, Judah's "hopeless entanglement in evil,"[13] coupled with its inability to reform, that elicits Jeremiah's comparison involving the leopard's spots and the Ethiopian's color. Once we realize precisely what the passage from Jeremiah entails—the prophet's audience, his message, his motivation—Chesnutt's intent in alluding to Jeremiah becomes clearer: he is passing a judgment on intraracial racism, pronouncing it nothing less than a moral evil. This he does by establishing a correlation between Judah's morally diseased condition, as diagnosed by Jeremiah, and the (to Chesnutt) equally diseased "atmosphere" of the color-conscious, bigoted Blue Veins.[14] Clayton, Chesnutt is positing, has so internalized his "atmosphere" that he can no more discard his disdain for "darkeys," as he calls them (111), than can the leopard change his spots or the Ethiopian his color—or Judah the wickedness of its ways. It is Judah's wicked ways, of course, and her inveterate sinfulness that prompted Jeremiah's comparison in the first place, and it Chesnutt's incorporation of that comparison into his story and his application of it to Clayton that forces us to see that Chesnutt is diagnosing Clayton's colorism as a moral evil. Nor, alarmingly, is Clayton's moral condition a short-term malady, for as Chesnutt's allusion to Jeremiah denotes, Clayton, like Jeremiah's Judean audience, is "so accustomed to doing evil" that he is impervious to change. Indeed, it is Clayton's very inability to change that endows the story with not only a seriousness that is not usually attributed to it but also with the kind of cynicism that Chesnutt normally reserves for more patently serious tales such as "The Sheriff's Children" or "The Web of Circumstance."

It may be argued, however, that such an interpretation of Chesnutt's allusion to Jeremiah is simply a textual overreading, that "A Matter of Principle" is not the serious, moralistic tale that such a reading makes it out to be. But to discount the weighty implications of the Jeremiah allusion in the story is to sell short Chesnutt's meticulous craftsmanship and his characteristic subtlety. As a careful reading of many of his other short stories (and novels) reveals, Chesnutt was a consummate literary artist, and like writers from time immemorial, he often used scriptural allusion in his fiction. But

what is especially noteworthy about Chesnutt is that while his use of scriptural allusion is always effective and always integral to the text, it is also invariably subtle. In "The Wife of His Youth," for example, arguably his best short story, scriptural allusion—to be specific, the allusions to Malachi, the Book of Proverbs, and Isaiah—is the very foundation on which the story is built, and one of the many reasons for the tale's power and beauty is that in it Chesnutt's use of scriptural allusion is so subtle and sophisticated. Similarly, in "Uncle Wellington's Wives," the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15: 11–32) serves as the story's framework; in fact, the story's treatment of racial identity and ethnic allegiance is enhanced by its being patterned after the famous parable in Luke's gospel. However, Chesnutt's incorporation of the parable into the story is far from obvious and least of all heavy-handed. Like his use of scripture in "The Wife of His Youth," it is subtle and sophisticated. Additionally, as J. Lee Greene has observed, in *The House Behind the Cedars* Chesnutt has fashioned "a well-wrought novel predicated on the Eden trope."[15] Greene goes on to point out how seamlessly Chesnutt weaves "the biblical narrative of Eden" into the fabric of the novel, establishing it in fact "as a framing construct."[16] But here, too, Chesnutt's use of scripture, vital to a fuller appreciation of the text, is fresh and innovative[17] and ever so muted, thus again revealing Chesnutt as a true master of subtlety. The point to be made is that "A Matter of Principle" is not the only Chesnutt story that demands that we closely examine how Chesnutt uses scriptural allusion if we are to properly understand what he is conveying. Focusing on Chesnutt's reputation in American literature, Stephen Knadler points to an all too frequent "failure to understand the artistry of Chesnutt."[18] Nowhere, it might be added, is Chesnutt's artistry more present than in "A Matter of Principle," and in no other of his stories is this "failure to understand [his] artistry" more evident.

