

Race and Ovidian Reception in Charles Chesnutt's Conjure Tales

The Conjure Woman, Charles Chesnutt's 1899 collection of stories of American slavery, opens with a frame-narrative in which a white Northerner buys a former plantation in the South. He meets and hires Julius, a former slave on the plantation during the antebellum days, to be his chauffeur. Each story begins with a situation that prompts Julius to relate an interpolated narrative of corporeal transformation in the unmistakable style of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Previous scholarship on Chesnutt's Ovidian reception has emphasized the effect of engagement with classical literature by a black author avowedly writing for the moral elevation of an elite white audience. But a study of Chesnutt's transformations of Ovid's text and language has yet to be done. In a deformation of Ovid's Narcissus-scene, for example, Chesnutt has the runaway slave "Lonesome Ben" fail to recognize his own face in a forest pond: he finds his body turned into the very clay that abject hunger has reduced him to eating. Narcissus' wish, the alienation of self from body (*o utinam a nostro secedere corpore possem!*), is for Ben horrifically fulfilled. The sun bakes Ben's clay corpse into brick—building material for future plantation structures—and so returns his corpse to the utility of the slave economy. Likewise, "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt", based on Ovid's story of Lycaon, features a man changed into a wolf as punishment for a murder. But where Ovid's transformation makes Lycaon's corporeal form agree with the innate savagery of a man already *notus feritate*, Chesnutt's character's wolf-body and increasingly violent behavior are concomitant results of the dehumanization of slavery. Julius inscribes the antebellum past within a *spatium mythicum* designed to entertain his white interlocutors; simultaneously, Ovidian transformation is repurposed as an expression of the brutal violence perpetrated by the plantation system on its victims' bodies and minds.