

Legacy and “The Human Document”:

Mary Boykin Chesnut’s Re-Visions of Herself and her Work

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Sequestered in the first floor library of her home in Camden, South Carolina, Mary Boykin Chesnut leans over her writing desk. She considers her activities and her conversations and picks up her pen. She begins by dating the top of the page and starts to write, rapidly, fluidly, substituting dashes for punctuation, with a novelist’s eye for detail and setting. She writes,

March 4, 1861

So I have seen a negro woman sold – up on the block – at auction. I was walking. The woman on the block overtopped the crowd. I felt faint – seasick. The creature looked so like my good Nancy. She was a bright mulatto with a pleasant face. She was magnificently gotten up in silks and satins. She seemed delighted with it all – sometimes ogling the bidders, sometimes looking quite coy and modest, but her mouth never relaxed from its expanded grin of excitement. I daresay the poor thing knew who would buy her.

I sat down on a stool in a shop. I disciplined my wild thoughts. . .

You know how women sell themselves and are sold in marriage, from Queens downward, eh?

You know what the Bible says about slavery – and marriage. Poor women. Poor slaves. (*MCCW* 15)<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps she considers the passage a while longer, toying with its phrasing or the pace of her narrative. Perhaps she shudders in remembrance of the young woman who so willingly commodified herself for the crowd. Perhaps she rubs her eyes in tiredness or debates what should follow this story in the passage. In any case, Chesnut would continue writing for the next three years, recording many more encounters and episodes, chronicling her experience of the Civil War. Mary Boykin Chesnut was writing her diary. Again. Twenty years after the beginning of the Civil War.

After the Civil War, Chesnut and her family, like many others in the South, found themselves in dire financial straits. In 1873, Chesnut and her husband moved into a new home, called Sarsfield, in Camden and from there they tried to manage the enormous debt left to them by the death of James Chesnut Sr. In 1881 Chesnut began to revise the material in her diary in earnest, with thoughts of publishing the text in order to alleviate the family's financial struggles. In a letter dated June 18, 1883, Chesnut wrote to her friend, Varina Howell Davis, former First Lady of the Confederacy, "How I wish you could read over - my journal - I have been two years looking over it - copying - leaving myself out. You must see it - before it goes to print - but that may not be just now. I mean the printing - for I must over haul it again -

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<sup>1</sup>In order to avoid confusion for the reader, C. Vann Woodward's 1981 *Mary Chesnut's Civil War* will be referred to in citations as *MCCW*. Woodward and Elizabeth Muhlenfeld's 1984 *The Private Mary Chesnut* will be referenced in citations as *PMC*. Also, any italics found within the citations from the diary, are according to Chesnut's habits as understood by Woodward. They are not intended to imply any special emphasis on the part of this scholar.

and again". Chesnut continued with the revisions for another year until 1884, when James became ill. He died in February of 1885, and Chesnut's mother, who had been living at Sarsfield, died a few days later. This apparently marked the end of her writing. In many ways, Chesnut was now alone in the world, without husband, without parents, without children of her own to comfort her. The ambitious undertaking of her revision came to a sudden halt, and historian C. Vann Woodward has suggested that Chesnut did not consider the project finished when she died in 1886.

The questions surrounding Chesnut's revised document are nearly as numerous as the pages of the text itself. Each tentative answer leads to another question. This essay centers on the question of Chesnut's possible motivations for revising the text as well as the issues of genre surrounding the revised text. Both of these concerns derive from questions regarding Chesnut's intentions in revising her Civil War diary, namely why Chesnut revised her text and what she hoped to achieve through the act of revision – both of which are linked to the idea of understanding Chesnut's intentions as a writer. While a portion of this essay relies on autobiographical and feminist scholarship, much of my personal and professional curiosity regarding Chesnut is based upon New Historicist and Cultural Criticism methodologies, namely founded on the premise that we can better understand the text by better understanding the life of the author. To be sure, there are numerous avenues by which one may approach Chesnut and her work, and the use of the term "intention" regarding the author carries with it certain implications. The exploration of authorial intentions gives way to a complicated debate over whether or not the

scholar can assume or even presume to understand the author in question. Included in this debate are questions regarding not only can we know the author's intentions, but also, why should we attempt to privilege those intentions. Opponents of this privileging of intention cite Wimsatt's and Beardsley's caution against "the intentional fallacy." I have examined Chesnut's intentions for her revised diary, because she appears to have recognized, as can be seen in her letter to Varina Davis, the manner in which the text was so closely tied to her own life and her perception of her self. Because the life of the author and the development of the text, in this case, are so closely linked, I find it imperative to consider the correlation between the two. This method of considering Chesnut's motivations alongside her work allows for specific conclusions regarding her text, namely her concerns for protecting her own persona as well as her community, her struggle with the doubled double-consciousness she encountered as a Southern woman writer, and her ability to rehistoricize her vision and versions of herself and her community through her texts.

The evolution of the literary canon over the last thirty years has allowed for new attention to be given to women's writings. A portion of that canon has recently opened to the texts of women's diaries. But this genre presents a particular problem for contemporary scholars, who must navigate the paradigm of audience and authorial intent in relation to these often very private texts. The complex nature of diary studies, which by necessity relies heavily on theories of autobiography, explores the conventional suggestion that women were and are relegated to writing diaries because the genre of autobiography has little place for subordinate members

of a hierarchical society. In *Altered Egos: Authority in American Autobiography*, G. Thomas Couser, while discussing Chesnut's texts, asserts that the "distinctive 'authority of authorship' faced by women writers takes on a particular intensity for women life-writers because autobiography involves an assertion of one's significance and autonomy traditionally reserved for men's societies" (165). This statement speaks to one of the primary issues of Chesnut's work, namely her revisions. To refer again to Chesnut's letter to Varina Davis from 1883, in her revisions Chesnut claims to be leaving herself out of the text. What is left to fill the gaps of Chesnut's "leaving out"? The image of the woman life-writer attempting to exempt her own life from the writing is problematic to say the least. Questions of why Chesnut might want to leave herself out of the text need to be explored as do the repercussions of this "leaving out."

Was Chesnut removing herself from the diary due to "anxiety of authorship" – feelings of trepidation and frustration at taking her place in the ongoing conversation among all of the writers and the texts which had come before? Women writers feel this anxiety in a doubled fashion, due to the fact that a patriarchal society does little to encourage women to assert themselves at all, let alone through the act of writing. And so, with regard to Chesnut, the question remains of how we shall approach the conflict between her assertion of authority through the act of authorship and her concurrent desire to leave herself out of the text.

Before we can address these important questions about the text, however, we must establish a foundation explaining why Chesnut revised the diary, what the new text is to be called, and if we, as contemporary readers, can classify the text in terms

of genre. These three problems surrounding the text will lead to a discussion of why Chesnut desired to remove herself from the process of the revision and what she created to fill in the gaps.

Chesnut's surviving papers indicate that her income after the Civil War consisted only of a milk and butter business she operated on shares with her maid Molly and the rent she collected from her former slaves living at Sarsfield. Elisabeth Muhlenfeld indicates this income was a little more than one hundred dollars a year (*MCCW* xliv). Certainly this meager amount represented a monumental struggle for a woman who had lived her entire life surrounded by wealth and opulence, before the war. In light of her financial hardships, Chesnut began searching for opportunities to bring in money. She wrote a short piece, taken mostly from her diary, called "The Arrest of a Spy", which was published in the *Charleston Weekly News & Courier* as part of a series called "Our Women in the War." (*MCCW* xliii). She earned ten dollars for the piece, and from this encouraging exchange she began to consider revising her war time diary for the purpose of publication and earning money.