As Chesnutt sees it, then, Cicero Clayton's colorism is neither a mere breach of racial etiquette nor simply an obstacle in the way of ethnic solidarity—nor is it a matter of little consequence simply because it is a black-against-black affair rather than an issue of white bigotry. Discrimination is discrimination, Chesnutt is arguing in the story, and intraracial racism is no less odious nor more excusable than white racism simply because black people are the ones discriminating against each other. In Chesnutt's eyes, the moral evil is the same. As his allusion to Jeremiah reveals, Chesnutt certainly regards intraracial color prejudice as a veritable moral wrong; accordingly, he depicts Clayton, one of its chief practitioners, as morally bankrupt. Indeed, in a revealing passage near the close of the story Chesnutt reemphasizes Clayton's moral bankruptcy as well as that of his wife and daughter. He does so, moreover, in another clever combination of humor

and seriousness—a combination so characteristic of the story. In the passage, Clayton picks up the morning newspaper and happens to read an article detailing the congressman's visit to Groveland. The article describes Representative Brown as "a tall and shapely man . . . with an olive complexion not noticeably darker than many a white man's, [and] straight hair" (125). Realizing the colossal mistake he has made, Clayton looks around for a good place to hide the newspaper from his family. He finds one—the best, in fact: "He folded up the paper and slipped it under the family Bible, where it was least likely to be soon discovered" (128). The line is a wonderful Chesnuttian stroke. It is humorous, of course, because it reveals, wittily and good naturedly, that the Claytons are not exactly avid readers of the Bible. At the same time, though, its implication is deadly serious. To the Claytons, Chesnutt is suggesting, the Bible is merely a fine and private hiding place, an ornamental book, its pages unread and hence its moral teachings unabsorbed. Accordingly, the Clayton household is as devoid of the *spirit* of the Bible as it is unfamiliar with its *letter*. In fine, the Claytons' neglect of the Bible as a text signifies their disregard for the moral principles and guidance contained and offered inside.[19]

As if to further underscore the moral dimension of Clayton's intraracial racism, Chesnutt reveals an interesting consequence arising from Clayton's error at the train station. As Clayton discovers when he reads the newspaper article, the dark-skinned man whom he had mistaken for the congressman turns out to be a clergyman—a bishop, to be exact. The fact that the spurned Dark Man is a cleric is another marvelous Chesnuttian stroke. Unobtrusively yet effectively, it reaffirms the underlying moral principle that Chesnutt is dramatizing in the tale, namely that the rejection of others because of their skin color is in effect a rejection of the sanctity inherent in the human, a veritable spurning of the divine reflection present in all humankind, which theologian Karl Rahner identifies as "the divine [dwelling] in the flesh of man."[20] Such a moral principle, however, is entirely lost on Clayton, mired as he is in what Russell, Wilson, and Hall have defined as "the color complex."[21]

In the final analysis, "A Matter of Principle" is certainly what Julian Mason has termed it—a "sharp satire on prejudice."[22] What should be recognized, however, is that the tale's satiric sharpness is more Juvenalian than Horatian—that is, if one can imagine Juvenal with a sense of humor. Indeed, of those African American writers who have treated the subject of intraracial racism—Wallace Thurman, for example, in *The Blacker the Berry* or Chester Himes in *The Third Generation* or Ernest Gaines in *Catherine Carmier*—Chesnutt stands alone in identifying colorism as morally evil. Unlike other African American authors writing during the same period—most notably

Pauline Hopkins and Sutton Griggs—Chesnutt chose not to focus exclusively on the pain and injustice inflicted on black people by white racism. This is not to imply, though, that Chesnutt ignored that pain and injustice. One only has to recall his depiction of the ravages of white racism in *The Marrow of Tradition* or "The Web of Circumstance" or "The Doll" to see the depth of his commitment to combating racial bigotry through his fiction. At the same time, Chesnutt believed that a vital part of what he called his "high, holy purpose" as a writer[23] was to crusade against that other, equally odious form of racial bigotry—colorism. Certainly nowhere else in his fiction does Chesnutt more ably fulfill that part of his "high, holy purpose" than in "A Matter of Principle."

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Notes

1. Sylvia Lyons Render, *The Short Fiction of Charles W. Chesnutt* (Washington, D. C.: Howard Univ. Press, 1974), p. 11.

2. Charles W. Chesnutt, "What Is a White Man?" *Independent*, 30 May 1889, p. 6.

3. Solomon Grundy is a curious example of intraracial color prejudice. Chesnutt describes him as "a tall, shapely, and *very dark* man, with a straight nose, thin lips, and blue eyes." "The Sway-Backed House" in Render, p. 223 (emphasis mine). He harbors, however, "a very distinct scorn for ordinary blacks." Thus, while he is not a "true" mulatto, he is nonetheless a valid example of intraracial color prejudice, as Chesnutt makes clear enough in the story.

