

Signifying on Scots: Charles W. Chesnutt's Parodies of Walter Scott

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Abstract:

Mark Twain's famous sentence from *Life on the Mississippi* (1883) about the Civil War and Sir Walter Scott introduces this paper: "Sir Walter had so large a hand in making Southern character, as it existed before the war, that he is in great measure responsible for the war." This contribution aims to show how Charles Chesnutt's fiction elaborates on Scott's influence on the South by parodying the received cultural identification white Southerners assumed about Scotland generally, and about the plots and romantic notions of Sir Walter Scott's fiction specifically. The explicit and implicit allusions to Scott's most popular romance among Southern whites, *Ivanhoe* (1819), will be examined in Chesnutt's early novel, *The House behind the Cedars* (1900) in light of H.L.Gates's theory of African American rhetoric.

I. Introduction

Can fiction cause war? Any direct allegation seems preposterous and most readers familiar with Mark Twain would associate this claim with his tall tales. Mark Twain's hyperbole, however, raises a more discrete question: Can imaginative literature generate a mindset which aids in bringing about a terrible ravaging reality such as the American Civil War – as he later claims in *Life on the Mississippi*? Even the great exaggerator Mark Twain hedges from his initial claim: he later backs off from his indictment against Scott, underscoring instead the cultural values his literary reception engendered:

It seems a little harsh toward a dead man to say that we never should have had any war but for Sir Walter; and yet something of a plausible argument might, perhaps, be made in support of that wild proposition. The Southerner of the American revolution owned slaves; so did the Southerner of the Civil War: but the former resembles the latter as an Englishman resembles a Frenchman. The change of character can be traced rather more easily to Sir Walter's influence than to that of any other thing or person (Twain 1981:219).

Twain loathed Sir Walter Scott's fiction, most particularly its alleged pernicious influence on the South, and he parodied what he condemned as Scott's "sham grandeurs, sham gauds, and sham chivalries of a brainless, and worthless long-vanished society" (Twain 1981:220), and he did so not only in his most famous novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Beyond Scott's influence in constructing Southern white values regarding birth, rank and honor rather than merit, Twain argued that his influence ruined the reception of Southern literature. He suggested that Southern novelists study *Don Quixote* by Cervantes rather than *Ivanhoe* if interested in chivalry.

Parodies of Scott's fiction by the first critically-acclaimed African American fiction writer, Charles Waddell Chesnutt, pastiches of an altogether different ilk, have not received much attention up to now by scholars. This paper intends to show how Charles W. Chesnutt parodied Sir Walter Scott, and that particularly *The House behind the Cedars* can be read as a pastiche or as "parodic-travesty forms," to use Mikhail Bakhtin's phrase (Bakhtin 1981:61). For the last three decades criticism has

reformulated the notion of literary history as a dynamic interplay of texts, as texts which “talk” to each other. J. Hillis Miller characterizes literary works as “inhibited [...] by a long chain of parasitical presences, echoes, allusions, guests, ghosts of previous texts” (Miller 1977:446).

Moreover, I would also regard the parody employed by Chesnutt as “signifyin(g).” In *The Signifying Monkey* Gates refers mostly to the intertextual, formal revision and implication by black authors on previous text(s) by black authors. A few critics such as William E. Cane have misunderstood Gates’ theory of “Signifyin(g)” to largely exclude white texts as a target of parody. While Gates employs the term “signifyin(g)” as a metaphor for this formal revision of black texts, his study nevertheless leaves the door open for black authorial revision of white texts as well. For example, Gates refers to sundry parodies of white authors in, for example, Wole Soyinka’s short play *The Lion and the Jewel* which “[s]ignifies [...] in our sense of the term [...] upon Shakespeare” as well as numerous occasions of Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s revision of James Whitcomb Riley. Likewise he refers to Sterling Brown’s “riff” on one of Robert Penn Warren’s poems and LeRoi Jones’s revision of W.B. Yeats (Gates 1988:107,122-123). Similarly, the main point in citing the Chesnutt’s parody, specifically his heightening of the characteristics in Scott’s novel, is best pointed out by Gates who describes theorizing the black tradition:

Our task is not to reinvent our traditions as if they bore no relation to that tradition created and borne, in the main, by white men. Our writers used that impressive tradition to define themselves, both with and against their concept of received order... black people created their own unique vernacular structures and relished in the double play that these forms bore to white forms (Gates 1988: xxiii, xxiv).

