

AFRICAN AMERICAN VERNACULAR LATIN AND OVIDIAN FIGURES IN CHARLES CHESNUTT'S CONJURE STORIES

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Scholars have assumed that Charles Chesnutt (1858-1932) employed a technique of interviewing African Americans for their folktales in order to compose his collection of stories entitled The Conjure Woman (1899). However, no thoroughgoing attempt to locate the sources for these conjure stories by Charles Chesnutt (1858-1932) has been undertaken. Scholars have simply positioned African American folklore as the source without actually citing any of the hundreds of tales collected by folklorists for comparative study because Chesnutt's authentic use of African American Vernacular English and the voodoo give a folklore 'feel' to his stories. While folklore has been thoroughly documented as the source for the famous Tales of Uncle Remus (1880) by Joel Chandler Harris – even Harris's African American informants have been identified – no similar verification appears in studies by Chesnutt scholars who have presumed that the folktale was Chesnutt's source. No similarities among the African American tales collected by folklorists were discovered. The conclusion drawn in this study is that, in composing his conjure stories, Chesnutt combined his extensive knowledge of classical literature with whole cloth to produce The Conjure Woman, excepting the first conjure story, "The Goophered Grapevine" (1887), the metamorphosis section of which Chesnutt had heard from his father-in-law's gardener in Fayetteville, North Carolina. As for many of the remaining stories, rather than African American folklore, Chesnutt made use of Ovidian figures from The Metamorphoses.

Charles Chesnutt was a proficient scholar and read classical literature in Latin although he had been educated in segregated schools without a Latin teacher. He therefore was essentially an autodidact. As he noted in 1878, "[a]s to procuring instruction in Latin [...], that is entirely out of the question.

First class teachers would not teach a ‘nigger’ and I would have no other sort.”¹ In his *Journal* Chesnutt describes making the acquaintance of a white teacher-trainer, John J. Ladd who had studied Latin at an “Ivy League” school, Brown University in Rhode Island. Ladd was visiting Chesnutt’s hometown in Fayetteville where a special school was set up for prospective white teachers in North Carolina (from which Chesnutt as a black teacher was unsurprisingly excluded):

I told him of my acquirements and my aims, and he was astonished. I read a selection from Virgil, in order that he might criticise my Latin pronunciation. To my surprise and delight it was perfect, and my labor had not been in vain. He 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. He encouraged me to continue my studies.²

As a 21-year-old teacher at a North Carolina public school for ‘colored’ children, Chesnutt describes – outside of his teaching duties – his dedication to the systematic study of Latin. In his *Journal*, the 20-year-old Chesnutt recorded his convictions about this study:

I do not think that I will ever forget my Latin. The labor I spend in trying to understand it thoroughly, and the patience which I am compelled to exercise in clearing up the doubtful or difficult points, furnishes[,] it seems to me, as severe a course of mental discipline as a college course would afford.³

Chesnutt quoted extensively from *The Aeneid* and from Cicero’s “Catiline Oration” in his *Journal*, and he additionally cited literary criticism that the scholars of his day had remarked about the Latin citations he quotes. He writes of the ignorance of the nominally educated class of whites in Fayetteville, noting their poor knowledge of Latin. Chesnutt records studying Ovid, Horace and Seneca in his *Journal*, and in his conjure stories, as well as his non-dialect short fiction, he puts on display his narrator’s

¹ Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Journals of Charles W. Chesnutt*, ed. Richard H. Brodhead (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993) 92.

² Chesnutt, *The Journals*, 105.

³ Chesnutt, *The Journals*, 92.

knowledge of many Latin writers as well.⁴ He successfully passed his love of Latin on to his second daughter, Helen Chesnutt (1880-1969) who earned an undergraduate degree in Latin from Smith College and a Master of Arts in Latin from Columbia University and made her career teaching Latin in Cleveland. She published a Latin textbook, *The Road to Latin* (1932). Among her many pupils was the poet Langston Hughes. She also wrote the first biography of her father, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt: Pioneer of the Color Line* (1952). Indeed, Charles taught all of his children at home whatever subjects he viewed the local educational institutions to have lacked.⁵

In Chesnutt's final novel entitled *The Quarry*, he depicts the education of an intellectual light-skinned African American, the protagonist Donald Glover, which adheres much to Chesnutt's own education (except that Glover was not self-educated). With regard to his classical philology studies he writes that:

[N]one of his teachers in the high school, not even the principal, had studied Latin or Greek. Donald in his thirst for knowledge must learn them both. The Greek, perhaps because of the unfamiliar letters, did not at first especially appeal to him [...] Latin, on the other hand, he simply ate up, so to speak [...]. During a summer vacation, he read the whole twelve books of Virgil's masterpiece – twice as much as demanded in most college courses in a year.⁶

The summer vacation in which Chesnutt himself accomplished nearly this same feat took place, according to his *Journal*, in the summer of 1879 (though in October 1878 he had got a "head start" reading Book 1 to Book 4) of *The Aeneid* in Latin. In the following subchapters, Latin texts which Chesnutt read in the original were revised and placed in a setting and followed a structure quite similar to those of *The Tales of Uncle Remus*.

⁴ See for example the wry comments on Horace at the start of Charles W. Chesnutt, "The Marked Tree," *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*, ed. Richard H. Brodhead (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993) 194.

⁵ As Henry Louis Gates shows, Chesnutt was not the first African American author to undertake a serious study of Latin. Gates cites two slaves, Phillis Wheatley and Francis Williams in the 1770s as having studied, and in the case of Williams, having composed, an ode in Latin. See Henry Louis Gates, *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley* (New York: Basic Books, 2003) 20, 32.

