"One touch of nature makes the whole world kin": Shakespeare and the Construction of Race in Charles W. Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars*

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Smack dab in the middle of Charles W. Chesnutt's 1900 novel of racial passing in the postbellum South is the omniscient narrator's catalog of the main characters' childhood library. John and Rena, growing up on the outskirts of town as the children of a black mother and a white father, had access to a wonderful library of books: Walter Scott's novels, *Arabian Nights, Don Quixote,* the Bible, John Milton, Thomas Paine, books on history, the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher, and Shakespeare, who "reigned over a silent kingdom" of pages and quires. This characterization of Shakespeare as king of the library is intriguing both because it indicates to the reader a bit of Chesnutt's own literary interests and ideas, and also because Shakespeare allusions and quotations are such an integral part of this novel.

Many nineteenth-century novelists use Shakespeare to create and reinforce boundaries, intimacies, and identities—political, cultural, racial, social—while at the same time congratulating themselves, their readers, and their characters for using Shakespeare to break down divisions and create unity. Conversely, Chesnutt uses Shakespeare in his novel to construct racial identities and

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expose the arbitrary divisions between the political, cultural, social, and racial classes to which his characters belong. In this novel, Shakespeare is a tool of identity-creation, intended to both enhance the plot and ingratiate the novel with its readers. Chesnutt's novel demonstrates how Shakespeare can reflect white Southerners' rejection of a unified, national culture. He borrows from *Hamlet, 1 Henry IV, King Lear, The Merchant of Venice, A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Tempest, Troilus and Cressida,* and *Twelfth Night.* With Shakespeare's plays working almost as another character in the novel, Chesnutt's engagement with these pieces of early modern poetry is part and parcel of the novel's racial politics, and the risks and rewards of racial passing for the book's main characters are inherently tied to and illuminated by the idea of Shakespeare as a gatekeeper of polite, educated, white society. The way Chesnutt appropriates and marshals Shakespeare spotlights how hard white, postbellum Southern society worked to keep the races separate.

While Chesnutt's body of work has elicited a healthy amount of scholarship, *The House Behind the Cedars* is one of his less well-considered texts, and as far as I can tell, no one has talked about this novel in relation to the Shakespeare it relies on so heavily. Shakespeare is an integral part of the textual experience of this novel, not only because the plot itself falls into the star-crossed lovers genre but also because Chesnutt relies on Shakespeare to help build interiority for his characters, most of whom are navigating a minefield of racial identity. At its core, this novel is about the tragedy that comes from hiding one's true identity in a world that will punish both deception and revelation. Chesnutt's borrowings from Shakespeare at key moments throughout prop up the racial politics of the novel, which I take to be aligned with racial equality and invested in dismantling racism and segregation through education and contact between blacks and whites. Parsing how Chesnutt uses Shakespeare to build and break racial constructions throughout the novel is important to understanding both how Chesnutt, himself a biracial man, hoped his literature could function in a white man's world and how the novel reflects Shakespeare's function in the construction of race and otherness during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The fact that we have not yet paid attention to Shakespeare's role in this

novel means we have neglected a rich store of knowledge about how Shakespeare has been used to construct racial identities in the American South.

The House Behind the Cedars tells the story of two siblings, John and Rena, raised in poverty in Reconstruction-era North Carolina by their single mother, Molly, and slowly reveals to the reader that John and Rena are mixed-race. Their skin, however, is light enough that John has been able to successfully pass as white and has set himself up as a lawyer in the white, upper-class society world of Charleston, South Carolina. He returns to his home to "rescue" his sister from a life of racial stigma and segregation and give her the opportunity for education and a "good" marriage among white society. The novel then follows Rena's anxieties about trying to pass while living in fear of being found out by her new fiancé, George. The turning point comes when Rena takes a risk to revisit her family home and events conspire to expose her familial origins to George. The second half of the novel follows the social and emotional fallout from these events: George's shock and immediate breaking of his promises to Rena, Rena's attempts to put her life back together by becoming a teacher, George's repentance and pining for Rena, Rena's encounters with the evil Jeff Wain (her second suitor), her flight into the woods where she suffers an accident, and her deterioration and death.