Before considering this analysis of Chesnutt’s fiction in light of Gates’ theory, let us first consider the significance of Scottish influence generally in the construction of the South.

II. Scottish Influence on the South

Today despite improved race relations in the South since the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, Southern symbols of Scottish heritage express frustrations of white Southerners. The controversy involves symbols on state flags, license plates, memorials, and parks. State parks, schools and highways have been named after Confederate generals, Ku Klux Klan leaders and Southern segregationist politicians. Debate rages on persistently about their appropriateness, and about whom one should remember (and evidently who should have the power to construct memory). Most of the symbols associated with the Confederacy are rooted in 18th and 19th century Southern Scottish culture, which likewise had a thoroughgoing influence on black cultural values before and immediately after emancipation from slavery. Remarkably little scholarly research has been undertaken about Scotland’s lasting impact on early African American letters.

The most notable symbol of the Confederacy is the so-called “rebel flag.” Its enormous popularity is seen throughout the South of the United States. (As an aside, the rebel flag has gained popularity internationally, including here in Eastern Europe: it can be seen inside Czech trucks and sold at open-air flea markets by Vietnamese merchants.) The Confederate States of America flag is basically a match of the flag of Scotland: the cross on the flag represents the saltire cross, which represents Scotland in the Union Jack. It also represents the cross of Saint Andrews, the patron saint of Scotland. The flag of the Ku Klux Klan is likewise remarkably similar to the Scottish flag.

The Confederate flag still makes up a portion of the design of the flags of the states of Mississippi, Alabama, Florida and, until 2001, Georgia. African American activists have argued for different flags to represent their states, excluding all Confederate symbols. To them the Confederate flag denotes white racial supremacy and celebrates the defense of slavery by military force. Whites in the South, on the other hand, have in the main defended the flag, asserting that the Confederacy is central to Southern culture, despite having lasted only four and a half years.

The Confederacy is linked to Scotland because so many of the white people populating the South emigrated from there. To be sure, Scottish cultural influence is paramount to this argument. Some critics may go further in their claims – such as Mark Twain (noted above) and more recently, Ishmael Reed who contends that the Civil War itself can be interpreted as a reenactment of Scottish-

English conflicts on American soil (Reed 2003:99). Songs and poetry from the South not only celebrated romantic notions of Scottish ancestry, but many songs linked the Confederate cause to the Scottish struggle. The cult of Scottish militantism was expressed in a distinctive mold: the tradition of Scotland as a birthplace of rebellion and political radicalism, from Robert Burns to James Keir Hardie to the Red Clydeside. As Martin Procházka puts forth,

[t]he disappearance of Highland culture in the eighteenth century [...] has led not only to the nostalgic idealization of the land and the people, but also to the glorification of the poet's subjectivity as a heroic voice surviving even after the deeds of warriors have been forgotten (Procházka 1997:69).

Their poems, songs and minstrels idealize images of heroic Highlanders who, despite following the ill-fated cause of Jacobitism, are depicted as loyal to the highest ideals of chivalry. Scott's fiction especially made this cause not only acceptable, but romantic and seductive, especially to Southern writers. For example, William Gilmore Simms wrote historical romances about the South's role in the Revolutionary War that were strongly influenced by Walter Scott. The projection of Scott's historical romances onto American soil and later to the rebellious and ill-fated cause of slavery is the basis for Mark Twain's condemnation. The received cultural identification white Southerners assumed about Scotland and Scott's fiction is really what Mark Twain condemns in the passages intimated before in *Life on the Mississippi*.

