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Marriage Plots and National Reunion: The Trope of Romantic Reconciliation in Postbellum Literature*

JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS'S 1898 SHORT STORY "A Comedy of War" begins its treatment of the Civil War very traditionally, as a fraternal conflict arising from a "house divided."¹ A family quarrel eventually leads two brothers to join opposite sides of the fray, only to connect again when their military units meet at the skirmish line located a short distance from their boyhood home. At the end of the story, they receive the news that Lee has surrendered, and the brothers promptly make peace with each other and with their father, resolving the familial conflict and, by extension, the national one. For good measure, however, Harris further solidifies this new-found amity by adding a romance between the brothers' sister, who has Northern sympathies, and a Southern soldier from the Confederate brother's unit. In concluding with the couple's engagement, Harris not only ends his story as a "comedy" in the strictest sense of the word, that also employs the trope of romantic reconciliation, already a long-established literary tradition by the end of the century. Indeed, Harris's story is only one of many examples of this postbellum publishing phenomenon.

During and after Reconstruction, as the country remained embroiled in sectional conflict, the publishing world created a niche for novels designed to help the nation travel along the rocky "Road to Reunion," to use historian Paul Buck's apt phrase.² According to these novels, what the

*I would like to thank Martha Banta, Gregory S. Jackson, Lois Leveen, and Richard Yarborough for their insightful comments on various versions of this article. The anonymous reviewer for the *Mississippi Quarterly* also had many helpful suggestions for improving the essay.

¹Joel Chandler Harris, "A Comedy of War," in *Tales of the Home Folks in Peace and War* (New York: McKim, Stone & MacKenzie, 1898), pp. 148-183.

²Paul H. Buck, *The Road to Reunion, 1865-1900* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1937).

United States needed was not military, legal, or financial Reconstruction, but rather a voluntary emotional reconciliation of Northerner and Southerner in a mutually forgiving relationship. To tackle this difficult goal, authors began churning out novels of intersectional courtship and marriage, turning to the ever-popular love story in the hopes that a good romance could vanquish the troubles of postbellum America, or at least gain a profitable readership. If a cold Northerner and a fiery, resentful Southerner could survive courtship and eventually find marital tranquility, the argument ran, could not the nation as a whole mirror their domestic peace?

In the post-war years, therefore, many white novelists returned to the antebellum trope of national harmony brought about by love and marriage between a Northerner and a Southerner. Caroline Hentz began the genre with her 1833 novel *Lovell's Folly* and employed it again in 1854 with *The Planter's Northern Bride*. William Alexander Caruthers quickly followed Hentz's lead with his 1834 novel *The Kentuckian in New York*. The by-then standard plot was also a favorite of Maria McIntosh, who used it in *Two Lives; or To Seem and To Be* (1846), *Charms and Counter Charms* (1848), and finally *The Lofty and the Lowly* (1853), in which not one but two pairs of North-South lovers successfully find personal happiness and thus, symbolically, bring about national peace. These antebellum attempts to promote sectional understanding and prevent war were not successful, of course, but the romantic plot remained alluring for post-war authors. Southerners such as Julia Magruder in *Across the Chasm* (1885), Joel Chandler Harris in "The Old Bascom Place" (1891), "Aunt Fountain's Prisoner" (1893), and *A Little Union Scout* (1904), and John Fox, Jr. in *The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come* (1903) found literary success with the standard plot. Northerners, including Constance Fenimore Woolson in "Old Gardiston" (1876), S. T. Robinson in *The Shadow of the War* (1884), James S. Rogers in *Our Regiment* (1884), Charles King in *Kitty's Conquest* (1884) and *A War Time Wooing* (1888), Maud Howe Elliott in *Atalanta in the South* (1886), John Habberton in *Brueton's Bayou* (1886), Joseph A. Altshler in *The Last Rebel* (1897), and Owen Wister in *Lady Baltimore* (1905), were equally eager to make use of the trope. Reconciliation romances also found their way onto the stage, with Elliot Barnes's "The Blue and the Gray" (1884), William Gillette's "Held by the Enemy" (1886), Bronson Howard's "Shenandoah" (1889), and Augustus Thomas's "Alabama" (1891) achieving great popularity during their theatre

runs.³

From this large body of romantic reconciliation novels, a few stand out for their provocative disruptions of the standard plot and therefore of the political reconciliation they were supposed to be effecting. To make these disruptions clear, I begin by examining John W. De Forest's *The Bloody Chasm* (1881), which is noteworthy for its strict, unwavering adherence to the literary formula; in particular, De Forest is careful to follow the usual gendering of these novels, by which the North is typically depicted as male and eventually dominant over the difficult but still lovable female South. Of course, not all authors were as willing as De Forest, a former Union officer, to comply with these gendered genre restrictions as dictated by Northern publishers, and I therefore turn my attention next to white Southern authors Thomas Nelson Page who in *Red Rock* (1898), and Grace King, who in *The Pleasant Ways of St. Médard* (1916), change significant details in the formulaic plot to reclaim at least fictional power for the South and, in the case of King, to undermine the very idea of national reunion. Finally, I look at African-American author Charles W. Chesnutt's "Hot-Foot Hannibal" (1898), which uses the standard romantic formula to denounce the reconciliation genre, and thus national reconciliation itself, as inherently founded upon the continued exploitation of black Americans. In their deviations from and undermining uses of the romantic genre that De Forest's work exemplifies, Page, King, and Chesnutt reveal the editorial pressures upon postbellum American authors, mirroring the political pressures felt by the nation at large.

By the 1880s, "the South was the most popular setting in American fiction," and "the recipe for southern romance still fascinated publishers" through the 1920s.⁴ The recipe was fairly straightforward but rigid, involving

³Elizabeth Moss, *Domestic Novelists in the Old South: Defenders of Southern Culture* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), p. 101; Buck, pp. 196-235; Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), *passim*.

⁴Jay B. Hubbell, *The South in American Literature, 1607-1900* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1954), p. 701; Michael Kreyling, "After the War: Romance and the Reconstruction of Southern Literature," in *Southern Literature in Transition: Heritage and Promise*, ed. Philip Castille and William Osborne (Memphis, Tennessee: Memphis State University Press, 1983), pp. 119-120.

a love affair between a Northerner and a Southerner whose relationship stands in for the nation as a whole. The romance is normally between a Union officer and a young unreconstructed Confederate woman. This standard gendering of the two regions was typical of the post-war era, when Southern women were considered the backbone of the Lost Cause doctrine and far less likely than the former soldiers to forgive their suffering at the hands of the enemy and to look forward to a future within a reunited nation. Jefferson Davis, for example, dedicated his history of the Confederate government to the women of the Confederacy. To a greater extent than in the North, Southern women made the sacrifice of sending off fathers, husbands, sons, brothers, and sweethearts to battle; that Southern men both enlisted and then died at greater rates than did Northerners increased Confederate women's sense of loss and their later bitterness at reconciliation attempts. Moreover, it was the women of the Confederacy who had to eke out lives on a homefront that was increasingly also a battle zone; they had to witness the invasion and often the destruction of their homelands at the hands of Northern soldiers. In 1887, Southern journalist Francis W. Dawson celebrated "Our Women in the War" thus: "as the men were the body, so the women were the soul. The men may forget the uniform they wore—it is faded and moth eaten today. But the soul, the spirit our women incarnate, cannot die. It is unchangeable, indestructible and, under God's providence, for our vindication and justification shall live forever!" The Memorial Society of the Ladies of the City of Petersburg, Virginia, for example, explained in their records that "the melancholy yet grateful task" of marking graves, holding annual commemorative services, and similar tasks of remembering fell to the women alone since the men were "seemingly unwilling to assist the ladies."⁵