Nothing[1] has been written about Shakespeare's presence in this novel even though the playwright's instrumentality in the formation of a national identity during the United States' nascent years is well documented.[2] For example, Lawrence W. Levine examines how Shakespeare participated in American culture during the nineteenth century: "Shakespeare's popularity in frontier communities in all sections of the country. . .does fit our knowledge of human beings and their need for the comfort of familiar things under the pressure of new circumstances and surroundings. . . . If Shakespeare originally came to America as *Culture* in the libraries of the educated, he existed in pre-Civil War America as *culture*."[3] Writing his foundational work in the 1980s, Levine takes a humanist and classicist view of Shakespeare, arguing that he was a unifying force for (mostly white) Americans struggling to assert themselves as a new nation on the global stage—a united body rather than a rag-tag collection of frontier

states. Levine acknowledges the shifting role of Shakespeare from the great unifier of the early nineteenth century to something more complicated in the late nineteenth century, but what he misses is that in the mid-nineteenth-century South, Shakespeare's role as a unifier was different: more problematic and political than elsewhere. In the South during the years surrounding the Civil War, Shakespeare was used to create division and boundaries, most often to codify elite groups (whites, the rich, the educated) and reinforce white, privileged opinions about their own superiority. As *The House Behind the Cedars* demonstrates, the American South used Shakespeare as a means to separate, divide, and classify just as often as it used him to come together.

Audience and Goal

Charles W. Chesnutt's novel of identity creation and the consequences of trying to outrun one's past uses Shakespeare to delineate along racial and class lines. As James R. Andreas, Sr., writes, Chesnutt's "literary progeny were often interested in erasing the trace of race, or of inverting its influence, in their appropriations and adaptations of the plays."[4] Chesnutt certainly employs Shakespeare to make points about racial and social separation throughout this novel (which I explore fully below); understanding his use of Shakespeare here is part and parcel of understanding Chesnutt's racial politics. Exploring Chesnutt's literary agenda further, Veronica T. Watson questions this "appropriation and adaptation" of Shakespeare's plays in what she calls "the literature of white exposure," which is

> the larger collection of materials from practically every conceivable written genre. . .that critically engages whiteness as a social construction. They challenge the myths and mythologies of whiteness and the meanings that are ascribed to it within American society at various historical moments by forcing readers to confront the regressive, destructive and often uncivilized 'nature' of whiteness as it is constructed in their worlds. Many texts within the tradition are also implicitly aimed toward white readers, part of an effort to engage white people in the process of reflecting upon their own lives and culture.[5]

Chesnutt reflects this idea of capturing white attention for his novels in his journal. He says, "If I do write, I shall write for a

purpose. . . . The object of my writings would not be 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. . . to scorn and social ostracism."[6] He takes a gentle approach to teaching white readers to confront their "regressive, destructive" whiteness by aiming for a mental or moral elevation of white attitudes toward blackness and white beliefs in non-white inferiority. *The House Behind the Cedars* is one of several of his novels to take on the task of elevating its white readers.

Chesnutt's journals express a desire to "secure a profitable niche among the reading public while altering his audience's attitudes about race."[7] No wonder, then, that Shakespeare became the vehicle for this project of alteration in *The House Behind the Cedars*. What better way to endeavor to change white hearts and minds than by using that bastion of white culture, Shakespeare? Writing in his journal in the spring of 1881, Chesnutt meditated on Shakespeare's utility, universality, and impact:

> To Shakespeare
> Illustrious poet! thine the pen,
> Which paints the minds and heart of men;
> Thy lines shall future ages trace,
> The Homer of the Saxon race![8]

Later that same year, he spoke of taking "a Latin method, a Greek grammar, Shakespeare, and a few other books" on a summer trip to Carthage, North Carolina, during which he would be able to "store away a vast amount of mental pabulum, which will provision my mind for future voyages."[9] He ended 1881 with Shakespeare as well, writing on New Year's Eve that he would close his journal "and read King Henry the Sixth" to follow his reading of *Henry V* "the other night."[10] Of the latter, he thought "Falstaff was a jolly old rogue, ancient Pistol a cowardly braggart, Fluellen an amusing character."[11] This year of meditating on Shakespeare was accompanied by thoughts about slowly luring white readers into changing their opinions: he saw literature as the vehicle by which "to accustom the public mind to the idea [of racial equality]; and while amusing them to lead them on imperceptibly, unconsciously step by step to the desired state of feeling."[12] Chesnutt's use of Shakespeare in his own life, as reflected in his journal, is a neat

reflection of how Chesnutt wanted Shakespeare to function in *The House Behind the Cedars.*

