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<https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-pxn7-jy24>

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"MOUTH WITH MYRIAD SUBTLETIES": RACE, GENDER, AUDIENCE, AND
AUTHORSHIP IN CHARLES W. CHESNUTT'S THE CONJURE WOMAN

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of American Studies

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by Kristin Margaret Edmonds

1996

APPROVAL SHEET

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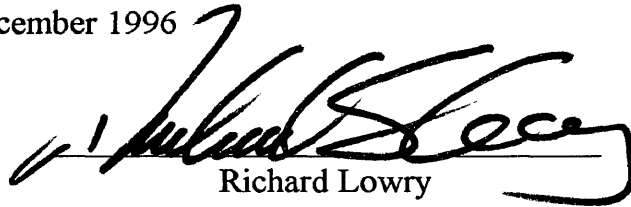
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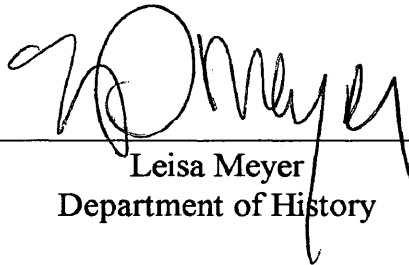


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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Professors Richard Lowry, Leisa Meyer, and Kenneth Price for challenging criticisms and comments; Hildy Coleman for pithy commentary and editorial assistance; Thomas Estes, Jr. for advice, encouragement, and understanding; and my mother for constant, unconditional support.

ABSTRACT

Charles W. Chesnutt's The Conjure Woman was, to some extent, a response to Southern, white writers such as Thomas Dixon, Thomas Nelson Page, and Joel Chandler Harris whose work glorified the antebellum South and slavery. The Conjure Woman is a series of short stories constructed according to the framework of plantation fiction, but Chesnutt orients his fiction toward the experience of the slave rather than the master and he organizes social relationships between men, women, blacks, and whites very differently.

Uncle Julius, a former slave, narrates tales of slavery and conjure to a well-to-do, Northern couple, John and Annie, who have relocated to postbellum North Carolina. John narrates the frame segment of each story in which he, Annie, and Julius discuss Julius's tale and their lives. John's commentary, although he is well-educated, considers himself the superior of the trio, and exerts himself to demonstrate his superiority to the reader, is less than astute. Annie and Julius, on the other hand, offer challenging, perceptive analysis and, albeit to a limited extent, manipulate John in the process.

Chesnutt wanted very much to earn his living as an author and responded accordingly to the demands of his publishers and his audience. His dream, though, was to improve the social status of African Americans through his writing. In the process of manipulating the roles of African Americans in his stories, Chesnutt suggests that women, too, may be worthy of greater consideration than was popularly acknowledged.

**"MOUTH WITH MYRIAD SUBTLETIES": RACE, GENDER, AUDIENCE, AND
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INTRODUCTION

Charles Waddell Chesnutt was the first African American fiction writer to be published in the leading literary journal of the nineteenth century, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the first to receive serious literary attention. Chesnutt was born free during slavery, the son of free mulattoes. As a child, he was educated in the best schools the South had to offer, in better schools than many of his white contemporaries attended. When Chesnutt was fifteen he left school to help support his family. He found work as a pupil-teacher and continued to educate himself throughout his life as best he could. He kept a journal as a young man in which he recorded with pride that a distinguished educator "declared that he had never met a youth who, at my age and with my limited opportunities for instruction, had made such marked and rapid progress in learning."¹ Chesnutt, a compulsive achiever, considered himself a self-made man in the tradition of Benjamin Franklin and Horace Greeley.²

Chesnutt chose to become an author for a combination of financial and idealistic reasons. From an early age he loved both reading and writing. More importantly, he believed that as an author he could support his family in comfort and

¹Charles W. Chesnutt, The Journals of Charles W. Chesnutt, with an introduction by Richard H. Brodhead (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1993), 105.

²Chesnutt, Journals, 106.

style. And he believed it was "the province of literature" to undermine and eradicate "the subtle almost indefinable feeling of repulsion toward the negro, which is common to most Americans."³ If he could achieve both moral and material success as an author, Chesnutt wrote, he would "gladly devote [his] life to the work."⁴

Chesnutt's first and most successful book, The Conjure Woman (1899), is a collection of short stories in the popular style of plantation fiction. Julius, a former slave, spins tales of conjure and slavery for the entertainment and education of John, a well-to-do Northern businessman, and Annie, his wife. John narrates the frame segments which precede and follow each of Julius's conjure tales; John, Annie, and Julius discuss and interpret the dialect tales during the frame segments. The stories seem innocuous on the surface, but become subversive as each succeeding layer is penetrated. Chesnutt believed that prejudice was too deeply ingrained to be conquered by direct assault. He chose, therefore, to embed his message for tolerance and equality in layers within the frame story, the conjure tale, and the juxtaposition between the two; the reader's thoughtfulness and powers of perception determine the extent to which the message is apparent. At the most obvious level, Chesnutt transgresses the conventions of the genre by portraying the lives of the plantations' slaves rather than their owners. His most insurgent suggestion, visible to perceptive readers, is that the matter of race is neither simple nor straightforward, despite desperate assurances to the contrary by contemporaneous writers such as the Reverend

³Chesnutt, Journals, 140.

⁴Chesnutt, Journals, 140.

Thomas Dixon.

In the process of rewriting roles for African Americans, Chesnutt suggests a similar reconfiguration of women's roles, recommending that the contributions and the potential of females are being undervalued and misappreciated. Uncle Julius, Annie, and Aunt Peggy, the local conjure woman, and their interactions with John, Mars Dugal, and Mars Jeems illustrate Chesnutt's radical rendering of race and gender.

PART ONE

As Chesnutt prepared himself for adulthood, he referred consistently to his desire to write, based on his belief that he could both make an adequate living as a writer and ameliorate the lot of African Americans. Black professionals in the South after Reconstruction were, for the most part, restricted to teaching or preaching.⁵ Chesnutt, who was principal of the North Carolina State Colored Normal School by the time he reached twenty-two years of age, was not satisfied to see out his professional career in that post. Married in 1878 and a father by 1880, he was an extraordinarily ambitious man. "I want to raise my children in a different rank of life from that I sprang from. In my present vocation, I would never accumulate a competency, with all the economy and prudence, and parsimony in the world."⁶ He could not expect to better himself professionally as a black man in the South; in 1883 he left the South for good, eventually settling in Cleveland. Although Chesnutt would eventually pass the Ohio bar in 1887 and rely upon a successful legal stenography practice to support his family when writing would not generate sufficient income, in 1881 he considered that he had neither the time nor the money to train for such a profession. "In law or medicine, I would be compelled to wait half a life-time to

⁵Brodhead, Journals citing Frenise A. Logan, The Negro in North Carolina, 1876-1894 105-116, states that according to North Carolina's 1890 census 95 percent of black professionals were teachers or clergymen.

⁶Chesnutt, Journals, 154.

accomplish anything."⁷ Chesnutt believed then that he could support his wife and children in comfort and style as an author. "Literature pays -- the successful."⁸

His companion ambition was to contribute to the improvement of the status of African Americans. He dreamed of an America where the African American would be considered "not as a separate race, not as a stranger and a pariah, but as a friend and brother."⁹ "I shudder to think of exposing my children to the social and intellectual proscription to which I have been a victim," he wrote.¹⁰ Chesnutt believed that literature had the potential to convince people that blacks could and would achieve equality. A strong offensive would be met with staunch resistance, but through literature -- especially if it were designed to work indirectly -- "we will find ourselves in their midst before they think it."¹¹

Chesnutt's conjure fiction is his cunning assault. The Conjure Woman illustrates a world in which cultural values are developed and debated through storytelling.¹² As he pointed out in an interview, each of the stories contains a moral for the thoughtful reader.¹³ In addition, the book redefines both function and

⁷Chesnutt, Journals, 154.