⁶ Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Quarry*, ed. Dean McWilliams (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) 68.

Chesnutt unabashedly shapes his stories so they replicate the folklore-inspired Uncle Remus tales but revises Ovidian figures to produce a more myth-inspired set of stories while containing much of the quaint humor, replacing the supernatural power of the gods from antiquity with the African American supernatural power of voodoo. While texts written in Latin at first sight would not seem to fit in with the signifying theory of Henry Louis Gates since Virgil, Ovid and most other classic Latin writers were not African, I would nevertheless like to employ his intertextual theory to some *Conjure Woman* stories by Chesnutt. Gates has written that “[a]nyone who analyzes black literature must do so as a comparativist, by definition, because our canonical texts have complex double formal antecedents, the Western and the Black.”⁷

In *The Conjure Woman*, Charles Chesnutt’s white narrator, an enterprising businessman from the North, seeks specific information about the land and development possibilities in North Carolina. In the process, he “learns” about the antebellum history of racial and social tensions of the region through stories narrated in African American Vernacular English from the elderly quipster and ex-slave named Uncle Julius McAdoo. Thus, the tales are made up of a series of black-white dialogues about black-white conflicts (as well as conflicts among blacks). Julius’s tales may be considered in the light of the Gatesian theory of Signifying, the trickster tradition of African literature. Uncle Julius McAdoo’s power struggles with the narrator and the narrator’s wife (as well as the masters of his past) fall under the Signifying Monkey strategy.

Henry Louis Gates has generated a great deal of interest for his theory of African American rhetoric, a theory which concerns in part African American authors redressing previous texts by black authors. However, Gates also makes a multitude of references in *The Signifying Monkey* to black authors signifying on white writers and traditions. He emphasizes that “[s]everal of the canonical texts in the Afro-American tradition seem to be related to other black texts primarily in terms of substance or content, whereas they seem to be related to Western texts in terms of form” and then Gates cites Chesnutt as one example.⁸ Gates further cites Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* signifying not only on Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* but on “Western etymology [and] abusive Western practices of

⁷ Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) xxiv.

⁸ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 122.

deflation through misnaming [...]."⁹ The misnaming of black persons themselves has become a fairly common trope for contemporary black writers. Reference has frequently been made to blacks possessing the 'slave names' that their ancestors' masters 'gave' them. A radical rejection of the slave name was made, for example, by the Nation of Islam members who use 'X' as their surnames to designate the mathematical symbol for 'unknown.' A similar response is the Philadelphia black liberation organization MOVE in which all members adopt the name 'Africa' (for example, John Africa, the founder of MOVE). In the conjure story "A Deep Sleeper," Chesnutt is arguably the earliest African American to signify on the misnaming practices of slave owners, the vernacular in "The Deep Sleeper" portending in a manner to the more recent renaming practices of the Nation of Islam and MOVE members.

Although descended from free blacks in Fayetteville, North Carolina, Chesnutt was aware of the power that slave masters held over the names of their 'chattel property.' Signifying, the focal point in the literary theory of Gates, may be applied to Chesnutt's multifarious critiques of white, and to some extent, black texts, and his theory may be applied not only to *The Conjure Woman* and *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line*, but also to the other tales and stories by Chesnutt first collected and edited by Sylvia Lyons Render. Richard Brodhead has subsequently edited all fourteen conjure tales together in one volume in 1993 (including those tales rejected by the white publishers for publication in *The Conjure Woman* from 1899). Both Render's and Brodhead's collections contain some of the best short stories and tales by Chesnutt and had, until the last few years, remained essentially neglected by the critics.

Rather than emphasizing black literature as an investiture of black history, sociology and politics, Gates has placed exacting attention on the nature of black figurative language. Gates argues that what makes black texts different is exactly their trans-historical modes of "signifying" against the grain of dominance – whether that be of a dominant white ethnocentrism or the lion of the jungle. "Signifying" functions primarily through the ambiguities of language in its capacity for repetition and reversal or revision.

"A Deep Sleeper", one of six tales meant for but eventually rejected from Chesnutt's first book, *The Conjure Woman*, includes the same narrative set-up of all of the other *Conjure Woman* stories: the unnamed northern white

⁹ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 221.

narrator assumes a powerful role and hears the history of local (race) relations from an ex-slave, Uncle Julius. The wrestling of the black man with the white man (and in this case also his sister-in-law) over power via language is evident early in the slave narrative within the conjure story narrated by the loquacious Uncle Julius:

“Tom’s gran’daddy wuz name’ Skundus,” he began. “He had a brudder name’ Tushus en’ ernudder name’ Cottus en’ ernudder name’ Squinchus.” The old man paused a moment and gave his leg another hitch.

My sister-in-law was shaking with laughter. “What remarkable names!” she exclaimed. “Where in the world did they get them?”

“Dem names wuz gun ter ‘em by ole Marse Dugal’ McAdoo, w’at I use’ ter b’long ter, en’ dey use’ ter b’long ter. Marse Dugal’ named all de babies w’at wuz bawn on de plantation. Dese young un’s mammy wanted ter call ‘em sump’n plain en’ simple, like *Rastus* er *Caesar* er *George Wash’n’ton*, but ole Marse say no, he want all de niggers on his place ter hab diffe’nt names, so he kin tell ‘em apart. He done use’ up all de common names, so he had ter take sump’n else. Dem names he gun Skundus en’ his brudders is Hebrew names en’ wuz tuk out’n de Bible.”¹⁰

Naturally the reader (like John’s sister-in-law Mabel) knows that these names do not originate from the Bible of the Hebrews, although the use of biblical names was increasingly common among slaves from the end of the eighteenth century onwards in North Carolina.¹¹ She is puzzled because she does not recognize the African American vernacular pronunciation of Latin ordinal numbers: *primus*, *secundus*, *tertius*, *quārtus*, *quīntus* etc.¹² In naming his slaves in Latin by order of birth, the owner usurps the privilege of family, one of many means of executing his power over the slaves, and in this case, through naming their babies. The joke lies in the masking nature of the Latin language: while Latin is opaque to the unlettered blacks, when

¹⁰ Charles W. Chesnutt, “A Deep Sleeper,” *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*, ed. Richard H. Brodhead (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) 138-39.