Using Shakespeare for this purpose, however, engages in a kind of respectability politics. Chesnutt, a biracial man, intended for Shakespeare to help his novels make the case that people of color are capable of liking and understanding Shakespeare, and to increase white sympathy this way. Chesnutt's deliberate, methodical, and thorough deployment of Shakespeare in this novel, coupled with Chesnutt's delayed reveal of John and Rena's parentage, works by turns to capture the interest of the target white reader, ingratiate both the characters and the novel with the reader, and then carry the reader through to the end, when the toxic effects of racial segregation and hierarchy come to a head.

The House Behind the Cedars, which takes as its goal the overarching desire to change (white) minds about (false) perceptions of black inferiority and racial othering, stems from Chesnutt's background as an educator. In his journal, Chesnutt expresses frustration with the ignorance among rural black populations in North Carolina: "Well! Uneducated people are the most bigoted, superstitious, hard-headed people in the world!"[13] This sentiment is directly tied to Chesnutt's perception that these rural blacks persisted in clinging to superstitious beliefs, but his frustration with uneducated people leads to the novel's attempts to create sympathetic mixed-race characters that appeal to both black and white readers. Shirley Moody-Turner articulates Chesnutt's "literary strategy" as aiming to "expose and subvert the protocols of authenticity influencing African American literary and cultural representation."[14] Though her essay focuses on other Chesnutt works and not *The House Behind the Cedars,* the rhetorical project of this novel is perfectly in line with exposing (the damage done by white supremacy) and subverting (the notion that mixed-race people are somehow lesser) for the purpose of encouraging his white readers to recognize and discard their prejudices about skin color. Moody-Turner sums up Chesnutt's overall writing goals best: "In his literary works, Chesnutt exposes the biases inherent in supposedly objective knowledge practices associated with the social sciences, revealing how the objectifying gaze often operates as a part of a system of domination and oppression."[15] In *The House Behind the Cedars,* as I will explore more fully below, Chesnutt uses

Shakespeare to expose and subvert the problems associated with categorizing people based on perceptions about their race.

Writing about the function of race in this novel, Melissa Asher Rauterkaus argues that "documenting the unbelievably horrific conditions under which most black people suffer may be the single most effective strategy for softening white people's feelings toward blacks and stamping out racial injustice. . .the text makes the point that genre can perform important social and metafictional work in the way of ridding the world of racism."[16] Her invocation of genre here highlights the way the novel swings between romance and realism, challenging questions of identity at each turn and bringing what she calls "the fictions of race" into focus.[17] The novel does not often feel overtly political or challenging to conceptions of whiteness and race, which points to Chesnutt's masterful integration of Shakespeare as a double agent that both placates delicate white feelings of superiority and at the same time provokes white intellectual engagement.

Tragedy

Chesnutt begins his skillful deployment of Shakespeare as a double agent for hooking the interest of white readers and then changing their hearts and minds by using Shakespeare's great tragedies to highlight racial, social, and national divisions in his novel's world. The Shakespearean references begin in the book's second chapter, with a direct quote from *Hamlet,* offset from the surrounding passage about this part of the South keeping to the old ways even after losing the Civil War. As one of the book's protagonists, John Warwick, visits his childhood home, he notices that the house contains "Confederate bank-notes of various denominations and designs, in which the heads of Jefferson Davis and other Confederate leaders were conspicuous."[18] This observation motivates John to utter a line from *Hamlet* as a response to what he sees: "Imperious Cæsar, dead, and turned to clay, / Might stop a hole to keep the wind away" (5.1.202-3).[19] At a glance, this first quote appears to mostly draw upon an appropriate Shakespearean line for the moment, with not much other motive than to set a mood. It also, however, illustrates John's total rejection of his upbringing. As Dean McWilliams asserts, John "inscribes himself within the dominant cultural narrative, the

racist ideology that consigns his mother to inferior status."[20] This early invocation of *Hamlet* perfectly encapsulates how John uses Shakespeare to envision the social and racial divide separating him from his mother and his upbringing: by calling upon Shakespeare and *Hamlet* to make sense of his return to his rejected boyhood home he invokes a touchstone of cultured, educated white society. In turn, John's use of Shakespeare invites the reader to view the novel through their own experiences of and with Shakespeare and find ways to see themselves in the characters who use Shakespeare's words and works. This careful deployment of Shakespeare to ask readers to cast themselves alongside the characters is designed to create a sense of intimacy between the reader, the novel, and the characters.

