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The Mule as Metaphor in the Fiction of Charles Waddell Chesnutt

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The term “mulatto,” meaning the offspring of one black parent and one white parent, is a racist term etymologically derived from the Spanish word “mulatto” meaning a young mule. The mule, a sterile offspring of a mare and a male donkey, is an important metaphor in early African American literature and folklore. Anthropologists collected African American tales with mules, and Charles Waddell Chesnutt (1858-1932), inspired in part by this folklore, employed the mule as a metaphor in his literary works to represent the subjugation of blacks.

1 Introduction

The mule, the sterile offspring of a mare and a male donkey, is an important symbol in early African American literature and folklore. The term mulatto, meaning the offspring of one black parent and one white parent, is a racist term etymologically derived from the Spanish “mulatto” meaning a young mule. It is racist because it associates offspring of animals of different species with a person of mixed ancestry.¹ The term “mulatto” is a cognate – even the Czech language uses “mulat/mulatka” to indicate a person of mixed African and Caucasian ancestry. The old-fashioned Czech idiom “*dřít jako mezek*” (*to slave like a mule*) likewise links slave and mule.

Sander L. Gilman has argued that “the abyss between the perceiver and the object in concepts of race is total. It is a complete form of distancing. Placing the Other beyond the pale by stressing an unchanging sense of self provides an image of the Other that is the antithesis of self” (Gilman 1986: 255). One might assume that the case of people of racially mixed ancestry might fill in this “abyss” described by Gilman. If the person were between black and white, the distance would be shortened, so to speak. Yet, then again it may be an examination of the myth-making which forms the basis of any communal identity that needs to be addressed.

In the United States today as in Charles Chesnutt's time, legally as well as otherwise, a person is classified either as black or white. Birth certificates and visa applications require classification of a person's race, i.e., "Caucasian" or "African American," – one or the other, since these forms leave no alternative. The "mulatto" term served as a linguistic means to maintain distance between the "white" and "black" race by defining the mixture of the two as Other (than white). After the Civil War "miscegenation" came to express the unacceptable notion of race mixing which in American English came to replace the term "amalgamation" as the word of choice.²

2 The degeneracy of mulattos

Early African American fiction and folklore frequently focus on hybrid mulattos and mules. Chesnutt challenges the Anglo-Saxon myth that the mixing of races constitutes degeneracy (implying most often the degeneracy of the white race), an allegation directed against fair-skinned heroes and heroines in his fiction. In Chesnutt's first published novel, *The House behind the Cedars*, a medical journal reported that "...the smallest trace of negro blood would inevitably drag down the superior race to the level of the inferior" (Chesnutt 1993a[1900]: 71), replicating notorious medical racist notions of the time. In Chesnutt's most renowned novel, *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), a white journalist rebukes a black man who works for him for purchasing hair straightening solutions and chemicals to lighten skin pigmentation:

"Jerry, when I hired you to work for the Chronicle, you were black. The word 'negro' means 'black.' The best negro is a black negro, of the pure type, as it came from the hand of God. If you wish to get along well with the white people, the blacker you are the better, – white people do not like negroes who want to be white" (Chesnutt 1969[1901]: 245-246).

The advertisement claims, "mulattoes turned perfectly white" (Chesnutt 1969[1901]: 244). A change of appearance is regarded as degenerate as well as a threat to white Southerners. The white journalist knows that Jerry wants to join the privileged group in order to gain power. When his "black face is splotted with brown and yellow patches," he is publicly exposed as a shoddy counterfeit, his face a metaphor of the "pathetic effort to escape from the universal doom of his race" (Chesnutt 1969[1901]: 245). At the same time that they decried race-mixing as degenerate, in Chesnutt's novels white characters persistently prefer lighter-skinned blacks. In *The Quarry*, which is set in the first quarter of the 20th century, the hero, Donald Glover, is fair-skinned. He

often had to explain that he was a Negro – he soon found out that most white people preferred the word to any designation that suggested or assumed blood kinship with themselves, though it was quite obvious that he got along better with them than a darker man would have, and in this way they acknowledged in practice what they rigorously ignored in theory (Chesnutt 1999b:189).