¹¹ Marvin Kay and Lorin Lee Cary, *Slavery in North Carolina 1748-1775* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995) 143-44.

¹² One of the most prominent slave characters in the *Conjure Woman* collection, unnamed in the citation above, is named “Primus” which would be recognizable in African American vernacular. His Ovidian predecessor will be discussed below.

rendered into African American Vernacular this “white” language of education¹³ has become inimitable and therefore opaque to whites. While the black slaves have no idea that their names are mere cardinal numbers in the learned language of educated whites, by giving the names innovative phonemes (and eventually developing different meanings) of their own, African American Vernacular English in point of fact subverts white authority to name slave babies in order of birth,¹⁴ resulting in an unknown identification to the white interlocutor. In this way, “Skundus” (*secundus*), “Cottus” (*quārtus*) and “Squinchus” (*quīntus*) gain new identities to both the signified and signifier. As Henry Louis Gates points out, owing to their subjugated position, slaves could not openly resist the pressure of the hegemonic ‘white’ culture. Gates writes that “it is in the vernacular that, since slavery, the black person has encoded private yet communal cultural rituals.”¹⁵ The well-read Mabel neither recognizes nor appreciates the names.

Henry Louis Gates refers to the distinctions and relationships between African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and Standard American English (SAE). Gates demonstrates that the Saussurean term “signifying” has acquired a different meaning in the AAVE context. In the structuralist theory, “to signify” refers to the relation of the concept, the signified (*signifié*) being represented by a phonetic or graphic word, signifier (*signifiant*, acoustic image). In AAVE this Euro-American word has been revised and parodied. The relation between this AAVE and SAE word is that of “difference inscribed within a relation of identity.”¹⁶ The SAE “signifying” has acquired the AAVE “Signifyin(g)” as its homonymous counterpart. The homonymous relation is signaled by the change in the difference in both pronunciation and orthography, the process known as “agnominatio.” This repetition of the SAE word with the AAVE difference results in a homonymic pun, referred to as “antanaclasis.”¹⁷

There is more to be said besides these similarities when it comes to what may be analogously termed ‘African American Vernacular Latin’ and ‘Standard Latin.’ Mabel does not come to terms with the slave names, for she

¹³ Latin has been regarded as the language which was traditionally the educational means of separating white people into their respective social classes.

¹⁴ Interestingly, Kay and Carey note that a number of West Africans practiced “naming their children in accordance with their birth position” and that practice may have survived in North Carolina. Kay and Cary, *Slavery in North Carolina*, 145.

¹⁵ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, xix.

¹⁶ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 45.

¹⁷ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 45.

fails to recognize the names as cardinal numbers in Latin. She asks Uncle Julius for an explanation, and so in her derogatory fashion she “draws out” the usually obsequious ex-slave. The white woman’s ignorance inveterately delights in the ignorance of the African American narrator, yet she frivolously seeks an ignorant explanation, and receives one: these highly unusual names – as Julius ‘translates’ them¹⁸ – originate from the Old Testament. When Mabel, the narrator’s sister-in-law, further inquires, “Can you give me chapter and verse?” – Uncle Julius responds, “No, Miss Mabel, I doan know ‘em. Hit ain’ my fault dat I ain’t able ter read de Bible. But ez I wuz a-sayin’, dis yer Skundus growed up [...]”¹⁹

In essence, Uncle Julius is unaware of the inaccuracy of his explanation because he cannot read the Bible since slaves were legally forbidden to be taught reading and writing. While Mabel enjoys his ignorance and mockingly laughs at him, he directly impugns and defies her enjoyment of his illiteracy by brazenly stating that his ignorance was not his own fault. As usual in these conjure stories, Chesnutt does not have Uncle Julius state overtly that whites forbade him the possibility to read and therefore kept him ignorant from knowing the word of God. Chesnutt has Julius react defensively about his lack of literacy (indirectly stating that he is not obtuse). It becomes obvious that he wants Mabel to stop laughing at him. In effect, Julius undermines the entertainment value of this minstrel-like appeal she demonstrates in laughing at his ignorance. He modestly attacks her white perception of his ontological ignorance as a black slave by stressing that his ignorance of the Bible is not due to stupidity on his part (or on the part of his race), leaving unspoken but understood that his ignorance of the Bible can be traced to white authority’s legally-enforced ignorance. That his discourse includes a defensive strategy clearly marks Chesnutt’s conjure stories as distinct from the minstrelsy of the humble black subjugated (ex-)slave notable in plantation fiction. Richard Brodhead writes that the decision by the (Southern white) editor of Chesnutt’s story collection to exclude this story as well as two other stories from the 1899 publication “censored some of Chesnutt’s more overtly subversive visions [...]”²⁰

¹⁸ In this case, Julius unknowingly ‘translates’ African American Vernacular Latin into standard English. His decoding between the two languages is an example of what Gates calls “Black double-voicedness” or a palimpsest in which a commentary is made on a word which the reader can decipher only by reading through the commentary that actually obscures in the very process of evaluating. Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 105.

¹⁹ Chesnutt, “A Deep Sleeper,” 139.