Later in the same chapter, Chesnutt turns to *King Lear* to help John process his mother's circumstances, and by extension, his own and his sister's. As his mother agrees to let John take Rena to Charleston with him in hopes of making a financially and socially advantageous marriage and assimilating into white society, she says, "I'll not stand in her way—I've got sins enough to answer to already."[21] John's pitying reaction to this statement is to note, internally, "If she had sinned, she had been more sinned against than sinning."[22] Likening John's mother, Molly, to Lear in this moment conveys shades of meaning to the reader. First, by aligning Molly with Lear, Chesnutt also aligns John and Rena with Lear's daughters. Though both John and Rena are more like Cordelia than Goneril or Regan, the suggestion of ungrateful, scheming children hangs in the ether. Is John, who has left his mother and his heritage behind, ungrateful? Is he seeking to erase her from the narrative of his life? Does his plan to "save" Rena reflect a betrayal of his mother? It could be that John struggles with internalized racism and guilt over his separation from his mother and sister and likens himself to Goneril and Regan as a form of penitence. Shakespeare helps build the intimacy between reader and character here, by offering interpretive choices to the reader that call on their own knowledge and experience of Shakespeare's play. Second, this line, pulled from the storm scene in which Lear's senses begin to abandon him, also provides a moment of foreshadowing the misfortune that will befall Molly. The original line comes at the end of a short speech in which Lear calls on the gods to "find

out our enemies" and deliver justice (3.2.51). It ends, "I am a man / More sinned against than sinning" (3.2.59–60). Indeed, her health (though not her wit) leaves Molly later in the book, perhaps precipitated by Rena's departure. Rauterkaus focuses on John's "metalevel" observations elsewhere in the novel, but these early moments of Shakespearean invocation also point to "his awareness of the importance of narrative positioning."[23] In this chapter where John Warwick comes to "save" his light-skinned sister from a life of poverty and struggle against racial prejudices, *Hamlet* and *King Lear* both illustrate the divide already evident between John, who has left to seek his fortunes elsewhere, and his family of origin, who stayed behind to struggle against the rules of a society that makes value judgements based on the color of one's skin.

Not only do these incorporations of *Lear* and *Hamlet* serve to build out the interiority of John's character, they also serve to hook the white, educated reader in deeper. By invoking Shakespeare, Chesnutt appeals to the sense of superiority in his readers who understand the references. Additionally, using Shakespeare to explain the inner workings of the mind of a mixed-race character has the benefit of ingratiating the character to Chesnutt's readers and combatting preconceived notions of racial hierarchy. I imagine Chesnutt intended white readers to find common ground with his characters through the vehicle of Shakespeare. I believe Chesnutt intended for his readers (mostly, but not entirely, white) who understood all of the Shakespearean references to feel a deeper kinship with the characters and the novel, but an increased sense of intimacy was available to even the reader who could only make sense of one or two references. Readers who understand Shakespeare, even just a little bit, can find themselves understanding characters who might not feel accessible, were they real people. Because Chesnutt offered Shakespeare as a mediator, he intended his readers to find in Shakespeare the tools to understand and care for John and Rena.

Comedy

While relying mostly on Shakespeare's comedies to inform his novel, Chesnutt chooses dark moments from these lighter plays to complicate the novel's events for his readers. In chapter four, as Rena and John are setting off from the house behind the cedars,

Molly reflects on the departure of her children by alluding to the hardest part of T*he Merchant of Venice.* Chesnutt writes, "She had paid with her heart's blood another installment on the Shylock's bond exacted by society for her own happiness of the past and her children's prospects for the future."[24] Chesnutt's allusion to Shylock's bond for the irredeemable pound of flesh highlights the struggle of a mother who wants her children with her because she loves them but also knows that their presence in her home will prevent them from successfully passing in white circles. She knows their best hope for an upwardly mobile economic and social life is to leave her forever. Chesnutt uses this moment to again reinforce the social and racial divide in the South through the use of Shakespeare's plays, reflecting Shakespeare's function as a tool of division more than of unification in the nineteenth-century South.