In Chesnut's lifetime, both during Reconstruction (1865-1877) and well afterward, the defeated Southern whites by and large continued what they deemed as the inveterate Scottish tradition of resistance and specifically evoked Scotland in that resistance. In what might today be termed a "culture war," Southern apologists aimed to convince Northern whites that life for black slaves in the antebellum South had been wonderful, a way of life for which post-bellum free and miserable blacks were nostalgic.

The common genre expressing these political (and to their mind didactic) views in an entertaining medium of fiction fell under the category of "plantation literature." Plantation literature grew out of the antebellum "Anti-Tom" literature which countered accusations leveled against slaveholders in Harriet Beecher Stowe's sensationally successful abolition novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851). Thomas Page, Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Dixon, all Southerners of Scottish ancestry, responded to Beecher Stowe's accusations of plantation cruelty with popular romances, short stories and tales drawing on the "family" metaphor which depicted white owners and black slaves expressing sentient bonds of loyalty toward one another. For example, in "A Story of the War," Harris has the black narrator, Uncle Remus, proudly recall shooting a Union soldier who was about to ambush his master, "Marse Jeems," even though, as he is reminded, Union soldiers were fighting for his freedom. Dixon's trilogy of Reconstruction, *The Leopard's Spots, a Romance of the White Man's Burden* (1902), *The Clansman, An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905) and *The Traitor* (1907) includes brutal violence against virtuous, refined Southern white women by vicious, horrific black men (some of whom are mulattos while others are Northern blacks). These crimes are depicted as justifiably avenged through the course of the novels by the Ku Klux Klan. As Chesnut referred to the situation years later, "Thomas Dixon was writing the Negro down industriously and with marked success. Thomas Nelson Page disguised the harshness of slavery under the mask of sentiment. The trend [...] was distinctly away from the Negro" (Chesnut 2001:101-2).

The first commercially successful artistic film in the United States, D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which likewise justifies the actions of the Ku Klux Klan, includes a scene with white-hooded clansmen surrounding a banner with "Scotland" written on it. This scene is not based on the novel itself, but on a statement in the "Preface" to Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman* in which he calls for the restoration of Scottish traditions that he saw under threat by the enfranchising of blacks and the politics of Reconstruction. The last sentence of Dixon's preface, linking "old Scotland" with the "young South," reads in full:

How the young South, led by the reincarnated souls of the Clansmen of Old Scotland, went forth under this cover and against overwhelming odds, daring exile,

imprisonment, and a felon's death, and saved the life of a people, forms one of the most dramatic chapters in the history of the Aryan race (Dixon 1997: iii).

In colonial America, immigrating Scots were originally not regarded as white, or "Aryan" as Dixon puts it. In his recent study, *Working toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Become White* (2005), David Roediger shows how Europeans such as Celts, Slavs, Jews as well as Latin immigrant "racial" groups were restricted from becoming full U.S. citizens at the onset and had to undergo a process of "becoming white." Karen Brodtkin's *How the Jews Became White Folks* (1999) and Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White* propound similar points: "Whiteness is not a culture [...] but a reflection of a privilege. Whiteness exists for no reason other than to defend it" (Ignatiev 1996:132). These studies, which emerge from a larger context, also establish that Scots arriving in America were not regarded as "white" because Celts were not among the privileged Anglo-Saxons to whom the "white race" was generally restricted. Assuming "whiteness" and differentiating themselves from the ultimate non-white – the African slave – enabled white Southerners to link themselves culturally with Scotland and, in addition, to project their inferiority complex onto the blacks.

To be sure, not all Scottish immigrants in the South were slavers or pro-slavery agitators. Alexander Hamilton, the son of a Scottish immigrant and one of the Founding Fathers, abhorred slavery. Likewise, in other states there were efforts instigated by Scots against the institution of slavery. W.E.B. DuBois reports that "there used to come strong protest against slavery from the Scotch Highlanders [...] down in Darien [Georgia]" (DuBois 1989:92).