⁸Chesnutt, Journals, 154.

⁹Chesnutt, Journals, 108.

¹⁰Chesnutt, Journals, 172.

¹¹Chesnutt, Journals, 140.

¹²Richard H. Brodhead, "'Why Could Not A Colored Man?' Chesnutt and the Transaction of Authorship," in Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 199.

¹³William L. Andrews, The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 39 citing Max Bennett Thrasher, "Mr. Chesnutt at Work: A Talk with an Author on His Methods," Boston (Massachusetts) *Evening Transcript*, 4 September 1901, 13.

capacity for African Americans and, in the process, effects a similar redefinition of women. If social roles, spheres of influence, appropriate and forbidden behaviors are designated on the bases of race and gender, Chesnutt suggests new considerations of race, the implications of which extend to gender as well.

W.E.B. DuBois wrote that Chesnutt "never forgot the absurdity of [his] artificial position [on the color line] and always refused to admit its logic or its ethical sanction."¹⁴ Chesnutt's writings frequently enact the absurdities of the color line by featuring characters who seem to be white, but could also be black.

By all indications, John and Annie are white. John's language is characterized by "Latinated diction and measured speech rhythms"¹⁵ and the casual use of sophisticated words like "desuetude," "predial," and "appurtenance." His language combined with his choice of reading material -- preposterously dense, complex tracts of philosophy -- prove that he is well-educated. He is also self-assured and arrogant. He and Annie are trained in the cultural arts, enjoy genteel entertainments, and maintain expensive diversions at home including "a fairly good library" and a piano "on which [Annie] played with skill and feeling."¹⁶ John's fortune is such that he can purchase "a plantation of considerable extent, that had formerly belonged to a wealthy man" (5) and be entertained as an equal by a cousin who is "a man of means"

¹⁴W.E.B. DuBois, "Postscript," The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races 40 (January 1933): 20.

¹⁵Brodhead, "'Why Could Not A Colored Man?,'" 198.

¹⁶Charles W. Chesnutt, The Conjure Woman, with an introduction by Robert M. Farnsworth (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1969), 102, 103. (Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically within the text.)

(4). John and Annie indulge Annie's neurasthenia, a popular nineteenth-century disease, diagnosed and treated by medical professionals, which seemed to afflict only leisure-class women (and a few men), having too much time on their hands and not enough responsibility or autonomy. An effect of Annie's disease is that she tires from the "exertion" of riding in buggies and strolling about vineyards. The deferential manner with which John refers to the doctor, the lengths to which he and Annie have gone to fulfill the doctor's prescription, and his contempt for any manifestations of folk medicine in Julius's stories identify him as a member of the power establishment that has assigned medicine as the province of licensed professional men. Annie's prescription, which John and Annie fulfill to the letter, consists of "a permanent residence, in a warmer and more equable climate" (1) such as those of "sunny France, of sleepy Spain, of Southern California" (2). Taken together, John's language, his arrogance, his easy references to far-away places, the couple's luxurious living situation, their leisure-time activities, their deference to medical "experts," -- affluence, education, and sophistication -- signify, in a word, whiteness.

In fact, John and Annie have been accepted and described as white by countless literary critics and Chesnutt scholars. William Andrews, Richard Brodhead, David Britt, R. V. Burnette, Lucinda Mackethan, Robert Stepto, and Lena Whitt all use the word "white" to describe John.¹⁷

¹⁷William L. Andrews, "The Significance of Charles W. Chesnutt's 'Conjure Stories,'" *Southern Literary Journal* 7, no. 2 (Spring 1975): 81; Brodhead, "'Why Could Not A Colored Man?'" 196; David D. Britt, "Chesnutt's Conjure Tales: What You See Is What You Get," *CLA Journal* 15, no. 3 (March 1972): 271; R.V. Burnette, "Charles

Literary critics notwithstanding, Chesnutt never actually specified John and Annie's race. They seem to be white, but nearly every indicator of whiteness that describes John and Annie intriguingly enough applies equally to Chesnutt. He too is well-educated, well-to-do, well-traveled, respectful of professional medicine, and disdainful of folk medicine.

Furthermore, although Chesnutt identifies himself and is identified by others as an African American, none of the other signs that designate the ex-slave Julius McAdoo as black apply to Chesnutt. Julius, born and raised on the McAdoo plantation, was "accustomed, until long after middle life, to look upon himself as the property of another" (65). He has probably left his plantation rarely and never traveled outside the sand-hill region of North Carolina. Far from standard English, he speaks the local dialect. (Chesnutt and John both speak standard English and they both understand Julius's dialect, but it is unlikely that John could write convincingly in dialect.) Julius is not formally educated, although he possesses an inexhaustible store of folk knowledge. More importantly, Julius's manner is self-deprecating, likely because he is poor and propertyless (131). He is wildly superstitious, preferring, for example, to suffer "a good dash of rain" (164) rather than risk bad

W. Chesnutt's The Conjure Woman Revisited," *CLA Journal* 30, no. 4 (June 1987): 438; Lucinda H. Mackethan, "Plantation Fiction, 1865-1900," in The History of Southern Literature, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 216; Robert B. Stepto, "'The Simple but Intensely Human Inner Life of Slavery': Storytelling, Fiction and the Revision of History in Charles W. Chesnutt's 'Uncle Julius Stories,'" in History and Tradition in Afro-American Culture, ed. Günter H. Lenz (New York: Campus Verlag, 1984), 30; Lena M. Whitt, "Chesnutt's Chinquapin County," *Southern Literary Journal* 13, no. 2 (Spring 1981): 44.

luck by raising an umbrella indoors. And John and Annie call him "Uncle" Julius, a familiar term for black men in the nineteenth-century South. Julius therefore is as different from John as he can be (if one considers education, language, attitude, social position, travel, medicine, and worldliness); he is also that different from Charles Chesnutt.

Chesnutt, although he shared his knowledge of black culture with Julius, was the antithesis of the characteristics that identify Julius as black. The main characteristic that Julius and Chesnutt have in common is their African descent which makes them both "black." But blackness, according to Chesnutt, is unstable and inconsistent. And whiteness, as constructed in The Conjure Woman, is indeterminate and based on flexible, shifting parameters.

Chesnutt's treatment of race in The Conjure Woman, although subversive, is also subtle due to his belief that indirect methods were the most effective against racism.¹⁸ Furthermore, his work had to first attract a publisher and a white audience to produce an effect. "It is extremely doubtful," Chesnutt pointed out thirty years later, "whether a novel, however good, could succeed financially on its sales to colored readers alone."¹⁹ Accordingly, he adopted the very popular plantation fiction formula, which "had as its end to sing of a glorious, golden, and prosperous antebellum South"²⁰ for his literary debut. This type of local color fiction dominated

¹⁸Chesnutt, Journals, 140.

¹⁹Charles W. Chesnutt, "Post-Bellum -- Pre Harlem," Breaking into Print, ed. Elmer Adler (New York: Colophon, 1937), 56.