Like his use of *Merchant*, Chesnutt uses *Twelfth Night* to complicate the story in chapter nine, though here Shakespeare takes on a sorrowful tone rather than a physically tortuous one. While Rena is worrying over whether or not her beau George might still love her if he knew the full story of her origin, the narrator comments: "Rena's secret was the worm in the bud, the skeleton in the closet."[25] This allusion to the second act of *Twelfth Night* calls up that play's heroine, Viola, who is herself struggling with the concealment of her true identity. In her speech (2.4.110–17), Viola, in disguise as the pageboy Cesario, is talking to her love, Orsino, about the travails of unexpressed and unrequited love:

> She never told her love,
> But let concealment like a worm i'th' bud
> Feed on her damask cheek. (2.4.211–12).

At this moment in Chesnutt's story, Rena is grappling with a similar struggle. Though George certainly knows of her affection for him, Rena is hiding a fundamental part of her identity that lurks among the petals of her outward appearance and gnaws away at the smooth surface of the identity she is trying to project. By likening Rena to *Twelfth Night*'s heroine, Chesnutt uses Shakespeare to telegraph interior monologue and character development. Until this point, Rena is a rather flat character who goes where her mother and brother tell her to and does what they want. This allusion to Viola's precarity communicates Rena's anxiety over the creation of her identity as a white woman, something she sees as a

lie to be protected and maintained at all costs if she wants to live a comfortable life accepted by the Southerners of rank and status around her. By giving her increased dimension, it further heightens the reader's concern for Rena, deepening their investment in her fate.

The most complicated use of Shakespeare's words in this novel comes in chapter eighteen, when Chesnutt provides a catalog of the books in the house behind the cedars. In a list that includes Shakespeare, Chesnutt also uses Shakespeare to govern their organization. He writes: "Among the books were. . . a collection of everything that Walter Scott—the literary idol of the South— had ever written; Beaumont and Fletcher's plays, *cheek by jowl* with the history of the virtuous Clarissa Harlowe. . . Robinson Crusoe and the Arabian Nights. On these secluded shelves. . . Milton's mighty harmonies were dumb, and Shakespeare reigned over a silent kingdom."[26] "Cheek by jowl" comes from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (3.2.338), taken from the end of the "lovers' quarrel" scene.[27] Chesnutt uses the quote to signify the proximity of the books to each other, but the portion of this literary litany that needs the most unpacking is why Shakespeare is the one who governs the "silent kingdom." Is Shakespeare's rule predicated on his literary prestige or reputation, or is it a byproduct of his complete works being the largest text on the shelf? Or, perhaps, is it due to his plays being the oldest English-language work in the list?[28] I suggest that while the characters reap no benefit from this litany of titles (it is information relayed from the omniscient narrator to the reader), this syllabus explains the atmosphere in which Rena and John were raised. John and Rena's white father provided these textual opportunities for in-home learning, and John took advantage of these books as a child, using them as the foundation to escape the life into which he was born. Chesnutt's use of Shakespeare here, then, perpetuates the idea of Shakespeare as a unifying force, allowing John to cross social boundaries—but in the same moment, Chesnutt holds up Shakespeare as racially and socially divisive, implying that it is only by the kindness of John's wealthy, white father that John is able to access Shakespeare and cross racial and social boundaries to become a lawyer and "pass" as white in South Carolina.