²⁰ Richard H. Brodhead, “Introduction,” *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*, 19.

In much the same way as he operates in other conjure stories, Chesnutt signifies on the minstrel or plantation writing depicting the obtuse black story teller whose ignorance serves as comic entertainment to the (white) audience. In this way, Chesnutt signifies and revises the black story tradition of Joel Chandler Harris and his *Tales of Uncle Remus* as well as the plantation fiction of Thomas Nelson Page, both of whom depict child-like black story tellers nostalgic for the return of the plantation 'family.' Chesnutt's revision comes in the form of Julius demonstrating that it was not his fault that he could not read, a response wholly nonexistent in plantation literature.

In his uniquely African American deployment of the Latin language in this conjure story, Chesnutt's metonyms make both a comic and tragic element of slavery, oblivious to both his black and white characters, reminiscent of tragic/comic elements in the "Esu-Elegbara" and "Signifying Monkey" trickster figures which Gates appropriates for his theoretical approach to black literature. Moreover, in his second chapter of *The Signifying Monkey* Gates shows a mathematical model of signification depicting standard American English and African American vernacular on the intersecting x and y axes of linguistic discourse as running perpendicular rather than parallel to each other.²¹ Chesnutt, however, elaborates African American speech by adding Latin, a rarely spoken foreign language, into this story. This chart naturally could not depict what Chesnutt has his characters in "A Deep Sleeper" employ by means of the Latin language, for in this case, one verbal mask meets another verbal mask, and language serves as the means of Chesnutt's wry humor. Recognizing this signified joke embedded in the tragedy of slavery requires a closer reading via the literary theory of Gates and an ability to recognize what scholars might well argue is Latin's most 'vulgar' form ever spoken (and published).

Publius Ovidius Naso's narrative poem *The Metamorphoses* is regarded as one of the greatest works in Latin which continues to be a success with the popular reading public. Ovid moved Chesnutt, like his many readers, with a simple set of stories concerning supernatural transformations. The motive of characters in the plots of the 250 stories by Ovid are multifarious and include greed, passionate, lustful nymphs and gods who succumb to violent fits of rage resulting in disfigurement, murder, cannibalism or rape. Transformations include humans or nymphs changed into animals, trees

²¹ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 49.

and other vegetation. Ovid assumes an unbroken relationship between man and nature, and he shows through his stories to some extent a political interest. The transformations not only link man with nature but reinforce the "Ovidian theme of the very contingency of connectedness."²²

It is noteworthy that Ovid himself employed a variety of material in *The Metamorphosis*: the Greek myths of Homer such as the Trojan War and various episodes from Virgil's *Aeneid*. After reading Homer's *Iliad* in Pope's translation, Chesnutt sums up characteristics of the Greeks which he in large measure employed in writing about black North Carolina slaves and the practice of voodoo in *The Conjure Woman*:

The standard of Grecian morality was low, which could permit men to worship such corrupt and partial deities [*sic*], but perhaps they worshipped them more from fear than from love. The worship of the Greek was not that of a Christian who loved his God, but that of a slave who cringes obsequiously to a capricious and tyrannical master, who one minute loads them with favors and the next strips them of everything and dismisses them in disgrace.²³

Chesnutt's conjure stories likewise include passionate love, jealousy, greed and death. His stories include trickster figures employing magical power which result in the transformation of characters on a slave plantation, both black and white. For some scholars,²⁴ Chesnutt's conjure stories have come from an oral tradition from the African American folktales, the same source that produced *The Tales of Uncle Remus* recorded by Joel Chandler Harris. Robert Hemenway and others show how the form of the folktale is evident in these stories. Among Chesnutt critics, only one scholar, Karen Magee Myers, links Ovid with one *Conjure Woman* story, namely "The Goophered Grapevine,"²⁵ though that story, originated from black folklore. Of all fourteen stories, only "The Goophered Grapevine" was directly told to the author by a black gardener from Fayetteville, North Carolina, as Chesnutt stated in an interview published in 1901:

²² Denis Feeney, "Introduction," Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, trans. David Raeburn (London: Penguin Classics, 2004) xxi.

²³ Chesnutt, *The Journals*, 87.

²⁴ See for example Robert Hemenway, "The Functions of Folklore in Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*," *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 13.3 (1976): 283-309.

²⁵ Karen Magee Myers, "Mythic Patterns in Charles Waddell Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*," *Black American Literature Forum*, 13.1 (Spring 1979): 13-17.

I remember a remarkable yarn which had been related to me by my father-in-law's gardener, old Uncle Henry, to the effect that the sap of a pruned grapevine rubbed on a bald head in the spring would produce a luxuriant growth of hair, which would, however, fall out when the sap in the vine went down in the fall. To the creative mind this was sufficient material for the story, "The Goophered Grapevine."²⁶

In his 1931 essay "Post-Bellum – Pre-Harlem" written in his seventies near the end of his life, Chesnutt writes a kind of career summary, and while looking back at his literary efforts, specifies the circumstances surrounding the composition of his conjure stories:

[...] while they employ much of the universal machinery of wonder stories, especially the metamorphosis, with one exception, that of the first story, "The Goophered Grapevine," of which the norm was a folk tale, the stories are the fruit of my own imagination, in which respect they differ from the Uncle Remus stories which are avowedly folk tales.²⁷

The assertion above is underscored by the fact that his conjure stories share no resemblance of plot or character with the collections of folktales collected by Hurston, Abraham or Dorson.²⁸ In contrast, a number of the most renowned Ovid stories from *The Metamorphoses* are astonishingly similar to the transformation stories described by Chesnutt's voluble narrator of the framed conjure tales, Uncle Julius McAdoo in *The Conjure Woman*. When comparing for example the famous story by Ovid called "Python and Daphne," Chesnutt has Sandy McSwayne in "Po' Sandy" transformed into a tree just like Daphne, and in both cases – as in so much of Ovid's work – the metamorphosis in this story ultimately concerns forbidden or thwarted

²⁶ Max Bennett Thrasher, "Mr. Chesnutt at Work: A Talk with an Author on His Methods," *Boston Evening Transcript*, 4 September, 1901, repr. in Charles W. Chesnutt, *Selected Writings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001) 345.