²⁰Donald B. Gibson, Politics of Literary Expression: A Study of Major Black Writers, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1981), 128.

the major popular magazines of the North;²¹ nostalgia, prompted by industrialization and social upheaval, was elevated to the status of a national pastime following the Civil War and Reconstruction.

White southern writers vigorously defended slave-based plantation agriculture beginning in the 1830s. Following the destruction of the plantation system, the fictional subgenre plantation fiction came into vogue. The immensely popular new plantation stories represented and reconstructed the antebellum South by creating and disseminating stereotypes of patriarchy: beautiful belles, gallant cavaliers, romantic courtships, thrilling duels, elegant mansions with endless fields of cotton, benevolent masters, and devoted slaves. The stories posited a world, unlike the present-day, where men and women, blacks and whites, had clearly defined roles, each uniquely satisfying and suitable. Plantation fiction's reification of the antebellum South implicitly or explicitly attacked the social rationale that brought about Reconstruction.²²

According to plantation fiction, life was better before emancipation. African Americans, naturally childlike and immature, needed the guidance and control of white masters. Since the abolition of slavery, the argument continued, blacks had been continually deteriorating and would eventually degenerate altogether into savage beasts. The popularity of plantation fiction among Northerners as well as Southerners is therefore informing (and disturbing): at the time, the majority of white Northerners

²¹Mackethan, 210-211.

²²Farnsworth, introduction to The Conjure Woman, v-vi.

did not view African Americans as equal to themselves. Granted, the Fourteenth (1868) and Fifteenth (1870) Amendments and the Civil Rights Act of 1875 were passed; but passage seems to have been a response to defiance of earlier reconstruction efforts by former Confederate states.²³ Plantation fiction, ranging from sentimental fantasy to obvious anti-black propaganda, excused the North's abandonment of African Americans after the official end of Reconstruction in 1877.²⁴ The Reverend Thomas Dixon's The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan (1905), for instance, became the celebrated movie Birth of a Nation (1915) by D. W. Griffith.

A contemporary Virginia aristocrat, Thomas Nelson Page, established the formula for plantation fiction with his book of short stories, In Ole Virginia (1887).²⁵ "Marse Chan" (1884) was the first and most popular of his stories.²⁶ It is a sentimental, thoroughly uncritical portrayal of the halcyon days before the war. A white man introduces the story and sets the tone with a description of Virginia's plantation aristocracy: "They desired but a level path in life, and that they had, though the way was longer, and the outer world strode by them as they dreamed."²⁷ The stranger asks of Sam, a former slave, "Will you tell me all about it?"²⁸ Sam

²³J. Noel Heermance, Charles W. Chesnutt: America's First Great Black Novelist (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1974), 8.

²⁴Brodhead, introduction to The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales, by Charles W. Chesnutt (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1993), 5.

²⁵Mackethan, 212.

²⁶Mackethan, 212.

²⁷Thomas Nelson Page, Marse Chan: A Tale of Old Virginia (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1892), 1.

²⁸Page, 4.

responds with a biography of Marse Chan from his universally heralded birth through his perfect love for Miss Anne, a paragon of Southern womanhood, to his romantic, tragic death on a Civil War battlefield. Although Sam's role in the tale is ancillary at best, clearly, he is proud to consider it the story of his life, too. "Dem wuz good ole times, marster -- de bes' Sam uver see! . . . Niggers didn't hed nothin' 't *all* to do," reports Sam.²⁹ He regrets that his term of service was not longer and devotes the end of his life to slavish care of Marse Chan's decrepit dog.

Joel Chandler Harris's equally popular Uncle Remus stories, which first appeared in 1880, present a less reverent interpretation of the antebellum South. In Harris's version of plantation fiction a former slave relates African-based animal trickster tales for the entertainment and edification of a small, white boy. The trickster tales are, according to Harris's introduction, authentic; they were collected during encounters with former slaves whose confidence Harris prompted by relating similar tales himself, in dialect. African and African American animal trickster tales typically revolve around relatively powerless animals who rely on cunning, guile, and deception rather than power or authority to achieve their ends.³⁰ Harris points out in his introduction that Remus, who narrates the tales, "selects as his hero the weakest and most harmless of all animals, and brings him out victorious in contests with the

²⁹Page, 13.

³⁰Lawrence W. Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 103.

bear, the wolf, and the fox."³¹ Harris and his contemporaries were well aware of the identification between African American storytellers and the animal trickster figure.

There is far more to the trickster tale, however, that went unremarked among white Americans. Trickster tales taught the slaves valuable survival lessons. Rabbit tricks Fox into throwing him into a briar patch, for example, because he can predict Fox's reactions. A slave who was intimately acquainted with his or her owners might similarly achieve certain objectives. Other stories suggesting identification with the tricked rather than the trickster taught slaves the value of skepticism. Despite their virtually unlimited power, whites practiced deceit and deception. Kunnel Pen'leton of "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny" sells Becky and then lies to her so that she will leave the plantation with her new owner; she learns too late that she has been sold away from her beloved infant son. Many of the implications of the tales, however, were lost on Harris. He asserts, again in his introduction, that Remus possesses "nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery."³² Although the animal trickster tales narrated by Harris's Remus are far more complex than Harris recognized, and although they allow for a greater variety of slave experiences than Page's, his stories were offered and functioned as a defense of slavery.³³

Taking advantage of both Page and Harris's popularity, Chesnutt adopted the

³¹Joel Chandler Harris, Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings, (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1929), xiv.

³²Harris, xvii.

³³Harris, viii.

plantation tale framework. In fact, the cover and dust jacket for the first edition of The Conjure Woman feature two long-eared rabbits,³⁴ an obvious reference to Harris's Br'er Rabbit, even though the illustration bears no relation to the contents of Chesnutt's book. Chesnutt presents a more realistic example of a former slave's interpretation, for a white person, of plantation life. Page's Sam and Harris's Remus are utterly selfless; Julius's interaction with John, on the other hand, is motivated by acquisitive incentives.

But Julius's ends are not merely material. Chesnutt's rendering of Julius's character is an explicit reference to traditional African American strategies of cultural resistance. The human trickster, much like Julius, "could outwit his master again and again, but his primary satisfaction would be in making his master look foolish and thus exposing the myth of white omniscience and omnipotence."³⁵ Furthermore, just as Chesnutt employed subtlety to communicate his message in The Conjure Woman, Julius and his fellow slaves relied on subterfuge for survival. Slaves lied, cheated, and stole; feigned ignorance, illness, and humility; broke tools and destroyed property; and masked their feelings and emotions. "I used to try to learn the ways of these Negroes," observed the son of a South Carolina rice planter, "but I could never divest myself of the suspicion that they were learning my way faster than I was learning theirs."³⁶ Another master complained that

³⁴Chesnutt, "Post-Bellum -- Pre-Harlem," 50.

³⁵Levine, 132.

³⁶Levine, 101 citing Duncan Clinch Heyward, Seed from Madagascar (Chapel Hill, 1937), 162.

Persons live and die in the midst of Negroes and know comparatively little of their real character. They are one thing before the whites, and another before their own color. Deception towards the former is characteristic of them, whether bond or free, throughout the whole United States.³⁷

The trickster tale has been called "the most important single mechanism produced by antebellum blacks to create this frustration among whites and enhance survival among themselves."³⁸ Trickster tales offered hope and inspiration and taught and reinforced survival strategies.