Chapter eighteen is the crux of Chesnutt's representation of Shakespeare as contradictory unifier and divider in the postbellum

South. Following the cedar-house's library catalog is a reference to the later, genre-defiant play *Troilus and Cressida,* issued by the town's lawyer. The narrator moves from this list of books to John's childhood engagement with them:

> When John. . .had learned to read, he discovered the library. . . and found in it the portal of a new world, peopled with strange and marvelous beings. . . . Sometimes he read or repeated the simpler stories to his little sister, sitting wide-eyed by his side. When he had read all the books,—indeed, long before he had read them all,—he too had tasted of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge: contentment took its flight, and happiness lay far beyond the sphere where he was born. The blood of his white fathers, the heirs of the ages, cried out for its own, and after the manner of that blood set about getting the object of its desire.[29]

Spurred on by ambition and the lust for knowledge, young John sets out for the town law office and declares to the lawyer he finds there that he wants to grow up to become a lawyer himself. In their initial interview, after discovering John's parentage, Judge Straight quotes *Troilus and Cressida.* The line in question comes toward the end of a lengthy speech by Ulysses (3.3.146–91) in which he is trying to convince Achilles to go to war to cement his fame and reputation. Achilles is resting on his laurels at this point in the play and is angry that all the generals have just walked past his tent and ignored him. Ulysses argues that greatness is only confirmed continual accomplishment of great deeds. Judge Straight misquotes Ulysses's line as evidence that young Warwick cannot rise above his social place as a person of black heritage: "'One touch of nature makes the whole world kin,' says the poet. Somewhere, sometime, you had a black ancestor. One drop of black blood makes the whole man black."[30] Chesnutt here is pulling on what Teresa C. Zackodnik calls "a focus on blood and its so-called admixture," which,

> in the latter half of the nineteenth century, did not quite change from a notion of "a less than reliably read exterior" into "blood as truth."[31] She argues that at this moment in American history, race was a thing often determined legally as "physically inspecting 'tell-tale' characteristics of blackness continued well into the 1920s in cases deciding racial identity."[32] Chesnutt's deployment of Shakespeare in

> an appropriated and weaponized context, designed to keep the races separate, underscores the real problem of white Southerners using Shakespeare to uphold racial divisions.

This moment in the text also serves to allow Chesnutt to subtly undermine the untruths to which whites subscribed in order to uphold their ideas about racial difference. If "one touch of nature makes the whole world kin," then there is nothing actually separating different races. If "one drop of black blood makes the whole man black," why does not one drop of white blood make the whole man white? Rauterkaus sees Chestnut asking the same question in the very beginning of the book; when John catches his first glimpse of Rena after not seeing her for many years he does not recognize her as his sister. John makes careful note of the as-yet unknown woman's "stately beauty," her "promising curves," her hair, her shoulders, and her dress.[33] Rauterkaus notes that this moment, with its intertwined "tropes of incest and miscegenation allows Chesnutt to call into question the scientific fictions regarding racial difference and to express cultural anxieties surrounding family, sexual desire, and racial identity—anxieties exacerbated by the mulatto's invisibility."[34] She does not address the later *Troilus and Cressida* moment, but it functions in the same way, pushing the reader to confront the arbitrary rules forcing separation between races.

The conflict caused by separation between races is most realized in the character of Rena, who spends the entire novel in a state of anxiety over her choice to pass as a white woman. Because Rena is the novel's protagonist and tragic heroine, Chesnutt uses Shakespeare references to track Rena's fortunes—Shakespeare is plentiful when she is accepted into Charleston's white society, representing the bounty of possibility, learning, and culture available to her in her life as a white woman. As her fortunes turn, however, the references drop off, and there are none from the time of her accident in the swamp until her death. This stark absence suggests that Rena might be the novel's source of culture and intimacy as well as the embodied representation of racial politics. As Rena lies on her deathbed at the novel's close, Chesnutt brings in two final Shakespearean allusions.

Denouement

While together these final two references (to *1 Henry IV* and *The Merchant of Venice*) bring Rena back into focus for the reader and tie her once again to a (white) model of intellectual curiosity and culture of education, the first of the two references also strangely negates Rena's death. The narrator trivializes Rena's passing even as Rena draws her last breaths by using an allusion to Shakespeare's first tetralogy of history plays. Chesnutt writes of long-time family friend Frank Fowler and his unrequited love for Rena:

