



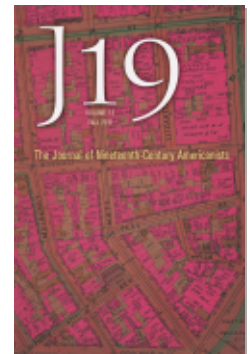
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On First Looking into Charles Chesnutt's Homer

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In the summer of 1878, just after Reconstruction had come to a formal end, Charles Chesnutt read Homer's *Iliad*. Chesnutt was twenty years old at the time, newly married and working as assistant principal of the State Colored Normal School in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Chesnutt read this work independently, in snatches of free time, and the response he described was complex and conflicted. He was fascinated that Homer's Achilles could call a council on the all-powerful Agamemnon and "accuse him of avarice, cowardice, and selfishness without fear of punishment"—and equally struck by the gods' arbitrary use of their power and the poet's ability to draw from nature to understand the complexity of human emotion. Chesnutt's August 13, 1878 entry on the *Iliad* is the Journal's longest, amounting to roughly one-third of Chesnutt's manuscript "Note-book and Journal."¹ His reading of Homer reveals the importance of the classical epic to the development of his own literary craft and also his position on the race problem of his time. Chesnutt's interpretation of Homer's *Iliad* is a response to the events of the post-Reconstruction era in which he wrote—and a contribution to its literature. Reading the *Iliad* translated by Alexander Pope gave Chesnutt a way of entering into the literate world of the educated elite without leaving behind the semiliterate community of the Reconstruction South in which he lived and worked.²

Chesnutt began reading Homer at the same age that John Keats had first "looked into Chapman's Homer" in the famous Petrarchan sonnet he published in October 1816. On the surface, Keats and Chesnutt seem to have little in common. Yet the sense of wonder that Keats experiences

when reading George Chapman's 1616 translation of Homer is not so different from Chesnutt remarking how "with Mr. Pope we cannot but admire the Invention of the poet."³ Though Chesnutt makes clear that he is reading Pope's translation, he offers few clues as to which version of Pope's *Iliad* he holds. He does not mention, for instance, Pope's preface to the *Iliad*, which appears in most complete editions of his translation. It is likely Chesnutt's first encounter with the *Iliad* was in an excerpted form, collected in an anthology or textbook that he does not name. Similarities to Keats notwithstanding, Chesnutt's reading echoes those of his fellow Americans William Cullen Bryant and Henry David Thoreau, whose engagements with the *Iliad* in the late nineteenth century suggest something of a renewed *American* interest in Homer. In an early chapter in *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods* (1854) entitled "Reading," Thoreau describes keeping "Homer's *Iliad* on [his] table through the summer, though [he] looked at his page only now and then." While he did not have time to read it as much as he would have liked since he was preoccupied by "incessant labor with [his] hands," he reveals that he "sustained [him]self by the prospect of such reading in future."⁴ Bryant was also personally preoccupied by Homer as he prefaced his 1871 translation of the *Iliad* with the admission that he had turned to Homer in 1865 "to divert [his] mind from a great domestic sorrow."⁵ Participating in this nineteenth-century American literary tradition of reading Homer for sustenance, Chesnutt turned to the *Iliad* in the summer of 1878 in search of meaning.

While the turn to classicism in nineteenth-century America has now been well documented by scholars such as Caroline Winterer and Christopher N. Phillips, the role African Americans have played in this intellectual project has only recently begun to receive attention.⁶ This study extends and deepens the scholarship on classicism's influence on American culture by taking up the role of one African American writer, Charles Chesnutt. Chesnutt plays a major role in the project of Black classicism, a project that continues well beyond the nineteenth century into the work of contemporary African American writers and artists such as Percival Everett and Kara Walker. In the case of Chesnutt, the classics formed the core of an education that proved essential to the development of his literary career.

Reading and writing in the wake of emancipation and Reconstruction, Chesnutt expresses what he elsewhere calls a "revulsion of feeling" for "the inequalities and antipathies resulting" from "the difference in race." Ultimately, he worked throughout his life "to soften the asperi-

ties and lessen the inequalities between the races,” and in the Journals he uses his reading of classic texts like the *Iliad* to develop a model for the society he envisions.⁷

As he read the *Iliad*'s opening books, Chesnutt's notes show him beginning to understand central tenets of democratic rule. It was through understanding its political theory that he started to develop the approach to character and storytelling that he would put to great effect in his later published writings. Both nonfiction and fiction, these writings largely focus on the way in which the southern Jim Crow regime—or state-sanctioned segregation—undermined American democracy, particularly a people's right to speak out against unjust rule. While Chesnutt's Journal reveals the creative development of a novelist, it is also an artifact of the history of Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction. And while Chesnutt's fiction—particularly his now-classic novel, *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), which recounts political events leading up to North Carolina's 1898 Wilmington Massacre—has received new attention, bringing him into the canon of late nineteenth-century American literature, the facts of his life as a student and teacher in the South during and after Reconstruction have been virtually ignored, and his Journals largely overlooked by historians of the Reconstruction period.⁸ This has been a great loss—but now presents a tremendous opportunity—as Chesnutt's Journals from 1874 to 1882 offer a rare perspective on the experiences and reading practices of a literate Black man coming of age during Reconstruction in the South.

As he proceeds through the *Iliad*'s opening books, Chesnutt's reflections would grow more complex. He sometimes even corrects them, crossing out and replacing words for the sake of accuracy, suggesting an insistence on precision in his commentary. While Chesnutt did not expect to publish his Journals—he declares in a fall 1877 entry that “this book is intended only for my own perusal”—his reading of Homer constitutes a critical part of his Journals. It is thus disappointing that “Chesnutt's Homer” was excluded from Richard Brodhead's 1993 edition in order to “register more general reflections.”⁹ The 1993 edition of the Journals truncates Chesnutt's reading of Homer's *Iliad* to a mere three paragraphs, an excerpt from his reading of each of the first three books. The severe pruning creates an impression that Chesnutt's reading of Homer was cursory, that he was just jotting down his observations as they occurred to him while reading, without giving any sense of the particularity of his observations. The paragraphs included in the published version are generally the most analytical, such as the commentary

on book 3, where Chesnutt remarks, “The resemblance of many of these legends to the stories of Bible History, as that of Deucalion and Pyrrha, Prometheus, Iphigenia and others that could be pointed out, only serve to show us that all men come from common stock.”¹⁰ Such an observation reveals Chesnutt’s particular view on race, a view he would eventually articulate more fully in a controversial series of essays that was published from August 18 to September 19, 1900, in the *Boston Evening Transcript* under the title “The Future American.”¹¹ Indeed, the purpose of the essays is to manifest the ludicrousness of the idea of racial difference by revealing, as he says in his reading of the *Iliad*, the truth “that all men come from common stock.” While the published edition of selections from the Journals offers scholars important insights into Chesnutt’s literary process and motives that distinguish him from other nineteenth-century African American writers, a return to the manuscript Journals with an eye to the books he read during his years as a schoolteacher can further tell us about the ways classical literature figured in how Chesnutt understood himself as a writer of fiction. Recent investigations of Chesnutt’s engagement with classical literature have uncovered the importance of Virgil to the *Conjure Tales* as well as his ironic deployment of the culture of ancient Egypt in *Marrow of Tradition*.¹² While these readings of Chesnutt’s classicism have illuminated and broadened the implications of his fiction, this critical interest has largely focused on the ways in which Chesnutt’s classicism emerges in his stories and novels. But, as we learn from his essays and lectures, the experience of reading the classics both alone and with a community of readers was central to his life and work as an author.