III. Chesnutt's Black and White Scots

Chesnutt depicts blacks emulating the Scottish heritage of the white Southern slaveholders. In *Mandy Oxendine* (1997), Chesnutt's main heroine, a beautiful African American teacher named Amanda Oxendine, a so-called "octoroon," sings Scottish songs celebrating the royal antics of the Stuart, King Charles. These songs, Chesnutt writes, were brought over by "the Scotch exiles who with Flora Macdonald had settled on the Cape Fear" region of North Carolina and passed it to the following generations, black as well as white (Chesnutt 1997:65). According to a study of early Dixie folk music, Scottish folk music was beloved in the South: "[b]y the 1840's substituting a southern plantation for a Scottish castle allowed American audiences the balance between remote fantasy and comfortable familiarity [...] in the Scottish myth [...] evoking the lost charms of medieval Scotland" (Glazer and Key 1996:14). Slaves frequently worked the fields while singing the Scottish songs of their white ancestors. Many other characters, black and white, have Scottish names and ancestors in this early Chesnutt novel.

Chesnutt's most successful (i.e., both popular and critically acclaimed) fiction is his dialect story collection *The Conjure Woman* (1899), which is replete with Scottish slave owners who settled the same region. Uncle Julius McAdoo, a former slave from whose owner, Dougal McAdoo, he has been named, is introduced in "The Goophered Grapevine" as "not altogether African" in appearance and character. This background is attributed to "shrewdness" in his character, synonymous with possessing Scottish blood (Chesnutt 1993a:34). In "Tobe's Tribulations," the narrator suggests attributing Uncle Julius McAdoo's "superstitions, filtered through the negro intellect, [to] the Scotch settlers who had founded their homes on Cape Fear at a time when a kelpie haunted every Highland glen, and witches, like bats, darkened the air as they flew by [...]" (Chesnutt 1993a:185). Chesnutt's stories of the color line such as "The Sheriff's Children" are also replete with Scottish-Americans.

The neighboring plantations in *The Conjure Woman* are owned almost exclusively by Scottish slavers, including "Jeems McLean," "Marrabo McSwayne," "Dunkin McSwayne," "Jim McGee," and Colonel Pennington; a downtown store is run by "Archie McMillan" and another store owner is named "Tom McAllister." While most Chesnutt short stories from North Carolina untiringly refer to white Scots, inevitably many blacks have Scottish names as well, since Scottish slavers named them. With regard to light-skinned blacks, they are in fact more Scottish than African, but the one-drop law keeps them subjugated.

In the ninth novel Chesnutt wrote, *The Quarry*, written in 1928, a Scottish American family, Mr. and Mrs. Angus Seton, rejects a child they had legally adopted in Ohio after they are mistakenly informed by the orphanage that their child is African American. After Donald Glover grows up in a

loving African American family, earns a doctor of philosophy degree at Columbia University, and takes a job as assistant to the director of the renowned black college, the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, he finds out in his twenties that he is of Italian nobility with no African ancestry whatsoever. Hence in Chesnutt's Harlem Renaissance novel written near the end of his life, the Scottish-American continues to exert a racist presence in his fiction.

In the novel I focus on in this contribution, *The House behind the Cedars*, it is a contested will written by Duncan McSwayne which produces the climax in the middle of the novel (chapter 15) when the "aristocrat Scot" George Tryon unmasks the "octoroon," his fiancée passing as white. Just before Tryon's discovery, Chesnutt parodistically links the Scottish custom of the whites to their deeply-felt identity of racial purity revealed moments later:

[...] for among the people of Patesville, perhaps by virtue of the prevalence of Scottish blood, the ties of blood were cherished as things of value, and never forgotten except in case of the unworthy – an exception, by the way, which one need hardly go so far to seek" (Chesnutt 1993b:90).