The implications inherent in writing for money raise concerns about audience and profitability for the text. In order to foster acceptance for her writing, Chesnut had to recognize that certain concessions must be made to her audience. The majority of the reading public would already be familiar with the events of the war and might also be unsympathetic to the Civil War writings of a privileged southern woman. The South had lost the war, and attempts to justify the emotions or actions of Southerners would be met with resistance by many Northern readers and

publishers. And so Chesnut had to determine in what fashion she would present her text. She considered writing a biography of her husband; she considering writing novels. But time and again she returned to the idea of publishing her diary. Clearly her journal, which recorded the most exciting and the most depressing years of her life, was close to her heart. Chesnut's desire to publish her diary forced her to make a series of decisions as to how she would present the text. In its original form, the diary is private, personal, and at times abbreviated in terms of language and anecdotes. And so, with profit and publication in mind, she began to revise.

To imply that financial gain was the only motivation behind Chesnut's revisions of her diary would be a disservice both to the author and the text. The importance of Chesnut's financial need cannot be denied; at the same time one must also recognize that Chesnut felt a strong personal conviction about the project and was compelled at least to try to share this document with others. She had kept the Civil War diary under lock and key, so the move from the private world of the diary to the public world of publication represented a vast transition for Chesnut as an author. What might have precipitated this move? To be certain, the simple desire to share one's ideas and experiences with others might have been a factor for Chesnut. This is a natural human inclination. And yet, there must have been something more which motivated Chesnut to devote so much time and effort to the revisions of her diary. In her introduction to *Written By Herself* (1992), Jill Ker Conway suggests that, "By mid-century (nineteenth) white American women with access to education saw their experience as exemplary, something to be made available to others, to encourage fellow seekers after knowledge and to instruct

skeptics who doubted the value of female learning” (ix). Chesnut was certainly well-educated for her time, and she seemed to view her experiences during the Civil War as noteworthy. It is possible that the desire to validate her experiences – and by default the experiences of the South during the war – represented Chesnut’s motivating desire to publish the diary in some form. Chesnut was an ambitious woman who sought attention and validation, and so these personal attributes might also have been factors in her intentions with the diary. She had lived through the decimation of her home land, her community, and her culture. This experience certainly produced a desire to explain the events and attitudes of the Southern community during the Civil War, a desire to present the South in a less villainous light, a desire to put a human and humane face on the people who had fought so valiantly to preserve, in their minds, their autonomy.

Perhaps our best clues as to why Chesnut re-wrote her diary for publication lie, not in conjecture about Chesnut’s state of mind or heart, not even in Chesnut’s own records, but in one of the earliest available examples of literary and biographical criticism found on Chesnut. A letter, written by a friend of Chesnut, an L. S. W. Perkins, is on deposit at the South Caroliniana Library at the University of South Carolina campus in Columbia. This letter was written to Chesnut’s first editor, Isabella Martin, early in 1905 shortly after the publication of *A Diary From Dixie*. While the letter was intended as a private message for Martin, it contains a number of valuable insights regarding Chesnut and her work. The letter reads, in its entirety:



(dictated)

Concord, Mass. April 4,

1905

My dear Miss Martin,

I do not see how it is possible that you should not be simply flooded with letters in recognition of Mrs. Chesnut's diary. It has made me just desperately homesick for her, for my sister, and for those old days when Mrs. Chesnut and I used to talk by the hour, and during which she often sent me a letter every day. I remember so well how we talked in the moonlight down there at Sarsfield, General Chesnut sometimes listening, sometimes joining in – about everything in heaven and on earth. And then the next morning, before I was out of bed, one of those faithful colored men would make his appearance with a note supplementing some of the last evening's talk and then it would begin again.

The last time I saw her we had a long talk on personal immortality, in which she opened her great heart. Are there not to be more volumes covering the years of reconstruction? That was the time when I began to know her, you know, and those later years of deepening spiritual consciousness added recognition of the wonderful ways of God in darkness. Surely it would be worth while. She used to talk often and often of "the human document." Now that is what she

was, and I don't believe you can give us too much of her. I find, in reading this book with deep attention, that in her later years of looking back upon that time she took a larger view, – large as the view was which she always took. I think she seemed to see the whole thing in a great big image, and almost as if creating itself without the volition of man; a great big understanding of what our ancestors called foreknowledge and foreordination.

I suppose you had to cut somewhat in that Richmond period, for I know she looked back pretty steadily on it, and used to speak freely, though it may be she spoke more freely than she wrote, because I fancy few people, in keeping a diary, can get away from the consciousness that somebody is looking over your shoulder, and perhaps she did not quite escape. There surely was never any one like her, – physically and intellectually fearless of facts and fearless of the truth, – never afraid where it would lead her or land her. We have no proof of immortality, but it is people like Mrs. Chesnut and like my dear friend Mrs. Lockwood, who was Senator Bayard's sister, and one or two others, that make you feel those spirits can never pass into nothingness, – nor even lose their identity in a greater spirit. The great argument against this latter theory has always been to me that God must be in himself complete and unchanging, and could not be subject to the constant flux of receiving earth-made individual spirits, They must either exist in some separate form, or else be merged into

nothingness, – but who can think of that clever, quick mind not going on somehow, somewhere, – and one may even go further and say, – how can one think that she would not welcome us when she saw us coming? – the people to whom she really gave so freely of that fine inner life.

I add with my own hand my gratitude for what you have given us, and my earnest wish that you may give us more.

Most sincerely yrs.,

L.S.W. Perkins

(*IDC* Collection)

Perkins, in this seemingly straightforward letter of recognition for the book, touches upon a number of relevant issues surrounding the discussion of Chesnut's work. Perkins was evidently unaware that *A Diary From Dixie* was taken from Chesnut's revisions, and so believed it to be from the original diary. Nonetheless Perkins manages to raise questions central to aspects of diary and autobiography theory.

Perkins' reference to "the human document" is noteworthy here. This phrase serves as a metaphor both for the act of diary or autobiographical writing, – the subject of a text centers on a person's life – as well as the premise that we all represent and build a life record simply through the act of living. The phrase refers both to the diary and the person writing it. Perkins' attribution of conversations regarding personal immortality and the human document to Chesnut, allows for a consideration of Chesnut's state of mind in the Reconstruction years, the years

during which she was revising the diary. For Perkins these conversations are linked to an understanding and an appreciation of the text. This represents another indication of how closely Chesnut, the woman, is linked to her text. There is no text, no diary or Revision, no *A Diary From Dixie*, without Chesnut, as the human document. Perkins' analysis of Chesnut's ideas, suggesting that "she seemed to see the whole thing in a great big image, and almost as if creating itself without the volition of man . . ." may also be applied to Chesnut's revisions. She attempted to recreate a coherent document, a coherent image of the Civil War. The intention surrounding this image required that she alter her view of her past, in order to accommodate the issues and experiences of her present. Furthermore, Chesnut had to change aspects of herself, as she was represented in the revision, to accommodate the image she wished to portray.

