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Scriptural Allusion and Metaphorical Marriage in Charles Chesnutt's 'The Wife of His Youth'

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The Cruelty of Husbands, the Complicity of Wives, and the Cooperation of Community in Rose Terry Cooke's "Mrs. Flint's Married Experience"

Rose Terry Cooke's "Mrs. Flint's Married Experience" (1880) provides a penetrating analysis of the abuse of patriarchal power in an old New England village. The institution of marriage in Cooke's Bassett, Connecticut, demands the subordination of Mrs. Flint to her cruel, miserly husband and a rigidified form of Calvinism promotes the deacon's parsimony, hypocrisy, and greed. Patriarchal authority also governs the entire church-centered community; it not only protects the abusive deacon but perpetuates the abuse on a larger scale. In short, the social and institutional practices of men in power come under harsh indictment in "Mrs. Flint."

But a fair reading of the story must also consider Cooke's views on the responsibilities of women in marriage. A committed Christian with roots deep in Puritan soil, Cooke believed that the divinely ordained nature of woman required the shelter of a home where, as wife and mother, a woman can undertake "the legitimate business of a married," a "genuine," woman. Indeed, marriage is so clearly an institution established by God that it should be violated only in the case of adultery, and the marital relationship itself is so sacred that, no less than men, women must shoulder much of the responsibility for its success. Cooke is accordingly tough on women who make poor choices in marriage. A woman has the right to choose her husband, but then "to her belong all the consequences of such a choice."¹

These views highlight a feature central to my reading of the story: Mrs. Flint's suffering stems not only from the hardness of the deacon's character, not only from the workings of patriarchal power, but also from the poor judgment of Mrs. Flint herself.² It stems, too, from the lack of communication between Mrs. Flint and her daughter. It is poor judgment and failed

raelites is Charles Chesnutt. Chesnutt, in fact, is a striking example of what T.S. Eliot would have regarded as enormous individual talent working within and enriching a tradition. Nowhere is Chesnutt's use of the Old Testament more pronounced and artistically polished than in his short story "The Wife of His Youth." This first and most famous of the nine tales in his 1899 collection *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* has been justly praised by critics from William Dean Howells to Eric Sundquist. Howells, for example, pronounced it "altogether a remarkable piece of work,"³ while J. Saunders Redding has gone so far as to submit that it is so reminiscent of one of Nathaniel Hawthorne's tales that "it might have been conceived and executed by the author of *Twice Told Tales*."⁴ But while critics have praised the story and studied its narratological subtlety⁵ and its incisive "critique of color consciousness and intraracial racism,"⁶ the importance of scriptural allusion to the story's meaning has largely gone unnoticed. Another, closer look at "The Wife of His Youth," however, will reveal that not only is Chesnutt drawing a tight parallel between the Blue Veins, the elitist group of light-skinned blacks in the story, and the post-exilic Israelites, but that such a parallel is central to a proper understanding of the story's meaning.

Chesnutt provides us with a key—indeed, *the* key—to that meaning in the title he has so purposefully given the tale. In truth, the story's title is charged with significance. It is through its title, in fact, that Chesnutt signals the story's overriding concern with racial identity, assimilation, and ethnic allegiance. The story's title has multiple sources, all of which are found in scripture. One major source is the book of Malachi:

You cover the Lord's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards your offering or accepts it with favor at your hand. You ask, "Why does He not?" Because the Lord was witness to the covenant between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. So take heed to yourselves, and let none be faithless to the wife of his youth. (Malachi 2: 13-15)

In this passage, the Old Testament prophet Malachi is censuring the post-exilic Israelites dwelling in Persian-ruled Judah for having divorced their Hebrew wives in order to marry the women of their pagan but more affluent countrymen, the Persians. Malachi, however, is not admonishing the Israelites exclusively about literal divorce and remarriage. As Graham Ogden points out, "Malachi uses the vocabulary of human relationships in a figurative way" and thus his "real intention is misunderstood unless the figurative meaning is followed."⁷ Malachi's "real intention" in his jeremiad to the Israelites is to hammer home to them that by divorcing the women