Since their publication over twenty years ago, scholars have relied on the Journals to discern the difference between Chesnutt’s personal motive and his sense of broader social purpose in becoming an author. This common understanding of Chesnutt’s Journals leans on a passage published in the 1993 edition and cited frequently since as an expression of his literary motive dating to 1880: “If I do write, I shall write for a purpose, a high, holy purpose, and this will inspire me to greater effort. The object of my writings would be not so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites.”¹³ Critics have been quick to point out that Chesnutt’s “high, holy purpose” for writing literature was compromised by his belief that literature meant (as Michael Nowlin phrases it in a recent assessment of the Journals), “a shot at professional, middle-class status in a northern ‘Metropolis’.” Thus the Journals have been used to highlight what Elizabeth Hewitt asserts is “Chesnutt’s belief that

authorship is a vocation that, far from transcending economics, is chosen in large measure because it can serve as a unique means by which to secure both fame and fortune.”¹⁴ This narrow utilitarian assessment of Chesnutt's motives for writing—based in large part on this single excerpt—has further led scholars to read the Journals narrowly as practice for Chesnutt's writing, neglecting the considerable space that the work of intensive reading occupies within its pages.¹⁵

While Chesnutt does wrestle in his Journals with the purpose of his own writing and the economics of authorship, a full review of the text shows that these are relatively minor issues for the young Chesnutt, emerging late in the years he recorded his reflections in his Southern teaching Journals. The Journals are more centrally preoccupied with reading and rereading works of literature than with creating them. This emphasis—from producing to consuming literature—makes a great difference in understanding Chesnutt's complex literary oeuvre and its politics of reading that appears among a largely illiterate or semilliterate population, an experience that distinguished Chesnutt's reading experiences from those of earlier American writers who engaged with classical literature in the context of the literate culture of New England. As literary critic and novelist John Edgar Wideman points out, “Chesnutt drew from both worlds, the literate and oral,” to create his distinctive brand of fiction.¹⁶ But how did Chesnutt use the Black oral culture that Wideman describes to develop a distinctive method of reading the Western classics?

I. Chesnutt as Reader

Chesnutt was born to free Blacks who had left their home in North Carolina for Ohio in 1858. As he explains in his first novel, *The House behind the Cedars* (1900), Chesnutt's “parents were of the class, more numerous in North Carolina than elsewhere, known as ‘old issue free negroes.’”¹⁷ As a young man classified as a “free Black” before the Civil War and “Colored” after the war in the South, Chesnutt acquired basic literacy with few obstacles. Unlike many of his peers, he had learned to read even before attending school. Both Chesnutt's parents were literate, and his reading experiences, as a result, differed from those of his peers descended from former slaves who had been denied access to education. After the Civil War, his parents returned with their children from Cleveland to Fayetteville and enrolled Chesnutt at the Howard School, newly formed under the leadership of Robert Harris to educate African American students. The death of his mother when Chesnutt was thirteen forced

him to discontinue his studies to help support the family; he eventually found work as a schoolteacher. His teaching career lasted roughly a decade, beginning in 1873 and ending when he left the South and returned to Cleveland with his wife and three children in 1883. While Chesnutt's formal education had ended in 1872, he continued his studies privately during breaks from teaching. Across those years he used his Journals—though they reveal personal thoughts as well—to track his studies and to offer up his written responses and analyses of the works he read for evaluation by an imagined reader. On August 13, 1875, he complains somewhat bitterly that “the people don't know words enough for a fellow to carry on a conversation with them.” Five years later, on May 29, 1880, he finds a solution to his lack of conversation: “A child may cry for the moon, but a wise man will accept the inevitable, and, if he cannot get what he would ‘like’ to have, is content to wait for it and in the meantime to supply its place as nearly as possible with some less valuable but more accessible material. Books may partially supply the want of conversation.” Chesnutt thus turned to books as a way of having a conversation about things he could not talk about with the people around him.

Long before Chesnutt published a single short story, novel, or essay, he relied on his Journal to think about the tensions between literacy and illiteracy so central to his published works. The Journal itself is one of the few surviving nineteenth-century journals written by an African American who both benefitted from and helped to implement the educational policies of the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction South. But journaling may have been more commonly practiced among African American schoolteachers of the period than surviving documents would indicate.¹⁸ Chesnutt began his Journal in imitation of a teaching journal shared with him by his supervisor, Cicero R. Harris. Chesnutt's first entry (July 1, 1874), describes how reading Harris's journal inspired him to start a journal of his own:

While Mr. Harris was packing up to-day for his Northern trip, I came upon his journal, one which he kept several years ago, and obtaining permission, I have read a part of it. In fact nearly all. After reading it, I have concluded to write a journal too. I don't know how long I shall stick to it, but I shall try and not give it up too soon.

Chesnutt was sixteen when he started his journal. By this time, he had completed his first year of teaching under Cicero Harris's supervision.

Harris had come to Fayetteville from Cleveland to teach alongside his brother, Robert, at the age of twenty-two. The Harris brothers both served as important role models and mentors for Chesnutt. When Cicero Harris departed for the summer vacation, he left his new assistant teaching and living on his own. Chesnutt's decision to begin a journal was both spontaneous and tentative. He began his journal as a way of continuing to learn from his supervisor even in his absence. Chesnutt also admits to reading all of Harris's journal after "obtaining permission." The fact that Harris allowed his young assistant to read his journal suggests that it did not contain particularly private material. As a teacher and principal of the Peabody School, Harris likely recorded lesson plans or thoughts on methods of teaching that would have been of some use to a young and inexperienced teacher like Chesnutt. Having begun his project as a teaching journal, however, it seems Chesnutt came to regard his own Journal as a place to record not only a detailed account of his daily experiences as a schoolteacher but also a record of the books he read.

Composed sporadically from July 1874 to February 1882, when Chesnutt was between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five, these Journals not only offer the earliest record of Chesnutt's writing—and hence a portrait of the African American writer as a young man—but also track his reading during Reconstruction and beyond. The Journals also recount conversations that he undertook with both literate and illiterate members of his community, including teachers, doctors, preachers, students, and their parents. The critical consensus on Chesnutt's early years—the years he spent teaching in the South before moving to Cleveland and beginning his professional literary career—has treated Chesnutt as something of a loner, deeply frustrated with the intellectual limits of his environs.¹⁹ Though Chesnutt registered his frustrations with the racial constraints of his time, his Journals often tell a different story, revealing in Fayetteville the coexistence of a thriving intellectual community alongside a largely illiterate or semiliterate population struggling to gain education. As a schoolteacher and administrator, Chesnutt was deeply engaged with both sides of Fayetteville's literary culture. This dual role proved essential to the development of his exceptional reading and writing skills.

While Chesnutt the schoolteacher was struggling to instruct his students in the basics of grammar, arithmetic, and history, Chesnutt the student bought books from the former Confederate soldier and bookseller George H. Haigh and discussed his reading with Haigh and others who frequented his book shop. Before becoming editor of the

Fayetteville Observer, Haigh owned one of the only bookstores in Fayetteville, located in its Market Square, which in the 1870s was open for business to both Black and white readers. Through Haigh's connections, Chesnutt met Emil Neufeld, a recent German Jewish immigrant, whom he hired at five dollars a month, to "give [him] instruction in French and German—three lessons a week."²⁰ Aside from Haigh, Chesnutt also knew R. K. Bryan, editor of the *Fayetteville Examiner* and Reverend S. B. Cobb, a local minister Chesnutt hoped would teach him Greek. These men helped Chesnutt to read different Western languages and texts. Even as he sought out instruction in other languages, Chesnutt relied mainly on his own reading to further an education that had been cut short by the need to work: "I sat down to write but I feel more like reading. My mind has been comparatively idle during the past school session, and consequently there is 'an aching void' which books alone can fill, and I shall strenuously exert myself to put something in it during the present summer."²¹ As is often the case in the *Journal*, reading trumps the desire to write. Entries from the months of July and August, during his short summer breaks from teaching, are filled with breathless accounts of books and reading:

Aug 23rd [1875]. Yesterday I went up to Mr. Harris and stayed nearly all day. Played the organ, and read 1 vol "Uncle Tom's Cabin." It was no ways old to me, although I have read it before.
Aug. 25 [1875]. I have just finished Barnes U.S. History, and have nearly finished Pages Theory and Practice of Teaching. I think I shall now read, "A view of S.A. and Mexico," by a citizen of the U.S. an old, but doubtless a valuable book. I have reread *Pickwick Papers*, by Dickens, and it was not at all old to me. I enjoyed it very much. It is a splendid book.