Finally Perkins notes the incongruity between Chesnut's verbal conversations and her written constructions. Perkins adeptly recognizes the notion of implied audience for diary writers – "though it may be she spoke more freely than she wrote, because I fancy few people, in keeping a diary, can get away from the consciousness that somebody is looking over your shoulder, and perhaps she did not quite escape." Seventy years before feminist scholars began to seriously consider the issue of audience in women's diary writing, Perkins demonstrates an understanding of the unavoidable habit of self-editing connected to the process of diary writing. Since we know that Chesnut edited herself in the original diary as well as the revised text, we can agree with Perkins' concern that the texts left to us are not Chesnut's exact feelings or thoughts on her particular experiences, but rather the

thoughts and feelings that Chesnut chose to share.

Perkins' letter, directed to the person who was most familiar with Chesnut's text, reveals a close and careful reading of *A Diary From Dixie*. It also reveals an uncanny understanding of important issues surrounding Chesnut's revision, issues we will return to again and again, namely the notion of the self as a document, concerns for images of the self and the text, and the premise of audience interference with a diary writer's intentions.

Because Chesnut chose to retain the diary format in her revisions, and because her text wasn't published until after she died, thereby preventing any clarification on her part, historians, scholars, and general readers alike labored under the misconception for nearly eighty years that Chesnut's published text was an actual diary. When C. Vann Woodward brought to light that the book, published under the title *Diary from Dixie*, was in fact written twenty years after the Civil War, scholars expressed outrage and accused Chesnut of deliberate deceit and misrepresentation<sup>2</sup>. Out of this conflict, an important question arose. What do we call a text which appears to be a diary, using dates for entries and first person, present-tense language and yet isn't a diary? Woodward has written extensively on the original diary and the revised text, and he suggests that we refer to the original diary as Chesnut's "Journal" and the revised text as her "book" (*MCCW* xvii). His use of the generalized, bland term "book" reflects the difficulty inherent in determining what exactly the revised text should be called. Most scholars when

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<sup>2</sup>C. Vann Woodward's discussion of critics' reaction to *Mary Chesnut's Civil War* may be found in his introduction to *The Private Mary Chesnut* (1984) pages xiii-xiv.

discussing Chesnut's work follow Woodward's lead and employ his terms, "Journal" and "book." And yet, "book" is not sufficient. To refer to Chesnut's revised diaries as simply a book borders on misleading. In his introduction to *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, Woodward, to a degree, underrates the messy debate of what this text is or is not by calling it a "book." Chesnut's work requires us to carefully consider what the text is and how we are to approach it. Michael O'Brien has suggested another term which he believes better describes the re-written diary. O'Brien writes ". . . one can justly ask, what do we call this book, these manuscripts, this jumble? The is a practical matter as well as an intellectual one. One must call it something in one's own discussion . . . My own preference is, simply, to call it a narrative journal, which conflates (Chesnut's) own terms" (111-2). The terms to which O'Brien refers are taken from the "Memoir" section of Chesnut's revised diary. She writes, "So this is no longer a journal but a narrative of all I cannot bear in mind which has occurred since August 1862" (*MCCW* 425). O'Brien's suggestion of calling the revision a "narrative journal" is not without its merits, for the use of the word "narrative" implies both the anecdotal aspects of the text as well as the fictional elements. Nevertheless, this term is also insufficient. It does not indicate the re-written, revised nature of the document.

For the purposes of this discussion Chesnut's "book," her "narrative journal," will be referred to as the Revision. The use of the term "Revision" serves a number of purposes. It does not allow for any doubt as to the nature of the document – it is a text which was revised, reconsidered, rewritten. Revision also implies the personal process which Chesnut went through in composing the text; she chose to

develop and embrace a new vision of the document and therefore a new vision of herself. Concerning the issue of women and their visions of self in relation to their work, Adrienne Rich writes:

Re-vision - the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction -- is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is a part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male dominated society. (537)

The issue of revising in order to survive proves important to Chesnut insofar as she had to seek out and create a hybrid genre in order to meet her needs as an author. Following Rich's lead, using the term "Revision" for the act of writing and the text produced through that act also avoids arbitrary genre designations which cannot help but limit our perception of this particular text.

The issue of genre as it applies to the Revision is certainly important; as readers we tend to approach a text with perceptions and considerations based on the genre of the text. A historical text is approached differently than a fictional one. A diary is read differently than a novel. In order to understand how we may approach the Revision – what we, as readers, should bring to the process of reading Chesnut's work – we must attempt to determine what the Revision is, or rather, what it is not. Reader-Response criticism suggests that the manner in which a reader approaches a text, as well as the reader's experience in interacting with the

text, defines it. This school of thought encourages the reader to be aware of her contribution to the act of communication in concert with the writer's contribution to the creation of the text. Furthermore, Reader-Response critics believe that the reader's understanding of the work is as valid as the author's interpretations of the text. This idea provides a plausible starting point for discussing Chesnut's revision. The Revision represents a particular problem for readers. Now that we are aware that Chesnut re-wrote her diary twenty years after the start of the Civil War, the reader must ask herself - What am I reading? Is this a diary, an autobiography, a memoir? Is it historical fiction? Do I trust the text – or do I question Chesnut's intention with every entry? And so, there is a dual consideration surrounding this discussion of Chesnut's Revision: what were her intentions for genre and why and how do we, as readers, understand the Revision and why?

Readers are inclined to define texts according to genre, in part by the format and presentation of the text. Chesnut chose to retain the diary format by including chronologically arranged entries which maintained the diction of first person narration and retrospection, and yet the Revision lacks the literal immediacy which one associates with a diary. One simply cannot write a "diary" twenty years after the fact – the genre is too invested in the issue of relative immediacy. If we accept that the Revision does not meet the generic requirements of the diary, then what is it? George F. Hayhoe has suggested that "(t)he last draft she completed, then, is both diary and something else, a work that simultaneously enlarges our understanding of the boundaries of that genre and demands a new classification of its own" (64). This new classification, called for by Hayhoe, must fall within the context, if not the genre,



of a diary as this was the choice that Chesnut made. Steven Stowe proposes that the diary form suited Chesnut's authorial voice better than other forms. He writes,

Moreover, the diary form convinced Chesnut that in bearing witness she had to interpret events. A diary by its nature encourages an intellectually active, organizing voice, putting the diarist legitimately at the center of determining the meaning of things. There was no need to be either supinely ornamental or cleverly self-deprecating and allusive, as novel writing encouraged women to be. . . . As a form, in short, the diary was suited to interpreting instead of moralizing. (316)

The Revision meets some of the definitions of a memoir or an autobiography, two genres usually distinguished from each other. Commonly autobiographies consist of an introspective narrative which centers on the author's life in retrospect, while memoirs are generally understood to be autobiographical writing which centers on significant events which the author has witnessed. Clearly, Chesnut's Revision contains elements of both of the genres, in that the author chose, at a point later in life to record her experiences and feelings surrounding a series of events. However, she prioritized neither the narrative of her inner life nor the reflective tone common to both genres. The American autobiographical tradition is often attributed to Benjamin Franklin who claimed to have written his memoirs in order to instruct his son in the ways of success in America (Baym 524). Chesnut does not appear to have been attempting any sort of theoretical or philosophical instruction with her text. As has been noted earlier, she created the text for the personal, and perhaps financial, edification of her own situation. And, autobiographies and memoirs, both written in

retrospect, do not adhere to the diary format.