⁵Francis W. Dawson, "Our Women in the War," delivered February 22, 1887, to the Fifth Annual Reunion of the Association of the Maryland Line; quoted in Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 102. Memorial Society records quoted in Suzanne Lebsock, *Virginia Women, 1600-1945: "A Share of Honour"* (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1987), p. 103. For further discussions of the role of women in the Lost Cause and the feminizing of the South, see, among others, Silber, p. 27 and *passim*; George C. Rable, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), pp. 236-239; John M. Coski and Amy R. Feely, "A Monument to Southern Womanhood: The Founding Generation of the Confederate Museum," in *A Woman's War: Southern Woman, Civil War, and the Confederate Legacy*, ed. Edward D. C. Campbell, Jr., and Kym S. Rice (Richmond, Virginia: The Museum of the Confederacy, 1996), pp. 131-163; and Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, "Divided Legacy: The Civil War, Tradition, and the Woman

The South thus frequently became gendered as female, and therefore as weak, foolish, wayward, sentimental, and too stubborn for its own good. This gendering became official federal policy when Confederate men lost their suffrage until they had taken the oath of loyalty to the United States. As long as they were unreconstructed devotees of the Confederacy, they remained in the same category as vote-less women.⁶ Only by reconciling with the North could Southern men regain their voting rights and thus their masculine status. Southern women, of course, were not given the option of voting until woman suffrage was granted in 1920 and consequently did not have the same incentive to forswear their Confederate loyalties; moreover, they were not even given the option, since the oath of loyalty was only available to those who could biologically assume such a masculine position. Reconstruction policies therefore constructed the South as inherently female, while the North, as wielder of votes, money, and power, adopted a masculine role.

The reconciliation romances that became popular after the war therefore required a love affair between a Northern hero and a Southern heroine. Paul Buck describes the basic formula of the reconciliation plot thus: "If in the process of courtship obstacles of misunderstanding had to be overcome, so also in the wedding of North and South contact brought reconciliation and the closing of the chasm" (p. 216). Historian Nina Silber has examined at length "the basic formula of the dramas of reconciliation [that] rested on a gendered framework which mediated the rush to reunion by making rebellious but ultimately compliant southern women the main subjects of sectional bonding" (pp. 109-110). The Northern-controlled literary world insisted that, however much the couple in question might war with one another initially—and a good lovers' quarrel is the backbone of any worthy romance—the novel had to end with an implied sexual, and figuratively national, union, which would result in the erstwhile stubborn and willful Southern bride being brought under the control of the manly Northerner. Such a union also held out the promise of eventual offspring,

Question, 1870-1920," in Campbell and Rice, eds., *passim*.

⁶Historian Mary P. Ryan's comment about the men of New Orleans during the war holds for the entire region during Reconstruction: "With military officers from the North at the helm of local government, male Rebels were placed in a feminized political position, as passive supplicants before the conquering Yankees" (*Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990], p. 143.)

future generations whose only patriotic identity was that of the American nation rather than of any particular region. Of course, given the history of the American family, the masculine and victorious Northern father, rather than the defeated Southern mother, would necessarily be the head of the new national household.

Such romances between Northern men and Southern women were not, of course, entirely the stuff of fiction. Human nature and the realities of war being what they are, many intersectional romances did develop immediately after the war. After all, the Southern white male population had been decimated, and many of the Union officers did respect and sympathize with the white women of the South. One young woman from Nashville, where relations between Union officers and Southern women were particularly cordial, wrote to her brother about what she viewed as this dismaying turn of events:

You will be surprised to hear that your friends of the female denomination are dropping off every day—yes, dropping off—as willing victims into the arms of the ruthless invaders. Just think of it! Mollie the unconquerable, who used to parade with a large Beaugard breastpin, and who sang “Maryland, My Maryland” with so much pathos, was married some four months ago to a Federal with one bar on his shoulder. Sallie, who used to sleep with the “Bonnie Blue Flag” under her pillow . . . is married to one with two bars, and so on.⁷

Much as this young woman would like to read her former friends as “victims” of their Northern husbands and thus of the war itself, she must admit that they were “willing” partners in their fate. Such willingness is at the heart of reconciliation novels; the South has been subdued and physically beaten during the war, reduced to being the embodiment of a wayward woman, and now must be gently wooed into the right path of heterosexual union and national Union. This task of the romances becomes all the more challenging because the women of the Confederacy fervently cling to their beloved Lost Cause and are fiercely expressive of their unremitting hatred toward “damn Yankees.” But the course of true love never did run smooth, and John William De Forest rises to the challenge in his 1881 reconciliation romance *The Bloody Chasm*.

⁷Francis Butler Simkins and James Welch Patton, *The Women of the Confederacy* (Richmond: Garrett and Massie, 1936), pp. 58, 62.

The Bloody Chasm was the last in De Forest's series of Southern novels. A native of Connecticut, De Forest observed the South first-hand as a Union army officer, fighting in Virginia and Louisiana, and then serving in the Up-Country South Carolina Freedmen's Bureau for fifteen months in 1866 and 1867. He turned his experiences into literary material for three novels, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty* (1867), *Kate Beaumont* (1872), and *The Bloody Chasm* (1881). Mirroring the growing national trend toward reunion, De Forest becomes less critical of Southern vices and more compromising in his attitude toward reconciliation over the course of the three works (Hubbell, p. 394; Buck, p. 229). His first two portrayals of Southern life are often considered the most realistic novels to deal with the War prior to Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, and both earned commendations from the Dean of American Realism himself, William Dean Howells. By his third Southern novel, however, De Forest's fame as a writer had dwindled, and although he claimed that "[f]rom *Miss Ravenel* on I have written from life, and have been a realist,"⁸ in this work he abandoned realism almost entirely and grasped at the popular form of the intersectional romance to try to recapture some of his literary acclaim. Given the academic neglect of popular genres until recently, *The Bloody Chasm* has received almost no critical attention in the twentieth century.

The novel deserves recognition, however, as the perfect example of a formulaic reconciliation romance. The title is drawn from a speech by Horace Greeley, a liberal Republican who vowed during his 1872 presidential bid to bridge the distance between North and South.⁹ The story opens in the immediate aftermath of the war, and the scenes of devastation in Charleston, South Carolina, are the only examples of realism in the novel; we see the ruin of the city through the eyes of an elderly Northern gentleman, Silas Mather:

Crumbled and flame-blackened fragments of buildings—many of them once superb mansions—covered a space of many acres. This was the quarter where, for month after month, Gillmore's shells were the only possessors and tenants. There they had rioted at will, crashing through walls, tearing open roofs, and prostrating steeples. To this solitary

⁸Quoted in his interview with Edwin Oviatt, "J. W. De Forest in New Haven," Volume XLIV of "Authors at Home" series, *New York Times—Saturday Review*, December 17, 1898, p. 856.