Chesnutt's version of Uncle Remus, Julius, uses the stereotype, a popular convention of plantation fiction, to manipulate John. African Americans, as Chesnutt observed, are pictured in the fiction of the day as good (childlike, contented, fawning, and devoted to whites), bad (criminals, activists, or agitators for African American rights), wastrels (lazy and good-for-nothing), or minstrels "who tried to keep the white folks in a good humor by [their] capers and antics."³⁹ Or (after emancipation) they become degenerate beasts.

Chesnutt uses stereotypes to direct the response of a character and/or of his audience. John's initial impression of Julius, for example, is manipulated according to a cliché of African American behavior. When John first meets Julius, "he held on

³⁷Levine, 101 citing Charles C. Jones, Jr., The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States (1842; reprint, New York, 1969), 110-111.

³⁸Levine, 101.

³⁹Sylvia Lyons Render, Charles W. Chesnutt (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980), 58-59.

his knees a hat full of grapes, over which he was smacking his lips with great gusto, and a pile of grapeskins near him indicated that the performance was no new thing" (8-9). John's focus on Julius's stereotypically black behavior precludes investigation of Julius's character. Mary Boykin Chesnut, on the other hand, a South Carolina plantation mistress, points out in her diary that her inability to discern her slaves' reaction to an event is not proof that the slaves are unaware or disinterested. "Not by one word or look," she wrote during the bombardment of Fort Sumter,

can we detect any change in the demeanor of these Negro servants.

. . . You could not tell that they even hear the awful roar going on in the bay, though it has been dinning in their ears night and day. People talk before them as if they were chairs and tables. They make no sign. Are they stolidly stupid? or wiser than we are; silent and strong, biding their time?⁴⁰

John, however, accepts Julius's pose without considering that it may be only one among many roles Julius is capable of presenting. Julius (and Chesnut) uses the same strategy to introduce his first conjure tale. "Ef dey's an'thing a nigger lub, nex' ter 'possum, en chick'n, en watermillyums, it's scuppernon's. [They] make you smack yo' lip en roll yo' eye en wush fer mo'" (13). The familiar, non-threatening caricature of black behavior functions to soothe John and Annie and the readers despite the exotic images summoned by Julius's casual use of the words "conjured,"

⁴⁰Mary Boykin Chesnut, *A Diary from Dixie*, Isabella D. Martin and Myrta Lockett Avary, ed. (Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1961), 38.

"goophered," and "bewitch'" (11).⁴¹ Julius takes advantage of John's expectations to manipulate his response, and Chesnutt similarly manipulates his audience: at least some readers must have accepted the characterization of African Americans as harmless buffoons. Although Chesnutt uses stereotypes, a common element of plantation fiction, he subtly reorders them and removes some of the negative impact they usually convey.

He wanted his audience to accept a positive, or at least understanding, depiction of African Americans. Stereotypes notwithstanding, Chesnutt's African American characters reflect a range of human emotions and behaviors: positive and negative, flattering and disparaging. That is to say, his black characters are not limited to stereotypes. Although they may be obtuse, ignorant, superstitious, malicious, and petty, they are also perceptive, wise, vulnerable, generous, and caring; they embody all of the faults and virtues of human beings. Chesnutt's African Americans encompass the possibilities of the human race.

As an aspiring author whose audience consisted for the most part of readers who were at best uninformed, if not openly hostile, Chesnutt had to be deliberately cautious about both the form and content of his stories.⁴² The narration of an educated, well-to-do, Northern businessman insulates the genteel reader within a comfortable, familiar milieu where the hierarchy of social values remains firmly in

⁴¹Eric J. Sundquist, To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993), 363.

⁴²Farnsworth, introduction to The Conjure Woman, vii.

place.⁴³ John's narration of Julius's tales creates an illusion of distance for certain of his readers that accommodates contemplation of the strange sounds, word arrangements, and meanings of vernacular English. His narration provides access to the titillation of the peculiar circumstances and unfamiliar, even forbidden actions of the social inferior and racial "other." Chesnutt, unlike Page or Harris, highlights the slaves' daily existence and focuses on their world, including their heartbreak and affliction, their triumphs and joys, rather than their masters'.

The local color tale within a frame story, a common device of plantation fiction popularized by Page and Harris, among others, is perfect for Chesnutt's purposes; his censure is masked. The strategy of embedding his message in several layers within the frame story, the conjure tale, and the juxtaposition between the two makes it accessible as the reader is willing or able to investigate.

Slavery was never a condition to be envied. Nonetheless, certain freedoms of the lower classes must have appealed to Victorian women in particular, bound by corsets and social taboos. Victorian ladies were expected to limit their interests and activities to the domestic sphere; the rest of the world was the province of men. According to convention, women were pure, pious, intellectually incapable and undeveloped, helpless, and dependent. Controversial new women's colleges emphasized physical exercise; regulated, orderly living; and feminine graces over

⁴³Valerie Babb, "Subversion and Repatriation in *The Conjure Woman*," *Southern Quarterly: A Journal of Arts in the South* 25, no. 2 (Winter 1987): 66 referring to Richard Bridgman, *The Colloquial Style in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966).

intellectual achievements. The dean of Smith College explained that women's colleges "exist not for the competition of women with men, but for the ennobling of women as women. They do not, or they should not exist primarily for higher learning."⁴⁴ Women's colleges perpetuated the idea that women ought to limit themselves to their own, domestic sphere. Even so, the new institutions sustained an on-going, heated storm of protest from physicians and the public.⁴⁵ According to Alexis de Tocqueville's Democracy in America (1835), "the inexorable opinion of the public carefully circumscribes woman within the narrow circle of domestic interests and duties and forbids her to step beyond it."⁴⁶ He concludes that "although the women of the United States are confined within the narrow circle of domestic life, and their situation is in some respects one of extreme dependence, I have nowhere seen woman occupying a loftier position."⁴⁷

Clearly, the domestic sphere was fraught with contradictions and dualities. Womanhood was supposed to require docility, obedience, and self-denial. Nonetheless, housekeeping and the realities of motherhood, pregnancy, childbirth, and family management demanded physical and emotional strength, self-confidence, and

⁴⁴Sheila M. Rothman, Woman's Proper Place: A History of Changing Ideals and Practices, 1870 to the Present (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 40 citing Briggs, "Address," 151.

⁴⁵Rothman, 26-42.

⁴⁶Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, volume 2, book 3, chapter 10 (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 201.

⁴⁷de Tocqueville, chapter 12, 214.

self-reliance.⁴⁸

Many women, Annie included, suffered from the "fashionable diseases": hysteria and neurasthenia.⁴⁹ According to the books, newspapers, and popular magazines of the day, ill health, exacerbated by a combination of unreasonable social expectations and medical ignorance, was pervasive among white, middle-class women.⁵⁰ Medical professionals assumed that women were controlled, mind and body, by their wombs.⁵¹ A professor addressing a medical society in 1870 stated that it seemed "as if the Almighty, in creating the female sex, had taken the uterus and built up a woman around it."⁵² The uterus, doctors concluded, was a dangerous organ to possess. Women "are and must be subject to the periodical infirmity of their sex; which for the time and in every case, however unattended by physical suffering, unfits them for any responsible effort of mind, and in many cases of body also."⁵³ Thus, even a woman who seemed healthy and capable could not survive outside the domestic sphere. The consequences of defiance, physicians warned, could range from

⁴⁸Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Hysterical Woman: Sex Roles and Role Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America," in Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 199.

⁴⁹Ann Douglas Wood, "'The Fashionable Diseases': Women's Complaints and their Treatment in Nineteenth-Century America," Clio's Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women, eds. Mary S. Hartman and Lois Banner (New York: Harper Colophon, 1974), 1.