IV. Chesnutt's Parody of Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*

Beyond numerous direct and indirect references to Scott in Chesnutt's shorter fiction and his later novels, Chesnutt's first published novel, the aforesaid *House behind the Cedars*, is a substantial burlesque of the Southern white vogue for books by Sir Walter Scott. White Southerners' predilection for chivalry is aptly shown through the genre of the so-called "Southern Romance." As Chesnutt avers, "The influence of Walter Scott was strong upon the old South. The South before the war was essentially feudal, and Scott's novels of chivalry appealed forcefully to the feudal heart" (Chesnutt 1993b:31). The significance implied and propagated in Scott's chivalric novel to white ante-bellum Southerners is that the power which rules behavior of honorable men is not God or Divine Providence but the power of chivalry, the code of honor. Chesnutt offers a critico-satirical depiction of a society worshipping a culture of honor and virtue that Southerners felt was best exemplified by Scott's fiction.

John Walden, an "octoroon" who passes as white, reads law books and passes the bar exam. This ability stems in part from his wide reading of edifying books his deceased white father left in the house behind the cedars, i.e., the house his white father built for his black mistress, John's mother. John Walden's posture toward achieving his ambitious potential was to acquire the perspicacity as well as the diction of the white man through his books. These books included Henry Fielding's complete works, Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novels, and "everything that Walter Scott – the literary idol of the South – had ever written" (Chesnutt 1993b:107-9). Reading these books in order to resemble a white man culturally and intellectually, John sought literary means to infiltrate and emulate the character of the Southern white gentleman of honor.

Although a free man, the impoverished, very light-skinned John Walden represents in the second half of the 19th century what Henry Louis Gates emphasized for enslaved blacks in the 18th century to be the ultimate American oxymoron to whites at that time: an intelligent black person. According to Gates, intellectuals did not judge blacks to be in possession of reason because of their illiteracy and inability to write original imaginative literature. Gates traces this debate, illustrating how Hume, Kant, Hegel and Jefferson judged blacks inferior by absence of reasoning faculties. Gates points out that literacy was the measure of blacks being regarded as human beings (Gates 1988:113, 167). More importantly, it was the means to liberty by slaves as revealed in slave narratives.

Although John Walden was not born into slavery, the same trope of literacy yielding more freedom, or lack of restrictions, is taken up by Chesnutt. John Walden's great ambition to succeed while passing as a white man directs him to read law, an education this fictional character shares with both authors under discussion, Chesnutt and Scott. He accomplishes his own professional preparation in the 1850s by secretly reading law after cleaning a judge's office. He persuades the local judge, a personal friend of his white father, to allow him to read his law books "under the rose" or surreptitiously after sweeping and cleaning up his law office. Part of his persuasion of the judge centers his status: John tells the judge that he is white, and pulls up his sleeves to prove it. The judge, aware of the "one drop of Negro blood" law, counters with legal aspects of his Negro status:

“[...]You cannot travel without your papers; you cannot secure accommodations at an inn; you could not vote, if you were of age; you cannot be out after nine without a permit. If a white man struck you, you could not return the blow, and you could not testify against him in a court of justice. You are black, my lad, and you are not free” (Chesnutt 1993b:113).

The judge is ultimately convinced after searching the law books and finding out that an octoroon is considered white in South Carolina, “because they have many more blacks than whites, and would like to lessen the disproportion” (Chesnutt 1993b:115). Legally, John Walden’s race may be black in North Carolina, but he is white in South Carolina.

After persuading a judge to let him read law in his office and obtaining the knowledge of the legal profession, John Walden takes an old name rooted in history as he leaves North Carolina to pass as a white lawyer. “John Walden” becomes “John Warwick,” based on Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, known as the “kingmaker” in Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s War of the Roses novel, *The Last of the Barons* (1843). This historical romance, one of John Walden’s favorites, portrays a feudal vision of a lost English cause comparable to Jacobitism, Walter Scott’s lost Scottish cause, or slavery, the lost cause of the white Southerners.