This experience was universal in the ante-bellum period, when lighter-skinned slaves served as domestic servants (or "house slaves"). The preference for fair-skinned blacks and the credence that they were somehow "better" or deserved preferential treatment is also not a uniquely American trait but can be observed among liberal-minded European intellectuals of the 19th century as well, even in countries with little experience in slavery or African colonialism.³

Chesnutt implicitly and explicitly refutes the myth of race mixing as degenerate in part through the trope of the mule. On the plantation, the mule was known as the superior beast of burden to either the horse or donkey. The hybrid animal ate less, worked longer hours and lived longer. It became ill less frequently and required less attention from its owners. These characteristics are echoed in literature about lighter-skinned slaves, who were sold at higher prices at slave auctions. House slaves are further described as more refined, wearing finer clothes, surrounded by wealth as well as mastering to a greater extent than their darker-skinned brethren the “more cultivated” language of their white master. Indeed, the lighter the pigmentation of Chesnutt’s African American characters, the closer their English language resembles that of their master, whereas darker blacks always speak African American vernacular.

3 Mules in Southern Culture

In the rural South where Chesnutt was raised, the mule was vital for slave labor on the plantation before the war and for black sharecroppers after the war. W.E.B. DuBois points out that in rural Dougherty County, Georgia, as late as the 1890s mules served as collateral for mortgages on land. The death of a mule for a black cotton farmer was “a calamity in this land equal to a devastating fire in town” (Du Bois 1989[1903]: 120, 107).

Mules play a major role in the symbolism within African American folklore. Folklore including the talking mule, the mule as trickster, mule bones talking to graveyard visitors – all have been assembled in folklore collections published by Richard Dorson and Zora Neale Hurston in the first half of the 20th century. Charles Chesnutt’s fiction was influenced by folklore as well. Chesnutt admitted in the 1901 essay, “Superstitions and Folklore of the South” that folklore played an essential role in his fiction’s depiction of blacks, hoodoo and culture (Chesnutt 1999a). He also notes that he was unconscious of folklore while writing *The Conjure Woman*. Folklore’s influence is also felt in his metaphoric depictions of mules.⁴

The mule is a frequently surfacing metaphor in the first novel Chesnutt published, a novel that attempts, like the story collection *The Conjure Woman* published a year earlier, to slip in powerful critique of the social injustices blacks suffered in the post-bellum period. As Chesnutt wrote 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 (Chesnutt 1993b: 139-140).

Chesnutt’s didactic texts aim to lift up the white people’s behavior by employing a popular romantic style that would entertain the white addressees while “imperceptibly” working in the idea of social justice into his fiction. Hence, Chesnutt does not vehemently expound the case of social injustice in *The Conjure Woman* and *The House behind the Cedars* to his overwhelmingly white readership at the turn of the century. In *The Conjure Woman* Chesnutt reinvented the notoriously racist plantation tale to render a subtle discourse as powerful as Zora Neale Hurston’s later “speakerly text” (Gates 1988: 170-216) because former slaves authentically retell the severe injustices of slavery in a delicate, subversive manner. Julius McAdoo, a trickster figure, keeps the sensibilities of his white listeners in mind. In this study

the metaphor of the mule imparts beneath the primary narratives certain injustices of the “mulatto” before and after the Civil War.