⁹James A. Hijiya, *J. W. De Forest and the Rise of American Gentility* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1988), p. 104.

abolitionist and patriot from Boston the spectacle was fascinating, solemn, and satisfactory.¹⁰

Mather has come to the South to find Virginia Beaufort, the young niece of his deceased wife. He finally finds her living in a shack with Aunt Chloe and Uncle Phil, the family's former slaves. Although Chloe and Phil are thrilled at their new-found freedom—Uncle Phil tells Mather, "Mighty starvin' times sence de wah, Boss. . . . Niggers is drefful poo' folks dese yere days. All de same, we'd ruther be our own poo' folks, an' not somebody else's" (p. 31)—they are still proud of their service to the Beaufort family before the war and remain loyal to Miss Virginia.

Given the utter devastation of her city and the loss of her five siblings to the war, Virginia is understandably bitter about the Confederate defeat and repeatedly expresses her hostility toward everything Yankee. Her first name, of course, being that of the home of the Confederate capital, immediately signals that she is the embodiment of the fallen but unreconciled South. Aunt Chloe analyzes the cause of her former mistress's—and thus all Southern women's—continuing anguish thus:

Virginia: "They talk about the war being over. It isn't over for the widows and orphans." . . .

Aunt Chloe: "Keeps it up deirselves—some on 'em. Blessed is the peacemakers" (p. 95).¹¹

In this and other reconciliation novels, the peacemakers are bound to be men, for, as Aunt Chloe says, Southern women are unruly, fractious recalcitrants who will not allow the war to be over, at least in their own minds. As one contemporary reviewer noted, "Miss Beaufort . . . is embittered against everything Northern with a bitterness which no man could ever dream of feeling against anything."¹² The task of negotiating peace is therefore the realm of the men, especially the soldiers whose battle experiences have purged them of such angry emotions and left them anxious for peace. The elderly Confederate General Hilton, Virginia's

¹⁰J[ohn]. W. De Forest, *The Bloody Chasm* (New York: D. Appleton, 1881), p. 6.

¹¹De Forest sometimes shifts from traditional novelistic depictions of dialogue to dramatic representations, as he does here.

¹²[Arthur G. Sedgewick], "A Novel of the Rebellion [review of *The Bloody Chasm*]," *The Nation*, 33 (November 10, 1881), 376-377.

confidante and advisor, explains to Mr. Mather, who was too old to fight and thus remains “a Union man—a bitter one,” that “Soldiers are comrades. . . . They may fight under hostile flags, but still they are comrades. I have encountered many of your officers since we laid down our arms. We can meet and do meet as comrades. I wish you personally had fought us. You would have liked us better. . . . The war is over. It would be well to be friends again” (p. 24). Although Mather is not entirely converted by Hilton’s words, he does eventually sympathize with the Southerners for their great losses, especially in light of his own wife’s recent death.

Even before the war, De Forest argues, the relationship between North and South could be rewarding but was strained. The Northern Mather and his Southern bride, Elizabeth Beaufort, enjoyed a loving and happy marriage, but this intersectional romance was rejected by Beaufort’s family. After Elizabeth dies during the war, all intercourse, unpleasant or otherwise, ends between the two families. Now that the war has ended, however, Mather fulfills the promise he made to his wife on her deathbed by returning to South Carolina to offer Virginia his financial support and a home in the North. Once he discovers Virginia’s lovely face and voice, he decides to kill two birds with one stone by arranging a marriage between her and his nephew, Union officer Harry Underhill. Underhill has concerned his uncle by flirting with a young Irish Catholic woman; in the era of the Irish potato famine and resulting mass immigration to America—issues unstated but clearly in the background of this novel—there are now qualities even more undesirable in a young white women than being Southern.¹³ Indeed, it is more important than ever in the face of these political crises to create a powerful and united national front by forging a new, stronger bond between the Northern and Southern families. Before this happy ending can come about, however, the angry feelings of the war must die down. General Hilton assures Underhill, “Ah! Colonel, this bitterness will pass—it will surely pass. . . . There will be a reconciliation” (p. 139).

A reconciliation there is, albeit a convoluted one. Although Virginia

¹³I would like to thank Lois Leveen for pointing out to me the importance of the potato famine to the depiction of Nora Macmorran, who is “an exceedingly attractive specimen of the dark Irish” (p. 13) and is “a good, sweet, nice girl, no matter if she is plebeian” (p. 272).

adamantly refuses to have anything to do with any Northerner, Mather includes her in his will anyway, with the proviso that she will only inherit if she marries Underhill. Mather does eventually die, and when Virginia, tired of poverty and hunger, understands that this is to be a marriage of convenience, which would have the benefit of bringing capital back into the bankrupt South, she succumbs to the lure of the money. Underhill has reservations about marrying a woman whom he does not know, but he finally decides to take the noble course of action, sacrificing his own happiness to benefit Virginia. In a ludicrous, melodramatic scene, the wedding ceremony takes place in a darkened church, the bride behind a dark veil and the groom in false side-whiskers, to ensure that the marriage remains only a legal formality between strangers who cannot even recognize each other, for Virginia has stipulated that after they marry, Underhill must give her the money and then never contact her again.

After the ceremony, however, Underhill undergoes a spiritual struggle in which he decides that marriage is a sacred institution, not to be undertaken lightly; that evening he confides to Hilton that he wants his marriage to be a real love relationship, not merely an economic arrangement. To accomplish his new goal of marital happiness, Underhill enlists the aid of Virginia's beloved General Hilton in an illuminating conversation:

"Really, Colonel, you awe me," said Hilton. . . . You are the North incarnate."

"And my wife is the South."

"Yes—a woman," sighed the General, "a generous and impassioned woman. The South has been just that, and only that, all my lifetime. I see it now." (p. 145)

De Forest thus faithfully follows the literary Reconstruction tradition in positing the South as a woman, one with the good qualities that the General acknowledges but also with the accompanying "female" weaknesses of temper, irrationality, and an inability to see beyond the limits of her own small domestic sphere to the concerns of the nation as a whole. Therefore, the South must be treated just as a man would treat a woman with the same characteristics: gently but firmly, she must be made to understand that she has a new master who will allow her these qualities to the extent that they enhance her charm but who will brook no further disobedience and

insubordination.¹⁴

Virginia has not stayed in South Carolina to receive such treatment from Underhill but has taken the money and immediately departed for Paris with Uncle Phil, Aunt Chloe, her aunt Mrs. Dumont, and General Hilton. To woo his bride, Underhill follows this Confederate party to Paris, where he disguises himself and acts the part of a Southern military officer. In a classic romance plot, Virginia falls in love with the assumed persona of a man whose true identity she hates. The Paris experience is good for both parties. Virginia begins to lose some of her bitterness by traveling in Europe and realizing how provincial Charleston is compared to Paris: "Virginia yawned—actually yawned over the question of North and South. . . . It seemed fearfully possible that absence from home and much gazing upon the great, fascinating world outside of South Carolina had begun to lull to sleep her once wakeful local patriotism" (p. 158). Underhill also benefits from adopting temporarily the role of a Confederate, for, as many Reconstruction critics argued, the North had truly to understand the Southern people before it could reconstruct them. The disguised Underhill

¹⁴De Forest's policy toward un-Reconstructed Southerners in his article "Chivalrous and Semi-Chivalrous Southrons," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, February 1869, p. 347, illustrates the same philosophy:

How shall we manage this eccentric creature [the Southerner]? We have been ruled by him; we have fought him beaten him, made him captive; now what treatment shall we allot him? My opinion is, that it would be good both for him and for us if we should perseveringly attempt to put up with his oddities and handle him as a pet. . . .