The only parody of Scott most readers note at first glance is the obvious tournament setting in chapter five of *The House behind the Cedars*. The winner of the jousting contest (no valiant contest to the death but merely ring gathering with a wooden lance on horseback), a Southern racist aristocrat, unwittingly chooses a passing “octoroon” as the tournament’s “Queen of Love and Beauty.” Dropping her handkerchief for “Sir George” to fetch with his lance, the character “Rowena Warwick,” as John Warwick renames his sister, reflects the constant reverberations of the conflicts between the Saxons, Normans and the Jew Isaac’s beautiful daughter Rebecca in *Ivanhoe*. Echoes of these racial conflicts in *Ivanhoe* are commented upon by characters in this Chesnutt novel. After the engagement of George Tryon and “Rowena Warwick” is made known to his white friends, Tryon’s family friends comment on her new first name and surname:

“A good, strong old English name,” observed the doctor.

“The heroine of *Ivanhoe*!” exclaimed Miss Harriet.

“Warwick the Kingmaker!” said Miss Mary. “Is she tall and fair, and dignified and stately?”

“She is tall, dark rather than fair, and full of tender grace and sweet humility.”

“She should have been named Rebecca instead of Rowena,” rejoined Miss Mary, who was well up in her Scott (Chesnutt 1993b:92).

Their comments specify those racial features that indicate Rowena in possession of the wrong name since her darker features bear more resemblance to the “dark” Jew Rebecca than Scott’s “fair” Saxon Rowena. Foreshadowing the unmasking of Rowena’s dark background as well as the failure of an interracial pairing, Chesnutt links Scott’s racial conflicts as well as a racialized allusion to Rebecca’s Semitic beauty expressed in chapter eight of *Ivanhoe* (Scott 1986:88). Rowena Warwick indulges in excessive ambition not only to pass as white but to climb to the top of white Southern society. Both Scott’s and Chesnutt’s tragic heroines ambitiously attempt to marry into a racist society which will never allow them entry, and eventually both are grievously punished for it. The principal difference between the two women’s ambition is that Rebecca never attempts to assimilate to Christianity whereas Rowena integrates by going to a “finishing school” and passing as white.

In Scott’s novel, *Ivanhoe*’s greater attraction and chivalric love for the black-eyed beauty Rebecca does not overcome society’s demand that he designate the “mild blue-eyed” Saxon Rowena as the “Queen of Love and Beauty.” This decision foreshadows *Ivanhoe*’s ultimate choice of Lady Rowena of Hargottstandstede as his bride, even though numerous exchanges of gifts, chivalric assistance on *Ivanhoe*’s side and Rebecca’s nursing him back to health after he suffered injuries express mutual attraction for each other.

After the initial confrontation between George Tryon and his unmasked fiancé, the “racial disgrace” is kept private between a few people. Later, letters are exchanged and Rena denies her blackness, for octoroons are white under South Carolina law. George Tryon’s erotic interest in

Rowena increases with her denial of blackness. In the resulting parting of their relationship, George Tryon appears to develop either a dishonorable motivation behind his continued pursuit of Rena, or he still feels he is in love with her. His motivation is ambiguous. Ultimately, the utmost duty of a chivalric “gentleman of honor” was to instantaneously protect women from assault. When the injured Saxon Ivanhoe defends the honor of the unassimilated Jewish maiden Rebecca by means of a duel of honor, both “race” and religion are transcended in Scott’s melodramatic display of the code of chivalry. This is not so with Chesnutt’s depiction of the South’s aristocrats, and this constitutes Chesnutt’s *cheval de bataille*, his pillorying of Southern “sham chivalry.” Rather than behaving like the heroic knight Ivanhoe, the healthy George Tryon functions more like Walter Scott’s loser in *Ivanhoe* (whose honor is equally ambivalent) named “Athelstane the Unready – slow, irresolute, procrastinating, and unenterprising” (Scott 1986:198).

When George Tryon learns that Rowena is ill and had left town, he makes a belated attempt to help out. Jeff Wain, a nefarious married man who appears intent on forcing himself on the maiden Rowena, is analogous to Brian de Bois-Guilbert who repeatedly attempts to either seduce or rape Rebecca. Unlike Scott’s heroic protector of Rebecca’s honor, Chesnutt’s tragic mulatto is left unprotected from the would-be rapist and must escape on her own. Eventually, she melodramatically dies in her attempt to escape.