4 The Mule in Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman*

In the fourth story of the collection *The Conjure Woman* entitled “The Conjuror’s Revenge,” Julius McAdoo, a former slave, firmly proposes to the white northerner that he identifies black people with the mule. He suggests that instead of a mule, a horse be purchased to work the expanded operations. Julius McAdoo encodes the brutality of slavery as he narrates the history of a dark black slave named Primus⁵ – an unwieldy slave who repeatedly broke the overseer’s rules. Primus ends up stealing a free conjure man’s shote and consequently is magically transformed by the Guinea-born conjurer into “a monst’us fine mule.” As a metamorphosized mule, Primus is resold to his slave master, who simultaneously and in vain hunts for the human version of Primus, whom he advertises as a runaway slave. The mule eats tobacco, drinks wine and viciously attacks a slave who attempted to make advances on Primus’s beautiful mulatto wife. In due course the African conjurer summons the mule to his house after his conversion to Christianity. The conjurer now wishes to do well by reversing his black magic, but he dies before completing the reversal of his punishing charm. For the rest of his life, Primus’s body is marred with the lower leg of a mule, illustrating the permanent physical disfigurement of his ordeal. Early in the story, Primus mercilessly whips a horse (the horse in the donkey – mule binary metaphor is evocative of the white man), thus revealing the tormented soul of a former slave.

“The Conjuror’s Revenge” is unique among the book’s stories because the conjurer is a man (rather than Aun’ Peggy or Tenie, the conjure women), reflecting the male as the agent of enslavement of Africans. The wife of Primus, “a monst’us good-lookin’ yaller gal” (Chesnutt 2000[1899]: 45), sexually links a mulatto woman slave with a mule, whose jealousy results in violent attacks against her wooer. Julius identifies with mules when he says,

“I doan lack ter drike a mule. I’s alluz afeared I mought be imposin’ on some human creetur; eve’y time I cuts a mule wid a hick’ry, ‘pears ter me mos’ lackly I’s cuttin’ some er my own relations, er somebody e’se w’at can’t he’p deyse’ves” (Chesnutt 2000[1899]: 41).

That the mule, like a human being, could be assessed for its health and strength and bought in a manner replicating the trade of slaves substantiates the connection between the mule and the slave, both of whom are dealt with identically by the white slaveholder. Despite Julius McAdoo’s initial protest and threatened refusal to narrate the history of Primus, feigning a loss of dignity because of the white couple’s initial ridicule, John regards the story of the transformation of the slave into a mule as a cleverly devised ruse by Uncle Julius. Here Chesnutt draws on the African-American use of the term “lies” which as Henry Louis Gates explains, describes wild tales and figurative discourse (Gates 1988: 56). After telling his calculated “lies,” Julius arranges the sale of a sickly horse to the white listener of his narrative instead of the coveted sturdy mule and thereby gains financially, to the detriment of the white northerner.

5 Mules in Chesnutt's *The House behind the Cedars*

Chesnutt's first published novel likewise makes use of the romantic "tragic mulatta" theme while, in the midst of the melodramatic plot, tranquilly offering seditious social criticism of the predicament of black Americans after the Civil War. The mules depicted in *The House behind the Cedars* more or less replicate the wealth or poverty of their owners. The former slaves and black neighbors of the Waldens, Peter and Frank Fowler, possess an old, one-eyed mule. The Fowlers reside "on the other side of the neglected by-street [...] in a low, rude building with a clapboarded roof" (Chesnutt 1993a[1900]: 9) and work as coopers in Patesville, North Carolina. When Frank Fowler offers his fair-skinned neighbor and heroine of the novel, Rowena Walden, a ride with his old mule and cart, Rowena's plan to pass and marry a rich white man precludes any association with the definitive image of the enslaved: a decrepit plantation mule. The offer is viewed "as the height of the ridiculous" (Chesnutt 1993a[1900]: 27).

The mule the dark black man Frank Fowler uses, often to help out with errands for his fair-skinned neighbors, had been an army mule used to transport military equipment in the Civil War. Most of the mules in the town of Patesville, North Carolina, were superannuated army mules, easily recognizable with the initials of their source branded in their bodies: "C.S.A." or "U.S.A." the latter "signif[ying] a very concrete fact" while the former reminded onlookers of "the vanished dream" of the "Confederate States Army" (Chesnutt 1993a[1900]: 71), much like some slaves who were likewise branded.