Chesnutt's early encounter with books reveals the development of criteria for selecting works that are "valuable" and "enjoyable." Books that fall under the former heading provide historical and geographic information Chesnutt believes is useful, while those that are enjoyable—works of literature like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Pickwick Papers*—he rereads because they are sources of pleasure. Chesnutt develops his reading method over the course of his *Journals*. Interspersed with his descriptions and notes about prayer meetings and how many students showed up for his class on a day, Chesnutt inserts his favorite passages copied from the books he is reading. He includes several stanzas from

Byron and Cowper, noting that "Cowper's 'Task' is splendid . . . Cowper gives me the materials [to build a castle in the air]." Alongside these copied lines, Chesnutt includes his own original material; one is an ode to William Shakespeare that appears on March 12, 1881, while he is in the midst of reading Horace Greeley's *The American Conflict: A History of the Great Rebellion, 1860–1865*, a contemporary history of the Civil War.

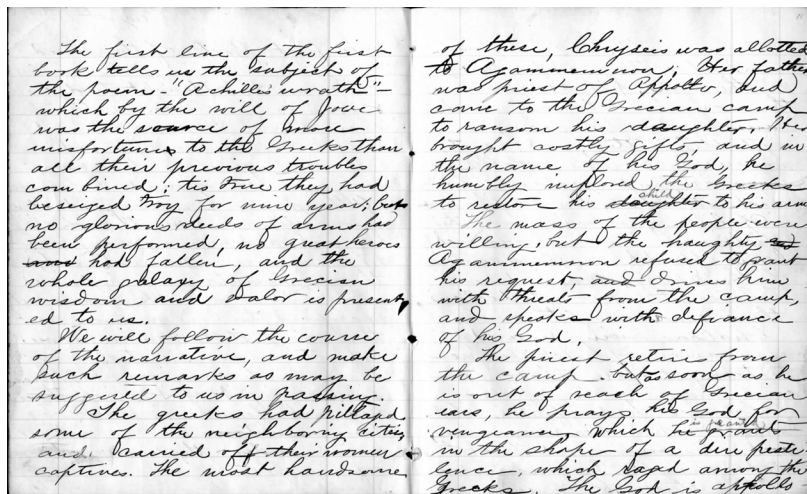
Although the Journals show us that much of Chesnutt's education took place outside of the classroom, his engagement with the classic texts of Homer, Virgil, and Shakespeare was not as exceptional as it might appear. As a teacher and assistant principal at the State Colored Normal School, Chesnutt, along with his pupils and fellow faculty, would have been familiar with the classics as part of the school's curriculum. The normal school was a state-run institution dedicated to the training of African American teachers.²² Established by the North Carolina State Board of Education under an act of the General Assembly of 1876–77, as Rutherford B. Hayes was elected president and federal troops were withdrawn from the South, the normal school thrived during the post-Reconstruction era. Its standard curriculum included courses in composition, ancient history, Latin, moral philosophy, rhetoric, and civil government. Late nineteenth-century normal schools routinely assigned the *Iliad*, along with stories of Greek and Roman mythology, in courses on ancient history. Introducing such subjects to students, many of whose parents were born into slavery, was no easy task. Chesnutt's Journals reveal a young man often overwhelmed by the work of teaching students who lacked basic literacy. As he embarked on his new career he observed, "Today I am to begin my school. Schools are certainly needed here. The people are deplorably ignorant."²³

Reading the Journals in this particular historical context provides a deeper understanding of the literary culture Chesnutt inhabited as a young man, one complicated by the political stakes of literacy acquisition. Chesnutt, as Wideman observes, "sought to school himself in the Anglo-Saxon literary tradition; also, just as studiously, he absorbed the Black folk culture of the rural South where he was raised and taught school."²⁴ Reconciling the tensions between these two modes of knowledge is a key feature of Chesnutt's writing. In his later short stories, literacy usually connotes the formal learning and education he associates with white Northerners like John and Annie in the stories collected for his first book, *The Conjure Woman* (1899). The married couple serves as the frame for his conjure stories and is explicitly represented as literate,

“occupying [themselves] with the newspapers and magazines, and the contents of a fairly good library.”²⁵ Similarly, characters in his second collection of stories, *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line*, Miss Chandler and Mary Myrover are white female school-teachers working in segregated schools who appear to be spreading the gospel of literacy. Both teacher characters exhibit a familiarity with poetry and the fine arts that their students lack. But collectively and consistently, the literacy Chesnutt’s white characters possess does little to help them understand the lives of the mixed race characters with whom they live and work. Illiteracy, meanwhile, distinguishes Black characters such as Uncle Julius (*Conjure Woman*) and Liza Jane (*Wife of His Youth*): both are former slaves who tell remarkable and affecting stories that captivate their literate audiences, *despite* being illiterate. But their audiences seem unable to appreciate fully the complexity of the stories they tell. Between Chesnutt’s literate and illiterate characters are his mixed race characters such as Mr. Ryder in “The Wife of His Youth”; Cicely, the titular character of “Cicely’s Dream”; and John Walden in the novel *The House behind the Cedars*; adding literacy to an inheritance of light skin generally secures these characters’ tragic fate. Reading forms a cornerstone of these characters’ identities that diminishes their reliance on a racial community, yet this lack of community leaves them yearning for what they have lost. Departing from the experiences of his Black, white, and mixed race characters, Chesnutt struggles to form a new community through the books he reads.

II. “In Beginning This Journal I Have Several Things in View”

Chesnutt’s complete three-volume manuscript set of personal journals reveals the clear right-slanting cursive he used to record his ideas on cheap lined notebook paper. We also find in them, as Brodhead points out, “an unusually detailed glimpse of the early life of the writer who went on to create” important works of literature.²⁶ We are given the mundane details of his daily life, encounters with young women, including his sexual awakening, as well as an account of his students, what he taught them, and how many of them showed up on a given day. As I noted previously, the Journals importantly contain lessons in reading works of literature by authors such as Robert Burns, Lord Byron, and William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, and Homer. Chesnutt’s transcript includes passages from history textbooks and instruction manuals; he also practiced shorthand, German, and Latin and used the Journals for his own creative writing.



Pages 10 and 11 of Chesnutt's Note-book and Journal, in which he takes up the *Iliad*. Courtesy of the Charles W. Chesnutt Papers, Box 13, Folder 2, Courtesy of Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Special Collections.

Like many Americans at the time, Chesnutt believed a good education was grounded in classicism, an understanding of Greek and Latin culture. He first signals this in his Journals when he commits to studying Latin on July 13, 1875: "I must now to my Latin lesson—There is an old history downstairs, published in 1793 or 4." Studying Latin, not unlike reading "Barnes's U.S. History" and "University Algebra," is primarily instrumental, facilitating the study of other subjects. As he explains months later, "I shall take up Latin Grammar again, for if I have the remotest Idea of studying Medicine, a knowledge of Latin is very essential." By the time he turns to reading book 1 of the *Iliad* in 1878, Chesnutt has also acquired a solid foundation in ancient history as he reports on November 30, 1877, reading about "Babylon, Assyria, Egypt &c." This type of reading, Chesnutt believes, is time well spent because, "by reading history one gets a general view of the founding of a government[,] the settlement of a country, the building of a city, and remembers the principal events in the history together with some ideas of the manners and customs of the people." Reading of this kind provided the still-young Chesnutt with useful information that increased his store of knowledge, allowing him to recite and "remember the dates of the various events narrated"—although, in the short run, reading for knowledge alone seems to have diminished his compassion for those around him who were not similarly well informed.