> Frank Fowler's heart was filled with longing for a sight of Rena's face. . . . He had sought work in South Carolina with the hope that he might see her. He had satisfied this hope, and had tried in vain to do her a service; but Fate had been against her; her castle of cards had come tumbling down. He felt that her sorrow had brought her nearer to him. . . . His unselfish desire had reacted to refine and elevate his own spirit. . . . He, Frank, was a man, an honest man—a better man than the shifty scoundrel with whom she had ridden away. She was but a woman, the best and sweetest and loveliest of all women, but yet a woman. After a few short years of happiness or sorrow,—little of joy, perhaps, and much of sadness, which had begun already,—they would both be food for worms.[35]

The phrase "Food for worms", shared between Prince Hal (the future Henry V) and the dying Hotspur (5.4.86), undermines the cause Hotspur and his family were fighting for, trivializes Hotspur's sacrifice for his cause, and allows Hal to place Hotspur squarely on the wrong side of the conflict. Chesnutt's use of the phrase in relation to the love between Rena and Frank illuminates the triviality and impermanence of life and the arbitrary rules that divide races, and asks the reader to consider whether Rena would have been better off with Frank or not. Rena's death also asks the reader to consider the tragedy of her life—did she deserve cruelty at the hands of her second suitor, Jeff Wain, and is death her only reward? If all she ever did was try to fit into her brother's society while not losing her ties to her mother, is it right that Rena should die? Why is it that Rena is punished while her brother John disappears from the novel, presumably with his reputation and livelihood intact? Bringing in Shakespeare for Rena's final moments again calls into

question Shakespeare's role in upward social mobility and the way readers use Shakespeare to code division between different races and classes while those races and classes "worthy" of Shakespeare congratulate themselves on his (and their own) egalitarianism.

As the novel closes, Chesnutt returns to the identity-building power of *The Merchant of Venice* to consider the ways Rena's story might have been different had she embraced her black heritage rather than eschewing it for a chance at the luxurious life of a white society woman in South Carolina. The author riffs on Shylock's "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech, and, comparing her to Frank, explores the cruelty of separating Rena from her chance at happiness—with either George or Frank—on the basis of her in-between genetics: "They were certainly both made by the same God, in much the same physical and mental mould; they breathed the same air, ate the same food, spoke the same speech, loved and hated, laughed and cried, lived and would die, the same."[36] Chesnutt's reinterpretation asserts that all humans are the same on the inside underscores the struggle at the heart of *The House Behind the Cedars:* Rena, our tragic heroine, is not permitted to belong in either the home of her birth or the high society her brother keeps, all because of the arbitrary genetic hand she was dealt. Aligning Rena's and Shylock's otherness allows Chesnutt to avoid definitively characterizing Rena as a woman who belongs in either place. This resistance on the part of the author means it is the reader who must draw conclusions about where Rena belongs, and by the end of the novel, I believe Chesnutt is clearly trying to engender within his intended audience a feeling that forcing people into one category or another based solely on the color of their skin is wasteful, arbitrary, and can have severe repercussions.

Chesnutt also borrows from another popular English writer, Walter Scott. Chapters five and six, "The Tournament" and "The Queen of Love and Beauty," feel as though they come straight from *Ivanhoe*—because, of course, *Ivanhoe*'s immense popularity in the Civil War-era South meant that any discussion of popular culture—even a fictional one—needed to touch on Walter Scott at least tacitly. Indeed, at the start of "The Tournament," the narrator notes the following:

> 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. During the month preceding the Clarence tournament, the local bookseller has closed out his entire stock of "Ivanhoe," consisting of five copies, and had taken orders for seven copies more.[37]

Chesnutt incorporates Scott throughout his novel, though to a lesser degree than Shakespeare, and to a different purpose. While Scott lends to Chesnutt local color, world-building, and pop culture tidbits, Shakespeare is woven more fully into the fabric of the novel to comment on the destructive nature of racial politics, to create intimacy with the reader, and to lend credibility to Chesnutt's writing. In much the same way that Phyllis Wheatley evoked classical poets to ground her own poetry in a predominantly white tradition, Chesnutt uses Shakespeare in this novel to align himself with the cultured, educated, well-read and well-spoken, mostly white populations which Shakespeare was coming to represent at the turn of the twentieth century.