A little letting alone, a little conciliation, a little flattery even, would soothe him amazingly; and if united with good government would in the end be sure to reconstruct him as a quiet citizen and sound patriot. The Republican party . . . ought to labor zealously for the prosperity of the South, treat tenderly its wounded pride, forget the angry past, be patient with the perturbed present, and so create a true, heart-felt national unity.

The South thus begins as a masculine force to be ruled by, fought with, and eventually beaten. Although De Forest uses masculine pronouns throughout the passage, the tactics he recommends are clearly appropriate for a recalcitrant but still desirable woman. Once captured, the South is immediately demasculinized into "a pet" and then treated as a petulant woman, to be flattered and cajoled into a submissiveness it does not have the sense to accept on its own.

In an instance of life mirroring art, De Forest's wife, Harriet, had spent much of her life in Charleston, South Carolina, and had strong Confederate sympathies, as did the other women in the family; De Forest's father- and brother-in-law both supported the North. De Forest and his wife did not manage to achieve fruitful reconciliation, however, and they spent much of their lives living separately (Hijiya, p. 55 and *passim*).

wins the heart of Virginia by writing poetry celebrating Southern battle scenes and acknowledging the bravery of the men who were in fact his foes. When Virginia discovers his true identity, she succumbs immediately to the double charms of a man who admires her Confederacy and yet, as a Union officer, has the money to support her in style. In the last words of the novel, the reader is informed that Mr. and Mrs. Underhill are to this day still very happily married. De Forest thus argues that if the masculine North can successfully coax the feminine South into a romantic and financially secure Union, they will have nothing less than marital bliss in the future. Of course, as a Union officer active in Congressional Reconstruction, De Forest has a vested interest in seeing this gendered reunion to a happy completion. The North, the site of victory and of publishing firms, easily embraced a genre that depicted the region as male, powerful, dominant, wise, and morally upright.

Other writers had region and gender loyalties far more in conflict with the intersectional romance plot demanded by the Northern publishing industry. Just such an author was Southerner Thomas Nelson Page of Virginia, whose popular novel *Red Rock: A Chronicle of Reconstruction* was fifth on the bestseller list of 1898.¹⁵ Although *Red Rock* has been credited as the first novel in which a Southerner expressed his "real attitude toward the cruel treatment experienced during Reconstruction," Page himself publicly took the stand that he had "never wittingly written a line which he did not hope might tend to bring about a better understanding between the North and the South, and finally lead to a more perfect Union."¹⁶ He agreed with De Forest that the North must understand the Southern point of view before true reconciliation could occur. Despite his often harsh words for Federal Reconstruction policies, his work was enormously popular in the North as well as the South.

Page perfected the genre of reconciliation through intersectional romance, usually in short story form (such as "Meh Lady: A Story of War," in his 1887 collection *In Ole Virginia*). After proving himself through these

¹⁵Earl F. Bargainnier, "Red Rock: A Reappraisal," *Southern Quarterly*, 22 (Winter 1984), 44. *Red Rock* is actually contemporary with *The Bloody Chasm*; although it was not published until 1898, it had already been written by 1885 (Hubbell, p. 798).

¹⁶Ernest E. Leisy, *The American Historical Novel* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950), p. 183. Page quoted in Buck, p. 215.

tales both as a writer and as a Southerner loyal to the nation Page branched out in *Red Rock* to a novel, in which no fewer than five couples make their way through the perils of love and war to find happiness in a reunified nation. Page took advantage of his popularity to write a novel that breaks many of the established conventions of the intersectional romance, conventions that he had helped to establish. Especially noteworthy is that, of the five couples in question, only one, and that a pair of minor characters, follows the traditional Northern man-Southern woman pattern; the other intersectional romance reverses the usual gendering, and the remaining three marriages are all intra-regional. Page thus argues for a very different process of national reunion than does De Forest.

The novel has very little plot that is separable from the history of Reconstruction itself, or at least one version of it. We follow characters in an unnamed Southern county through the soldiers' return from battle; the early days of peace, in which it seemed as though Southern life would continue as it had for generations, the only difference being that former slaves would now earn wages; the coming of military Reconstruction and the stationing of Union troops in their town; the threat of uprising by freed slaves; and the reign of carpetbaggers and scalawags.

Page's biographer Theodore Gross characterizes the novel as "his version of the rape of the post-bellum South,"¹⁷ which would certainly be a rewriting of the heterosexual union that De Forest sees as eventually entirely consensual. In fact, however, Page departs from literary tradition by choosing not to characterize the South as exclusively female. The closest he comes to this standard gendering is to remark in his narration,

If the part that the men played in the war must be passed over in silence as too large for this history, how much more impossible would it be to describe fitly the part that the women performed. It was a harder part to fill, yet they filled it to the brim, good measure, overflowing. It is no disparagement to the men to say that whatever courage they displayed, it was less than that which the women showed. Wherever a Southern woman stood during those four years, there in her small person was a garrison of the South, impregnable.¹⁸

¹⁷Theodore L. Gross, *Thomas Nelson Page* (New York: Twayne, 1967), p. 78.

¹⁸Thomas Nelson Page, *Red Rock: A Chronicle of Reconstruction* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898), pp. 49-50.

Not only are Southern women valiant Confederates, they are “impregnable” in the word’s sexual as well as military meanings. For these women to become romantically available to the Union would be a weakening in the “garrison of the South,” a military error of which no Page heroine would be guilty. In this paradigm, Southern women’s sexual chastity becomes even more important after the war ends as the one last stand in the defense of the Old South. Page’s project for the most part, however, is to praise Southern women’s strength and courage rather than, as Gross suggests, to label the entire region as feminine, particularly in the manner of De Forest. Indeed, Steve Allen, the Confederate hero of the novel, is aggressively male, almost hypermasculine.

Page is further misread by Kenneth O’Brien, who sees all of the female characters as “clearly passive,” an assertion not supported by the novel.¹⁹ Page’s Confederate women are Southern belles at their romantic best, steel magnolias who still burn with the fire of a defeated but not vanquished people. Confederate Andy Stamper’s remark about his unreconstructed wife—“if Delia Dove had been where I was, she’d never ’a surrendered. If there’d been her and a few more like her, there wouldn’t ’a been any surrender” (p. 483)—holds true for all of the Southern women in the novel.

Delia is the character closest to the traditional conception of Southern white womanhood, for she refuses to surrender, even after the men of the region have ceded victory and peace has been declared. She sharply departs from the fate of De Forest’s Virginia Beaufort, however, for she refuses to reconcile with anyone or anything Northern. When her husband buys an old army wagon to begin farming after the war,

[i]t had had “U.S.” on it, but though Andy insisted that the letters stood for “US,” not for the United States, Delia Dove had declined to ride in the vehicle as long as it had such characters stamped on it. As Mrs. Stamper was obdurate, Andy finally was forced to save her sensibilities, which he did by substituting “D” for “U.” This, he said, would stand either for “Delia Stamper,” or “D-d States.” (p. 93)

In this rather overdrawn passage, Page plays a game of semiotics to depict

¹⁹Kenneth O’Brien, “Race, Romance, and the Southern Literary Tradition,” in *Recasting: Gone with the Wind in American Culture*, ed. Darden Asbury Pyron (Miami: University Presses of Florida, 1983), p. 156.



the unyielding strength of the stereotypical recalcitrant Southern woman.