Late in the volume Frank Fowler proves his abiding fidelity to the Walden family, helping for example their old ailing mother, Mary Walden, free of charge. Rowena Walden's wealthy brother John, who has since legally become a white man, decides to replace Frank's old mule. He purchases "a fat, sleek specimen of vigorous mulehood" (Chesnutt 1993a[1900]: 124), a tool for the work he does as a cooper as well as a sign of greater prosperity. Frank's father Peter Fowler regards this act as "somethin' like rale w'ite folks," (Chesnutt 1993a[1900]: 125) complimenting in this "white" way John Warwick for his "white generosity" when in fact the white slaveholders who took his services as a slave never gave him any cart or mule.

John Walden, who like Rowena Walden is described as an "octoroon,"⁶ has been passing as white and working as a lawyer in South Carolina since before the Civil War. John "Warwick," as he calls himself after leaving his mother and sister in North Carolina and beginning a new life as a white man, marries a wealthy widow (her deceased husband was struck down in the Confederate Army). He gains substantial wealth through a plantation he secures after his opportune wedding and his work as a commercial lawyer in South Carolina. John Warwick has a son with his white wife, and his "mulatto" son corresponds to the "new American" that Chesnutt calls for in a number of essays, such as "The Future American: What the Race is Likely to Become in the Process of Time" (Chesnutt 1999a[1900]).

On the slave plantation, fair-skinned slaves resulted almost exclusively from the racial mixture of white men and slave women, most often through seduction or rape. White men had never condemned race mixing until after the Civil War when the notion of the separation of the races became a political issue, which, at least under Reconstruction, was no longer under their control. Suddenly the "crime of miscegenation" became the white Southerner's basis for demanding segregation. This argument cunningly projected the sexual suffering of slave women on to white women. In Chesnutt's time, the Southern demand for segregating the races in hotels, railroad cars and especially schools was regarded even by many Northerners as crucial to prevent sexual intercourse of African American men with white women and the consequential "amalgamation" of the races (Mayer 1970: 207-208). Chesnutt knew sure

enough that there was no “unmiscegenation” for white and African American blood. Once mixed at the pleasure of the bygone southern gentleman, it is mixed forever.

6 Names of Chesnutt’s Mules

In an early short story by Chesnutt, “McDugald’s Mule” (1981[1887]), the baffling obstinacy of McDugald’s mule (another Civil War beast of burden named “General Beauregard” which served both sides of the conflict) is esteemed as an animal with prophetic wisdom, rather than laziness. Chesnutt’s much talked-about mule in this tale is named after General Pierre Gustave Toutant-Beauregard, a West Point graduate who commanded the forces that fired on Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, which began the Civil War. Beauregard later commanded Confederate forces in North Carolina, the state where Chesnutt grew up, opposing Sherman’s Union forces in 1864-5.

The novel *Mandy Oxendine*, first published in 1997, opens up with the scene of a yellow mule named “Sherman” (after the famous Union General, William Tecumseh Sherman) picking up the novel’s protagonist from the railroad. At the conclusion of *The House behind the Cedars* Frank Fowler’s strong and dependable mule, who was newly purchased and called “Caesar,” melodramatically brings the beautiful octoroon Rena home after she escapes two men attempting to rape her. John Walden names himself after a general of the War of the Roses, Warwick, as depicted in a novel by the English novelist Bulwer Lytton. Generals seem to be common names given not only to mules, but blacks who either pass or have the opportunity to name themselves. The empowering names of generals Chesnutt’s black characters assign to both mules and black people include “Caesar,” “(E-)Rastus” and “Washington.” The fondness of slaves able to command “respected generals” seems the basis for naming mules after generals, rather than demeaning the military personalities.

7 The mechanical mule

Chesnutt’s mule in *The Colonel’s Dream* is an altogether modernist rendition. North Carolina during Reconstruction is again depicted as degenerate and the white population as shiftless. For the entertainment of white children Ben Dudley, the son of a former slaver, builds a “mechanical mule.” Made of scrap wood and other material, Chesnutt describes how, “by manipulating rubber bands [...] the mule could be made to kick furiously” (Chesnutt 2004 [1905]: 133), and it is made for entertaining a white little boy, a son of a Confederate Colonel and slave owner.