Rena fantasizes, while escaping, of an Ivanhoe-like knight coming to her rescue, but Tryon’s rescue never materializes. In her hallucinatory fantasy before her black servant, she envisions her estranged lover George Tryon saving her just as Rebecca was saved, accentuating Chesnutt’s satire. She sentimentally confuses the black servant who saves her with her beloved ex-fiancé:

“George,” she cried, in melting tones, “dear George, do you love me? How much do you love me? Ah, you don’t love me!” she moaned; “I’m black; you don’t love me; you despise me!” Her voice died away into a hopeless wail (Chesnutt 1993b:192).

Tryon, who on one level is a well-drawn character, represents as Chesnutt’s parody of Ivanhoe a scathing caricature of a Southern gentleman. He is nowhere to be seen when Rena needs his aid, although he belatedly hears of her suffering and attempts a search. Instead, the dark black servant and gallant devotee named Frank Fowler rescues her from the swamp-like location where she had collapsed in a delirium. The “black knight” exclaims his chivalric devotion to her: “Frank loves you better’n all de world [...] I’d ‘a’ died, fer you, Miss Rena,” (Chesnutt 1993b:192,195). However, Frank’s attempt to rescue and bring her home to die is nearly thwarted twice: a young white man asks, “Look a-here, nigger, what are you doing with this white woman?”; later, fox-hunting whites on horseback, following their hounds, question the black man carting Rena home with a mule, only to leave him with the white-looking woman when Frank tricks them into believing her ailment contagious (Chesnutt 1993b:193). Even the black servant Frank Fowler exploits the cowardly character of the Southern white man. Chesnutt’s white Southerners never put themselves at risk even when a distressed woman appears white.

“Death is Freedom,” as William Wells Brown entitles a chapter near the end of *Clotel* (1853), and it manifests itself as Rena’s only freedom as well. Death serves as a means to preserve her honor (i.e., her virginity). Although death ensues in the “tragic mulatto” tradition, it is not usual to combine it in a scene evoking an escaping slave, but rather following a century-old genteel convention of female malaise, or emotional fever caused by a broken heart, leading to what one scholar calls “the bourgeois Liebestod” as exemplified by Richardson’s *Clarissa* (Fiedler 1966:62). Chesnutt combines both conventions in the death of Rena Walden. Tryon’s failure to consistently behave according to the “code” as Ivanhoe does toward Rebecca, Scott’s racial Other, exemplifies Chesnutt’s untiring and nearly inexhaustible satirizing of the Southern white “sham” chivalry.

In racial and cultural terms, Sir Walter Scott’s novel *Ivanhoe* depicts a conflict between the Saxons and the Normans which concludes in a peaceful mixture of the two groups. The general peace ensues from their intermarriage historically:

[...] these distinguished nuptials were celebrated by the attendance of the high-born Normans, as well as Saxons, joined with the universal jubilee of the lower orders, that marked the marriage of two individuals as a pledge of the future peace and harmony

betwixt two races, which, since that period, have been so completely mingled that the distinction has become wholly invisible (Scott 1986:515).

Interracial marriage was the ideal for Chesnutt as he proposes in his essay published in 1900, "The Future American: What the Race is Likely to Become in the Process of Time," where he envisions the racial mixture as an inevitable and welcomed solution to the racial troubles, resulting in what he designated a new American race. Chesnutt propounds a mixing of the European, African and Native American races so that a new American race comes about, and envisions the harmony which Scott describes as the English model of the mix of the Normans and Anglo-Saxons. Then again, the American "one drop of Negro blood" rule precluded any chance of the English model succeeding in the United States unless one passed as white. Scott's novel also expresses a limit to mixing as well: Rebecca may assimilate through Christian conversion only – never as a Jew. When offered an opportunity to stay in England at the end of *Ivanhoe*, Rebecca replies most appositely, "There is a gulf betwixt us. Our breeding, our faith, alike forbid either to pass over it" (Scott 1983:517).

