

Apuleius in the Work of African American Novelist, Charles W. Chesnutt (1858-1932)

This paper looks at one of Jim Ruebel's scholarly interests, namely Apuleius (Ruebel, 2000), and how Apuleius found his way into the work of the African American novelist, Charles Waddell Chesnutt. Redding (2006) and Masiki (2016) have brilliantly explained a number of Apuleian elements in two of the stories in Chesnutt's first book, *The Conjure Woman and Other Tales* (1899), which was a collection of seven stories about a freed slave named Uncle Julius who tells two white visitors about Southern culture in North Carolina. The Apuleian themes they have traced include magical spellcasters who can transform humans into other life forms (mules, trees and grapevines), issues/problems of human misidentity, and the soul's struggle to find redemption. To do this they looked at various items in Chesnutt's correspondence and his bookshelf, and traced his knowledge to works in translation. What they have not looked at is Chesnutt's interest in the actual classical languages. This paper will show that it was through self-tutorials and some paid tutoring that he acquainted himself with Latin and Greek (Brodhead 1993, 170). While this paper cannot prove that he read the actual Latin texts of Apuleius and other such as Ovid whose also influenced him, we know that he while he was a school teacher he set up a Latin class (Chesnutt 1952, 27) and in August and October 1878 was reading the first book of the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* (Brodhead 1993, 87-8; 90-92). He passed these interests on to his four children, who were all well-educated (Harvard, Smith and Western Reserve). One of them, Helen Maria Chesnutt (1880-1969) became a professional (SCS, 1920-1934), and taught high school Latin in Cleveland all of her life. She (with co-authors Martha Olivenbaum and Nellie Rosebaugh) published a successful Latin textbook, *The Road to Latin* (1932) that went through several editions. It is her 1952 biography of her father, which other researchers have overlooked, that gives us our evidence (Chesnutt 1952, 14, 16-17, 19, 22, 27, 30). Using

elements of Chesnutt's own biography this paper will also suggest that the mule in his stories was not only an appropriate choice for his stories as perennial figure in the southern landscape, but also served as a metaphor of himself, a mixed race American and a light skinned descent of slaves.

Bibliography

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