²⁷ Charles W. Chesnutt, *Essays and Speeches*, ed. Joseph R. McElrath (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999) 544.

²⁸ In my study of black folktales in the following collections, I could not discover any mark of influence on Chesnutt's 14 conjure stories. See Richard M. Dorson, *American Negro Folktales* (New York: Fawcett Premiere, 1968); Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules & Men*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978); Roger D. Abrahams, *African American Folktales. Stories from Black Traditions in the New World*. (New York: Pantheon, 1985).

love. In the plot by Ovid, the love is being denied by the beautiful Daphne who is relentlessly pursued by the love-smitten god Apollo.²⁹ In the case of the enslaved “Sandy” in Chesnutt’s story “Po’ Sandy,” his love is denied not by his wife but by his master who repeatedly sold or lent either his wives³⁰ or him to other neighboring plantations. The master separates Sandy from his second wife as well, atrociously forbidding them from any contact together. His wife, a conjurer, suggests solving their separation problem with guile by transforming him, suggesting sundry animals (a rabbit, a dog, a wolf, a mockingbird), though they finally settle on a quiescent tree in order to avoid being sold away. In Uncle Julius McAdoo’s “gruesome narrative,” however, Sandy’s wife transforms him into a tree which is cut down, brought to a saw mill and cut into lumber to build a schoolhouse, and his wife consequently becomes frenzied and eventually raving mad as a consequence of personally witnessing and hearing (through the abysmal grating noise) her transformed husband cut into pieces by a circular saw of a nearby lumberyard. In “Po’ Sandy” Chesnutt graphically describes the sepulchral widow go to pieces while puzzled members of the plantation community look on.

The similarities of the metamorphoses in both the Latin classic and Chesnutt’s story concern injustice and thwarted love, and while the setting and mythmaking details in Ovid’s work naturally differ, the transformation of a person into a tree seems to be unique to only Chesnutt and two of Ovid’s stories based on Greek mythology.³¹ Like Ovid’s gods Cupid and Peneus, the conjure woman, as in most of Chesnutt’s conjure tales, serves as a conduit between the injured party and the perpetrator of injustice, usually the slave master. In another story in Book 9 of *The Metamorphoses*, “Dryope,” a picture is provided of the retribution that may happen to anyone harming trees since trees are potentially the abode of nymphs. Precisely the same

²⁹ Cupid has shot Apollo with an arrow to cause him to fall in love with Daphne. Cupid is a trickster figure insofar as he is much less of an authority or as powerful as the Roman gods he shoots.

³⁰ Sandy’s first wife was sold when “a spekilater come erlong wid a lot er niggers.” Chesnutt, “Po’ Sandy,” *Conjure Tales and Stories of the Color Line*, ed. William L. Andrews (New York: Penguin Classics, 2000) 16. She is traded, never to be seen by Sandy again. Sandy then gets a new wife named “Tenie,” a conjure woman, with whom he falls deeply in love.

³¹ Tree transformation does not appear in the African American folklore collected by Abrahams, Hurston or Dorson. A tree metamorphosis does appear with a positive conclusion in Ovid’s “Philemon and Baucis” (Book 8).

kind of pernicious warning is enunciated by Uncle Julius McAdoo who urges the newcomer John from Ohio not to use the wood because it is still haunted by the metamorphosed slave Sandy, a warning echoed in a conjure story discussed earlier entitled "The Marked Tree."³²

Chesnutt draws on Pan in Ovid's story "Pan and Syrinx." Ovid describes Pan as goat-footed, like Primus in "The Conjuror's Revenge" who is mule-footed. Pan and Primus share nearly all personality traits related by these respective authors. A former slave of a nearby plantation who tends horses,³³ Primus is mule-footed because, near the end of Julius McAdoo's conjure tale, he was not completely returned to human form before the conjurer died. In "Pan and Syrinx," Pan is a rustic God described as a musical, noisy and fun-loving shepherd, living in the country, and also physically exhibiting sexual prowess which celebrates masculinity as well as a reflection of the animal itself. Chesnutt adapts similar manifestations for his transformed slave Primus, such as his concupiscent behavior toward women generally and toward Sally, a lighter-skinned mulatto, particularly. Primus is described as "de livelies' han' on de place, alluz a-dancin', en drinkin', en runnin' roun', en singin', en pickin' de banjo."³⁴ Chesnutt translates Pan's mental instabilities into Primus's "stubborn spells" which cause him to engage in acts of violence. These spells are so dangerous that blacks and whites alike stay out of his way. After Primus is transformed into a mule, his mule face is still familiar-looking to the slave's owner. Among other misdeeds, the transformed mule viciously attacks a slave who had precipitously made sexual advances on Primus's beautiful mulatto lover, an act Chesnutt transposes into an act of rather violent slapstick comedy. Like Pan, Primus is prone not only to violence but to madness (as a mule Primus's irascible character remains intact through, among other things, his comically excessive consumption of tobacco and alcohol).