In the immediate postbellum period, the other white women of the region agree wholeheartedly with Delia. In planning the first party after the War, which is to raise money for the wounded soldiers and soldiers' widows, some of the men are in favor of inviting the Yankee officers who have been stationed in the county as part of military Reconstruction, but "[t]he ladies were a unit. 'No, indeed; not one of them should set his foot inside the door; not a girl would dance with one of them'" (p. 84). As the military term "unit" suggests, even if the men of the Confederacy have been forced to concede, the women of the South have not yet laid down their arms.

The ladies have other ways of making their views felt as well. When the Dockett family finally agrees to house the Union officers, Miss Elizabeth Dockett spends the evenings singing Southern songs so loudly that the men can hear them even in their rooms. The lyrics include "Oh! I'm a good old rebel,/ Now, that's just what I am;/ For this 'Fair land of freedom,'/ I do not care a-t all." (Miss Dockett has substituted a lady-like phrase for the last line, which, given the song's rhyme scheme, is almost assuredly supposed to be "I do not give a damn.") When one of the officers, in protest, begins to sing "The Star-Spangled Banner" in his room, "he had got no further than the second invocation to 'the land of the free and the home of the brave,' when there was a rush of footsteps outside, followed by a pounding on his door, and on his opening the door Mrs. Dockett bore down on him with so much fire in her eye that Reely was quite overwhelmed" (p. 99). Reely Thurston eventually wins over Mrs. Dockett and marries her defiant daughter. Theirs is the only relationship to follow the traditional Northern man-Southern woman romance, but their marriage will not fulfill the stated purpose of such literary relationships, because Mrs. Dockett is clearly not one to be led gently back into the Union. It is rather Thurston who succumbs to the passion of the South; although he does not give up his Union officership, he does settle down into marital bliss under the watchful eye of Mrs. Dockett, and the happy couple moves in with her parents. Mrs. Dockett makes clear to Thurston that "everyone who came into that house had to dance to the tune of Dixie. This the Captain professed he was prepared to do, and would only ask that he might sometimes be allowed to warble in his own room the Star-Spangled Banner" (p. 582). In this case, the Northerner is the reconciled, submissive marriage partner.

Page does allow the reader to flirt with another traditional intersectional romance through his heroine, Blair Cary. In her initial relationship with the Union officer Larry Middleton, there is every indication that the two have sprung out of a De Forest novel. Blair is a thoroughly unreconciled Confederate; she always wears her dead brother's gray military cap and has sewn the brass buttons from his uniform on her dresses, buttons that all Confederate men had been required to cut off or cover with cloth as part of Federal Reconstruction laws. Women were not included in this prohibition and thus continued to display such Confederate regalia, another indication, like the voting restrictions discussed earlier, that the gendering of the South as female was in part a direct result of Northern intervention and laws. By taking full advantage her political non-status, Blair gains power from the gendered regulations that assumed she had none. Even when she agrees to go riding with the Union officer Larry Middleton, she makes it clear that "[t]hey were enemies. Between them there was never more than a truce. She would be his friend while it lasted; but never more. That was all! Her skirmish-line, so to speak, exchanged courtesies with his; but, on the first suggestion of a signal, sprang to her rifle-pits" (p. 177). This equation of Blair with Southern military defense again seems to indicate a traditional gender division between the regions, a division that in traditional romances is bridged by true love. Page, however, rejects any such union, as well as the feminizing of the South that it requires, for in the end Blair marries Confederate Jacquelin Gray, and Middleton weds a fellow Northerner.

Perhaps, however, Page was genuine in his expressed desire for post-war reconciliation, or perhaps he was concerned with Northern publishing expectations, or both, for the novel ends with a wedding between the Confederate officer Steve Allen and the Northerner Ruth Welch. Steve had helped to organize the Klan for a one-time raid in which all weapons were taken away from freed slaves, but he repudiates the Klan as soon as it becomes a lawless group of white rabble interested only in terrorizing the local countryside. He had earlier confessed his activities to Ruth, who then marries him in a midnight ceremony in his jail cell so that she cannot be forced by the evil Reconstructionist Jonadab Leech to testify against him. The couple has been silently in love for months, their romantic inclinations unable to overcome their sectional differences; the trial provides the impetus for them to declare their love for one another. And once again, it

is the Northerner who changes sectional loyalty in this marriage; over the course of the novel, Ruth has been steadily moving away from her abolitionist sympathies toward an understanding and finally championing of Southern causes, and her family gains a place in the community when townspeople declare that Ruth's father "certainly was more like our people than like Yankees" and that "maybe there's some of 'em better than them we know about" (p. 469).

Page ends his novel of reunion and romance on an ambiguous note, remarking in his final narration that "[m]arriage, which used to be the entrance to bliss unending, appears to be now [in modern stories] but the 'gate of the hundred sorrows;' and the hero and heroine wed only to find that they loved someone else better, and pine to be disunited. They spend the rest of their lives trying to get unmarried" (p. 579). Page then promptly disavows such an attitude on the part of his characters, extravagantly comparing the marital bliss of all five couples to that of the prelapsarian Adam and Eve; of course, such an analogy acknowledges the eventuality of a fall from Paradise, and Page's tone throughout the concluding chapter is so coy that he deliberately refuses to make explicit his own attitude toward this trope of romantic reunification.

Not all Southerners chose to take refuge in ambiguity, however, as Grace King illustrates in a Southern white woman's rendition of this gendered struggle. In *The Pleasant Ways of St. Médard* (1916), King ruthlessly undercuts the optimism for reunion held by both De Forest and Page, refusing to yield any of her Southern loyalty or to see any good in Northerners. In maintaining her animosity, she flouts the expectations of the publishing world, which was, even by the turn of the century, still exerting pressure on Southern writers to produce reconciliation romances. King wrote *The Pleasant Ways of St. Médard* at the recommendation of George C. Brett of the Macmillan Company. As she described their 1899 meeting,

[Brett] suggested that the reconstruction period in the South had always seemed to him a picturesque setting for a story. He advised me to try it.

I told him that I recollected the period perfectly and that it represented to me not only a heroic but a cruel, heavy strain for the men and women to make a living under every political burden possible for a victorious enemy to lay upon their shoulders. I could recall no softening picture, no romance connected with the period. As for a love story, it was impossible to conceive of one at that time. I spoke bitterly and resentfully.

Mr. Brett listened patiently and thoughtfully, and then exhorted me to work upon

it. "Write," he said, "as you know it—your own experience; and send it to us."