As readers of the Journals have pointed out, one of their most troubling aspects is the frustration Chesnutt expresses toward the people he encounters in his everyday life. After copying a fairly long passage from a poem by the popular English nineteenth-century poet Samuel Woodworth, on Friday August 13th, 1875, Chesnutt records a somewhat nasty screed against his neighbors:

Well! Uneducated people, are the most bigoted, superstitious, hardest headed people in the world! Those folks down stairs believe in ghosts, luck horse shoes, cloud signs and all other kinds of nonsense, and all the argument in the world couldn't get it out of them. It is useless to argue with such persons. All the eloquence of a Demosthenes, the logic of Plato, the demonstrations of the most learned men in this world, couldn't convince them of the falsity, the absurdity, the utter impossibility and unreasonableness of such things.

Chesnutt exhibits here a fairly sophomoric understanding of the classics. He seems to set himself apart from those “uneducated people” who do not, like him, appreciate the “eloquence of a Demosthenes” or the “logic of Plato.” But it would be precisely these uneducated people like Uncle Julius, the storyteller of the *Conjure Tales*, who would exhibit the eloquence of a Demosthenes and the logic of a Plato, without having read either. In other words, critics may be hasty in judging the young Chesnutt so harshly: as he read more deeply into the classics and gained in perspective, he would revise his understanding of the differences between the men and women of the classical world and those of his own.

Chesnutt may have read a copy of the *Iliad* that he borrowed from the school or from one of its other teachers. Unlike other books he read and recorded during this period of his life, his copy of the *Iliad* is not included in his personal library, which is now housed with most of his personal papers at Fisk University's Special Collections Library.²⁷ His book collection does, however, include a copy of William S. Scarborough's *First Lessons in Greek*, published in 1881. Chesnutt signed that copy with his name (“C. W. Chesnutt”) and included the date (“Oct. 1881”) and place of purchase (“Fayetteville, N.C.”), as he did for most of the books in his personal library. Scarborough was the first African American member of the Modern Language Association and a well-known classical scholar at the time.

Greek and, to a lesser extent, Roman culture were his scholarly interests. Chesnutt does not mention Scarborough's textbook in his Journal, and the version of the *Iliad* he read in 1878 was Pope's 1715 translation, as his direct citations make clear: purchasing Scarborough's Greek text a few years later might signal he hoped to read the epic in its original.

Unlike Scarborough, who had relied on his own study of the classics to pursue a successful career as a nineteenth-century African American in academia, Chesnutt did not identify as a classical scholar. Scarborough, like the fifteen Black classicists featured in the recent *Black Classicists* exhibit at Harvard University's Center for Hellenic Studies, studied and taught the classics at the college level; he received a BA from Oberlin College and taught Greek and Latin at Wilberforce University.²⁸ He expressed deep satisfaction with his disciplinary identification and believed that his credentials as a certified classicist brought what Scarborough called "race recognition" to all African Americans.²⁹ Thinking in such terms about the value of acquiring a classical education was not uncommon at the time.³⁰ Was Chesnutt reading Homer, as Scarborough studied Greek and Latin, in part to prove to men like John C. Calhoun and other skeptics that "the Negro," in the parlance of the time, was indeed a man? If so, this was a deeply buried motive since Chesnutt, unlike Scarborough, never mentions in his personal writings Calhoun or other such controversial Southern politicians skeptical of Black accomplishment. He does, however, mention "Dr. Haigh," chair of the white board of managers of the State Colored Normal School, who "recognized [his] ability and accomplishments, and felt that [his] lot was a hard one, to be cut off from all intercourse with cultivated society, and from almost every source of improvement."³¹ Instead, Chesnutt seems to read the classics for his own "improvement," rather than for the improvement of the race. Moreover, he believed that he would observe something about these ancient texts that had not yet occurred to their previous readers for the benefit of "cultivated society." At the same time, Chesnutt developed a reading method for those, like him, who lacked formal instruction:

Books may partially supply the want of conversation. To read to the best advantage I would suggest the following plan:—When you wish to study a subject, a character in history for instance, take up a book which treats of the subject, read it carefully, then if you can find it, take a book which looks at the subject in a different light,

and as you read compare the opinions of the two writers; take the historical facts of the case, about which there can be no dispute and putting them all together, come to some conclusion. I think every man should have opinions of his own,—not necessarily different from those of others,—(for there is no subject which would admit of such diversity of opinion)—but some decided opinion on every subject which is clear enough to admit it.³²

The value of reading books “carefully” for Chesnutt was how they helped him to develop opinions of his own. The conversation Chesnutt develops between the *Iliad* and other books situates him as an active reader, in Lisa Jardine and Anthony Grafton’s now well-known formulation: “reading as intended to *give rise to something else*.”³³ And that “something else,” in the case of Chesnutt, was individuality, an identity apart from his racial experience.

Never having attended college, Chesnutt pursued his personal education in the classics with more personal objectives. In his reading of Homer, he dwells on aesthetic details—and the creative powers that could draw forth a work of beauty without academic instruction: “Homer has ransacked every corner of nature for his similes.” Taking note of such poetic devices, Chesnutt comments on the ornamental epithets the poet uses to identify the different characters. He creates his own list of the characters with their attributes—“the Godlike Hector, the divine Aeneas, Pandarus the skillful bowman, partial Jove, the jealous Juno, the blue-eyed Minerva, Apollo, God of the silver bow, the silver-footed dame Thetis; the awkward but pacific Vulcan”—as a way of assessing and remembering them for himself. Chesnutt is also deeply captivated by Homer’s “originality” and declares that for the reason of working without a literary tradition Homer “deserves the more praise.”

More praise than whom? Departing from his earlier reading of Dickens’s *Barnaby Rudge*, Chesnutt turned to the *Iliad* on August 18, 1878, seeming to find in Homer something of a kindred spirit. After listing several of the most memorable characters in Dickens’s novel—“Sweet Dolly! Dear Emma! Faithful Joe! Honest Gabriel! Queer old Grip! Poor Barnaby! the Villain Rudge, the longsuffering Mrs. Rudge, the stupid old Joe, Chester, Edward, Hugh, Dennis the hangman, the amorous but ugly Nigel”—Chesnutt declares, “I wish I could write like Dickens, but alas! I can’t.” A few pages after bemoaning the fact that he could never match Dickens’s style, believing the English author’s “versatility and scope of genius” so far beyond his own, Chesnutt then describes

Homer as a more approachable model, for his genius made beauty out of nature, rather than learning: "The poet had no magnificent works of art to draw his attention from the beauties of nature; and if association with beautiful things begets a love and appreciation of them, the Greek of all men should be nature's most devoted admirer." Chesnutt seems to identify with Homer's culture of illiteracy, a culture that lacked "magnificent works of art," a culture, perhaps, that was in this respect not so different from his own.

III. Chesnutt's Homer

In contrast to the factual knowledge he gains from reading works of history and grammar, Chesnutt's approach to Homer is largely an interpretive or literary enterprise in developing "reflections on his style, or some criticism on his heroes, some bright spot which has not been overflowed by those rivers of ink, or buried under those mountains of paper." Reading about the facts of history may have given Chesnutt a better sense of the world in which he lived, but he turns to Homer's *Iliad* to learn something of his place within it.

Chesnutt's engagement with the *Iliad*'s first three books stretches over forty-six Journal pages and appears under a single date: "August 13th '78." The entry is divided into three distinct parts: "The first Book of the Iliad," "Iliad II," and "Iliad Book III." The entry, the longest in the Journals, concludes not with a date but instead with an ornamental line formally signaling a close. Recovering these sections of Chesnutt's reading of the *Iliad*, omitted from the 1993 edition, and reading the Journals within the biographical and historical context of their original writing enable a better understanding not only of the primary purpose of Chesnutt's Journal but also of the way that literary reading figures in his later life and work.³⁴

Chesnutt does not mention explicitly—though he did so with other books he reads in the Journals—why he picked up the *Iliad* in 1878. He does not explain how he acquired a copy of Pope's translation, nor does he mention where he read the book. Chesnutt begins his reading only with an apology:

For me to attempt to discuss or even to comment on the Character of Homer would indeed be presumption, when so many great writers have gone over the ground before me. Although every undergraduate has criticised him, though all his real and imaginary beauties have been pointed out; though great mountains of paper

and whole rivers of ink have been sacrificed to his memory, yet there may still remain some reflections on his style, or some criticism on his heroes some bright spot which has not been over flowed by those ~~mountains~~ rivers of ink or buried under those mountains of paper.