⁵⁰Rothman, 25; Wood, 1.

⁵¹Rothman, 23; Wood, 3.

⁵²Wood, 3 citing M. L. Holbrook, Parturition Without Pain: A Code of Directions for Escaping from the Primal Curse (New York: Wood & Holbrook, 1875), 15.

⁵³Rothman, 25 citing Mary Putnam Jacobi, The Question of Rest for Women During Menstruation (New York: 1877), 4.

collapse to insanity to death. A leading psychiatrist of the time, Isaac Ray, believed that "with women it is but a step from extreme nervous susceptibility to downright hysteria and from that to overt insanity."⁵⁴

Although John confesses that the life of a gentleman is sometimes "rather dull" (103), his wife is so bored by lack of activity and inspiration that she is subject to dangerous melancholy "fraught with grave consequences" (133). Contemplation of "free niggers," "po' buckrahs," slavery, and conjure, however, rouses her from the semi-stupor that is her life.

Annie, like many of her contemporaries, is fundamentally devitalized by her privileged existence.⁵⁵ Her vitality cannot be revived by any of John's exertions; he reads novels, he summons the hands to serenade her, he invites friends in for conversation, and he encourages a steady supply of letters from friends and relations in the North, all to no avail. Julius's narrative, "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny," delivered in local dialect, restores "sympathy, indignation, pity, and at the end lively satisfaction" (158) to the formerly prostrate Annie. She calls the story "a godsend" (167). Chesnut's illustration of privilege -- its price and its treatment -- demonstrate that rigid demarcation between white and black, rich and poor, male and female, exacts a toll on the privileged as well as the disadvantaged. The "disadvantages" connected with the status "lady" or "gentleman," however were nowhere near the tribulations connected with the status of "slave," which rendered one vulnerable to the

⁵⁴Rothman, 25, citing G. J. Barker-Benfield, The Horrors of the Half-Known Life (New York: 1976), 83.

⁵⁵Brodhead, "'Why Could Not A Colored Man?'" 205.

slightest whim of capricious, cruel, and greedy masters.

The seven stories that compose The Conjure Woman offer several levels of meaning. The three characters who inhabit the frame story serve as representatives and interpreters of each one's apparent race, gender, and social class. The different layers of meaning within the stories and the role each character plays in unearthing them are important parts of Chesnutt's strategy to undermine prejudice against blacks. Furthermore, his female characters circumvent the restraints of their positions in the social hierarchy.

John, as the wealthy, educated, landowning male, is the apparent representative of authority. His life is regulated and defined by his insistence that only those facts which can be accounted for according to rational, orderly rules of logic and supported by empirical findings have any merit; he values objectivity above all else. His inflexible insistence on reason, and the rigid categorization that he imposes on his wife and coachman, however, limit his powers of perception.

Annie, on the other hand, John's wife, represents leisure-class women. As presented by her husband, she is his antithesis: irrational, instinctual, intuitive, empathetic, sympathetic, and subjective, not to mention inferior. He tends to belittle her throughout the stories. His exclusive use of the diminutive form of her name, for example, infantilizes her. In sum, John highlights Annie's powerlessness throughout The Conjure Woman.

The first line of the first story, "The Gophered Grapevine," denies Annie agency while reinforcing John and his code of rationality. "Some years ago my wife

was in poor health, and our family doctor, in whose skill and honesty I had implicit confidence, advised a change of climate" (1). Annie is defined solely as wife, her name omitted altogether. She is ill. Decisions are made for her, not by her. John mentions that he trusts her doctor; Annie's opinion of the doctor is, apparently, irrelevant. John's status as ruler and protector is firmly established: he is the doctor's representative and agent-at-hand, acquiring authority as he commends and carries out the doctor's recommendations.

John takes Annie's reaction to Julius's stories as evidence of the limitations of her female intellect. For example, when Julius first meets John and Annie, he informs them that the McAdoo vineyard is cursed: John "felt somewhat interested" (12) while Annie "was evidently much impressed" (12). John seems to think that Annie's reaction indicates lack of discernment and susceptibility to suggestion. But a more persuasive interpretation is that Annie is hopelessly bored and so Julius's storytelling, his strange dramas and dilemmas, are relief from monotony, if not redeeming high points in her tedious life. Likewise, that she should express interest in an anecdote about something called "goopher" -- a phenomenon so unfamiliar that she and John do not even recognize the word -- is hardly surprising.

Moreover, Annie's reactions to the tales are actually more insightful than John's, and not as limited. Annie defies John's attempts to discount her mental capacity in "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny," wherein Julius tells a story to prove that a rabbit's foot brings luck to its bearer. John claims that Julius failed to make his point. Annie answers John's criticism with a more astute understanding of Julius's

tales: "'I rather suspect,' replied my wife promptly, 'that Sis' Becky had no rabbit's foot'" (160). John labels "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny," a story in which animals take on human attributes, "an ingenious fairy tale" (159), Annie counters that "the story bears the stamp of truth, if ever a story did" (159). John interprets Annie's response literally, and dismisses it. The truth that Annie refers to, however, is not that little Mose was actually transformed from human into hummingbird, but that Sis Becky's and Mose's story is a metaphor suggesting that the endurance of enslavement required strength, determination, fortitude, and creativity, among other things. Annie, unlike John, recognizes that Julius's story illustrates human dignity and purpose in the midst of degradation.⁵⁶

John's efforts to establish that Annie is his intellectual inferior, to the contrary, establish his own affinity for narrow-mindedness and underestimation. For instance, John, having undertaken the control of his wife and their household, is to blame for any irrational transgressions in their daily lives. All of Annie's actions, therefore, are either insignificant or, whether John approves of them or not, his responsibility. For example, John firmly decides against rehiring Julius's grandson in "Mars Jeems's Nightmare." He announces and reiterates the decision -- "it is impossible" (67). Nonetheless, when Annie defies her husband and rehires the young man, John must let her decision stand. "I did not share my wife's rose-colored hopes in regard to Tom; but as I did not wish the servants to think there was any conflict of authority in

⁵⁶Andrews, "The Significance of Charles W. Chesnutt's 'Conjure Stories,'" 95-96.

the household, I let the boy stay" (102). John feels obliged to indulge her, even as she defies him. To reverse Annie's action would mean that his control over her is incomplete. Annie is not as foolish as John would have his audience believe although he tries and tries to make it seem so.

Julius is also smarter than John would like to grant. For example, as earlier discussed, Julius manipulates John's initial assessment of him to ensure being underrated. As planned, John accepts that Julius is the lesser man and points it out frequently. In the introduction to "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," John describes Julius's intimate knowledge of the neighborhood, geographically, agriculturally, and for hunting and fishing, and his amazing skill with animals (64-65). However, rather than acknowledge how helpful Julius has been to him and Annie, strangers to the South, John demeans Julius, citing his skills as evidence of bestiality (John says he is more familiar with the minds of animals "than mere use would seem to account for" (64-65)) and mental incapacity (Julius has been crippled by the experience of slavery so that he considers himself an appurtenance to the plantation (64-65)). John would have us believe, and so convince himself and Julius, that the skills and knowledge Julius has acquired over a lifetime of labor have reduced him to something slightly less than human, a cousin of the animals and a dependency to the plantation. The extent of Julius's knowledge, however, even when described by John, is worthy of admiration rather than disdain or ridicule. John's lack of perception, rather than any deficiency on Julius's part, is what John manages to convey.