The opening of Chesnutt's story "The Conjuror's Revenge" depicts the free black man, Primus, violently whipping his horses before Julius McAdoo and a Northern couple for whom McAdoo serves as coachman. This

³² In "The Marked Tree" the tree in question looks like an oak tree but is referred to by the African American narrator Uncle Julius McAdoo as a "U-Pass" tree (or Upas tree), "the fabled tree of death" with poisonous effects that both Lord Byron in *Canto IV* of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and Charlotte Brontë in *Jane Eyre* allude to. See Chesnutt, "The Marked Tree," *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*, 196.

³³ Primus also appears in Chesnutt's novel *Mandy Oxendine*: Primus cares for the horses of a murdered white man who had attempted to rape the heroine of the novel.

³⁴ Chesnutt, "Po' Sandy," 42.

disturbing behavior is ascribed by Uncle Julius McAdoo as the frustrations of a club-footed ex-slave (and an ex-mule).³⁵ While the setting and plots obviously differ greatly, the similarities of the characteristics of Ovid's Pan and Chesnutt's Primus cannot be regarded as purely coincidental, given Chesnutt's avid interest in the Latin classics.

In Chesnutt's conjure story "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny," an innocuous slave woman is sold (or rather exchanged – for a horse) without her knowledge by her stingy and duplicitous master. She has to leave her mother and her infant-baby behind. After some time this baby, called "little Mose," becomes sick, apparently out of longing for his benign mother. His transformation into a humming bird, later into a mockingbird, and finally a sparrow, recalls Ovid's story "Tereus, Procne and Philomela" from Book 6 of the *Metamorphoses* whereby four characters are magically transformed into birds. (A hornet nest is conjured and a hornet likewise flies to the exchanged horse, infecting it with an illness, thus echoing the four metamorphoses into birds that Ovid's story contains.) Becky, her son Mose and the exchanged horse all become deathly sick under the spell of the conjure woman. With brief visitations as metamorphosed birds, both mother and child recover temporarily their health. Unlike Ovid, the efficacy of these permutations results in a happy ending, for the exchange of sale is recalled by both of the white, slave-owning parties because of the illnesses of the exchanged "articles of property," resulting in the jovial reunification of mother and son.

Gender-roles in Ovid's violent "Tereus, Procne and Philomela" and Chesnutt's "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny" are reflected similarly: men intentionally induce immeasurable suffering on their subjugated women while the same women succeed in rectifying their respective difficulties in both stories. Chesnutt expands upon the gender conflict when John, the narrator, crosses swords with his wife in a form of literary criticism of Uncle Julius McAdoo's tale. John derides the "ingenious fairy tale [...] especially the humming-bird episode, and the mocking-bird digression, to say nothing of the doings of the hornet and the sparrow."³⁶ His wife, however, recognizes the story as a woman might – how the child and mother may become physically ill when separated, and declares that

³⁵ Both Julius and Primus shared the same master and accordingly the same family name, McAdoo.

³⁶ Chesnutt, "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny," *Conjure Tales and Stories of the Color Line*, 61.

[t]hose [birds] are mere ornamental details and not at all essential. The story is true to nature, and might have happened half a hundred times, and no doubt did happen, in those horrid days before the war.³⁷

As in Ovid's classic story, the entire conflict in Chesnutt's story is instigated because of imposed family separation and a terrible injustice to a female family member. Chesnutt modifies the tactic of Procne while describing the sufferings of an enslaved black woman sold away, thereby artfully projecting the Ovidian figures and conflict into a plantation setting.

In "Narcissus and Echo" in Book 3, arguably Ovid's most famous story, Narcissus falls in love with his own beauty when seeing his image at a clear fountain. He pines away to become one with nature in the form of the flower named after this story. Chesnutt revises this plot in his gripping short story "Lonesome Ben,"³⁸ one of the rejected conjure stories Chesnutt penned but did not see published in *The Conjure Woman*.³⁹ In this astonishing story, a slave named Ben runs away from his stern master because "he wa'n't gwineter take dat cowhidin'" as punishment for drinking alcohol.⁴⁰ He escapes with some provisions with the intent of going North, loses his way and after a few days finds himself back where he started. Running out of food and consequently eating clay near a river to kill his hunger pains, Ben hides in the woods and sees his lover Desdy and one of his two children. Upon seeing her and his beloved son Pete walking down a trail, Ben reveals himself from his hiding place but is surprised to find that they utterly fail to recognize him and walk on after some exchange of rather inhospitable words. Ben in turn weeps over their quick forgetfulness and goes to a nearby creek. Ben looks at himself in the water's reflection. Moreover, similar to Narcissus, Ben's vision of himself in the water becomes his own undoing, for he sees that his skin has been transformed from black to a light yellow:

Ben didn' knowed w'at ter make er it fer a minute er so. Fus' he 'lowed he must hab de yaller janders, ersump'n lak dat! But he had knowed rale dark folks ter hab janders befo', and it hadn't nebber 'fected 'em dat-a-way. But bimeby he got up o'ff'n 'is han's an' knees an' wuz stan'in' lookin' ober de crick at de clay-bank, an' wond'rin'

³⁷ Chesnutt, "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny," 61.

³⁸ "Lonesome Ben" was written in 1897, but first published in 1900.

³⁹ Richard H. Brodhead, "A Note on the Text," Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*, 25.

⁴⁰ Chesnutt, "Lonesome Ben," *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*, 150.

ef de clay he's b'en eat'n' hadn' turnt 'im yaller w'en he heard
sump'n say jes' ez plain ez wo'ds.⁴¹

Ben does not look for a prolonged span of time at his new ugly yellow/white pigmentation as Narcissus does at his own beautiful image. Instead, his new image audibly haunts him. At this point, Chesnutt combines his scrupulous revision of Ovid with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*:

'Turnt ter clay! turnt ter clay! turnt ter clay!'