As he self-consciously adds his reading of Homer to a long tradition of both aspiring and established writers recording their experience of reading Homer in translation, Chesnutt confesses a certain “presumption.” He admits to his own vanity in engaging in a dilettante’s exercise—and in presuming the presence of readers to whom his comments are addressed. Locating himself in a long tradition, these other readings remind him he is not alone. When he reads Homer he understands that he is engaged in a formal practice of reading, and that he is confronting a monumental, even geological, work (“mountains,” “rivers”) that has previously been read by others of much greater education and literary knowledge. As he approaches the task of reading the *Iliad*, he expresses a painful self-awareness of his inadequacy as a reader and his lack of the resources that would make possible the classical learning that, as Caroline Winterer has shown, formed the core of college education in America at the time.³⁵ Why, given his lack of learning and culture, should he read the *Iliad* at all?

As he explains in the apology, Chesnutt’s consciousness of “great writers” having read and commented extensively upon the *Iliad* renders his reading mere rereading, perhaps a waste of time when compared to the “time [that] has been well-spent” on fact-based reading of ancient history. Chesnutt’s sense of the value he contributes in reading this particular text, however, is that he has the potential to unearth some hidden detail, or some criticism, that goes beyond the recitation of dates and place names. Reading the *Iliad* from Chesnutt’s particular perspective as a literate African American man living and working among a largely uneducated population is for him about making a truly original contribution to literary history, especially as he was reading it alone, without the guidance or influence of a well-educated teacher or peers. This preoccupation with not being up for the monumental task of reading and understanding the classics only intensifies his belief that being outside the tradition of reading the classics amid the well-educated elite puts him in a position to offer new insights into the well-read classics. But in reading Homer he comes to reassess the circumstances in which he lives, discovering a connection between

the illiterate people who surround him and the culture of the ancient world depicted in the *Iliad*. Throughout his reading of Homer, he never mentions his social status or the conditions that prohibit him from advancing his formal education—though he refers to these repeatedly in other Journal entries. Instead, Chesnutt imagines himself in conversation with “great writers” and “every undergraduate” who “has gone over the ground before [him].”

Though he recognizes he may be considered unworthy or lacking the training required to read the *Iliad* properly, Chesnutt proceeds with an extremely close reading of books 1–3. He concludes his detailed synopsis of each book with a reflection on Homer's style, signaling his membership in a community of critical readers. Although in the first line of the apology he refers to himself in the singular first person: “For me to attempt to discuss or even comment on the Character of Homer,” elsewhere he consistently employs first-person plural pronouns: “The first line of the first book tells us the subject of the poem,” or “We will follow the course of the narrative and make such remarks as may be suggested to us in passing.” Chesnutt's reading of Homer is the only place in the Journal where he departs from singular first-person form. When he is teaching or receiving instruction, on the one hand, Chesnutt is alone.³⁶ When he reads Homer, on the other hand, he places himself in a community of readers as an equal—reading alongside the great writers and undergraduates he evokes at the outset of his essay. Reading Homer closely, repeatedly, reflectively, and alongside great writers allows Chesnutt to close the gap between his world and theirs.

Chesnutt rereads his summary in the concluding paragraphs of each section. In these closing sections, he remarks on the character of the gods compared to mortals and further comments on the brilliance of Homer's metaphors and similes, explaining how the poet works. In these concluding comments, Chesnutt's reading of the *Iliad* diminishes the difference between classical antiquity and, in his words, “civilized America today,” much as Homer diminishes the difference between mortals and gods in the poem. Nowhere is Chesnutt's reflective method of reading more evident than in his summary of book 2, where he considers the Trojan War as depicted in the *Iliad* and comments on its application to his present:

True courage maybe displayed, but the glory and renown is ~~garnered~~ acquired by the officers and skillful generalship has gained many a battle in which the ~~general~~ commander was exposed

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to no danger. The bravest man may be cut down by a flying messenger of death which no strength or skill of his could avert.

But this state of things is not to be deplored. War divested of its romantic garment appears in all its ghastly deformity and men are less willing to undertake it; the spirit of Christianity is opposed to it, and when it is resorted to ~~the~~ modern inventions and the voice of the world all tend to terminate it as speedily as possible.

[section break, with flourish]

Last sentence is bad.—

Chesnutt reads the *Iliad*, in part, as an occasion to think about the aftermath of the Civil War on his contemporary society. It is the Civil War, in contrast to the Trojan War of the *Iliad*, that appears “in all its ghastly deformity.” He is also engaged here in a practice of self-critique, commenting on the quality of his prose, perhaps to signal that he will revise his comments when he rereads this passage at a later time.

Chesnutt revisits these reflections when he introduces to readers the ambiguous hero of his first novel, John Walden:

Some such trite reflection—as apposite to the subject as most random reflections are—passed through the mind of a young man who came out of the front door of the Patesville Hotel about nine o'clock one fine morning in spring, a few years after the Civil War.³⁷

Chesnutt's “random reflections” on the *Iliad* prove essential to his most autobiographical novel, *The House behind the Cedars*, which begins “a few years after the Civil War.” Like John, Chesnutt understood his reading as essential to the formation of a self that was out of step with the racial constraints of his historical moment. But, unlike John, he does not physically leave the present racial community into which he is born; instead, he expands and develops a timeless community through the books he reads.

IV. Conjuring the *Iliad*

In reading Homer, Chesnutt read the relationship between those with power and those without, considered that relation in ancient Greece, and contrasted it with relationships between Blacks and whites in practice as Reconstruction unfolded and unraveled around him. He reflected more broadly on Homer's method and inspiration as he completed his reading of book 1: “Homer must have been a wanderer

indeed. He seemed to possess an accurate knowledge of every city, river and mountain in Greece; to have been familiar with all their local traditions and history. In those bookless days he could only have acquired this by personal observation." Chesnutt's use of the word "bookless" to describe Homer's historical context suggests an almost direct connection to his own moment. Like Homer, Chesnutt is writing among a largely "bookless" population, even though he insists on finding books to read, as he believes they are the key to his social and economic progress. In reading Homer, however, he begins to understand the value, rather than the deficiency, of a bookless culture. Chesnutt, like Homer, must employ his own power of "personal observation" to supplement his reading in order to gain the knowledge necessary to tell a great story, one that would endure long after his time. This paradoxical understanding of the value of growing up in a bookless culture, I want to suggest, informs Chesnutt's brand of realism, which remains one of the most elusive aspects of his writing.³⁸

Chesnutt's reading of the *Iliad*'s book 1 concludes with a brief summary of the characteristics displayed by the gods. In fact, as Chesnutt goes on to remark, "In the course of the work they lie and cheat just like mortals." In Chesnutt's reading of Homer, gods and mortals are not fundamentally different; hence, the social hierarchy that gives some power over others is arbitrary; hence the ensuing war. Chesnutt leads from the ancient Greeks' worship of gods to a more familiar situation in recent American history: "The slave who cringes obsequiously to a capricious and tyrannical master who one minute loads them with favors and the next strips them of everything and dismisses him in disgrace." What are the moral characteristics of a good master or a good slave? Are all slave masters bad, even when they try to be good? Despite the unequal relation between them, Chesnutt's fiction diminishes the differences between slaves and masters, whites and Blacks, since all are mortal and flawed.