"Sis' Becky's Pickaninny" contains another of John's unsuccessful attempts to

deprecate Julius. This time, despite John's formal education and superior command of standard English, Julius triumphs in a battle of words. Julius announces his belief that a rabbit's foot is a talisman of good fortune. John criticizes Julius's superstition, equating it with lack of reason and common sense (28) and implying that the plight of African Americans stems from their superstitious nature. John criticizes Julius's faith that "the fore-foot of a poor dead rabbit, with which he timorously felt his way along through a life surrounded by snares and pitfalls, beset by enemies on every hand, can promote happiness or success, or ward off failure or misfortune!" (135). John's description of the foot's function, however, suggests that it was a useful survival tool for the rabbit. The correlation between the foot's original function and Julius's plight as a black man in a hostile world are lost on John.

Julius's ability to effect broad-based change is limited by his race and class, yet he cunningly achieves small victories over his opponent. John underrates both Julius and Annie throughout The Conjure Woman, demonstrating his own insecurity and shortsightedness in the process. Annie and Julius gradually establish a cooperative relationship from which John is excluded and by which he is manipulated. Julius's first story, "The Goophered Grapevine," is about a slave who, through no fault of his own, becomes a particularly lucrative possession. Henry eats goophered grapes, but because he ate them without realizing that they had been goophered, the conjurer reduces his penalty. Instead of death, Henry's health, vitality, strength, and sexuality vary with the grapevines, in concert with the growing seasons. Henry's master, a particularly greedy man, sells him each spring when he is young and vital

and buys him back in the fall, for a profit of one thousand dollars, when the grapevines go into hibernation and he concomitantly deteriorates. Unfortunately, Mars Dugal is swindled by a con man's scheme to increase grape yield; as a result, when the grapevines die Henry withers away, then dies too. "'Is that story true?' asked Annie doubtfully, but seriously" at the conclusion (33). "It's des ez true ez I'm a-settin' here," responds Julius (33). He offers to prove it by leading Annie to the slave's gravesite in the plantation burial ground. Annie's question, although it is lost on John, is directed toward the callous cruelties of Mars Dugal and plantation slavery, rather than the specifics of grape conjure. Julius's response does not address specific details of the story, but points to evidence in the form of human remains and memories. Slavery did indeed exist and it was indeed terrible; the presence of Julius, a former slave, is one proof, the graveyard and the plantation are others.

"Mars Jeems's Nightmare" presents another Annie-Julius interaction that goes unnoticed by John. At the conclusion to the story Annie criticizes it in terms typically associated with John: "'That is a very strange story, Uncle Julius,' observed my wife, smiling, 'and Solomon's explanation is quite improbable'" (100). John concurs. Annie's smile as she makes the observation, though, is revealing. She is smiling because the story details the transformation of a mean, heartless master into a more merciful and humane man, whose plantation flourishes in response. In the beginning, Mars Jeems's treatment of his slaves is unusually cruel and he is unhappy; at the conclusion, his philosophy of ownership has undergone a drastic change and his plantation and slaves, as a result, are the finest in the area. Everyone lives happily

ever after. Annie appreciates hearing about a humane plantation ownership, a rare example. Her decision, therefore, to give Julius's grandson, Tom, a second chance -- despite John's adamant insistence that he will make no allowances, has hardened his heart, and will stay firm as a rock -- is expected; she hears a moral in the story (John does not); she fulfills Julius's request in blatant defiance of her husband.

In the story of "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny," Annie corrects John's interpretation of the tale and then interacts with Julius, in a sort of call and response pattern, to supply information that John is unable to access. "By the way, Julius," remarks John, "your story does n't establish what you started out to prove, -- that a rabbit's foot brings good luck" (159). Julius responds that he is sure he made the point, so sure that he will have Annie, his other listener, defend him against her husband's charge. "'I rather suspect,' replied my wife promptly, 'that Sis' Becky had no rabbit's foot'" (160). Not only is Annie able to supply the moral that John cannot and speak on behalf of Julius in response to a charge from her husband, the moral is supplied in coded language through which she and Julius communicate, but which is incomprehensible to John. Annie accepts Julius's gift of his rabbit's foot which "no 'mount er money could buy" (135) despite her husband's scorn and without his knowledge. Her alliance with Julius against her husband gives her strength, ends her depression, and cures her illness. "My wife's condition took a turn for the better from this very day, and she was soon on the way to ultimate recovery" (160). John, meanwhile, fails to recognize the collusion between his wife and his black coachman. If well-to-do white men are not as smart as they would like us to believe, then women

and African Americans are far smarter than popular conceptions indicate. Given John's position as the representative of masculine authority, Chesnutt is subtly winning respect for Julius and Annie as they hold their own and achieve small conquests.

Within the confines of the stories that make up The Conjure Woman, Julius and Annie effectively disrupt the power relationship between themselves and John, defying expectations of standard race and gender roles. Between them, for example, they control the topics of discussion in each story, they control the action of the conjure stories and the limited action of the frame stories, and, most importantly, although John offers an interpretation of each story, they provide the thoughtful, meaningful, useful interpretations. The battleground of The Conjure Woman is words and ideas; John acquits himself poorly against the verbal maneuverings of Annie and Julius, despite his superior erudition and cultural position.

Julius, as the storyteller, controls the subject matter of each offering to suit his personal agenda. "In every instance," Chesnutt wrote later, "Julius had an axe to grind, for himself or his church, or some member of his family, or a white friend."⁵⁷ Julius with Annie arranges the conclusions of the stories and the ways in which they are interpreted.

Consider "The Goophered Grapevine": Julius has lived on the old McAdoo plantation for years and earns a living selling grapes from the abandoned vines. He cautions John repeatedly against buying the plantation: "This, doubtless, accounted for

⁵⁷Chesnutt, "Post-Bellum -- Pre-Harlem," 49.

his advice to me not to buy the vineyard, though whether it inspired the goopher story I am unable to state" (35). Although Julius's story attempts to establish that the vineyard is not suitable for cultivation without his own supervision, John fails to recognize the self-interested connection between Julius's story and his intention to buy the plantation; he refuses to grant the story any significance. Julius (and the author), meanwhile, use the storytelling opportunity to illustrate the hardships of slavery, the cruelty of masters, the dehumanizing potential of enslavement, and the essential, persistent humanity of the slaves. And Annie and Julius take advantage of the story to establish a bond of cooperation. John's inability to extract information or meaning from Julius's stories forfeits interpretation to Annie and Julius.

Furthermore, the Annie-Julius alliance violates the conventions for acceptable social interaction in the nineteenth century South. Marriage between blacks and whites was legally prohibited. Sexual relations between black men and white women, particularly among the upper classes, were socially prohibited. The same taboo remained firmly in place during the notorious 1930s Scottsboro, Alabama trial of nine black youths charged with rape, for example, a judge instructed a jury that consensual sexual intercourse between a black man and a white woman was an impossibility, that any sexual interaction between a black man and a white woman was rape.⁵⁸ Sexual interaction between white men and black women, on the other hand, had been commonplace throughout the century and before. Slave owners commonly engaged in

⁵⁸Dan T. Carter, Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South, rev. ed., (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979).

sexual intercourse with female slaves, at times with the explicit intention of impregnating a woman in order to increase the slave population. Intercourse of any kind between black men and white women, however, was taboo.

Without the oppression of *all* women, the planter class could not be assured of absolute authority. In a biracial slave society where "racial purity" was a defining characteristic of the master class, total control of the reproductive females was of paramount concern for elite males.

