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Entertainment or Enlightenment [RD]:

Kate Chopin’s use of Local Color and Story Telling in “Athénaïse”

In 1896, Kate Chopin’s “Athénaïse” was published in two parts over the August and September issues of *The Atlantic Monthly*, an elite East-Coast magazine proudly aligned with Europe, something boasted in naming itself for the ocean that geographically connects the two places. The elite readership of *The Atlantic* was often presented with stories and essays about “exotic” places and cultures, whether that be as far off as Japan like in the essays by Lafcadio Hearn or as close as Illinois as depicted by Mary Hartwell Catherwood. Chopin’s piece presents a setting of Catholic southern Louisiana, both and unfamiliar place and religion for the upper class Easterners reading *The Atlantic*. While most contemporary scholars hold their focus elsewhere, I have decided to better understand Chopin’s motivation for writing in such a manner by looking into the writings of William Dean Howells (a gatekeeper of sorts for *The Atlantic*), Kate Chopin’s financial records, and the text of “Athénaïse” itself to see where and to what extent Chopin conformed and to what extent she held to her own ideals.

Chopin is a widely known author in the American literary canon and there has been much study in and writing about her more known works such as *The Awakening* (1899), but there is little to be found on her short story “Athénaïse.” What does exist seems to focus on the reading of the text itself. Catherine Savage Brosman writes about how the actions of the title character “go against current feminist dogma” (127) and the representation of woman, marriage and motherhood in “Athénaïse,” as well as other Chopin works. David Wehner writes about Chopin’s depiction of religion in her works, mentioning that “Athénaïse” was “turned down… as unethical” (154). Avril Horner chooses to write about modernism and Chopin, discussing both how “conservative magazine readers of the 1890s” and modern feminists might interpret “Athénaïse” saying that “it can be read as a conservative text that expresses nervousness about the vulnerability of the modern woman in the city” (139). In contrast to these three scholars, Thomas Morgan is instead interested in “mapping out the slippage between [Chopin’s] literary interests and those of her audience” and how doing so can give “insight into the problems created by reception for authors interested in using short fiction as a means to intervene socially or politically” (137). Morgan specifically examines “her work in conjunction with its publishing history” (138) as well as regionalism in Chopin’s writing, including “Athénaïse”.

My approach is similar to Morgan’s in that I am focusing less on the text itself but rather looking at the purpose of Chopin’s writing style in “Athénaïse”. I will be looking into the publishing history of the short story as well as the finances involved in its publication. My goal is to reveal the relationship that developed between Chopin and *The Atlantic* readership. I intend to reveal what this relationship says about Chopin as an author and *The Atlantic* as a publication. It is important to keep in mind that while there is much that can be inferred through close reading and scholarship, author intent cannot be known with certainty unless explicitly revealed by the author. For this project, I will look into the issues of *The Atlantic Monthly* in which “Athénaïse” was published and investigate what sort of writing was published along side Chopin’s piece. This will set up the context as well as reveal the interests of readers and publishers. To further understand the interests of the publishers, I have looked into some of the writings of William Dean Howells. Finally, I will use Chopin’s own writing: “Athénaïse” itself and *Kate Chopin’s Private Papers*.

William Dean Howells, editor of and writer for *The Atlantic*, says in his 1891 book *Criticism and Fiction*, “The time is coming, I hope, when each new author, each new artist, will be considered, not in his proportion to any other author or artist, but in his relation to the human nature, known to us all, which it is his privilege, his high duty, to interpret” (8). Howells goes on to express his distaste for the “ideal” and “artificial,” and that the value of a writer is in the realness of what they present. Despite of Howells strong position, many pieces published in *The Atlantic* could be labeled as “token exotic pieces.” These works would have given readers a sense of education on the foreign subject matter of the writings as well as provided adventure through exoticism.