The capriciousness of masters Chesnutt observes in the *Iliad* becomes a central theme in Chesnutt's later writings, particularly in stories such as "Dave's Neckliss" and "Po' Sandy," the second of Chesnutt's Conjure Tales to appear in the *Atlantic* less than a decade after he recorded his reading of the *Iliad* in his Journal. In "Po' Sandy" we meet "Sandy's master" through the voice of the dialect-speaking Uncle Julius: the master "wuz one er dese yer easy-gwine folks w'at wanter please eve'ybody."³⁹ In this story, the easygoing master is no different from the capricious master Chesnutt parallels with the Greek gods in his reading of the *Iliad*. Sandy is at the mercy of his master—"Mars

Marrabo McSwayne”—who lends him from month to month to serve different members of his family. As a result, Sandy cannot live with his own wife and children—and his master sells them while Sandy is away serving one of Marrabo’s children on another plantation. Sandy is heartbroken. Eventually, Sandy finds a new wife, Tenie. When Marrabo continues his practice of lending Sandy out, Sandy seeks to remain close—asking Tenie to turn him into a tree. To Sandy and Tenie’s horror, Marrabo cuts down the tree and turns it into a new kitchen. Integrating Chesnutt’s take on the *Iliad* with Uncle Julius’s narration of “Po’ Sandy” reveals nuances in Sandy’s story, written from the perspective of Chesnutt’s own postslavery historical moment, reminiscent of the era and ethos of Homer’s. The slave master’s cruelty echoes the capricious acts of Zeus and Hera from the *Iliad*, and the consequence of this thoughtless capriciousness is Sandy’s tragic death. The master who wants to “please eve’body” is given arbitrary power over his slave. As a result, Sandy is separated from his wife and killed, while Tenie goes mad, a classical set of outcomes that would not be out of place in the works of Homer, Aeschylus, or Ovid.

After concluding his reading of book 1 by comparing the capricious gods to the capricious masters of his own era, Chesnutt moves on without a break, signaling a shift with only a separate heading, “*Iliad* II.” His reading of the second book focuses on the inequality between the Greeks and Trojans; Chesnutt uses the allusive phrase “aristocratic democrats” to describe the epic’s characters who violently quell all dissenting voices, perhaps alluding to Southern Democrats of his own time. Comparing the wars that take place in the *Iliad* to the Civil War, Chesnutt contrasts the beauty of war as depicted through the similes of Homer’s epic form against the arbitrary dangers of modern warfare:

War by our modern improvements in the art has been divested of its charms. The display of personal valor, the strong arm, the skillful hand and the dauntless heart have given place to the strength of powder and ball. The sword which earned its owners fame, is displaced by the musket which any coward can fire; the inspiring spirit of Mars has given place to the inspiring sound of the drum and the fife.

In other words, there is no parallel between the Trojan War and the Civil War. Given the reliance on “the strength of powder and ball” as well as “the musket which any coward can fire,” war is now driven by

mechanical forces that, like the power of the gods or pre-Civil War slave owners, are arbitrary, rather than linked to individual merit. There are few Civil War heroes in Chesnutt's books, only tragic, misguided former soldiers, whose efforts to correct past mistakes inevitably fail. In the last novel published in his lifetime, *The Colonel's Dream* (1905), officers and generals rely more on weapons than "the skillful hand and the dauntless heart," thus allowing cowards to prosper and the deeds of courageous men to pass unnoticed. Refusing to celebrate the war's heroes, on either side, Chesnutt offers a truer depiction of these men.

The third and final section of Chesnutt's Homer is perhaps the most interesting as he introduces a conversation between other books and the *Iliad*. He begins his remarks on book 3 with the comment, "Yesterday while reading the ante-Homeric history of Troy as related given in Dwights Mythology, we were struck by the story of Iphigenia, and its remarkable resemblance to the story scriptural account of the offering of Isaac." This comment reveals not only that other works inform Chesnutt's reading of the *Iliad* but also that his study of Homer is not an episodic single-day plunge into a text but a report on an ongoing project, stretching over days, perhaps even weeks or months. This passage affirms the connections Chesnutt identifies between the *Iliad* and other books more familiar to him and his students—such as the Bible and Mary Ann Dwight's *Grecian and Roman Mythology* (1850), which, as Brodhead usefully notes, was "available in special school editions in the 1870s."⁴⁰ Dwight's *Mythology* may have been one of the textbooks Chesnutt's students used in their ancient history class, and he likely had it readily on hand.

By relating the events of the *Iliad* to other stories, Chesnutt could perhaps prove (to himself and to his readers) how all cultures, even those that display a certain "ignorance of writing," rely on stories to make sense of the world. Highlighting the specific importance of those stories that are not written down, he goes on to develop his theory of literature. In this final commentary on the *Iliad*, Chesnutt writes, "The addition with which the imagination of different generations adorned them became the improbable legends which are preserved to us in classical literature." Chesnutt's idea of what constitutes classical literature helps us to understand "the improbable legends" that appear in the form of his Conjure Tales. In a majority of these stories Chesnutt employs "a tale within a tale technique" in which, as Wideman helpfully points out, "Chesnutt blends the literary and oral traditions without implying that the black storyteller's mode of perceiving and recreating reality is any

less valid than the written word.”⁴¹ Chesnutt’s Black storyteller is Uncle Julius, and it is his imagination that stands at the center of these stories. His illiterate voice narrates a story—an “improbable legend”—about the slave past that involves men becoming trees or a man called Skundus who disappears when he falls asleep for a month. The white, literate audience to whom these stories are generally addressed has no idea how to read Uncle Julius’s stories. At the end of “The Gray Wolf’s Ha’nt,” for instance, John “looked in vain” for “any evidence” of the truth of Uncle Julius’s story. Though he finds no evidence to verify the tale, he does find the truth that lies within it in “the stores of honey” he finds buried in “an ample cavity” of a bee tree in the woods.⁴² In other words, the story is based on real things that can be touched, smelled, and tasted in the world where the listeners of the story live.

In a now well-known essay published in 1931, just a year before his death, Chesnutt weighs in on the debate over the issue of the genre of his fiction by setting the stories apart from the kind of “folk tales” (including those written by Joel Chandler Harris) that were so popular at the time:

The name of the story teller, “Uncle” Julius, and the locale of the stories, as well as the cover design, were suggestive of Mr. Harris’s Uncle Remus, but the tales are entirely different. They are sometimes referred to as folk tales, but while they employ much of the universal machinery of wonder stories, especially the metamorphosis, with one exception, that of the first story, “The Goophered Grapevine,” of which the norm was a folktale, the stories are the fruit of my own imagination, in which respect they differ from the Uncle Remus stories which are avowedly folk tales.⁴³

In asserting that “the stories are the fruit of my own imagination” and that “they employ much of the universal machinery of wonder stories,” Chesnutt seems here to be making a case for *The Conjure Woman* as a work of “classical literature” as he defines it through his reading of the *Iliad*. Chesnutt’s stories rely on an oral storyteller, who relates the violence of events that occurred in the not-too-distant past, when slave masters ruled over the lives of slaves, just as gods did over mortals in Homer’s worldview.

Chesnutt’s reading of Homer begins on August 13, 1878. The next dated entry describing his “late reading of Dr. Todd’s invaluable ‘Student’s Manual’” begins on October 7, 1878. It is possible his reading of the *Iliad* was a two-month-long project, filling up his break from teach-

ing during the summer of 1878. But it is also possible, as he suggests in one of the last works published in his lifetime, that he returned to the *Iliad* in his later years as a professional author. As I mentioned previously, Chesnutt does not distinguish the days he reads the *Iliad*, as he does in the Journals regarding other books he reads, suggesting something singular about this reading. His reading of the *Iliad* moves over almost fifty Journal pages, but time seems to stand still. When reading the *Iliad*, Chesnutt for the first time is entering into a conversation about literature, virtual though it may be, with other people. He addresses his readers directly for the first time, suggesting that he is one of them, even though he is living in a “bookless” world.