In his article “Autobiography and Historical Consciousness,” Karl J. Weintraub argues that “real autobiography” is built upon self-consciousness and that the value of autobiography lies in its focus on the self as a character or personality (827). At the same time, Elizabeth Bruss suggests that the significance of autobiography resides in the shared expectations of the reader and the writer alike. Weintraub further asserts that “the diary, the letter, the chronicle . . . have their value because they are but momentary interpretations of life” and that “autobiography and diary do not mix well” (827); Bruss cautions against establishing an autobiographical genre hierarchy for the purpose of differentiating differing forms. While these two theorists are at odds regarding the nature and interpretations of autobiographical writings, both provide a position from which to consider Chesnut’s Revision. Weintraub would be hard pressed to deny that Chesnut’s Revision centers, at least in its inception, on her notion of self and the presentation of that self to the reading public. While Chesnut chose to remove herself from the text, she chose to retain an autobiographical form of sorts through using her diary entries. She remains at the core of the document, if not the center. At the same time, Bruss’ insightful premise that the autobiographical form is as important in the reading as in the writing applies to our attempt to understand Chesnut’s Revision, both in terms of the context of the document and the content of the text. Textual and contextual readings of Chesnut’s work reveal the complicated nature of Chesnut’s position as an author, and the complexity of her chosen hybrid genre. While we cannot measure how much of the text is a diary, how much is an autobiography, how much is a fiction, we can

determine that Chesnut herself orchestrated, carefully I would suggest, this generic puzzle.

In an article published in 1984, three years after the publication of *Mary Chesnut's Civil War* and near the same time as the release of *The Private Mary Chesnut*, C. Vann Woodward explored Chesnut's options and intentions for genre. By the time he wrote "Mary Chesnut in Search of Her Genre" Woodward had given extensive consideration to Chesnut's authorial choices with her Revision, and he seemed more willing to attempt a specific stance on genre than he had been in the introduction to *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*. This particular article deserves close attention in this discussion of genre because Woodward is the scholar most familiar with Chesnut's work, and because it articulates his willingness to reconsider the genre of the Revision over time.

Woodward recognizes, as would any careful reader of Chesnut, that elements of each genre found their way into the Revision. He proposes that autobiography, "whether fictional or otherwise, led her away from her vital interest, which was not her inner self but her self as witness, and narrator . . . She proved impatient with the fictional conventions of her time . . . and never mastered them. Instead she rebelled against them" ("Genre" 202). Woodward suggests that Chesnut required a new form of writing in order to bring her authorial vision to fruition. He enumerates what Chesnut needed from her chosen genre:

Such a form would have to permit her to be both witness and narrator, to speak in her own colloquial, witty, ironic style, and yet to convey the authority of first-hand experience It would have to enable her to be

analytical and opinionated in a way fiction would not. It would have to allow much flexibility to accommodate the sporadic character of personal and random experience and yet permit subtle characterization. ( "Genre" 203)

Woodward's consideration, here, reflects his understanding of Chesnut's unique position. Chesnut certainly explored various forms, but found that none suited her needs as well as the diary. Woodward explains that Chesnut "sought by her adoption of the (diary) form to combine historical with figurative and fictional truth and thus to generate the coherence and irony she sought" ( "Genre" 207-8). In the end, Woodward seems comfortable with the notion that Chesnut has established a "creative work", a "new genre", and "conscious art" with her Revision ("Genre" 208). While Woodward continues to refer to the Revision as a book, he appears comfortable with designating the text as a diary – in spirit at least, if nothing else. Woodward has led the way to a careful consideration of the notion that Mary Boykin Chesnut created and molded conventional fictional forms to meet her needs and to benefit her work, thereby further establishing Chesnut's legacy as a deliberate and innovative author.

Few scholars agree with Woodward's inclination that *Mary Chesnut's Civil War* is still a diary. However, fewer still are clear on what the text is in terms of genre, if not format. Neither diary nor memoir, neither fiction nor historical treatise - this text is both problematic and provocative in terms of genre. Let us consider, again, Chesnut's own term, according to Perkins - "the human document." To echo Perkins' sentiment, that is what Chesnut has given us - a human document, one that

does not fit neatly into generic definitions and categories. The Revision is dynamic, not static; Chesnut changed the text, and the text changes again according to the needs of the reader. Historians may find themselves hoping to discover insight to the Civil War through Chesnut's Revision. Feminist scholars might seek out passages centering on the lives of women and their needs. Were Deconstructionists to approach the Revision, they might recognize a text deconstructing itself and its era as it progresses. Woodward has suggested that the text is a palimpsest – a text which has many layers or many meanings. Michael O'Brien takes issue with Woodward's term, suggesting, "this is more elegant than practical" (112). While O'Brien's point is well-made, the use of the term "palimpsest" and the implications of the term in relation to Chesnut's Revision merits attention.

Consider that we have before us a text which originates from a twenty year old diary - a diary which we can no longer completely review as nearly two thirds of it has not survived the passage of time - a text which also includes vast portions of narrative that have been designated as "Memoir" by the author, and which contains the creation of extensive passages which have no basis or verifiable foundation in the remaining diary. Also consider that Chesnut appears to have re-written the entire manuscript at least three times and perhaps four. The Revision is by all means a "layered" text in its inception and presentation, to say nothing of the author's possible themes or theses within the work. And so, this human document, the Revision, remains in limbo in terms of genre. And in the end, perhaps genre concerns are less important when discussing the Revision, insofar as the text contains elements of several forms and yet conforms to none. What is perhaps

more engaging when considering the Revision is the question of how and why Chesnut fashioned this text to meet her needs as a writer, as a woman, and as a planter-class Southerner.

Chesnut's rewriting of her Civil War diary is an example of rehistoricizing her personal past as well as the past experience of her community, her culture, her nation. New Historicist scholars suggest that any attempt to study history places the individual in a paradigm of defining herself and history in complementary and connected terms. The individual strives to understand what she sees of herself in this history and what she does not. In simpler terms, we look for ourselves in the experiences of the past, situating our present conditions in terms of what we recognize from the past. What scholars have yet to fully address, however, is the notion that rehistoricizing may be a conscious, deliberate act on the part of the writer. And this premise, that Chesnut deliberately rehistoricized her text through the post war Revisions is the crux of this discussion. To return to Adrienne Rich's quote on re-Vision, Chesnut's Revision represents an act of survival – and in order to survive, she had to consider her personal and communal history in a new light. Her vision of her self, as it is intimately linked with the text, had to be reviewed, reconstructed, and rehistoricized. Peggy Prenshaw explains that Chesnut's consideration of her self was not unique, but rather a struggle faced by many southern women:

The double bind that constrained nineteenth-century European and American women generally was especially intense in the American South. For women, honor and good name and "selfhood,"

such as might be confirmed by one's society, were attendant largely upon a woman's acceptance of a private – not public domain. The act of expressing herself in public in writing, of intruding the female self upon male-dominated turf, meant risking her standing in her family and acceptance by her neighbors, her church, by the whole wide world, as far as she could tell. (444)

The Revision took the form of a rehistoricized document in several ways. Chesnut worked with a diary which was twenty years old; the very act of rewriting this historical document corresponds to the act of rehistoricizing. Secondly, and perhaps this represents a more subtle move on Chesnut's part, she edited the historical document for her own personal protection. Suzy Clarkson Holstein attributes a portion of this struggle to Chesnut's position as a Southern woman. She writes,