In the following chapter, the fun comes to an abrupt end: “that artificial animal suddenly refused to kick, and lapsed into a characteristic balkiness for which there was no remedy [...]” (Chesnutt 2004 [1905]: 137). It is never repaired to its original purpose again. The mechanical mule is a metaphor of the continued attempts by white Southerners at manipulating the black man well after emancipation, a manipulation that fails in the end to bring the desired results of re-enslavement. Ben Dudley, who constructed the mechanical mule, eventually moves to New York with another machine with which he hopes to begin a new business venture.

Chesnutt describes the change in the national economy and the apathetic Southern population which was slow to participate in changing economic opportunities. On the surface level, the mule was slowly moving from the beast of burden bred and exploited daily to an old legend. The interest in keeping its entertaining trait alive is reflected in the mechanical mule,

and its mechanical nature and its use as slap-stick entertainment for whites seems comparable to the “electrified rug” episode in Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man* (1952).

8 Conclusion

Why does the mule play such a significant role in the folklore and early fiction of African Americans? Part of the reason may be that the black man and woman saw this beast of burden exploited, laughed at, slighted as “stupid” and “lazy” and “stubborn,” etc., and because of the hybrid breeding which brought greater opportunities for profit, it was seized as the metaphor for the black man.

In Chesnutt’s fiction, the mule is a reliable figurative substitute for the slave. Whites characterized both “mulattos” and mules with the alleged attributes such as laziness, the yellow color and stupidity. Often in Chesnutt’s tales, much like the folklore he refers to in his essay, the black story-teller signifies on the white master–black slave relationship by taking the master’s role and substituting his own role as slave with his mule. Chesnutt’s fiction exhibit an occasional reversal of the commonly practiced principles of the master–slave relationship.

Endnotes:

- ¹ The Spanish first termed the racially mixed offspring because they first enslaved Africans across the Atlantic and also introduced mules there.
- ² Miscegenation is etymologically a misnomer as well. Ashley Montagu states that “[t]he prefix “mis” (from the Latin *miscere*, “mix”) has probably contributed its share to the misunderstanding of the nature of “race” mixture. Words that begin with the prefix “mis” suggest a “mistake,” “misuse,” “mislead,” “and similar erroneous ideas implying wrong conduct.” See Ashley Montagu (1967), pp. 400-401.
- ³ See for example Marian Musgrave, “Heinrich Heine’s Anti-Slavery Thought,” p. 91 – Heine indicates that “mulattoes [sic], whether slave or free, should be treated better,” although his contempt for slaveholders is unmistakably expressed in letters and poetry, most notably in his poem, “Das Sklavenschiff” (“The Slave Ship”).
- ⁴ See Robert Hemenway (1986): “The Functions of Folklore in Charles Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman*. In: *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 13: 283-309.
- ⁵ Primus has brothers mentioned in another short story, “A Deep Sleeper,” originally intended to be included in *The Conjure Woman* but later edited out. “Tom’s gran’daddy wuz name’ Skundus,” he began. “He had a brudder name’ Tushus en’ ernudder name’ Squinchus.” The slave names in “A Deep Sleeper” along with Primus in “The Conjuror’s Revenge” are really Latin: *primus*, *secundus*, *tertius*, *quartus*, *quintus* etc. In naming his slaves in Latin by order of birth, the owner usurps the privilege of family, a means of executing his power over the slaves through name giving in language. Julius describes names of famous generals (Washington, Caesar, and Erastus) as favored for their children (Chesnutt 1981: 115-122).
- ⁶ The designation “octoroon” is confirmed to be the mixture of Chesnutt himself – “I am really seven-eighths white, but I have never denied the other [...]” (Chesnutt 1997b: 89)

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