of their own religion and blood—the wives of their youth—and marrying the women of an alien, pagan culture for the sake of material possessions and heightened social status, they are betraying their unique heritage, are rejecting their identity as a people—are, in fine, behaving immorally. As biblical scholar Beth Glazer-McDonald has remarked, Malachi's jeremiad to the Israelites is "calculated to remind [them] of their obligations, and to bring home strongly the enormity of their offense."⁸ To understand the intensity of Malachi's anger and why he regards the Israelite males' intermarriages as such an enormous offense, it is necessary to realize that Malachi sees the marriage bond between Hebrew man and Hebrew woman as a reflection or image of—in truth, as a kind of living metaphor for—the bond, the *covenant*, between Yahweh and the Israelites. Glazer-McDonald accurately captures Malachi's *forma mentis* when she points out that "The connection between intermarriage and apostasy is made explicit in the covenants detailed in Exod. 34:10 and Deut. 7:1. In both, Israel agrees to the stipulation not to intermarry since the marriage of an Israelite male to a foreign woman results in a turning away from Yahweh to follow her gods."⁹ Malachi, then, views the Israelites' assimilation into a pagan culture through marriage for the sake of money and improved social position as "apostasy," as the violation of a long-standing, sacred covenant and thus morally reprehensible. His mission therefore is to exhort the Israelites to reject this apostasy of assimilation and to remain faithful to their covenant with Yahweh and thus to their identity as a people.

The Book of Malachi, however, is not the only scriptural source that Chesnutt is alluding to in the story's title. A variation of the phrase *the wife of his youth* is also found, as Chesnutt well knew, in the Book of Proverbs. There, interestingly enough, it is used in a passage inveighing against adultery.

Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well. Let your fountain be blessed, and have joy from the wife of your youth, a lovely hind, a graceful doe. Let her affection fill you at all times with delight, and be infatuated with her love. My son, why are you wrapped in the embrace of a loose woman? Why do you clasp the bosom of an adventuress? (Proverbs 5: 15, 18–20)

While the emphasis here is on eschewing adultery rather than, as in Malachi, on condemning divorce, the underlying message that the sacred sage is conveying in these verses is the same as the one Malachi puts forth. In Proverbs 5, as in Malachi, the sacred sage is warning his immediate audience, the Israelites, not to stray from the path of marital fidelity, not to betray the wife of their youth by engaging in an adulterous relationship.

Unfortunately, the full import of the word that the sacred sage uses to identify the adulterous woman he warns against is lost in most English translations, where it is usually rendered “adulteress” or “loose woman” or even “adventuress.” In Hebrew, the word that the sage uses is *zarah*, and it specifies a foreign, unchaste woman, a non-Israelite, in fine, a pagan, with whom, under Mosaic law, sexual intimacy is forbidden. Indeed, the Vulgate captures the meaning of the Hebrew *zarah* much more accurately than most English translations. In the Vulgate, *zarah* is translated as *aliena*, meaning an outsider, a woman from an alien/foreign (hence non-Hebrew) culture.

Accordingly, the focus of the verses in question (15–20) is primarily on the Israelite males’ adulterous affairs with pagan (that is, Canaanite or Edomite) women rather than on intra-ethnic adultery. It is important to note, however, that the adultery against which the author of Proverbs counsels is, like the divorce against which Malachi rails, primarily referential. This is to say that the Israelites’ literal adultery with the women of the Canaanites and Edomites represents or symbolizes Israel’s spiritual adultery. Kathleen Farmer, in her analysis of the Book of Proverbs, places in proper perspective the sacred sage’s warning against adultery. “On one level of reading,” she argues, Proverbs 5 “can be understood as a sermon advocating fidelity in marriage.” However, she goes on to stress, Proverbs 5 is “more than a simple warning against adultery,” for marital fidelity and its breach are “used metaphorically . . . The fidelity which most concerns the speaker in Proverbs is fidelity to Israelite ways.” In truth, she concludes, Proverbs 5 “is more concerned with national and religious fidelity than it is with personal morality . . . [and its] primary concern is with loyalty to the covenant between God and Israel.”¹⁰ In Proverbs 5, then, the Israelites’ betrayal of their wives through adultery with pagan women betokens their betrayal of their God and hence of their religio-cultural identity. Marriage in Proverbs 5 is thus essentially metaphorical, just as it is in Malachi, signifying Yahweh’s covenant with His chosen people.

It is precisely this notion of marital fidelity as used in scripture to symbolize religio-cultural fidelity that Chesnutt is drawing on in his story’s title.¹¹ He is purposely and purposefully alluding to both Malachi and Proverbs to underscore his major concern in the tale: the moral imperative to acknowledge and accept one’s blackness in the face of great temptation to deny it—betray it, actually—through assimilation. The validity of such an interpretation of Chesnutt’s intent in the story becomes clearer when we realize that in “The Wife of His Youth” Chesnutt, like Malachi and the author of Proverbs, is treating marriage as a metaphor.