Patriarchy was the bedrock upon which the slave society was founded, and slavery exaggerated the pattern of subjugation that patriarchy had established.⁵⁹

Any alliance between a white woman and a black man was a threat to the social foundation Southerners were struggling so hard to maintain. The relationship between Annie and Julius was without John's knowledge while serving to manipulate him, pushing the boundaries of acceptable behavior.

⁵⁹Catherine Clinton, The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), xiv.

PART TWO

Chesnutt's The Conjure Woman presents and makes acceptable a world where black men and white women work together, manipulating white men to their ends. Similarly, the power configuration within the conjure tale of "The Goophered Grapevine" is neither conventional nor straightforward. Mars Dugal McAdoo, a rich, white, landowner and slave master, depends on the cooperation and intervention of "a conjuh 'oman livin' down 'mong's' de free niggers" to maintain his profitable plantation (15).

Mars Dugal, according to social and economic indicators, is a powerful man. He is a white, male adult; he owns a "spacious mansion" on a large estate and many slaves (8). Needless to say, he would have had virtually unlimited legal dominion over his human possessions. As early as 1669, for example, it was legally impossible for a master to be guilty of murdering his slave; slaves were possessions not human beings according to the law, with no more licit rights than horses.

Dugal has the only vineyard in an area with a substantial African American population. As luck would have it, scuppernong grapes are wonderfully sweet and, according to the testimony of Julius, African Americans love scuppernongs. Naturally, "atter a w'ile Mars Dugal' begin to miss his scuppernon's. Co'se he 'cuse' de niggers er it, but dey all 'nied it ter de las'" (14). Dugal cannot make the slaves admit that they are stealing the grapes, nor can he prevent them from stealing

the grapes. He and his overseer attempt to entrap the thieves, but the grapes continue to disappear. "Mars Dugal' sot spring guns en steel traps, en he en de oberseah sot up nights. . . . But somehow er nudder dey could n' nebber ketch none er de niggers" (14-15). Despite his impressive social standing, Mars Dugal is apparently unable to enforce his authority upon the slaves. Defeated, he turns to Aunt Peggy, the conjure woman.

Aunt Peggy is Mars Dugal's social, legal, cultural opposite: she is a woman, she is poor, and she is black. She is officially powerless. Nonetheless, all de darkies fum Rockfish ter Beaver Creek wuz feared er her. She could wuk de mos' powerfulness' kin' er goopher, -- could make people hab fits, er rheumatiz, er make 'em des dwinel away en die; en dey say she went out ridin' de niggers at night, fer she wuz a witch 'sides bein' a cunjuh 'oman. (15)

She obviously commands a great deal of respect within the black community.

Dugal, too, demonstrates respect for Peggy. For instance, he carefully solicits her assistance rather than commanding it.

One day in de spring er de year, ole miss pack' up a basket er chick'n en poun'-cake, en a bottle er scuppernon' wine, en Mars Dugal' tuk it in his buggy en driv over ter Aun' Peggy's cabin. He tuk de basket in, en had a long talk wid Aun' Peggy. (16)

Dugal travels to consult Peggy rather than summoning her to his presence; he goes into her house to discuss his concerns rather than having her wait upon him at his

buggy; he brings a gift, a gift prepared by his wife rather than his slaves; he drives himself to the meeting rather than being driven by his coachman; and he participates in "a long talk," indicating that he cannot simply order Peggy to help him. The basket, furthermore, is not payment for services, but offered to persuade Peggy to talk with him. He is the supplicant to her assistance.

Peggy agrees to assert her protection over Mars Dugal's grapevines for a fee. Whereas Mars Dugal's accusations were met with denial, Aunt Peggy has merely to inform a single slave that she has goophered the grapevines; word spreads throughout the population without further effort on her part. "Atter dat de niggers let de scuppernon's 'lone, en Mars Dugal' did n' hab no 'casion ter fine no mo' fault" (17). The reaction of Henry, a new slave, to the information that he has inadvertently eaten goophered grapes speaks to Aunt Peggy's potency. "He 'uz dat tarrified dat he turn pale, en look des like he gwine ter die right in his tracks" (19).

Aunt Peggy is not merely an enactor of the goopher, she also manipulates the spells. For example, Henry eats goophered grapes, but because he did not know that they were goophered, Peggy permits him to live, with certain rituals of concession. When Henry offers Aunt Peggy a ham, she declares that he may eat all the scuppernong grapes that he wants. "En bein' ez he fotch her de ham, she fix' it so he kin eat all de scuppernon' he want" (21). Aunt Peggy is a skilled practitioner of her art.⁶⁰

⁶⁰Aunt Peggy's efforts result in a 50 percent increase for Mars Dugal's wine making. That counts as material success according to his production-oriented standard and by the slaves' consumption-oriented standard.

In addition to Mars Dugal, Peggy defeats another prime representative of authority, a white, male doctor, the embodiment of power and authority. Because Henry ate goophered grapes, he waxes and wanes with the growing seasons. His new owner, thinking that Henry might die, "sent fer a mighty fine doctor, but de med'cine did n' 'pear ter do no good" (25). Even when Henry informs the doctor of the cause of his illness, "de doctor des laff at 'im" (25). Unable to diagnose the problem, the doctor dismisses it. Henry remains close to death. "Dey ain' nuffin pertickler de matter wid 'im -- leastways de doctor say so -- 'cep'n a tech er de rheumatiz; but his ha'r is all fell out, en ef he don't pick up his strenk mighty soon, I spec' I'm gwine ter lose 'im," laments Henry's owner (26). Henry's disease, administered and controlled by Aunt Peggy, vanquishes the professionally trained, white, male doctor.

The doctor, although unable to offer either treatment or cure, rejects Henry's conjure-based explanation out of hand. Mars Dugal, on the other hand, acts according to the influences of conjuration. He turns to Aunt Peggy, whose power is rooted in conjure, when he cannot establish control over the slave population. Although he may claim not to believe in conjure -- "some er de w'ite folks don't, er says dey don't" -- it is conjure that solves his problem (11). And Mars Dugal recognizes and participates in Henry's conjure-induced cycles. "W'en he see how Henry git young in de spring en ole in de fall, he 'lowed ter hisse'f ez how he could make mo' money out'n Henry dan by wukkin' him in de cotton-fiel'" (24). Dugal accordingly sets up a scam whereby he sells Henry in the spring when he is "spry and libely" and then buys him back in the fall when he "begin ter git ole en stiff in de

j'int's" for an overall profit of one thousand dollars (23). "Dugal tuk good keer uv [Henry] dyoin' er de winter, -- give 'im w'iskey ter rub his rheumatiz, en terbacker ter smoke, en all he want to eat" (27). Mars Dugal recognizes that Henry changes with the seasons; the changes are brought about by Aunt Peggy's conjure; to recognize the changes is to recognize the conjure. The conjure tale contained within "The Goophered Grapevine" suggests a transposed power configuration: the elite white male is dependent upon the cooperation of a marginal black female.

In the story of "Hot-Foot Hannibal" Mars Dugal clearly recognizes and acknowledges conjure and the power of conjure and he recognizes Aunt Peggy's status as a conjure doctor. When Dugal is presented with evidence of conjuration in the form of a charm he admits the potential of the object and that his slave Hannibal suffered under its spell. "Mars' Dugal' tu'nt w'ite ez chalk. 'W'at debil's wuk is dis?' sezee. 'No wonder de po' nigger's feet eetched'" (218). Mars Dugal had lost slaves to the power of conjure and had thereafter directed his slaves to have nothing to do with any goopher. Dugal is so considerate of Aunt Peggy's awesome power that he would like to have her whipped. "Sump'n got ter be done ter l'arn dat ole witch ter keep her han's off'n my niggers" (218). He would like to have Aunt Peggy whipped because he is afraid of her, but she is a free woman and "he wuz 'feared she'd cunjuh him" (219). Dugal, the slavemaster, both acknowledges and reveres the power of conjure and of Aunt Peggy.