Enmeshed in a troubling social system, caught up in a desperate and devastating war, women knew that public dissent endangered the strength of the cause. As a result they expressed their dissatisfaction only in private. But the discrepancy between external appearance and internal perception becomes even more glaring in the image of the Southern lady. Perhaps suppressing her discontent about other matters taught her to suppress her ambivalence about the role: in any case, the Southern woman chose not to rebel openly against the image. (121)

Writing is an act of exposure for the author, and Chesnut strove not to expose

herself too much. She removed passages from the diary which she believed reflected poorly on herself. She curbed her sarcastic, sometimes vicious comments directed toward family members, friends, and politicians. She also removed passages which exposed some of her more liberal sentiments regarding slavery, miscegenation, marriage, and the treatment of women. These notions, while perhaps widespread among a number of Southern women at the time, were certainly not popular, even twenty years after the fact, and would have been uttered in public rarely, if at all. And so Chesnut's rehistoricizing included an attempt to shape a personal private document into one which would conceal some of her most private thoughts and ideas.

Chesnut's attempts to protect herself also extended to a desire to protect her community. She understood fully that she was a member of an embattled culture, one whose traditions and values had been questioned in light of the national conflict. Melissa Mentzer suggests that, "Chesnut, in particular, felt that she could offer insight concerning the Confederacy to later readers" (49). In Chesnut's Revision, she clearly addresses this issue in the following passage dated March 10, 1862: "These memoirs *pour servir* may some future day afford dates, facts, and prove useful to more important people than I am. I do not wish to do any harm or hurt anyone. . . Now I have made my protest and written down my wishes. I can scribble on with a free will and free conscience" (*MCCW* 301) Whether or not Chesnut went on to write with a free conscience, however, is a matter of debate. She clearly recognized the flaws of Southern culture, namely the institution of slavery, but she was also compelled to make clear to the reading public that many Southerners were



not as inhumane or cruel as the stereotypes of the time projected them to be.

Finally, Chesnut's rehistoricizing of the diary can be attributed to what can best be described as her double-consciousness. Double-consciousness, a literary term which initially referred to African American writers, primarily of the Harlem Renaissance, is based upon the premise that minority authors are aware of their status as "Other" – that is, they are not members of the majority and therefore most of society's culture, politics, and philosophies do not reflect their values, ideas, and experiences, and yet are applied to members of the minority. This status as Other in society creates a double-consciousness because the author understands the majority's culture, as she is forced to operate within it, and is yet conscious of the fact that the majority culture does not understand or represent her. Literary scholars eventually came to the conclusion that the term may apply not only to members of the racial minority but also to women.

For centuries American women lived in a society which failed to recognize their agency and authority, and as the majority of decisions, both culturally and politically, were being made by men, women were both disenfranchised and discriminated against. Chesnut recognized this as can be seen in her passages which use a comparison common to nineteenth century women's rhetoric when she links women's lives and slavery. Chesnut spoke more freely on this subject in her Civil War diary than she did in her Revision. Two such entries may be found on March 4, 1861 (*PMC* 21) and June 23, 1865 (*PMC* 261) in Woodward's *The Private Mary Chesnut*. Chesnut was an Other in her world due to her gender, and this leads to her double-consciousness as a writer. As Chesnut considered her audience she

operated with the knowledge that she was, in essence, required to write against her own consciousness, against her own experiences in order to make herself understood.

Peggy Prenshaw explores this issue further. She states that

The characteristic approach for a female writer of the nineteenth-century South, as well as for most of the twentieth century, as indeed for most women elsewhere, has not been studied with attention to and analysis of the self. Such an overt display of self would have been regarded as immodest, egotistical, and above all unladylike, thereby attracting hostile reaction and dismissal from many of the very audience one seeks to address. Understandably, we find instead texts that focus attention not on the self but on the selves and events that surround the writer, and most typically in forms we call diary, journal, memoir, daybook, letters – those fragmented, discontinuous “lower” forms. (450)

The authorial problem of self and authority is further complicated for Chesnut by the fact that she was Othered not only by her status as a woman, but also by her status as a Southerner. After the Civil War, nearly all of the country’s resources, again both culturally and politically, were located in the North. The industry, politics, publishing houses and critics of the day were nearly all either located in or heavily influenced by Northern interests. Chesnut was a cultural minority because she was a Southerner, and this led to another occurrence of Otherness. And so, in addition to the double-consciousness that any female writer would have faced, Chesnut

faced a doubled double-consciousness because she was a Southerner.

This doubled double-consciousness results in Chesnut having to edit her writing not only to accommodate the interests of her personal self, but also the experiences of her gender and her community. While contemporary readers may find it distasteful to portray Chesnut – a privileged, wealthy, white, female Southern slave-owner – sympathetically, when one considers the monumentally difficult task she undertook as a writer it is clear that her project must have proved at times daunting and disappointing. Prenshaw emphasizes that a reader must be aware of these particular concerns in order to more fully understand the text at hand. She writes,

To read texts by southern women autobiographers with understanding, one faces the necessity not only of comprehending the shaping influences of gender (“women’s writing”) and the problematical literary-linguistic context of the form (the “mixed genre” of autobiography), but also their sociohistorical and regional context (their “southernness”). . . . The socialization that has constrained overt expression of a public identity has also produced, not surprisingly, life writings that efface, or express, or reconfigure a separate self in favor of subjectivity formed by a web of relationships, a subjectivity most fully approachable by means of inference. (444-5)

Prenshaw goes on to describe the “web of relationships” as the family, the home, and the dominant male order. She suggests that reading southern women’s autobiographical texts

. . . calls upon the reader to engage selves that dissolve into other selves, protagonists who sometimes seem nearly invisible, and narrators who resist forthright expression, expressing intentions indirectly, even obliquely, but narrators who often demonstrate an acute political sense of the uses of language for winning approval of others and for influencing others' actions. (452-3)

Prenshaw's implication that language held great power for Southern women is worth further consideration. In the end, Chesnut used the most powerful tool at her disposal – her ability to write. Revising the diary allowed Chesnut to sculpt, shape, and build the presentation of herself and her community which best fit her needs. She was entirely aware that this text need not be, even could not be “honest” in the conventional sense. She wrote to a hostile audience, one which would be hard pressed to accept her perspective and voice. In order to reach this audience, Chesnut chose to present herself as a subjective entity, one which she could manipulate and alter to suit her demands, thus revealing a highly developed sense of authority and agency on her part. This particular concern of the subjective self of the writer leads to the question of what Chesnut actually did with the Revision to accommodate her concerns as a writer, a woman, and a Southerner.

Perhaps the most interesting aspects of the original diary reside in Chesnut's intimate portrayal of herself and her feelings about slavery, her writing, her ambitions, and her depression. As Chesnut began to consider her Revision, she set out to revise the very person she portrayed herself to be in the diary. The importance of this move cannot be over-estimated. In the diary Chesnut created a

self, put forth a persona which was probably very near to her actual personality and experiences. She recorded, in private, callous remarks about her peers, her community, and her self. She recorded, in private, her sympathetic leaning toward abolitionists. She recorded, in private, her struggles with depression and drug use. This was the self, the person, woven into Chesnut's Civil War diary. As she began to revise the diary, however, Chesnut set about to unravel this self from the tapestry of the diary. And much like Homer's Penelope she worked as hard at unraveling her tapestry as she did in the initial weaving.