He looked all roun', but he couldn' see nobody but a big bullfrog
settin' on a log on de yuther side er de crick. An' w'en he turnt roun'
an' sta'ted back in de woods, he heared de same thing behin' 'im.

'Turnt ter clay! turnt ter clay! turnt ter clay!'

Dem wo'ds kep' ringin' in 'is years 'til he fin'lly 'lowed dey wuz
boun' ter be so, er e'se dey wouldn' a b'en tol' ter 'im, an' dat he had
libbed on clay so long an' had eat so much, dat he must 'a' jes nach'ly
turnt ter clay.⁴²

The African American narrator Uncle Julius McAdoo is suddenly interrupted by the new, white Ohio-born settler, John, who directly recites from Shakespeare the words of Hamlet (V.1):

Imperious Caesar, turned to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away,

I [John] murmured parenthetically.

"Yes, suh," said the old man, "turnt ter clay. But you's mistook in de
name, suh; hit wuz Ben, you 'member, not Caesar. Ole Mars Marrabo
did hab a nigger name' Caesar, but dat wuz anudder one."⁴³

⁴¹ Chesnutt, "Lonesome Ben," 155.

⁴² Chesnutt, "Lonesome Ben," 155.

⁴³ Chesnutt, "Lonesome Ben," 156.

After John is admonished impatiently by his wife for rudely interrupting the narration that fascinates her, Uncle Julius continues his narrative of Ben's fate. To recapitulate, Ben finds it so incredulous that his face turned from dark black to yellow that he himself momentarily thinks the image in the water might be that of another man. Thereafter Ben contemplates that he may be sick from jaundice, though he finally concludes that he must have turned yellow because of all the clay he has been relegated to eat as a runaway slave. Hearing noises in the swamp, Ben then interprets the croaking of the bullfrog as the repetition of the words "Turnt ter clay! turnt ter clay! turnt ter clay!" The repetition of this line haunts and estranges him, making Ben even more lonesome. Just as he looks around to find a man who could look like the image in the water, he turns around thinking a human being has said the words, but instead sees only the bullfrog. In the words of his friend Primus, Ben looks like "de mos' mis'able lookin' merlatter I eber seed"⁴⁴ and assumes a physical characteristic not uncommon among clay-eating slaves according to antebellum plantation historical and medical reports.⁴⁵

This narrative is then interrupted by the literate interlocutor, John, who references the line from the fifth act of *Hamlet*. The illiterate Julius naturally fails to recognize the literary source of John's Shakespearian utterance and corrects him with regard to the name of the slave in question. The poignant story ends rather grotesquely with the slave turning into clay after he is baked by the sun into brick. Eventually a tree falls from strong wind onto Ben (whose remains are transformed into brick). He is thereby smashed into countless pieces. Like Ovid's Narcissus, Ben dies and literally returns as part of nature to the mother earth. Chesnut thus redresses the Ovidian theme of vanity into a fugitive slave theme of nostalgia, and Ben's ultimate destiny is fulfilled as he both eats and is transformed into clay and earth.

In the context of the quote from Shakespeare, Hamlet utters these lines to Horatio after pondering the physical change, or the natural metamorphosis, of the King's jester, Yorick, whose skull he held in his hand. In this famous part of *Hamlet* preceding the funeral of Ophelia, Hamlet reflects on death,

⁴⁴ Chesnut, "Lonesome Ben," 153.

⁴⁵ As Jennifer Fleissner's recent article points out, some black slaves really ate clay, becoming sick and dying from this practice due in part to a lack of food given by slave owners. This phenomenon was reported and published in nineteenth century medical journals. The results of this diet, called "geophagy," often included a lightened color in skin pigmentation, mental disease and death. Jennifer Fleissner, "Earth-Eating, Addiction, Nostalgia: Charles Chesnut's Diasporic Regionalism," *Studies in Romanticism*, 49.2 (2010): 321-31.

and what becomes of all human beings after life ends. Hamlet asks Horatio if he “thinks Alexander looked o’ this fashion I’ the earth” and after Horatio’s affirmation, Hamlet feels the state of the skull is not useful, but rather “of earth we make loam; and why of that loam – whereto he was converted – might they not stop a beer barrel?” (V.1.190; 203-204)

Chesnutt’s motivated or critical signifying underscores a Shakespearian meditation on death, thereby foreshadowing Ben’s inevitable destiny. Allegorically, Chesnutt uses the sallow pigmentation of clay-skin as more than physical sickness: Ben’s madness seems to be less a result of his diet than his irrevocable loss of loved ones who no longer recognize him.⁴⁶ Just as Hamlet lost his father and his respect of his own mother – all said his love of life itself – Ben has lost his beloved family and ultimately his purpose for living. Ultimately, the desire to be free vanquishes his will to live, for it destroys both home and family. Like Ophelia,⁴⁷ Ben suffers hallucinations rather than mere physical illness. John perceptively acknowledges his malady by quoting from *Hamlet*. Both Ophelia and Ben die horrifically in a swamp setting. Likewise, Narcissus, Hamlet and Ben express – in ways signifying mental neurosis at various moments – a keen desire to escape from their respective fates.