Looking a little more closely at the pieces published along side Chopin’s “Athénaïse” we can find the sense of exoticism that takes place. “About Faces in Japanese Art” by Lafcadio Hearn responds to the criticisms of Japanese art the author felt were “unjust” but “quite natural, and indicated nothing worse than ignorance of that art and miscomprehensions of its purpose” (Hearn 220). True to the title, Hearn does on to discuss the depiction of faces in works of Japanese art. In “Out of the Street: Japanese Folk-Songs”, Hearn provides translations and some analysis of Japanese street songs. Hearn writes to educate readers on a topic that he himself is well studied in. Essays about such topics as foreign art might have appealed to the readership of *The Atlantic* in that it would allow them to engage in conversation that would come off as “high-brow” and “intellectual,” and although reading such pieces would by no means make them experts, it may have simply been the idea of *sounding* cultured that would attract readers. Hearn’s articles of Japanese culture were published with a number of other pieces that have focus on the American West and South. The juxtaposition of Japanese culture, from somewhere so far physically removed from the East coast, with the culture of the American West and South helps further romanticize and remove the regions from the East coast.

The September 1896 issue of *The Atlantic* also contains an article titled “The Problem with the West” written by Frederick J. Turner, a historian with a focus on the West. As one reads Turner’s article, it quickly becomes apparent that the title is intentionally misleading. The essay opens with the line “The problem of the West is nothing less than the problem of American development” (Turner 289). Turner, clearly conscious of his Eastern audience, explains that the West “is a form of society rather than an area” (289), seemingly as a reminder to the readers that there are civilized people and culture in the West. Turner goes on to explain how the western frontier has helped shape and reshape the society and democracy of America, quoting Mr. Bryce that the “‘West is the most American part of America… What Europe is to Asia, what England is to the rest of Europe, what America is to England, that the Western States and Territories are to the Atlantic States’” (289). Turner uses a misleading title to rope in readers before showing that the “problems” the East have with the West are based in misconception and a lack of understanding of the reality of the situation. This article serves as a means for readers of *The Atlantic* to come to some more factual sense of the West, beyond the romanticism of literature, somewhat ironically published with a number of short stories based on the West full of vivid characters

“The Spirit of an Illinois Town” by Mary Hartwell Catherwood offers a picturesque scene of the American Midwest. The opening paragraph describes the rolling prairie, “with scarlet bunches of paint-lady, small yellow sunflowers, and lavender asters, and acres of other blooms” (Catherwood 168). Cartherwood introduces readers to an exotic history of the town with the Pottawatomie indian tribe and buffaloes (168). The houses in the town are describes as ranging from “mansions having their own gas, and their water propelled by gayly painted windmills” to “the rudest shelters of pine, in which lot-owners tabernacled until they could do better” (168). One can practically see the movie scene play out in their mind while reading the following passage:

The sun, a plainly defined ball, was melting away in its own radiance, and flattening as it melted, just above the horizon… Now it was half gone – now three quarters; now it was a disk of gold – a quivering thread of fire – and now a memory… A freight-train trailed off into glorified northern prairie. The town-herder was bringing cows out of the west, and we could hear farmers’ wagons rattling home on the dry autumnal plain. Everybody wore a satisfied grin, because the days of rattlesnake-fighting were over and a long-looked-for millennium had come. (169)

Catherwood’s writing gives readers a beautiful image of a Midwestern town, and even though the reality might have been far less ideal, East-Coast elites may have been rapt by the verision presented to them in *The Atlantic*. Someone who had never seen the prairie may cling to this vivid description without ever knowing the reality of the place, which, if they did ever come to see, they may consider rather drab or unappealing.

In “Athénaïse,” Chopin gives a vivid depiction of the Creole South, similarly to the way that Catherwood did for the Midwestern prairie. Lines such as “Dat beat me! on’y marry two mont’, an’ got de head turn’ a’ready to go ‘broad. Ce n’est pas Chrétien[[1]](#footnote-1), ténez!” (Chopin 233) and “Mon Dieu, Mon Dieu[[2]](#footnote-2)! Sister Marie Anglélique knew w’at she was saying; she knew me better than myse’f w’en she said God had sent me a vocation an’ I was turning deaf ears. W’en I think of a blessed life in the convent, at peace! Oh, w’at was I dreaming of!” (236) are not only presented in rich French-Louisiana dialect, they express the value of Catholicism in the South. Chopin provides a cultural image of the South in describing a scene of “a party of young people paddling around” (223) on a river, singing into the night, or when she explains that “a dance at Miché’s and a plate of Madame Miché’s gumbo filé at midnight were pleasures not to be neglected or despised” (234). Chopin’s colorful imagery would surely be intriguing to a reader who had never experienced the culture of the American South.