Chesnutt's reflections on the *Iliad* illuminate his conception of his own role as a young reader and aspiring author in one of the more unusual, or original, aspects of Chesnutt's reading of the *Iliad*. Just after he describes the scene in which Helen meets Priam, the father of Paris, Chesnutt embarks on a lengthy digression regarding the value of old men.

—The Greeks revered the aged, and it seemed to be a notion among them as among other nations, that age and wisdom were inseparable. In those days when wisdom could only be gained by experience and knowledge from observation, it was reasonable to suppose that the man who had experienced most, and had more time for observation was the wisest. We acknowledge the prudence of age, and when the mind of an old man retains all its former vigor, stored with the fruits of a long life of experience and observation; whose youthful impetuosity has been cooled by ardor many winters which are interspersed among the summers of the happiest life, his advice is worthy of our ~~highest~~ revered attention and deep respect.

But ~~unfortunately generally~~ the old adage applies to this as to many other cases. “mens sana in copore sano,” and as the body is enfeebled by age, the mind generally shares in the gradual decay; prudence becomes cowardice; the passions peculiar to youth give place to those which age can indulge; patriotism becomes selfishness; economy contracts itself to parsimony; and loss of memory ~~weakens~~ diminishes the value of experience. “This is old; I know, “The Old for counsel; the young for action.” [quotation marks in original]

Keeping in mind that Chesnutt was only twenty when he was reading the *Iliad* on August 13, 1878, this digression easily reads as a

self-admonishment. He is young, not old, and so must act with the assistance of older men. And yet, as Chesnutt extends his comments, we might further read this passage as a metaphorical call to arms for his generation. Old men like Priam cannot be trusted to do the right thing. They are either too weak or weighed down by history when action is needed. It is the men and women of Chesnutt's postwar generation, living in the aftermath of a war in which they did not participate, who "may gain many battles and astonish the world by [their] success." Continuing his conversation with other books, Chesnutt compares youth to the "career of Charles XII," which he had earlier read in Voltaire's *History of Charles XII*. He recalls how Charles "took command of an army at eighteen; he conquered Poland, deposed and made king ~~elected another~~ for nine years he kept Peter the Great at bay and received the title of 'Arbiter of the North.'" The young rely on older ideas that they read or hear in the stories told by their elders. Yet relying too much on experience may leave the young fixed in the ways of the past only to continue its errors. To avoid such a scenario, Chesnutt reimagines the stories of his elders, making those improbable legends into contemporary literature.

Chesnutt's defense of youth continues for several more pages, concluding, as his reading of the *Iliad* had begun, with an apology: "I hope my readers will pardon this digression but if without diminishing that reverence which is due to age, it may convince any one of them that 'the oldest man is not always the wisest,' it may not be without use." Chesnutt seems here to be interrogating who we, as a society, consider to be the "wisest." Are the wisest those college-educated, literate men who occupy the most important positions in political and educational institutions? Or might wisdom be found in the stories told by illiterate men like Uncle Julius? Chesnutt's direct address to the reader here suggests a different purpose for reading the *Iliad* than his more familiar desire for knowledge or pleasure. Chesnutt here shifts from merely reading the text to criticizing it and, indeed, moves toward telling a story of his own with characters that manifest an ability to transcend the differences that have been imposed upon them from above.

John Walden in *The House behind the Cedars* and Mr. Ryder in "The Wife of His Youth" read for knowledge and pleasure, reread treasured texts, and use their reading to escape the racial constraints that trap them. Like Chesnutt reading Homer, Mr. Ryder is reading "a volume of Tennyson—his favorite poet—" intensively at the moment when he is interrupted by Liza Jane.⁴⁴ John Walden finds in his father's library "the portal of a new world, peopled with strange and marvelous beings," but

that door is ultimately closed to him when his racial identity is discovered.⁴⁵ These characters at once find themselves and lose themselves in the books they read; reading is their way of recognizing who they are in a world riven by racial classification and inequality. By writing like Homer, or at least within the marrow of this tradition, Chesnutt aims to replace racial categories dividing people in his time with those more timeless qualities associated with the characters of classical antiquity. While his characters, like Chesnutt himself, are still constrained by the racial categories of their time, reading classical literature such as Homer's *Iliad* enables them to imagine a future in which racial difference is just ancient history.

Notes

Thanks to fellow members of the C19 "Practices of Rereading in the Nineteenth Century" panel—Faye Halpern, Barbara Hochman, and Claudia Stokes—for their insights and suggestions.

1. Charles W. Chesnutt Papers, "Note-book and Journal," Franklin Library at Fisk University, Box 13. The original Journals are divided into three separate folders: July 1874, 160 pages; November 1877, 237 pages; and January 1881, 53 pages. Unless otherwise noted, all citations to the Journals are from the unpaginated original manuscript and are indicated by journal entry dates.

2. Chesnutt's presence in "two worlds" was first put forth by the critic and novelist John Edgar Wideman, in his important essay "Charles Chesnutt and the WPA Narratives: The Oral and Literate Roots of Afro-American Literature," in *The Slave's Narrative*, ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 59–78. Here I expand on Wideman's theory of Chesnutt "straddl[ing] two worlds"—the literate and oral—through a reading of the manuscript Journals.

3. Chesnutt owned a copy of *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, which remains in his personal library, but it was acquired well after he first read Homer in 1878. John Keats, *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, ed. H. Buxton Forman (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, n.d.), signed, dated by Chesnutt "Christmas 1896." See Charles W. Chesnutt Papers, Fisk University.

4. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854), in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, 1820–1865*, ed. Robert S. Levine (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017): 1022.

5. William Cullen Bryant, preface to *The Iliad of Homer* (Boston: Fields, Osgood, 1870), iii.

6. Reginald A. Wilburn's *Preaching the Gospel of Black Revolt: Appropriating Milton in Early African American Literature* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2014), presents the connection between early seventeenth-century author John Milton's poetry and the writings of early African American authors such as Phillis Wheatley, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Frederick Douglass, Anna Julia Cooper, and Sutton E. Griggs. Working in a similar vein, Dennis Looney's *Freedom Readers: The African American Reception of Dante Alighieri and the Divine Comedy* identifies and explains references to Dante in works of nineteenth-century African American authors such as Cordelia Ray, William Wells Browns, and W. E. B. Du Bois. Much of the focus of Looney's book focuses on connections between Dante and mid-twentieth-century author Ralph Ellison. The Dante-Ellison connection continues to be the subject of recent critical debate. See Dennis Looney, *Freedom Readers: The African American Reception of Dante Alighieri and the Divine Comedy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011); Richard Purcell, "An Integrative Vernacular: Ellison, Dante, and Social Cohesion in the Post-Civil Rights Era," *ELH* 80, no. 3 (2013): 917–44.

7. Charles W. Chesnutt, "The Courts and the Negro," in *Plessy v. Ferguson: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Brook Thomas (Boston: Bedford, 1997), 157; "The Disfranchisement of the Negro," in *The Negro Problem*, ed. James Pott (New York: James Pott & Co., 1903), 106.

8. Though published well before the Brodhead edition of the Journals, William L. Andrews, *The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980) was pivotal in introducing a new generation of readers to Chesnutt's life and work.

Andrews provides biographical details to contextualize his reading of Chesnutt's fiction and nonfiction, but he draws almost entirely from Chesnutt's post-Fayetteville writings. In the same years the Journals were published, Eric Sundquist also offered an important treatment of Chesnutt's short stories and an influential reading of *The Marrow of Tradition*. In *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), Sundquist makes a compelling case for reading the novel as "classical tragedy" but a tragedy deriving primarily from Chesnutt's "familial history," rather than his reading of classical texts (389–91).

9. Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Journals of Charles W. Chesnutt*, ed. Richard H. Brodhead (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 87.

10. *Ibid.*, 88.