Lawrence W. Levine writes that the "ability of Shakespeare to connect with Americans' underlying beliefs is crucial to an understanding of his role in nineteenth-century America."[38] However, as Chesnutt shows, the underlying beliefs to which Shakespeare connected in early America were, more often than not, related to upholding strict divisions along racial and social lines. Levine's work argues for an America that used Shakespeare to unite under a "shared public culture,"[39] but the American South that Chesnutt illustrates uses Shakespeare to divide and separate races. In this novel, Shakespeare works with Chesnutt to build a skillfully crafted story that gives the reader unique insight into what it means to be othered in the postbellum, white, American South. All in all, Chesnutt's novel undermines the idea of Shakespeare as a unifying force, or at least points out that those unifications were within carefully set, established parameters, and used to strengthen already-existing bonds between communities of the same race or social class.

Notes

1. Loath though I am to make such a unilateral statement, as far as I can tell, there has been no work published on Shakespeare and this novel in the last century.

2. Though by 1900 the United States was no longer nascent, the novel takes place in the post-Civil War South, thereby contributing to the idea of a past in which the country was still trying to assert its identity. For more, see Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Michael A. Morrison, "Shakespeare in North America," in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Stage,* ed. Stanley Wells and Sarah Stanton (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Kim Sturgess, *Shakespeare and the American Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Virginia Vaughan and Aldan Vaughan, *Shakespeare in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

3. Levine, "William Shakespeare," 40, 42.

4. James R. Andreas, Sr., "Signifyin' on The Tempest in Mama Day," in *Shakespeare and Appropriation,* ed. Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer (New York: Routledge, 1999), 105.

5. Veronica T. Watson, *The Souls of White Folk: African American Writers Theorize Whiteness.* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 5.

6. Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Journals of Charles W. Chesnutt,* ed. Richard H. Brodhead (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 139.

7. Shirley Moody-Turner, "'The Stolen Voice': Charles Chesnutt, Whiteness, and the Politics of Folklore," in *Black Folklore and the Politics of Racial Representation* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 127.

8. Chesnutt, *Journals*, 163.

9. Chesnutt, *Journals*, 168.

10. Chesnutt, *Journals*, 169.

11. Chesnutt, *Journals*, 160.

12. Chesnutt, *Journals*, 140.

13. Chesnutt, *Journals*, 129.

14. Moody-Turner, "The Stolen Voice," 130.

15. Moody-Turner, "The Stolen Voice," 132.

16. Shirley Moody-Turner and Melissa Asher Rauterkaus, "Racial Fictions and the Cultural Work of Genre in Charles W. Chesnutt's The House Behind the Cedars," *American Literary Realism* 48.2 (2016): 129.

17. Moody-Turner and Rauterkaus, 129.

18. Charles W. Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 11.

19. Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars,* 11. All quotations used by Chesnutt follow the spelling and punctuation in the Penguin edition of *The House Behind the Cedars,* but I take line numbers from the Arden editions of the plays. All Shakespeare quotes used in this paper use the Arden editions as their source.

20. Dearn McWilliams, "The House Behind the Cedars: Creatures of our Creation,'" in *Charles W. Chesnutt and the Fictions of Race* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002), 136.

21. Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars,* 19.

22. Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars,* 19.

23. Moody-Turner and Rauterkaus, 137.

24. Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars,* 28.

25. Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars,* 51.

26. Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars,* 108. Emphasis added.

27. Demetrius and Lysander, both charmed into loving Helena, exit the scene to fight privately and leave Hermia and Helena to sort out what they will do next. Lysander challenges Demetrius, "Now follow, if thou dar'st, to try whose right, / Of thine or mine, is most in Helena" (3.2.336-7). Lysander answers, "Follow? Nay, I'll go with thee, cheek by jowl" (3.2.338).

28. This list includes a Bible and a copy of the *Arabian Nights,* which of course are older than Shakespeare's works, but not originally written in English.

29. Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars,* 109.

30. Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars,* 113.

31. Teresa C. Zackodnik and Dean McWilliams, "Fixing the Color Line: The Mulatta, American Courts, and the Racial Imaginary," in *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 3.

32. Zackodnik and McWilliams, 3.

33. Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars,* 5.

34. Moody-Turner and Rauterkaus, 131.

35. Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars,* 188.

36. Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars,* 188. "I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed with the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer winds as a Christian is? If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that." (3.1.53-61)

37. Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars,* 31.

38. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow,* 42.

39. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow,* 46.