. . . I was convinced by him that the field was a good one and that all Southerners should tell their stories about it.²⁰

Due to a series of family misfortunes and tragedies, she did not finish the novel until 1908.²¹ What she eventually wrote—a series of related sketches peopled by many of the same characters—is classic regionalist realism.²² The thread that connects all of the characters and sketches is the Talbot family of New Orleans: a father who fought for the Confederacy and now hopes to recoup the family's lost fortunes through his formerly thriving law practice; a mother who ran the family's plantation by herself, taking care of the children and the slaves (and the two are certainly linked for King) and defending their home against Yankee invaders; and four children. The fate of the Talbot family is in large part autobiographical, based on King's childhood memory of Reconstruction and on family stories of that time.

King knew that this was not the sort of novel popular with mainstream audiences; it was certainly not the romance of reconciliation for which publishers were looking. As she described it:

[T]he result was not a story, and it would not turn into a story such as people love to read. I was in despair and could think of nothing but to rewrite it from beginning to end, trusting to some inspiration to change it to a conventional standard. But it refused to be changed, the characters were obstinate, and what I had written seemed to be the inviolable decision of my pen. (*Memories*, p. 236)

King revised the novel five times for Brett, but by 1913 it was still not in print, and she was sure that the publishers "demur as I am convinced from making public so Southern a version of Reconstruction" and that she was suffering from "literary subjugation to Yankee publishers." It was finally published by Henry Holt and Company in 1916 to good reviews. The novel went through only three small printings, however, and her realistic

²⁰Grace King, *Memories of a Southern Woman of Letters* (1932; rpt. Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), pp. 234-235.

²¹Robert Bush, *Grace King: A Southern Destiny* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), pp. 250-251.

²²King's work is similar in style to that of Sarah Orne Jewett, who has been lauded by literary critics interested in women's regionalism while King has been virtually ignored, no doubt because of the latter's offensive racial views.

recreation of Reconstruction proved to be a less than popular subject as America faced a new war.²³

A love story would certainly have been more popular and thus profitable, but there were certain concessions that King was not willing to make. Although King admired Thomas Nelson Page, she refuses to import his romanticism into her novel. In an often-quoted passage from her *Memories of a Southern Woman of Letters*, she describes the advice that Page gave her in 1922 when she confided to him the problems she was having publishing *La Dame de Sainte Hermine* (finally printed in 1924):

I told him that the fault alleged was the want of a love story in it. He brightened up. "I know, I know," he said. "That was the fault they found with one of my novels. And I had to remedy it to get it published. Now I will tell you what to do; for I did it! Just rip the story open and insert a love story. It is the easiest thing to do in the world. Get a pretty girl and name her Jeanne, that name always takes! Make her fall in love with a Federal officer and your story will be printed at once! The publishers are right; the public wants love stories. Nothing easier than to write them. You do it! You can do it. Don't let your story fail!" (*Memories*, p. 378)²⁴

Because King does not describe his tone of voice or her own reaction, the passage has been interpreted in a variety of ways, ranging from a light-hearted laugh between two authors to Page's self-deprecating humor to an older, established author's heartless attempt to manipulate the work of a younger artist. It seems clear to me that Page was poking fun, albeit with serious intent, at the clichés of which Northern publishing houses and Northern reading audiences never tired; his remark about the name "Jeanne" is too obviously humorous to warrant reading it as completely serious advice. While Page could laugh at this trope while he complied with it to great popular success, King was never willing to accept such publishing

²³Bush, pp. 255, 267-269. Although D. W. Griffith's filmic treatment of Reconstruction, "The Birth of a Nation," was enormously popular when it was released in 1915, it was hardly a realistic depiction; indeed, it makes use of the very trope of romantic reconciliation that King was protesting. Although Brett did not get the Reconstruction romance he was looking for until 1936, when Macmillan published Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, the one million copies sold in the first six months were ample reward for his patience (Kreyling, p. 119).

²⁴Although the critics who cite this passage as advice about the publication of *The Pleasant Ways of St. Médard* are wrong, since King did not even meet Page until six years after *St. Médard* was published, it is still pertinent to a discussion of the novel. Page did no more than point out a publishing prejudice of which King was obviously aware.

strictures, perhaps identifying more closely with “Jeanne” than did Page.

In *The Pleasant Ways of St. Médard*, King argues firmly against this romantic trope (as well as the exploitation of it by Page and others). She begins her project by deriding the sentimental world and the heroines who live there. Like all Southern women dealing with the trials of Reconstruction, Mrs. Talbot has troubles that never figure in typical romances; and although “[n]ervous and sentimental ladies might have spent a day in their beds over a single one of them, . . . she had only moments to spare.”²⁵ Moreover, in describing the aftermath of the War of 1812’s Battle of New Orleans, when the British wounded were taken into American homes to be nursed back to health or to die in comfort and “the young ladies lost their hearts to them” (p. 142), Mrs. Talbot insists that these romantic feelings only sprang up because the British had been defeated and that no true American girl could have been attracted to a man who had successfully captured her city.

This assertion is particularly appropriate when that city is New Orleans. The women of the city were especially fractious and recalcitrant toward the invading Union army, openly snubbing them in the street, singing Confederate songs, and sometimes even spitting on the soldiers (Simkins, p. 56; Ryan, p. 143). In response, General Benjamin F. Butler issued General Order Number 28, his famous “Woman Order” of May 15, 1862, which declares that

As the officers and soldiers of the United States have been subject to repeated insults from the women (calling themselves ladies) of New Orleans, in return for the most scrupulous non-interference and courtesy on our part, it is ordered that hereafter when any female shall, by word, gesture or movement, insult or show contempt for any officer or soldier of the United States, she shall be regarded and held liable to be treated as a woman of the town plying her vocation. (Ryan, p. 3)

Any woman who stayed true to the Confederacy was thus to be cast into the role of the prostitute, a paradoxical choice given that the women in question were doing everything within their power to repulse Northern men, to remain, in Page’s analogy, “impregnable.” Butler apparently could not predict the philosophy of the future romance novelists who would

²⁵Grace King, *The Pleasant Ways of St. Médard* (New York: Henry Holt, 1916), p. 256.

require such resistant women to be coaxed into sexual union, rather than bullied into it by the threat of forced prostitution.

Like Butler, King stresses the degraded nature of relations between Northern men and Southern women, but she insists that it is actually the women who are reconciled to the invaders, rather than those who mock them, who should be considered as prostitutes. *St. Médard* includes only one potential love affair typical of the reconciliation romance formula. Mademoiselle Coralie, the Talbots' white Creole servant before the war, longs for a marriage like those she finds in novels: "What a luxury in her eyes, would have been the decried *mariage de convenance*! What an announcement, as of the Heavenly Father Himself, the: 'I will that you become the wife of so and so. Come! No prayers! No tears! Prepare for your wedding!' Ah, only in novels do poor girls find such royal chances in their path!" (p. 263). Coralie is thus anxious for romantic coercion, which would make her the perfect heroine of the novels that she loves.