While Chopin may have been simply offering a snapshot of the life and culture she knows, the “local color” and vivid imagery could have been apart of a larger project. She very well could have been aware of the “exotic” adventures consumers would want to read, and created a story that would sell. It must be remembered that Chopin was an author; her income was whatever publishers were willing to pay for her writing. And *The Atlantic* was willing to pay well. According to *Kate Chopin’s Private Papers*, “Athénaïse” was the most lucrative piece the author wrote in 1896, earning more than twice as any other piece. Of the $288.62 in revenue from writings that Chopin recorded that year, $155 was for the two-part short story (140). Chopin’s papers also reveal that “Athénaïse” was rejected by Century\* and Chap Book\* before being picked up by *The Atlantic*. While the politics of *The Atlantic* may have been, in a way, corrupt, and caused Chopin to fall into the roll of the token female writer of the American South, one would be hard-pressed to deny that they payment she received from the publication was more than substantial. Seeing how vital being published in *The Atlantic* was to Chopin’s finances, it was necessary to present a story with a high probability of making it into the publication.

Chopin’s writing style in “Athénaïse” may have been used to create a story that pandered to readers of *The Atlantic*, but it may have served as a camouflage or distraction to get her story past Howells’ gatekeeping. When looked at closer, “Athénaïse” tells a story very reminiscent of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a novel which Howells openly expressed his distaste. About Stowe and her novel, Howells claims:

[S]he adhered to the native tradition, which went back to the eighteenth century, of sentimental, pious, instructive narratives written by women chiefly for women. Leave out the merely domestic elements of the book—slave families broken up by sale, ailing and dying children, negro women at the mercy of their masters, white households which at the best are slovenly and extravagant by reason of irresponsible servants—and little remains. (203)

Howells’ greatest criticism of Stowe’s work is her inclusion of sentiment, something that is indeed not present in the works published by *The Atlantic* discussed previously. Chopin uses story telling similar to that of works like Cartherwood’s to narrate a setting like Stowe’s in a manner that would be pleasing to Howells. Both Stowe and Chopin’s stories take place in the south – *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* namely in Kentucky and Louisiana, “Athénaïse” solely in Louisiana – and both depict race and slavery, but in vastly different manners (or at least on the surface level).

In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe gives a page long introduction of the character Aunt Chloe. Stowe’s describes Aunt Chloe physically as having a “round, black, shining face” and her “whole plump countenance beams with satisfaction and contentment from under her well-starched checked turban” (60-61). Stowe then spends an entire paragraph detailing Aunt Chloe’s abilities as a cook, and then finally tells us that, to Aunt Chloe, “no sight was more welcome to her than a pile of travelling trunks launched on the verandah, for then she foresaw fresh efforts and fresh triumphs” (61). One can see in this lengthy introduction some of the sentiment that Howells so disliked in the novel. In contrast, Chopin introduces her character of Pousette in little more than a sentence saying, “Pousette, a little, old, intensely black woman, was splashing and dashing buckets of water on the flagging, and talking loud in her creole patios to no one in particular” (406). Chopin does little more in the short story to develop Pousette beyond the babbling old black woman.

The manner in which the two works approach slavery is also vastly different. While the topic is the focus of Stowe’s novel, there is only one scene that outright discusses the treatment of slaves. For the purpose of this paper, I have chosen one passage from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that works in more direct contrast to that of “Athénaïse” in that both have to do with the treatment of runaway slaves. The passage from Stowe’s novel is from Tom’s arrival at Legree’s plantation. Stowe writes, “three or four ferocious-looking dogs… came tearing out, and were with difficulty restrained from laying hold of Tom and his companions…. ‘Ye see what ye’d get!’ said Legree, caressing the dogs… ‘Ye see what ye’d get, if ye try to run off’” (360). Stowe creates a high-fear consequence for the action that grips readers with the emotion. The scene in Chopin’s writing take form in a memory from Cazeau’s childhood:

He was a very small boy that day, seated before his father on horseback. They were proceeding slowly, and Black Gabe was moving on before them at a little dog-trot. Black Gabe had run away, and had been discovered back in the Gotrain swamp. They had halted beneath this big oak to enable the negro to take breath; for Cazeau's father was a kind and considerate master, and every one had agreed at the time that Black Gabe was a fool, a great idiot indeed, for wanting to run away from him (237).