With his characteristic literary craftsmanship, Chesnutt is using literal marriage to symbolize the “wedding” of black folk to their racial and cul-

tural identity, and in the same vein he is using divorce (an option certainly open to Ryder) to symbolize the rejection of that identity. Liza Jane, the wife of Ryder's youth, is thus emblematic of blackness, of Ryder's indelible ethnicity, of who and what he actually is no matter how hard he tries to deny it. As Werner Sollors has so well defined her, she is "South and slavery, black culture and black consciousness, folk and past, mother culture and memory."¹² On the other hand, Mrs. Dixon, the light-skinned widow whom Ryder intends to marry, represents whiteness—or to be more precise, surrogate whiteness, which is as close to the real thing as Ryder can possibly get. Viewed in this light, Ryder's choice in the story is not so much between two women as it is between acknowledgement and denial, between fidelity and assimilation. Ryder must decide whether to acknowledge and embrace his racial identity or to deny and thus spurn that identity by inhabiting a racial limbo that disallows any memory or reminders of, as Sundquist puts it, "a painful past and the culture that is carried with it."¹³

Chesnutt leaves little doubt that Liza Jane represents that past and that culture. He describes her as "look[ing] like a bit of the old plantation life, summoned up from the past."¹⁴ That "old plantation life," with its slavery and degradation, is what Ryder had escaped twenty-five years earlier when he fled from "ole Massa," leaving Liza Jane—and everything she represented, both pleasant and unpleasant—far behind to forge a new life for himself. The bedrock on which Ryder has built his new life is clear at the outset of the story: it is intraracial elitism grounded in skin color and socio-cultural refinement. This elitism finds its clearest, most emphatic expression in the Blue Vein Society, a social group composed of cultured, very light-skinned blacks whose unwritten policy is to exclude other blacks "whose complexions and callings in life were hardly up to the standard which [the Blue Veins] considered proper" (7). One of the Blue Veins' objectives is to distance themselves as far as possible from blackness while moving steadily toward whiteness. Their credo is perhaps best articulated by Maria Lightfoot, another member of another Blue Vein Society, the one Harlem Renaissance luminary Wallace Thurman depicts in *The Blacker the Berry*: "Whiter and whiter every generation."¹⁵ It is a credo that Chesnutt's Blue Veins heartily espouse. When the story opens, Ryder is not merely a member of this society but its leading light. Fittingly, his climb away from blackness toward whiteness is epitomized in his proposed marriage to Mrs. Dixon, the widow who has stolen his heart. Like him and all the other Blue Veins, she is light-skinned enough to pass for white. Youthful and attractive, articulate and cultured, she is the antithesis of Liza Jane. Like Liza Jane, however, Mrs. Dixon is not only a flesh-and-blood character but also, as pointed out previously, a vibrant symbol of the surrogate whiteness in which

Ryder has been working to immerse himself. His marriage to her would therefore be a giant step toward his ultimate goal of, as he himself defines it, "absorption by the white race" (7).

Complicating Ryder's plans, however, is the abrupt reappearance of Liza Jane, the wife of his youth. Like so many other characters in Chesnut's short stories (Mrs. Harper in "Her Virginia Mammy," for instance, or Martha Chandler in "Cicely's Dream," or even Tom in "The Sheriff's Children"), Liza Jane returns from the past to radically alter the lives of those around her. Principally, her return forces Ryder to make the decision that constitutes the story's moral epicenter. Given this, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the real decision Ryder must make is not between an older, dark-skinned woman, unattractive and uneducated, and a younger, light-skinned one, pretty and cultured. Ryder's decision, instead, is a latter-day version of the decision that Malachi and the author of Proverbs would have the Israelites make. Liza Jane, it must be remembered, is not simply Ryder's literal wife, just as the Israelite women in Malachi and Proverbs were not simply wives to their Hebrew spouses. Rather, she is who and what Ryder is—she is the living embodiment of his racial identity, his blackness. In contrast, Mrs. Dixon, with her youthful looks and charm, is the personification of who and what Ryder wants to be: as close to white as possible. She is Chesnut's modified, modern equivalent of the Persian woman in Malachi and the *zarah* in Proverbs. Ryder's decision to embrace Liza Jane is thus an affirmation of his blackness; it is his own personal Carlylean Everlasting Yea.