The removal of the author from a diary is a nearly impossible task, even in a diary which is supposed to center on the events of the Civil War. This act is in direct conflict with the very nature of what a diary is supposed to represent – the private ideas and experiences of the writer. Because the removal of self created a gaping chasm in Chesnut's text, she began to create a new self, a new representation of her ideas and experiences to fill in the text. Her old "self" was too private, too personal. She was concerned with embarrassing her self, her husband, and her community. Chesnut's fears of criticism and censure were often at odds with her ambitions and convictions as a writer.

Anne C. Rose, in her discussion of Victorian America and autobiographies explores the problems faced by writers revising their personal stories. She suggests,

Strategies for handling disturbing thoughts, less by deception than by emphasis or by finding the right words to contain the truth, were rarely devised without struggle . . . Victorian writers must have been deterred

by this taxing emotional process. [S]etting down one's memories was at best an ambiguous act, since language made thoughts not only tangible possessions, but autonomous objects . . . There was an emotional safety for the Victorians in working and reworking autobiographical material. If they finished their books, they would have to face the future unprotected by identities they forged in the past.

(248)

Rose raises several interesting points. She understands the notion that presenting private information to the public presents a strategic problem, such as the one Chesnut faced. Chesnut had to determine the "right words" to present herself. Rose also recognizes the life which a text takes on, both separate from its author and yet symbiotic. The identities presented through the text would be forever forged in history, and therefore indelibly tied to the author. Chesnut certainly understood this on some level as she repeatedly reworked her voice, and by default, her identity in the Revision. The question remains of how Chesnut repositioned herself in the Revision.

This is where her doubled double-consciousness, her rehistoricizing impulse, and her re-visionary tactics all converge. In order to present a coherent voice, which was familiar to Chesnut's own, but not entirely representative of her personal convictions and experiences, Chesnut chose to do two things. First she moved her voice to the margins of the text, positioning herself as a narrator more often than participant in the drama which unfolds within the text. Secondly, she placed her sentiments in the voices of other women, some of whom were identified speakers

and some not. In so doing Chesnut orchestrated an authorial coup – she represents her ideas and emotions, many of which might prove unpopular or even dangerous to her reputation, without alienating herself from her potential readers. She diffuses the sentiments of the text by claiming to have overheard the conversations in which they were expressed.

Let us consider first how Chesnut deliberately moved her self to the margins of the Revision. Chesnut's first and most obvious tactic was to remove aspects of her most personal life from the text. In her Revision, Chesnut did not include references to her marital discord, her feelings of ambition and depression, her use of opium, and her most fervent feelings about slavery and miscegenation. These topics reveal the most private and personal aspects of Chesnut the author. Take for example, Chesnut's use of opium. The Civil War diary contains several passages which refer to opium. Nearly all of the passages indicate that Chesnut took the drug to alleviate her depression and anxiety surrounding the war. In the Revision, however, Chesnut only refers to taking the drug when she is physically ill. She writes, in a passage dated July 16, 1861,

Today I was ill. Mrs. Auze' kindly insisted on my taking something to ease my pain. She seized upon a small laudanum bottle: "the very thing!" She dropped ten drops, and I drank it with a grave face. I had filled that vial with Stoughton bitters just before leaving home.

I have no intention of drugging myself now. My head is addled enough as it stands, and my heart beats to jump out of my body at every sound. (*MCCW* 102)

In an entry dated February 11, 1862, Chesnut writes, “After several weeks’ illness – dawdling on, kept alive by Dr. T’s opium – once more I was on my feet” (*MCCW* 286). And finally, in a passage dated May 23, 1862, Chesnut writes, “Mem Cohen missed me. The Jewish angel. She came with healing on her wings. (She found me very ill.) That is, in her hands she bore opium” (*MCCW* 344). In the act of revising, Chesnut determined that she did not want to include references to her drug use, and so, while she retained instances of taking opium, she always framed the act in terms of a medical emergency. She even goes so far as to proclaim having no desire to drug herself, because of the adverse effects, in the entry dated July 16, 1861. This particular incident is found in the original diary, described similarly, except that in the original, Chesnut takes 25 drops of the opium/bitters, as opposed to the 10 drops she supposedly takes in the Revision. Clearly, Chesnut is aware of the manner in which her personal habits may or may not reflect badly on her, and she took great pains to remove the incriminating evidence. Melissa Mentzer has suggested that Chesnut’s decision to remove aspects of her “self” from this material “allowed her to speak from her role within her role as a white woman” (50). She writes,

The elimination of references to marital quarrels, personal problems and ambitions alters the portrayal of the author as a protagonist in a simple autobiographical sense, and is part of what I call the fictionalization of Chesnut’s work. The narrator-protagonist’s primary identity is no longer the wife of James Chesnut. On one level, she emphasizes instead her role as witness and reporter of the events of



the Civil War. This strategy represents and re-presents Mary Chesnut as a particular speaker not bound by the same cultural restrictions that would silence the author, the wife of James Chesnut. (50-1)

Mentzer refers to this as the “fictionalization” of Chesnut’s work, and insofar as Chesnut was creating a narrator through which she could speak, even a narrator based so clearly and so closely on the author herself, fictionalization is probably an accurate term.

And so we read the Revision with an understanding of Chesnut as the narrator of sorts, if no longer the protagonist of her own entries. Her second strategy, and one which proved more complicated was to create multiple female voices through which to express her experiences, her feelings, and her ideas. While the social aspect of Chesnut’s life during the Civil War played an important role in Chesnut’s original diary, she recorded many of her experiences in an abbreviated fashion. She made note of entertaining or interesting conversations throughout the diary, but for the most part, these interactions took on the form of anecdotes upon which Chesnut would then comment. In the Revision, however, Chesnut expanded these conversations and wrote them out in a more complete and dramatic fashion. Michael O’Brien comments on these conversations, suggesting that Chesnut is working from a proto-modernist position:

The thing that most distinguishes the original diary from the narrative journal are the voices. These were much of what she added and wanted to realize. They embody her quasi-modernist leanings par excellence because they are fragmentary, intentionally so, I believe.

People say things. Often we do not know who is speaking. One quotation does not always follow logically from its predecessor. (118)

O'Brien believes that Chesnut's skillful relation of dialogue stems from her understanding and appreciation of literature. He goes on to suggest that any incoherence present in Chesnut's depiction of the conversations was planned. O'Brien asks, "Why? Because she did not think that the world added up to a smooth story with an ordered moral" (121). Inasmuch as Chesnut had lived, in essence, on the front lines during the most disruptive and violent period in American history, O'Brien's conclusion that Chesnut faced an emotional and mental challenge to make sense of the War and her journal is legitimate. There are other concerns, however, regarding Chesnut's use of multiple voices to convey her experience in the Civil War. Chesnut certainly wrote with a novelist's sense of time and dialogue. However, many of the most fascinating sentiments and conversations in the Revision are included with little indication as to who is speaking, and it is worth noting that many of these same dialogues are spoken by women. These two points are vital to an appreciation of Chesnut's rhetorical strategies in the Revision. Keeping in mind that Chesnut was an opinionated and intelligent writer who attempted to protect herself from the revelations she was making in the text, we must recognize that these intentions influenced the dialogues in the Revision. Consider this passage from the original diary and below it the altered presentation of the passage from her Revision:

March 23, 1861

Miss McEwen sent word by Munroe to Aunt Betsey that her father was

behaving shamefully – disgracing them. Two months ago they gave him some brandy when he was ill – & he has never been sober since – had not tasted brandy for 14 years – but could not resist the first taste. A queer tale to tell on one's own father — (*PMC* 46)

March 22, 1861

At my aunt's, heard her coachman deliver her a message.