4. *Colorism* is Alice Walker's fitting term for intraracial skin color prejudice or "intramural" racism. She defines it as "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color." Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt, 1983), p. 290.

5. Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1989), p. 97. All subsequent references are cited parenthetically.

6. Although this description of the Blue Veins comes from "The Wife of His Youth" (7) rather than from "A Matter of Principle," it is nonetheless an accurate description of Cicero Clayton's social group since the Society is the same one in both stories.

7. Wallace Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), p. 12.

8. It is surely no accident that Chesnutt has Jack concoct the particular fable he does, for the lie that Jack comes up with to keep the Dark Man away from the Clayton house is actually more the truth than it is a falsehood. Jack's note says that Cicero and his family are under quarantine because of malignant diphtheria. But while their physical illness is a lie, their moral sickness—intraracial racism—is not. The Claytons, Chesnutt is pointing out, are indeed sick people.

9. Samuel J. Schultz, *The Prophets Speak: Law of Love—The Essence of Israel's Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 120.

10. Frederick Wood, *Fire in My Bones* (Nashville: Broadman, 1959), p. 40.

11. Carl Friedrich Keil, *The Prophecies of Jeremiad* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1971) p. 21.

12. Derek Kidner, *The Message of Jeremiah: Against Wind and Tide* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1987), p. 65.

13. Elmer A. Leslie, *Jeremiah* (New York: Abingdon, 1954), p. 76.

14. As I have argued elsewhere, Chesnutt's knowledge of the Bible was extensive and firm. See Earle V. Bryant, "Scriptural Allusion and Metaphorical Marriage in Charles Chesnutt's 'The Wife of His Youth,'" *American Literary Realism*, 33 (Fall 2000), 64. Indeed, Chesnutt's study of and resultant familiarity with the Bible are reflected throughout his journals, where he alludes to or cites scriptural passages quite frequently. See, for instance, *The Journals of Charles W. Chesnutt*, ed. Richard Brodhead (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1993), pp. 73, 79, 123, and 149. In one entry, in fact, he gives a lengthy summary of a Congregationalist minister's discourse on the Second Coming of Christ (96–97). In addition, for three years (1873–1876) Chesnutt served as the assistant to Cicero Harris, a clergyman-educator whom he emulated. It is important to note that Harris was well versed in scripture and went on to become a bishop of the A. M. E. Zion church in 1889. Chesnut's close association with Harris, as well as with several ministers whom he mentions in his journals, certainly contributed to his knowledge of scripture and—more importantly—to his acquaintance with scriptural interpretation. Interestingly, in one of his journal entries (158), Chesnutt quotes the very passage from Jeremiah (13: 22–24) that he incorporates into and uses so effectively in "A Matter of Principle" to pronounce intraracial racism a veritable moral evil. In fine, not only was Chesnutt very well versed in the Bible, but he was also quite familiar with the specific context of Jeremiah's castigation of his people.

15. J. Lee Greene, *Blacks in Eden: The African-American Novel's First Century* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1996), p. 74.

16. Greene, pp. 73, 66.

17. Greene, p. 74.

18. Stephen P. Knadler, "Untragic Mulatto: Charles Chesnutt and the Discourse of Whiteness," *American Literary History*, 8 (Fall 1996), 427.

19. Ironically, however, the Claytons' neglect of the Bible does not stop Cicero from quoting scripture, albeit hypocritically, when it serves his purposes. The story ends, in fact, with Cicero delivering one of his characteristically hypocritical speeches on "the brotherhood of man" (131), a speech in which he uses a scriptural passage to support his self-serving plea for racial equality: "What the white people of the united States need most, in dealing with [the race problem], is a higher conception of the brotherhood of man. For of one blood God made all the nations of the earth" (131). Cicero's scriptural quote, taken verbatim from Acts 17: 26, is St. Luke's straightforward declaration of equality, of the oneness of the human family—of, as Cicero phrases it, "the brotherhood of man." Coming from Cicero, of course, the words have a decidedly hollow ring, for the only kind of equality Cicero believes in and wants is equality with whites for himself and the other Blue Veins who share his *forma mentis.*

20. Karl Rahner, *Everyday Faith* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968), p. 114.

21. Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall, *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* (New York: Harcourt, 1992).

22. Julian Mason, "The Stories of Charles W. Chesnutt," *Southern Literary Journal*, 1 (Dec. 1968), 94.

23. Chesnutt, *Journals*, p. 139.