When the Talbots leave New Orleans before the Northern invasion of the city and flee to their plantation, Coralie steals old linens, wines, curtains, china and glass, bibelots, and dress finery from the family, her former employers who had befriended and protected her. The novel's narrator does not condemn her for these actions, which are made under duress, as Yankees are marching down the streets confiscating house after house. What is presented as unforgiveable is that Coralie uses the family's finery to create a persona for herself, that of a now-destitute heiress who had fled from San Domingo, and from this new position proceeds to flirt with the Union officers in the hopes of marrying one of them. Helen Taylor reads King as much kinder to Coralie than I do. Although there is certainly some sympathy proffered to her, primarily because she alone is bearing the burden of an invalid father and an alcoholic wastral of a brother, the narration does not make light of Coralie's assumption of her former mistress's finery. Taylor views this scene as amusing and suggests that "Coralie's decision to survive the war through sexual exploitation at the expense of loyalty to and eventual intimacy with her friend . . . [is] used as further example[] of the humiliation enforced on the South and southern

women by the occupying troops."²⁶ But Coralie is not portrayed as a sexual victim; she is described instead as marketing herself to men, a sale that places her in the position of a prostitute: "There could be but one end in Mademoiselle Coralie's mind as in the mind of every young woman like her and it is needless to say what that end is, so well is it known, so well was it known even to the *garçons* of the confectioneries where she munched cakes and candies with the officers of the United States army" (pp. 262-263). King reverses Butler's infamous Order to argue that it is the reconciled, reconstructed women, not the recalcitrant ones, who are prostitutes. For Coralie to maintain her facade of the San Domingan heiress to capture a Union officer, she must eventually repudiate the Talbot family, and the novel thus illustrates that those women who can consider, much less pursue, romance with the enemy are traitorous as well as fallen women. In other words, King deliberately sullies the romantic novel by making its sexual context explicit, rewriting the traditional reconciled heroines as simply whores selling themselves to the highest bidders.

Although King is thus bolder in her realism than De Forest and Page, she joins them in refusing to make explicit the racial underpinnings of the war. In all of these novels, the slaves for whom the War was ostensibly fought either disappear from view, other than to provide local romantic "color," or they reemerge as undifferentiated and frequently villainous characters. In the face of this literary evasion, Charles W. Chesnutt dared to coopt the genre and use it for his own ends. Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* (1898) is a collection of stories about Reconstruction that takes its place in the tradition of the dialect plantation tale, following in the footsteps of Joel Chandler Harris, whose "Uncle Remus" stories made the genre popular.²⁷ The tales are told by a freed slave-turned-coachman, Uncle Julius, to a white Northern couple, John and Annie, who have arrived in the South to take advantage of the region's weather, good for Annie's delicate health, as well as its economic climate, ripe for Northern capitalist exploitation and thus

²⁶Helen Taylor, *Gender, Race, and Region in the Writings of Grace King, Ruth McEnery Stuart, and Kate Chopin* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), p. 80.

²⁷Chesnutt drew a distinction between himself and fellow Southerner Harris by insisting that *The Conjure Woman* was "the fruit of my own imagination, in which respect [the tales] differ from the *Uncle Remus* stories which are avowedly folk tales." (Charles Chesnutt, "Post-Bellum—Pre-Harlem," *Crisis*, 40 [June 1931], reprinted in *Breaking into Print*, ed. Elmer Adler [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1937], p. 50.)

good for John's finances. Julius is a trickster figure, a master manipulator, and his tales of romantic plantation life "befo' the wah" are for his own profit; by working on the emotions of his audience, mostly Annie, he gains a cured ham, a job for a lazy grandson, a building for his church, money for a new suit, and other desirable objects. *The Conjure Woman* has deservedly received critical acclaim for its ingenious undermining of the plantation story tradition, which usually sentimentalizes antebellum life, particularly race relations; Chesnutt told an interviewer in 1900 that his "dialect stories, while written primarily to amuse, have each of them a moral, which, while not forced upon the reader, is none the less apparent to those who read thoughtfully."²⁸ Julius plays on the conventions that romanticize the antebellum South but deliberately refuses such romanticism, instead illustrating the harsh inhumanity of slavery and gaining power (albeit limited) in a political system in which he is supposed to be powerless. Chesnutt noted, years later, that "the wind-up of each story reveals the old man's ulterior purpose, which, as a general thing, is accomplished" ("Post-Bellum," p. 49). In the last story of the collection, however, Julius tells a tale that seems to earn him no immediate profit but rather brings about benefit for Annie's sister. In "Hot-Foot Hannibal," Chesnutt expands his literary scope to critique not only the plantation tale but also the convention of the reconciliation romance. He thus challenges the purveyors of the genre, both Northern and Southern, by exposing what they have deliberately ignored, the exploited and devastated black bodies on which such romance is built. In this final story, Julius forgoes tangible reward to make a larger indictment of racial injustice in postbellum America.

Like Chesnutt's other conjure tales, "Hot-Foot Hannibal" is a story within a story. During a drive in the country, Uncle Julius tells John, Annie, and Annie's younger sister, Mabel, who has just broken off her engagement to a young Southerner, a story of two slave lovers, Chloe and Jeff. As Julius narrates the tale, their romance is made difficult because Chloe is a house slave while Jeff works in the fields, so the two can never be together; furthermore, Chloe has been promised in marriage by her master to another slave, Hannibal. They know that Jeff is second in line behind Hannibal for the choice position of "house boy," so they consult with the

²⁸Quoted in William L. Andrews, *The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), p. 39.

conjure woman Aunt Peggy to get Hannibal replaced by Jeff. Aunt Peggy uses her conjure to make the formerly efficient Hannibal forgetful and clumsy, "light-headed en hot-footed,"²⁹ thus earning him both his eponymous nickname and a demotion to field laborer. Jeff gets the desired promotion, and he and Chloe are planning a spring wedding, when the conjure wears off, and Hannibal wreaks his revenge on the couple. In a plot of mistaken identity, disguise, and betrayal, Hannibal dresses as a woman to convince Chloe that her lover is cheating on her with another slave. Jealous and enraged, she tells her master and mistress about the entire conjure scheme, throwing all of the responsibility on Jeff; the plantation master decides to warn his slaves against using conjure (of which he is more than a little afraid, although he will not admit it) by promptly selling Jeff down the river to an Alabama speculator. After Jeff has gone, Hannibal completes his revenge by telling Chloe that, in fact, Jeff had been faithful to her all along and that he himself had been responsible for her misapprehension. Horrified, Chloe begs her master to buy Jeff back, only to be told that on the steamboat trip South he had thrown himself overboard and drowned. A heartbroken Chloe slowly pines away and one night sneaks out to die under a willow tree by the creek, the very spot where she "saw" Jeff being unfaithful; her body is found there the next morning.

Uncle Julius tells his story to touch the heart of Mabel, who had fought with Malcolm Murchison, her fiancé, over his supposed infidelity in attending church with another woman. Shocked and distressed by the fate of the two slave lovers torn apart by a misunderstanding, Mabel resolves to reconcile with her Southern beau. Julius has deliberately timed their drive so that they will run into young Murchison on his way to the train station to head North, leaving behind his broken heart forever; the couple reconciles immediately, and the last the reader sees of them "[t]hey were walking arm in arm, and their faces were aglow with the light of love" (p. 119). Julius's plan has been successful.