“The ladies say I must tell you their father is behaving shameful. He is disgracing hisself. He had not tasted whiskey for 15 years. He took some as physic a month ago, and he ain't drawed a sober breath since.”

“Do they not read the Ten Commandments in your church? There is one with a promise ‘that thy days may be long.’ These people do not heed it, it seems.”

“Don't laugh. He does those poor girls dreadfully (his wife and daughters).”

“What does he do?”

“I don't know – now – but when I went to school with them, he seized one of them and dropped her in the molasses hogshead – bonnet, cloak, satchel, and all.” (*MCCW* 33)

Chesnut alters certain details in the retelling. She changes the man's drink of choice from brandy to whiskey and adds a year to his former sobriety, from fourteen years to fifteen. What is more interesting in this comparison though is the dialogue in the

second passage. In transforming the entry from anecdote to conversation, Chesnut includes the voice of a servant, the coachman whose lines contain grammatical errors, as well as the voices of at least two other speakers. Whereas in the original entry, Chesnut includes primarily the facts of the situation, she constructs the second entry so as to include moral indictments, namely the reference to the Commandment concerning honoring your father and mother, and comments on the difficulties faced by women living with alcoholic men. Chesnut follows a similar pattern in a number of entries in the Revision, taking what was an anecdote in the original diary and altering the scene to include dialogue. It is in these alterations that Chesnut allows herself, in a sense, to speak more freely. She creates conversations which may or may not have taken place through which she can comment on the position and treatment of women.

A representative example of this technique occurs in an entry dated August 29, 1861 in the Revision.

Coming home, the following conversation:

“So Mrs. \_\_\_\_ thinks Purgatory will hold its own – never be abolished while women and children have to live with drunken fathers and brothers.”

“She knows.”

“She is too bitter. She says worse than that. She says we have an institution worse than the Spanish Inquisition – worse than Torquemada and all that sort of thing.”

“What does she mean?”

“You ask her. Her words are sharp arrows. I am a dull creature. I will spoil all, repeating what she says.”

“It is your own family she calls the familiars of the Inquisition.

She declares they set upon you, fall foul of you, watch and harass you, from morn till dewy eve. They have a perfect right to your life night and day. Unto the fourth and fifth generation. They drop in at breakfast. ‘Are you not imprudent to eat that? Take care now, don’t overdo it. I think you eat too much so early in the day.’ And they help themselves to the only thing you care for on the table. They abuse your friends and tell you it is your duty to praise your enemies. They tell you all of your faults candidly – because they love you so. That gives them a right to speak. The family interest they take in you. You ought to do this, you ought to do that. And then – the everlasting ‘You ought to have done.’ That comes near making you a murderer – at least in heart.”

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“A woman who talks that way is a dangerous character. It is awfully upsetting – all that stuff.”

“Suppose the women and children secede?”

“Knit your stocking. We have had enough for today.”

Aside: “She was trying to imitate Thackeray.”

“But you know, our women all speak in that low, plaintive way because they are always excusing themselves for something they

never did.”

“And the Yankee women are loud and shrill because they fight it out – fair field and no favor – and when incompatibility comes in, they go out for divorce. And they talk as if *money only* bought black women in slave countries. Women are bought and sold everywhere.”

I sat placidly rocking in my chair by the window, trying to hope all was for the best. (*MCCW* 180-1)

Melissa Mentzer suggests that “This anonymous conversation includes a critical as well as a cautious voice, yet unlike an identified speaker within an autobiographical narrative, the unnamed voice cannot be censured by contemporary or future readers for her comments” (52). Mentzer goes on to lament that “this strategy, however, did not allow the author to speak with complete freedom in her text” (52). While what she sees as lack of authorial freedom is problematic for Mentzer, we must recognize that Chesnut willingly acknowledged that she desired to leave herself out of the text. She sought out rhetorical conventions which allowed her to express some, if not all, of her feelings in such a way that would also provide her protection from critics. By using unidentified speakers, Chesnut can voice her own sentiments as well as those of the women around her. In effect, Chesnut is diffusing narrative authority in order to establish a creative authority so that she might express herself. She could embody the cautious or the critical voice, or both in such a way as suited her and indicated her double-consciousness. At times Chesnut was highly critical of men and their vices, and yet she was also fiercely loyal to her community, often asserting the superiority of southerners, both male and female. These anonymous

conversations allow Chesnut to express both aspects of her sentiments – and this represents a certain degree of freedom for the writer. Chesnut, herself, was a conflicted person living in a conflicted community in a conflicted nation. She manipulated the text to allow for these layers of conflicts and consciousness.

Furthermore, in removing the identity of the speakers from the conversation, Chesnut creates the illusion of an essential female experience. Mentzer suggests that, "As Chesnut gives a voice to women who have not been heard, she un-names the speaker, enabling the unnamed to speak and to claim a subjectivity they have been denied, for woman's experience is now voiced" (52). The voicing of women's experiences has occupied the world of feminist scholarship for the past four decades, and yet, in the 1880s this issue concerned Chesnut to the extent that she chose to offer insight into these communal female experiences through her journal. In a lengthy passage from the entry dated August 27, 1861, Chesnut writes, "Now, this assemblage of army women or Confederate matrons talked pretty freely today. Let us record . . .", and then chronicles a conversation among an indeterminate number of women. The question which opens the conversation, "Are our men worse than the others? Does Mrs. Stowe know?<sup>3</sup> You know?", leads to the following exclamations:

"I hate slavery. I hate a man who – You say there are no more fallen women on a plantation than in London, in proportion to numbers.

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<sup>3</sup> This allusion to Mrs. Stowe is in reference to Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). It has been suggested that this novel was the most influential literary work of the nineteenth century, and as Mrs. Stowe's work proceeds from an abolitionist premise, the novel was not well-received in the antebellum or post-war South.

What do you say to this? A magnate who runs a hideous black harem and its consequences under the same roof with his lovely white wife and his beautiful and accomplished daughters? He holds his head as high and poses as the model of all human virtues to these poor women whom God and the laws have given him. From the height of his awful majesty he scolds and thunders at them, as if he never did wrong in his life.

“Fancy such a man finding his daughter reading *Don Juan*.

‘You with that unmoral book!’ And he orders her out of his sight.”

The conversation turns from concern about the quality of southern men directly to the issue of miscegenation and then to the moral hypocrisy of the white Southern male. Chesnut makes clear that, at least in this conversation, these three issues were undeniably linked. The women continue their conversation by sharing anecdotes about different men who all share attributes of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s brutish character, Simon Legree.

“And I knew the dissolute half of Legree as well. He was high and mighty. But the kindest creature to his slaves – and the unfortunate results of his bad ways were not sold, had not to jump over ice blocks. They were kept in full view and provided for handsomely in his will.

“His wife and daughters in the might of their purity and innocence are supposed never to dream of what is as plain before their eyes as the sunlight, and they play their parts of unsuspecting angels



to the letter. They prefer to adore their father as model of all earthly goodness.”