The conjure story within "Mars Jeems's Nightmare" also contains the provocative suggestion that control and authority did not rest solely in the hands of

white, landowning males in the postbellum South. The lapses from conventional portrayals of power in this story, too, are striking. Mars Jeems McLean is a very cruel master. His slaves work long hours on scant rations, they are not permitted any amusements, and lovemaking above all is strictly forbidden. Solomon, a slave, asks Aunt Peggy to moderate Mars Jeems's cruelty and reunite Solomon with his sweetheart who was sent away by Jeems. Peggy agrees to assert herself on Solomon's behalf in exchange for two pecks of corn. Accordingly, she gives Solomon a potion and strict directions for its use on Jeems. "It's gwine ter do 'im good, but he' hab a monst'us bad dream fus'," she promises (77). Solomon must keep her informed of plantation events because she "has ter kinder keep track un it [the conjure] ter see dat it doan 'complish no mo' d'n I 'lows fer it ter do" (77). White people, according to Peggy, are not immune to conjure; rather, the limits to her powers are self-imposed. Although she qualifies her statement -- "I has ter be kinder keerful 'bout cunj'in' w'ite folks" (77) -- the idea that a "free-nigger cunjuh 'oman" (76) would dare assert her powers over a white man is very much at odds with the ethos advanced by plantation fiction.

Jeems ingests Peggy's potion in a batch of okra soup; the next morning he leaves the plantation for a month. Three or four days later a neighbor delivers a new slave, a stray who was purchased very recently at auction, to the McLean plantation. The new slave claims not to know his name or where he came from. "My head is all kin' er mix' up," he tells the overseer (82). When the overseer, Mr. Johnson, attempts to whip him, the new slave is startled by the first blow -- "as if he did n'

know w'at ter make of [it]" -- and then attacks when Johnson begins a second blow -- "ef some er de yuther niggers had n' stop' 'im, it 'peared ez ef he mought 'a' made it wa'm fer Ole Nick [the overseer] dere fer a w'ile" (82). The new slave does not work well, seems unfamiliar with fieldwork, doesn't mix with the other slaves, and generally "could n' 'pear ter git it th'oo his min' dat he wuz a slabe" (84).

Eventually the overseer sells him because he is unable, despite frequent whippings and fastings, to function as a slave. When Peggy learns that the new slave has been sold she upbraids Solomon for failing to keep her informed of the proceedings on the McLean plantation. She sternly instructs Solomon to deliver a goophered sweet potato forthwith to the new slave. The very next day Mars Jeems reappears, but he is so altered that Solomon recognizes him only by his voice. "He wuz dress' lack a po' w'ite man, en wuz bare-footed, en look' monst'us pale en peaked, ez ef he'd des come th'oo a ha'd spell er sickness" (91). Peggy has changed a prosperous, slaveowning gentleman into poor white trash, unrecognizable to his own slave. "Dey su't'nly wuz a change come ober Mars Jeems," relates Solomon (92-93).

Furthermore, one of Mars Jeems's first acts upon returning home is to fire Mr. Johnson. Johnson is known for his ability to control unruly slaves. According to Mars Jeems, he is the best overseer in the county (96). Nonetheless, he is fired summarily -- "de oberseah wuz so 'stonish' he did n' ha'dly know w'at ter say" (96) - - and refused a recommendation -- "I doan lack yo' looks sence I come back I's feared ef I'd meet you alone in de woods some time, I mought wanten ha'm you" (97), says Mars Jeems. Peggy's goopher fundamentally transforms the McLean

plantation and everyone, white and black, associated with it.

The changes effected by Peggy are permanent, drastic, and dramatic.

All dem things I done tol' you ain' nuffin 'side'n de change w'at come ober Mars Jeems fum dat time on. Aun' Peggy's goopher had made a noo man un 'im enti'ely. De nex' day atter he come back, he tol' de han's dey neenter wuk on'y fum sun ter sun, en he cut dey tasks down En he 'lowed ef de niggers want ter hab a dance in de big ba'n any Sad'day night, dey mought hab it: (98)

Before Peggy's intervention, the McLean plantation was a place of atrocious hardship and unusual cruelty and Mars Jeems was a man who "nebber 'peared ter hab no feelin' fer nobody" (70-71). Following her interference he is a happily married man with "a finer plantation, en slicker-lookin' niggers, en . . . he 'uz makin' mo' cotton en co'n, dan any yuther gent'eman in de county" (99). Peggy improves the lot of the McLeans as well as the McLean slaves. "And they all lived happily ever after," summarizes John (99).

Peggy wields far more power, particularly over white slaveowners, than Chesnut's white readers would have likely approved. She manipulates slaves because they believe in her and she manipulates masters because of her power over their slaves. According to social, legal, and political indicators, Aunt Peggy is supposed to be powerless, but she is not. Conversely, Mars Dugal's power, which is virtually unlimited according to the law and the custom of plantation fiction is shown to be fallible and vulnerable.

The Conjure Woman is comprised of circumstances which, for lack of a better phrase, are not what they seem. Annie and Julius seem submissive and obedient to John's authority, but they manipulate him to their own intentions. Peggy is officially powerless, but her influence extends from Rockfish to Beaver Creek and effects rich whites as well as poor blacks. The Conjure Woman may seem like the typical plantation fiction that created and disseminated a myth, but in fact it presents a more realistic rendering of human interaction. Although the relationships in the stories appear conventional and unobjectionable on the surface, they are surprisingly subversive.

Insofar as John represents a reader, Chesnut's subversive tactics are a form of conjure; they exist, but John and the reader may choose not to recognize them. In that case, Chesnut, an African American, has proven himself the intellectual superior. He presents a world where black men, white women, and black women manipulate white men and the environment to their purposes. Another possibility is that the reader recognizes all this and approves of Chesnut's destabilization of the terms black, white, male, and female. Plantation fiction was created, after all, in response to the abolition of slavery and concomitant agitation for increased legal rights, education, and social freedoms for women.

CONCLUSION

The Conjure Woman is a message from Chesnutt for tolerance and equality. Granted, the strength of the plea is tempered by the tension between his desire to live well and his desire to improve the social standing of blacks in America. Chesnutt had to moderate the radical fire of his beliefs in order to be published; he tailored his writing to appeal to the conservative, white reading public and considered the impact of his words carefully.

The Conjure Woman was both the least incendiary and the best received of Chesnutt's books. Not surprisingly, his most popular fiction was also his most subtle. Following the success of his first book, Chesnutt began to take greater liberties with his readers' sensibilities. These more radical novels, however, were not well received.

Plantation fiction in the hands of Dixon, Page, and Harris suggests that the system of plantation slavery was a boon and a blessing for all concerned. Chesnutt's plantation fiction, although he was always profoundly affected by the demands of authorship and audience, advocates and reinforces ideas that the genre was created to dispel: race is neither simple nor straightforward; gender roles are arbitrary and subjective.

"We Wear the Mask"

Paul Laurence Dunbar

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,
 This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
 And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
 Nay, let them only see us, while
 We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
 We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
 But let the world dream otherwise,
 We wear the mask!

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