Mabel and Murchison could have been plucked straight out of any reconciliation romance, although Chesnutt reverses the usual gender roles

²⁹Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1899); reprinted in *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*, ed. Richard H. Brodhead (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 112.



in order to alter the traditional understanding of Reconstruction. Both of the young lovers stand in for their regions. The South is represented in this intersectional romance as, in John's words, a "young man . . . [who] was proud, firm, jealous of the point of honor, and, from my observation of him, quite likely to resent to the bitter end what he deemed a slight or an injustice." Mabel, embodying the North, "was quite as high-spirited as young Murchison. I feared she was not so just, and hoped she would prove more yielding. I knew that her affections were strong and enduring, but that her temperament was capricious, and her sunniest moods easily overcast by some small cloud of jealousy or pique" (p. 107). John Condit reads their romantic break-up as due to Murchison's overly sensitive pride and temper, qualities aptly describing the Reconstruction South, and thus sees this tale as "suggesting that the white South's lingering commitment to its traditional codes places in peril any just reconciliation with the North."³⁰ The story itself, however, clearly lays the initiation of the rupture on Mabel's over-active jealousy, which is why Uncle Julius's moral lesson has such effect. In other words, Condit has it backward; it is the North, in the form of Mabel, who recognizes the error of her ways and yields to the sounder judgment of the South in this reconciliation.

Julius seems to have brought about a happy ending by saving this romance, but Chesnutt uses the now-blissful couple to argue for the failure of Reconstruction, not because the North and South have failed to come together in a new Union, but rather because they have. Just as Mabel succumbs to Murchison, the North takes on the weak, feminized role and succumbs to the masculine South. This unification has been effected by the victors' yielding to the racial beliefs and ideology of the enemy they had apparently subjugated. Murchison and Mabel are only reconciled at the expense of a black slave couple, who die because of the worst aspects of slavery—the lack of control over their own lives, and the constant threat of ever-worsening living conditions—aspects that are not so different in the post-Reconstruction South, as Chesnutt makes repeatedly clear throughout these stories.

There is, moreover, another romance in this tale, and indeed in the

³⁰John H. Condit, "Pulling a Chesnutt out of the Fire: 'Hot-Foot Hannibal'," *CLA Journal*, 30 (June 1987), 434.

rest of *The Conjure Woman*. Just as the embrace between Jeff and his apparent female lover is actually the embrace of two men, one of them in drag, the overarching romance in these stories is between businessmen of the North and South, a relationship that allows for no female role at all. This homosocial relationship becomes clear in the first story of the collection, "The Goophered Grapevine," when the newly arrived John and his thriving vineyard are praised by "the local press as a striking illustration of the opportunities open to Northern capital in the development of Southern industries" (p. 43). In fact, this male-male relationship is more equitable than any of the heterosexual relationships that appear in the book, for the North capitulates to Southern racist ideology to be able to exploit the region's natural resources, while the South in turn embraces the opportunity for Northern capital. This financial romance becomes clearer when we look at young Murchison's earlier adventures in "The Dumb Witness," a dialect tale not included in *The Conjure Woman*. Condit makes the connection between the Murchisons of "Hot-Foot Hannibal" and "The Dumb Witness," but then concludes that the connection is interesting but coincidental because the characters named Malcolm Murchison in the two stories differ widely in age and attributes. Given the particular editorial challenges of "The Dumb Witness," however, it is reasonable to assume that the Malcolm Murchison of "Hot-Foot Hannibal" and the Roger Murchison of "The Dumb Witness" are one and the same.³¹ In "Hot-Foot Hannibal," John desires the match between Mabel and Malcolm as "another link

³¹"The Dumb Witness" was tentatively approved for publication by *Atlantic* editor Walter Hines Page on October 2, 1897. It was, however, never published as a short story during Chesnut's lifetime. The two extant manuscript versions, held in the Charles Waddell Chesnut Papers at Fisk University Library, are both incomplete, and only eight pages of the second, revised, manuscript survive. (The story did appear in a different version as part of Chesnut's 1905 novel, *The Colonel's Dream*, but the characters' names have been changed.) In the story, Malcolm Murchison is already an old man when John meets him during Reconstruction. His nephew, who I am positing is the same man as the Southern lover in the later story, is referred to as "young Murchison" except on the very last page, when Uncle Julius calls him "young Mistah Roger" (p. 171), his grandfather's name. "Hot-Foot Hannibal" was one of six conjure stories that Chesnut wrote in as many weeks and then sent to the *Atlantic* less than seven months after submitting "The Dumb Witness" (Brodhead, pp. 23-26); it is certainly not unreasonable to think that the name change, from Roger to Malcolm, was merely an editorial slip, particularly given the strong similarities between the characters that I discuss below. Had "The Dumb Witness" been included in *The Conjure Woman* rather than languishing unpublished, Chesnut or Page would have undoubtedly straightened out the name confusion. Richard Brodhead includes "The Dumb Witness" in his edition of Chesnut's conjure tales.

binding me to the kindly Southern people among whom I had not long before taken up my residence" (p. 108), but in "The Dumb Witness," he makes it clear that the relationship he has with young Murchison is economic, revolving around a timber deal "on terms that were fair to both" (pp. 161-162). At the end of "The Dumb Witness," when the young Southerner has inherited his family's fortune, he steps into the role of the New South, modeling itself on the industrial North; as Uncle Julius tells John, "He's done 'mence' ter fix de ole place up. He be'n ober ter yo' place lookin' 'roun', an' he say he's gwineter hab his'n lookin' lak yo'n befo' de yeah's ober" (p. 171). In other words, Murchison is creating a Southern version of the Northern version of the South that John has created—the mirroring of a homoerotic attraction. The relationship masquerading as romantic, between a young man and woman, in "Hot-Foot Hannibal" is clearly financial, between Northern and Southern businessmen, in "The Dumb Witness."

This homoerotic, economic rewriting of the Northern-Southern reconciliation romance has been consistently overlooked by readers, both contemporary and modern, who have instead seen "Hot-Foot Hannibal" as falling firmly and straightforwardly within the genre of reconciliation romance, a pleasant story in which the North and the South, in the form of Mabel and Murchison, learn from the mistakes and hurt of the past to form a strong new nation. Even so insightful a critic as William Andrews has read the story as a clear case of "sentimentality" and as Chesnutt's "return[] to orthodoxy" after breaking the norms of plantation writing earlier in the collection. Indeed, Chesnutt, who was anxious for literary validation in this first book, chose to end the collection with "Hot-Foot Hannibal" because it leaves, in his words, "a good taste in the mouth" of the reader (Andrews, pp. 63, 52, 35). Little wonder, then, that this story became part of the collection *The Conjure Woman* in 1898, apparently fitting as it does the popular genre of political reconciliation through intersectional romance, while "The Dumb Witness," with its explicit economic language, remained unpublished until years after Chesnutt died. Chesnutt, more than any of the other authors I have examined, had to bow to publisher's demands to give the public what it wanted.

And what the reading public wanted was national optimism and escapism, something that authors like John W. De Forest were anxious to

give them by churning out reconciliation romances in which the nation's anxieties about the aftermath of its bloody Civil War could be relieved by the beauty and simplicity of a seemingly timeless love story. These stories were anything but timeless, however, for anxieties about gender and race, about legitimate and illegitimate sexuality, about economic, political, and military power, and about the disaster of Reconstruction could not be kept out of these tales of romance. Authors such as Thomas Nelson Page, Grace King, and Charles W. Chesnutt insisted on challenging, to different extents and in different arenas, the assumptions that De Forest and others were forced to make to lay these anxieties to rest. The genre of the reconciliation romance thus provides a valuable opportunity for exploring the pain, sorrow, and fear that continued to haunt the nation after the Civil War.