“Well, yes. If he is rich, he is the fountain from whence all blessings flow.”

Having suggested that a man’s wealth may cover a multitude of his sins, one of the speakers turns to what role, if any, a white woman might play in this social drama:

“Now. Now, do you know of any woman of this generation who would stand that sort of thing?”

“No, never – not for one moment. The make-believe angels were of the last century. We know – and we won’t have it.”

“Condition of women is improving it seems. These are old-world stories.”

“Women were brought up not to judge their fathers or their husbands. They took them as the Lord provided – and were thankful.”

“If they should not go to heaven, after all – think of what lives most women lead.”

Chesnut’s speakers continue to consider the various ways they might be subjected to suffering through the misconduct of the men in their lives. Having addressed miscegenation they proceed to the topic of drunkenness and its effect on wives.

“How about the wives of drunkards? I heard a woman say once to a friend of her husband, tell it as a cruel matter of fact, without bitterness, without comment: ‘Oh, you have not seen him. He is changed. He has not gone to bed sober in thirty years.’ She has had

her purgatory – if not what Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_ calls, ‘the other thing’ – here in this world. We all know what a drunken man is. To think, *for no crime* a person may be condemned to live with one for thirty years.”

At this point, the dialogue returns to its initial topic as the original speaker proclaims, “You wander from the question I asked. Are Southern men worse because of the slave system and the – facile black women?” The reader should note that the original question was “Are our men worse than the others?”, not “Are Southern men worse because of the slave system and the – facile black woman?” This transition is significant. In its first form the question is abstract and non-specific, whereas the second version of the question is much more direct in its intent and subject. What was formerly the sub-text of the conversation has become explicit, and in the final section of the conversation, at least one speaker takes it upon herself to address this specific question.

“Not a bit. They see too much of them. The barroom people don’t drink. The confectionary people loathe candy. They are sick of the black sight of them.”

“You think a nice man from the South is the nicest thing in the world.”

“I know it. Put him by any other man and see!”

“And you say no saints and martyrs now – those good women who stand by bad husbands? Eh?” . . .

. . . “Seems to me those of you who are hardest on men here are soft enough with them when they are present. Now, everybody

knows I am 'the friend of man.' and I defend them behind their backs, as I take pleasure in their society – well – before their faces.” (*MCCW* 168-70)

It is impossible to determine the number of speakers in this passage and whether or not Chesnut was one of the voices. Nevertheless, Chesnut, as the narrator, establishes this dialogue in such a fashion as to reveal that Southern women were critical of the men with whom they shared their lives, their families, and their communities. They question if Southern men are more or less moral than men everywhere, and they wonder aloud the effect of miscegenation on white women. As the conversation turns to drunkards, we find confirmation that whatever shortcomings a man might have, the women in his life were entirely at his mercy, entirely dependent upon his good will for their protection and sustenance.

The conversation also includes notions of social progress for women insofar as the speakers claim that no “woman of this generation . . . would stand that sort of thing” (169). This marks a curious turn in the conversation, because one must wonder at the veracity of such statements – certainly Chesnut and her speakers encountered on a regular basis women whose lives were completely controlled by abusive men. Is Chesnut imposing 1880s social values onto a supposed 1860s conversation? Or perhaps Chesnut, as the author, wanted to close out this conversation, and so she included these dissenting voices late in the dialogue, thereby allowing the reader to imagine that the conversation had run its natural course. To be sure, as Mentzer has suggested, Chesnut creates a powerful series of female voices in this entry. By removing, or at least unnamng herself and the

specific speakers from the dialogue, Chesnut generalizes the sentiments, creating the impression that these speakers might be any women – at least any Southern women, exposing their concerns about autonomy and power in male/female relationships.

This universal voice, or voices as the case may be, represents Chesnut's legacy in the Revision. She recognizes her limitations as an author and as a Southern woman writing a personal narrative, and she turns these limitations to advantages. She records and shares not just her own experiences during the war, but also what she saw as a representative female experience. Chesnut's fragmentary female voices represent her recognition of her own fragmented female self. We understand that Chesnut was aware, on some level, of her mandated roles in society, and at times she was either unwilling or unable to fit into these roles. And so, in the Revision, Chesnut seems to be working with the idea that if she were destined to be overlooked or underestimated simply because of her gender, then she would present her experiences and feelings in the context of other women, thereby exposing the danger inherent in undervaluing an entire portion of society. Michael O'Brien suggests that "the mark of intellectual freedom for women would be the movement outward, out of the room, into the world . . . It is useful for understanding Mary Chesnut, who moved towards the genres of outwardness, but by the half-step of importing a teeming world into her drawing room and mingling the techniques of fiction and 'fact'"(126).

Chesnut achieves a level of freedom in the passages that subverts the standard roles which would otherwise confine her as a woman and a writer.

Chesnut was a woman who longed to be out of the room, in the world; however Chesnut's time and her place confined her to the half-steps between the room and the world at large. It is less that she chose to make the room her world in the *Revision*, than that she worked to expose this room – its contents and voices – to the world. She offered an insider's view of women's experiences as well as an insider's understanding of the South. The *Revision* represents Chesnut's appreciation for the condition of her gender and her community – the two primary factors which served to confine her writing and to fragment her consciousness.

In the end, we must ask ourselves again why Chesnut created this text. She was concerned with finances, certainly, and yet, she spent several years revising a text which she probably could have published at any time. We must consider the larger personal and theoretical issues which contributed to the *Revision* as it stands today. Chesnut was compelled by a desire to share her self and her experiences with the public in some form. She recognized that in order to do so she would have to revise her vision of herself. This act of considering and re-shaping the self led Chesnut to rehistoricize her experience through the dual lenses of time and community. Time served to provide perspective on the events of the Civil War; Chesnut had nearly twenty years to determine what she felt was most important about these fateful four years of conflict.

Furthermore, Chesnut lived the remainder of her days among much of the same community with which she had experienced the Civil War. She worked to present this community in what she deemed to be an objective light, exposing their vices and their virtues. She was a Southerner and a woman – both conditions in her case contributing to bouts of depression as well as a fierce sense of loyalty and self-worth. All of these concerns contribute to the Revision, and all of these issues comprise the legacy of the text – a legacy which is at once both honest and fictional, both truthful and biased – because, finally that is the legacy of many Southern women of the era. Chesnut was shaped by the South and in turn she shaped her Revision to reflect the South as well. Women were and are party to the good and the bad of Southern culture; they are engaged in a symbiotic relationship with it – both shaping the culture and being shaped by it. The legacy of the South – slavery and The Civil Rights movement, dire poverty and vast wealth, strong community ties and even stronger notions of independence and self reliance – is vital to our understanding of the Southern woman. And it is vital to our appreciation of both Chesnut’s original diary and her Revision, that contemporary readers recognize the conflicts within the writer which reveal themselves as the conflicts within the text. From Chesnut’s decisions to erase passages in her original diary to her placement of unnamed female voices in the Revision she is revealing to the reader her life and her community. And so, she determines, at least in part, her own legacy: that of a wealthy white Southern woman who opted to speak freely at times and covertly at others, but frankly about her gender, her communities, and her loyalties.

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### **Archive Material**

L.S.W. Perkins to Isabella Martin, 4 April 1905, Isabella Donaldson Martin papers.