Ryder's choice of Liza Jane over Mrs. Dixon, while not revealed until the very end of the story, is nonetheless hinted at even before the story opens. That hint, albeit a subtle one, Chesnut gives in, again, the story's title. As pointed out earlier, the tale's title has multiple scriptural sources. While Malachi and Proverbs are without a doubt the two primary sources that Chesnut is alluding to, there is yet another scriptural passage that he certainly has in mind. That particular passage is found in Isaiah:

Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into jubilant song, you who were not in labor. For the Lord has called you back like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, like a wife of youth when she is cast off, says your God. For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will take you back. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with enduring love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer. (Isaiah 54: 1, 6-8)

Unlike Malachi and the author of Proverbs, Isaiah is not admonishing the Israelites for having turned away from their God and their religious heritage by taking as wives and mistresses the pagan women of the land. He is,

instead, comforting them in their distress during the Babylonian captivity, reassuring them that Yahweh has abandoned them only “for a brief moment” and will shortly take them to Himself again, “like a wife of youth” who has been “cast off.” Isaiah’s message, then, is that Israel’s suffering and separation from God’s “face” will soon be over, that reconciliation is imminent. It is this scriptural passage heralding reunion, as surely as it is those passages in Malachi and Proverbs inveighing against infidelity, that gives the story’s title its allusive richness. In sum, while the tale’s title is, on the one hand, a clarion call adjoining racial fidelity, it is at the same time a veiled assurance that Ryder, who “for a brief moment . . . forsook” the wife of his youth, which is to say his blackness, will in the end “with great compassion . . . gather [her]”—will, in short, acknowledge and accept his racial identity, the blackness that is, as Chesnut’s famous contemporary Frances Watkins Harper defines it in her poem “The Slave Auction,” “the impress of [the] Maker’s hand.”¹⁶

“The Wife of His Youth” is by no means the only short story in which Chesnut treats the issues of racial identity and ethnic allegiance. There are, in fact, five other tales in *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* that also explore this theme. A careful reading of those other five tales, as well as of Chesnut’s many other short stories and novels, will reveal not only his deeply rooted, abiding concern with what Russell, Wilson, and Hall have termed “the color complex”¹⁷ but will also show how pervasive is his use of scriptural allusion in his treatment of African American color consciousness. But it is in “The Wife of His Youth,” arguably his best short story, that Chesnut’s consummate literary craftsmanship emerges most fully. With its scripturally allusive richness, “The Wife of His Youth” helps confirm Sundquist’s judgment of Chesnut as “one of the most important—and least understood or appreciated—American writers of the early modern period.”¹⁸

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Notes

1. James Weldon Johnson, “Why the Difference?” *New York Age*, 3 February 1916.
2. Tracy Mishkin, *The Harlem and Irish Renaissances: Language, Identity, and Representation* (Gainesville: Univ. of Florida Press, 1998), p. 3.
3. William Dean Howells, “Mr. Charles W. Chesnut’s Stories,” *Atlantic Monthly*, 85 (May 1900), 699.
4. J. Saunders Redding, *To Make a Poet Black* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1939), p. 70.
5. Charles Duncan, *The Absent Man: The Narrative Craft of Charles W. Chesnut* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1998), p. 125.
6. Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993), p. 299.

7. Graham S. Ogden, "The Use of Figurative Language in Malachi 2: 10-16," *The Bible Translator*, 39 (April 1988), 223-224.

8. Beth Glazer-McDonald, *Malachi—The Divine Messenger* (Atlanta: Scholar Press, 1987), p. 88.

9. Glazer-McDonald, p. 88.

10. Kathleen A. Farmer, *Who Knows What Is Good?: A Commentary on the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 43.

11. As critics have noted and as his journal entries attest, Chesnutt was a voracious reader—a "bookish person," as William Andrews characterizes him, with a "rigorous dedication to self-culture." William Andrews, *The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 1, 7. Sylvia Render, focusing on Chesnutt's "lifelong passion for books and love of reading," points out that among the multitude of works that Chesnutt immersed himself in was the Bible. Sylvia Lyons Render, *The Short Fiction of Charles W. Chesnutt* (Washington, D.C.: Howard Univ. Press, 1974), p. 4. Indeed, Chesnutt's study of and consequent familiarity with the Bible are reflected throughout his journals. See, for instance, *The Journals of Charles W. Chesnutt*, ed. Richard Brodhead (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1993), pp. 73, 79, 123, and 149. Not only does he frequently allude to or cite scriptural passages, but in one entry he gives a lengthy summary of a Congregationalist minister's discourse on the Second Coming of Christ (pp. 96-97). Additionally, for three years (1873-1876) Chesnutt served as the assistant to Cicero Harris, a clergyman-educator whom he emulated. Harris, it is important to note, was well versed in scripture and went on to become a bishop of the A.M.E. Zion church in 1889. Chesnutt's 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.

12. Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), p. 161.

13. Sundquist, p. 276.

14. Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1989), p. 10. All subsequent references are cited parenthetically.

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

16. Frances Watkins Harper, "The Slave Auction," *The Complete Poems of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), p. 10.

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

18. Sundquist, p. 276.