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Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman*, and the Racial Limits of Literary Mediation

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

CHARLES W. CHESNUTT, THE CONJURE WOMAN, AND THE RACIAL LIMITS OF LITERARY MEDIATION Paul R. Pétrie
Southern Connecticut State University As thoroughly as that of any other figure in American literature,
Charles W. Chesnutt's writing career proceeded from a prior commitment to a particular set of social and
political goals. Chesnutt's fiction, from his first conjure tale in 1887 to his final novel in 1905, persistently
sought to alter prevailing white cultural myths of race, deploying fiction as a tool against the intensifying
post-Reconstruction trend toward civil re-enslavement of black freedmen and women. Chesnutt's career—
not only as fictionist, but also as lawyer, businessman, and civic leader—demonstrates the depth of his
commitment to Progressive racial reform. But the movement toward polemic late in his writing career, as

others have noted, testifies to an increasing frustration with both the reform effort and the role of his own writing in it.¹ All of Chesnut's published fiction proceeded from a set of extra-literary political and ethical imperatives which he increasingly felt to be incapable of effective enactment by means of literature, and this realization, as the standard biographical interpretations have it, led to his early retirement from a career in letters. This literary-biographical narrative might be taken to imply a progression from idealistic naïveté to a more realistic (not to say cynical) position on race relations. Such an interpretation, however, would ignore not only the fact that Chesnut's commitment to the reform cause in his extra-literary work did not end with the demise of his literary career, but also that he began his literary career with a remarkable degree of awareness of the obstacles his self-imposed task would face. Closer examination of Chesnut's earliest published fictions reveals that Chesnut was engaged with such issues from the first. Having set himself the task of using fiction to transform the hearts and minds of a politically powerful, elite white readership, upon whose conceptions of African Americans every possibility of civil and social reform depended, Chesnut simultaneously began the parallel task of employing his fiction to assess the prospects and preconditions for success in this endeavor. The tales collected in *The Conjure Woman* seek to win a white audience to a comprehensive transfiguration of its relationship to African American people and culture, redeploing the generic conventions of white racist plantation-dialect fiction for racially progressive purposes. More particularly, Chesnut's manipulations of the white narratorial frames of his black-vernacular tales rehearse the full range of his actual white audience's probable responses to racially progressive tales of Southern black folk culture. Adjustments of genetically expected relationships among narrator, narrated, and audience, even as they further an antiracist social agenda, investigate the limits of a white readership's ability to overcome its own racial acculturation—a product, in part, of the racial overdetermination of Chesnut's chosen literary genre. If plantation-dialect fiction, because of its familiarity to white readers, presents itself as a logical choice for seeking to alter white racial attitudes, Chesnut asks: To what extent can that familiarity be made to yield white readerly sympathy with black folk and black experience, beyond the accustomed generic boundaries of a condescending pity or an amused toleration? Chesnut employs *The Conjure Woman*'s various figurations of its own audience to critique the very principle of literary use upon which the fiction itself is founded.² Rarely has a literary figure specified so minutely, before the fact, his purposes in adopting a literary career as did Charles W. Chesnut. In 1880, resolving in his journal to "write a book" for the first time in his life, Chesnut describes the "high, holy purpose" to which his fiction would be devoted: The object of my writings would be not so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites,—for I consider the unjust spirit of caste which is so insidious as to pervade a whole nation, and so powerful as to subject a whole race and all connected with it to scorn and social ostracism—I consider this a barrier to the moral progress of the American people: and I would be one...

**CHARLES W. CHESNUTT,
THE CONJURE WOMAN, AND
THE RACIAL LIMITS OF LITERARY MEDIATION**

Paul R. Petric

Southern Connecticut State University

As thoroughly as that of any other figure in American literature, Charles W. Chesnutt's writing career proceeded from a prior commitment to a particular set of social and political goals. Chesnutt's fiction, from his first conjure tale in 1887 to his final novel in 1905, persistently sought to alter prevailing white cultural myths of race, deploying fiction as a tool against the intensifying post-Reconstruction trend toward civil re-enslavement of black freedmen and women. Chesnutt's career—not only as fictionist, but also as lawyer, businessman, and civic leader—demonstrates the depth of his commitment to Progressive racial reform. But the movement toward polemic late in his writing career, as others have noted, testifies to an increasing frustration with both the reform effort and the role of his own writing in it.¹ All of Chesnutt's published fiction proceeded from a set of extra-literary political and ethical imperatives which he increasingly felt to be incapable of effective enactment by means of literature, and this realization, as the standard biographical interpretations have it, led to his early retirement from a career in letters. This literary-biographical narrative might be taken to imply a progression from idealistic naïveté to a more realistic (not to say cynical) position on race relations. Such an interpretation, however, would ignore not only the fact that Chesnutt's commitment to the reform cause in his extra-literary work did not end with the demise of his literary career, but also that he began his literary career with a remarkable degree of awareness of the obstacles his self-proposed task would face.

Closer examination of Chesnutt's earliest published fictions reveals that Chesnutt was engaged with such issues from the first. Having set himself the task of using fiction to transform the hearts and minds of a politically powerful, elite white readership, upon whose conceptions of African Americans every possibility of civil and social reform depended, Chesnutt simultaneously began the parallel task of employing his fiction to assess the prospects and preconditions for success in this endeavor. The tales collected in *The Conjure Woman* seek to win a white audience to a comprehensive transfiguration of its relationship





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