11. Calling these essays Chesnutt's "most definitive and comprehensive statement on racial amalgamation," SallyAnn Ferguson emphasizes the ways in which racial difference operates in Chesnutt's work. SallyAnn Ferguson, "Charles W. Chesnutt's 'Future American' in *MELUS* Forum 15, no. 3 (1988): 95.

Whereas Ferguson's starting point is racial difference—and she distinguishes consistently between black and white people—Chesnutt regards such differences as fictions that can be erased by certain measures, chief among these the work of literature. The so-called racial differences that apparently existed between writers such as Alexander Pushkin, Robert Browning, and Alexander Dumas, he asserts, were overcome by their common investment in literature. So too might reading a common literature render obsolete "racial" differences predicated on one group being literate and the other illiterate. See SallyAnn H. Ferguson, "Chesnutt's Genuine Blacks and Future Americans," *MELUS* 15, no. 3 (1988): 109–19.

12. See Sarah Wagner-McCoy, "Virgilian Chesnutt: Ecologues of Slavery and Georgics of Reconstruction in the 'Conjure Tales,'" *ELH* 80 (Spring 2013): 199–220; John Levi Barnard, "Ruins amidst Ruins: Black Classicism and the Empire of Slavery," *American Literature* 86, no. 2 (June 2014): 361–62.

13. Chesnutt, *Journals*, May 29, 1880.

14. Michael Nowlin, "'The First Negro Novelist': Charles Chesnutt's Point of View and the Emergence of African American Literature," *Studies in American Fiction* 39, no. 2 (2012): 148. Nowlin's view echoes in large part that articulated earlier by Joseph R. McElrath, who reads the Journals primarily as a forum for "Chesnutt's ambitions" and concludes that "he was a pragmatist convinced that professional authorship in the service of high moral principles was compatible with . . . the taking of hefty profits." See "W. D. Howells and Race: Charles W. Chesnutt's Disappointment of the Dean," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 51 (1997): 476. For other deployments of the "write for a purpose" passage, see also Matthew Wilson, *Whiteness in the Novels of Charles W. Chesnutt* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), xiv; Elizabeth Hewitt "Charles Chesnutt's Capitalist Conjuring," *ELH* 76, no. 4 (2009): 931.

15. See Dean McWilliams, *Charles W. Chesnutt and the Fictions of Race* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002), 32–37.

16. Wideman, "Charles Chesnutt and the WPA Narratives," 60.

17. Charles Chesnutt, *The House behind the Cedars* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 104.

18. Although there are not great numbers of surviving nineteenth-century African American journals, the few that have survived offer important insights into the practice. The most well known of them is Charlotte Forten Grimké's. Her journal begins in May 1854 and concludes just before the end of the Civil War. Grimké's journal describes in detail her personal reading experiences, in which there is much overlap with Chesnutt's. Like Chesnutt, Grimké copies stanzas of poems she admired and wanted to commit to memory; she also declares a deep admiration for the works of Charles Dickens. Unlike Chesnutt, however, Grimké was a committed abolitionist whose reading choices were strongly influenced by the political movement. See *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké*, ed. Brenda Stevenson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

19. The portrait that emerges from William Andrews's account of Chesnutt's early life is that of a "bookish lad" struggling to make a living "in a depressed and war-torn region." See Andrews, *The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt*, 1–17.

20. Chesnutt, *Journals*, June 28, 1880.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Much of the institutional history of the State Colored Normal School can be found in the archives of present-day Fayetteville State University. After the death of his mentor, Robert L. Harris, Chesnutt served as the normal school's principal from 1880 to 1883. For an assess-

ment of Harris's career and contributions to the field of black education, see Earle H. West, "The Harris Brothers: Black Northern Teachers in the Reconstruction South," *Journal of Negro Education* 48, no. 2 (Spring 1979): 126–38.

23. Chesnutt, *Journals*, July 12, 1875.

24. Wideman, "Charles Chesnutt and the WPA Narratives," 60.

25. Charles Chesnutt, "The Conjuror's Revenge," in *Charles W. Chesnutt: Stories, Novels & Essays* (New York: Library of America, 2002), 46.

26. Brodhead, introduction to Chesnutt, *Journals*, 1.

27. For a full list of Chesnutt's personal library preserved by Fisk University, see Joseph McElrath, "Charles W. Chesnutt's Library," *Analytical and Enumerative Bibliography* 8, no. 2 (1994): 102–19. The entry on work by John Keats can be found on p. 111 and Scarborough on p. 114.

28. See *Black Classicists / Fifteen Portraits*, curated by Michele Valerie Ronnick, Center for Hellenic Studies, Washington DC, Harvard University, March 1, 2018–Fall 2018. Chesnutt's daughter, Helen M. Chesnutt, is included in this exhibit. Helen taught Latin at Central High School in Cleveland and was strongly influenced by her father's reading of the classics. See her biography of Chesnutt, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt: Pioneer of the Color Line* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1952).

29. William S. Scarborough, *The Autobiography of William Sanders Scarborough: An American Journey from Slavery to Scholarship*, ed. Michele Valerie Ronnick (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 84.

30. Steven Mailloux has traced this line of thinking about the classics in African American thought to John C. Calhoun's famous challenge that "if he could find a Negro who knew the Greek syntax he would then believe that the Negro was a human being and should be treated as a man." Steven Mailloux, "Thinking with Rhetorical Figures: Performing Racial and Disciplinary Identities in Late-Nineteenth-Century America," *American Literary History* 18, no. 4 (2006): 701–702.

31. Chesnutt, *Journals*, June 25, 1880.

32. Chesnutt, *Journals*, October 7, 1878.

33. See Lisa Jardine and Anthony Grafton, "'Studied for Action': How Gabriel Harvey Read His Livy," in *The History of the Book in the West: 1455-1700, Vol II*, ed. Alexis Weedon (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 451.

34. As most readers of Chesnutt's work know, he was the first African American member of the all-male Rowfant Club, a bibliophilic society located in Cleveland and founded in 1892. Chesnutt remained an active member of the society until his death in 1932. Chesnutt's activities with the Rowfant Club were primarily about reading works of literature, not writing them.

35. Caroline Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life, 1780–1910* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 1.

36. Chesnutt's description of his plan to study with Neufeld strongly hints at the barriers faced by a young African American man who tried to pursue an independent education: "Mr. Neufeld told me yesterday that after I had spoken to him a few days ago, Mr Kyle . . . asked him if he intended to give me instruction . . . Mr. K advised him not, lest he should lose some pupils." Chesnutt, *Journals*, June 25, 1880.

37. Chesnutt, *The House behind the Cedars*, 1.

38. The debate over the generic categories through which to read Chesnutt's work was first put forth by Joseph R. McElrath in "Why Charles W. Chesnutt Is Not a Realist," *American Literary Realism* 32, No. 2 (Winter 2000): 91–108. The question of Chesnutt's realism remains a crucial aspect of more recent assessments of his literary career. See Henry B. Wonham, "What Is a Black Author? A Review of Recent Charles Chesnutt Studies," *American Literary History* 18, No. 4 (January 2006): 829–35.

39. Chesnutt, "Po' Sandy," *Atlantic Monthly* 61 (1888): 605–11.

40. Brodhead, introduction to Chesnutt, *Journals*, 88.

41. Wideman, "Charles Chesnutt and the WPA Narratives," 60.

42. Charles Chesnutt, "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt," in *Charles W. Chesnutt: Stories, Novels & Essays*, 82.

43. Chesnutt, "Remarks of Charles Waddell Chesnutt of Cleveland, in Accepting the Spingarn Medal at Los Angeles" (July 3, 1928), in *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Joseph R. McElrath Jr., Robert C. Leitz III, and Jesse S. Crisler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 544.

44. Charles Chesnutt, "The Wife of His Youth," *The Atlantic Monthly* (July 1898), 57.

45. Charles Chesnutt, *The House behind the Cedars*, 108.