While the heroine, Rena, dies with her dream of marrying into the white race unfulfilled, her brother succeeds in passing as white, marrying and then having a child with a white woman. Success for African Americans passing as white is ambiguous in Chesnutt's novel. In *Ivanhoe*, a similar ambiguity is expressed, for while the Anglo-Saxons mix with the Normans, Rena's mortal end replicates Rebecca's miserable fate as the wandering Jew. Rena dies knowing that her racial ancestry brought about her demise while Rebecca winds up favoring Muslim-dominated Spain as a more tolerant environment for Jews than Christian England. In both novels, the female Other cannot put their beloved men into unacceptable positions of a mixed marriage.

John Warwick appears similar to *Ivanhoe* as well. Chesnutt relocates the notion of the "disinherited knight" in *Ivanhoe* to the African American experience. John Walden is disinherited by the white descendants of his father's family. They demand that these "mulatto" children (their half-brother and sister) remain "unacknowledged" black bastards when the deceased's lawyer (the judge who later trains John in law) attempts to fulfill the unnamed father's desire to leave a legacy to his "dark family." Wilfred of *Ivanhoe* as a Saxon to some extent can be regarded as a cultural, if not racial "passer" when he assimilates Norman values, thereby resulting in his "disinherited" status. Near the opening of both novels, John Warwick and *Ivanhoe* return home after ten years, both strangers to their own families. Like a modern day Robin Hood, John returns home to Patesville as a criminal in the opening of the novel, attempting to steal blackness (his sister Rena) and transform it (her) to whiteness. Like *Ivanhoe*, John returns secretly as a prominent member of the Other (race). Whereas *Ivanhoe*'s alienation from his proud father Cedric continues only until his marriage to Rowena, John must tragically separate himself, his sister and his son from any bond with his mother who "would have given all the world to warm her son's child upon her bosom; but she knew this could not be" (Chesnutt 1993b:16).

Shortly after Rowena's unmasking as an African American, John Warwick knows that his own ability to pass may be compromised. He sententiously tries to persuade Rena to move and pass as white again:

"Listen, Rena," he said, with a sudden impulse, "we'll go [...] far away from the South and Southern people, and start life over again. It will be easier for you, it will not be hard for me—I am young, and have means. There are no strong ties to bind me to the South [...]" (Chesnutt 1993b:122).

Yet Rena refuses to pass again. At that point, after bidding farewell to the family friend, John Warwick leaves Patesville, never to see his home, mother or sister again. In fear of further vicissitudes, John takes leave to ensure that he will never be unmasked. Warwick's complete disappearance from the plot about two thirds of the way in the novel (chapter 19 of a total of 33 chapters) also replicates the fate of wandering Jew Rebecca. Unlike Rebecca who goes to Spain, the reader has no clear knowledge of John's place of destiny. As an African American passing as white, John Warwick is permanently exiled from family, home and even from the reader of the novel.

V. Conclusion

Many critics have noted Chesnutt's initial writing method accentuating the more popular romantic or melodramatic style, seeking through the white character George Tryon to infiltrate white readers' racist feelings. Editors indicated to him that this practice was popular and to Chesnutt this appeared to have the best chance for success in achieving Chesnutt's didactic aim, which was "not so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites," as Chesnutt wrote in his journal (Chesnutt 1993c:139). This rather traditional African American literary aim goes back to abolitionist slave narratives.

Walter Scott is no longer as popular as he was in the 19th century. Yet his impact on African American fiction was enormous, particularly as it influenced the culture and mindset of the South in the U.S. His impact is still felt in contemporary Southern fiction, most famously and reverently in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). Charles Chesnutt was not the only African American writer to "signify" on *Ivanhoe*. With the character "Ras the Destroyer" in *Invisible Man* (1952), a black man in New York City dressed as a modern-day knight on horseback fighting superior white forces indubitably shows Ralph Ellison's particularly close affinity to Scott's romance. Ishmael Reed does likewise in both his short fiction and in at least one novel. In my reading of early African American fiction, however, I believe Charles Waddell Chesnutt was the first to do so. Moreover, he was the first writer to parody the construct of Southern white Scottish culture.

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