While John quotes *Hamlet*, demonstrating his literary edification, Julius misconstrues his naming Caesar for Ben. In a surface reading, Chesnutt seems only to indicate the dichotomy of the literate white man’s knowledge of Shakespeare with a humorous correction by the illiterate Uncle Julius. However, with a recognition of Chesnutt’s echo of a scene in *Hamlet*, Ben, the lowly slave, subliminally reinforces the notion that an enslaved black human being may be ranked as worthy of the same intensity of sympathy as Prince Hamlet shows for Alexander or Caesar, just like the sympathies for Ovid’s young boy Narcissus or the woman Procne are likewise echoed. Hence Chesnutt illuminates another horror of slavery – specifically the tragic plight of fugitive slaves – to the reader’s attention through what Gates would term as an example of Chesnutt’s “motivated signifying” of Shakespeare, i.e., a form of critical signifying so that the reader may commensurate with the lowly fugitive slave Ben and not only the great men of Western history. Ben returns home but he cannot “go home” again;

⁴⁶ The realistic tragedy of runaway slaves Chesnutt presents in this allegory was the runaway’s loss of family and friends, a trope common to both slave narratives and early African American novels.

⁴⁷ Interestingly, Ben’s wife’s name is unusual, Desdy, short for Desdemona, another likely suggestion of Shakespearian influence.

freedom is thereby understood as ontologically detrimental to life itself. The literary audience advances sympathy by linking the fugitive slave's death with the great heroes of ancient history. Chesnutt thus sensitizes whites – his main literate audience in 1899 when his conjure stories come out – with his didactic aim of elevating the white people by conflating elements of *Hamlet* with a story by Ovid widely known by his white literate audience,⁴⁸ as he states in his *Journal* on May 29, 1879:

If I do write, I shall write for a purpose, a high, holy purpose, and this will inspire me to greater effort. The object of my writings would be not so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites [...]. This work is of a twofold character. The negro's part is to prepare himself for social recognition and quality; and it is the province of literature to open the way for him to get it – to accustom the public mind to the idea: and while amusing them to lead them on imperceptibly, unconsciously step by step to the desired state of feeling.⁴⁹

Charles Chesnutt deftly projects the characteristics of heroes as well as some plots from Ovid's stories of magical transformations into his conjured slaves in an antebellum North Carolina setting. In the conjure stories, Chesnutt does not overtly rely on the [white] reader recognizing Ovid's (or for that matter, Shakespeare's) name to support his conjure stories' intertextual purposes, for neither of these two author's names ever appears in any conjure story. Rather, he wishes to "lead them on imperceptibly, step by step" by means of familiar characters and plots of Ovid (and Shakespeare) in order to obtain "the desired state of feeling" – a sympathetic feeling for the plight of African Americans.

With the white narrator John framing the conjure story-teller's narration, the magic transformations through voodoo are never presented by Chesnutt as anything but heterodoxy to his readers, unlike some of the later African American writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, a trained ethnologist whose

⁴⁸ Like a novel greatly admired by Chesnutt, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, sympathy was regarded as a means to effect social change through the power of sentiment, producing a fellow feeling to transcend social differences, revealing a common humanity.

⁴⁹ Chesnutt, *The Journals*, 139-40.

stories and novels were highly influenced by folklore.⁵⁰ Unlike Chesnutt's critical and secular approach to voodoo, Ovid does not have characters ridicule belief in the Greek gods, but rather he grants these gods a privileged position as a unifying mediating force. Chesnutt's white narrator in contrast always has the last word and uses it to explain away the power or influence of voodoo. As Eric Sundquist emphasizes, Chesnutt himself regarded voodoo as superstitious and the belief system as "forms of primitivism among contemporary African Americans who did not aspire to a more assimilated American middle class"⁵¹ in his nonfictional essays as well as in his *Journal* where he describes his encounters with superstitious blacks in North and South Carolina.

While Chesnutt's conjure stories are an unambiguous indication of his syncretistic openness to different religious traditions, the Ovidian influence featuring myths from the ancient civilization he closely studied is one of the, if not *the*, major source of stimulation for both plot and character in many of Chesnutt's imaginative conjure stories. There is no evidence of a more substantive influence on the plots and character of many of Chesnutt's conjure stories than *The Metamorphoses*, and Chesnutt may well have used Ovidian figures with the intention of universalizing the black slave's experience of suffering. In contrast, no evidence could be found of influence from among the recorded and meticulously collected folk tales which have been passed orally by African Americans.

This conclusion underscores the argument Ralph Ellison made in his 1958 essay, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" that the trickster figure can hardly be regarded as a unique phenomenon of black culture but that many other world literatures have employed the trickster to enormous success, and that what a white scholar termed the "darky entertainer" was in fact white.⁵² Likewise, Chesnutt's framing of *The Conjure Woman* stories has a white

⁵⁰ Supported by a Guggenheim fellowship, Hurston composed *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) in Haiti while undertaking field work in a scholarly study of the practices of voodoo, and voodoo presented in her study *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (1938) is clearly evident in many aspects of her most famous novel. Moreover, Hurston participated in rituals and was a practitioner of this proto-African religion. See Christopher Koy, "Zora Neale Hurston's Literary Roots in Ethnographic Research," *Antropologické Symposium* (Plzeň: ZČU, 2000) 65-74.

⁵¹ Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) 135.

⁵² Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," *Shadow and Act* (New York, Signet, 1964) 62. Originally published in *Partisan Review*, Spring 1958.

interlocutor-narrator named John whose employee slave, Uncle Julius, entertains him and his wife with a series of plantation tales. Following the theory of Ellison, these framed narratives in AAVE signify on the white-authored folklore of *The Tales of Uncle Remus*. Chesnutt changed the joke (from the quaint tales of a nostalgic Sambo reminiscing about the good old days on the plantation to a more authentic rendering of the slave experience, including whippings, the selling of family members and slaves escaping their cruel masters) and likewise slipped the yoke (from the exploited black ex-slave to the tricked white carpetbagger). In other words, in *The Conjure Woman*, the joke is on the white man.

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