Here, Chopin gives a scene in which the only consequence for running away is to be though a fool.

In a comparison of Stowe and Chopin’s works on the whole, there is a lack of any emotional prompting by Chopin that stands in stark contrast to Stowe. While *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* results with the death of a child and the title character, “Athénaïse” resolves with the title character discovering that she is pregnant and returning to her husband, whom she spent the entirety of the story trying to remove herself from. Stowe ends her novel with a call for action to her readers. In a story barely longer than 19 pages, Chopin spends an entire paragraph describing a meal that Athénaïse enjoys. With her low drama, low emotion piece, Chopin has made herself somewhat of an anti-Stowe, creating a work that would likely appease Howells, which it evidently did if the financial figures are anything to go by.

While it may initial seem that Chopin has forfeited any of her personal and political opinions in “Athénaïse” by removing sentiment, a closer look at the text may reveal a more political scene than what appears on the surface of the story. Chopin’s hidden agenda is revealed in a number of places. For this paper I am looking into the character of Cazeau and the interactions between Gouvernail and Pousette.

When initially reading “Athénaïse”, readers may find themselves sympathetic to Cazeau. In one of the only emotionally charged scene in the story, Cazeau admits to Athénaïse, “I married you because I loved you; because you were the woman I wanted to marry, an’ the only one… I believed that yo’ coming yere to me would be like the sun shining out of the clouds, an’ that our days would be like w’at the story-books promise after the wedding. I was mistaken” (238). Any sentiment in the scene is quickly wiped as Cazeau suggest making “the best of a bad bargain, an’ shake han’s over it” (239) and lets Athénaïse leave on her own accord. His admission of defeat may seem rather heartbreaking, until readers think back to the opening paragraph of the story in which in which Cazeau holds more concern for his absent horse than his absent wife. Chopin writes that Cazeau “was used to solitude… He had lived alone ten years, since his first wife died” (233), but it there is an implication that his solitude might have not been exactly so. As he walks around his house, Chopin sets up the scene of nightfall in the south, including “In the beam of light from the open kitchen door a black boy stood feeding a brace of snarling, hungry dogs; further away, on the steps of a cabin, some one was playing the accordion; and in still another direction a little negro baby was crying lustily” (233). It is very possible that Chopin is implying that these children are Cazeau’s, as it would not be uncommon in the south at the time for land and servant owning white men to impregnate their black servants, servants who were all but slaves, only under a different title to comply with the law. It is a detail that could easily be missed by East Coast readers who were ignorant to the true state of the South.

Another revealing aspect of Chopin’s short story is the relationship between Gouvernail and Pousette. While it is never stated outright, it is implied that Gouvernail is a white supremacist when Chopin writes that at one point he “was absorbed in his own editorial on Corrupt Legislation” (406). It can be inferred that what Gouvernail was referring to as corrupt is the black politics of the South, a topic which Charles Chesnutt wrote about in *The Marrow of Tradition*, published in 1901, a review of which swiftly destroyed the author’s carrier. A review written by none other than William Dean Howells. Chopin broaches the topic, but hides in under Gouvernail’s fascination and infatuation with Athénaïse, but his treatment of Pousette demonstrates his true sense of white superiority. Shortly after his self-adsorbed episode, Chopin writes that Gouvernail pays Pousette “a weekly stipend for brushing his shoes and clothes. He made a great pretense of haggling over the transaction, only to enjoy her uneasiness and garrulous excitement” (406). It is clear that Gouvernail takes joy in his power over the old black woman. In a later scene, Gouvernail scolds Pousette for forgetting to bring Athénaïse her ice-water. Pousette quickly rattles of excuses and “hoped Madame Sylvie would not be informed of her remissness” (409). It is clear that Pousette’s entire life revolves around her ability to hold this job, and while she is not technically a slave, she is still held hostage by the social and political atmosphere and supremacists like Gouvernail.

As seen, Chopin still as well as subtly exposing the truth of society and the political landscapes, but in a way that is easily glossed over with the anti-climatic love-story of two well of white Southerners. While it may be easy to criticize Chopin for the move upon the assumption many have that being an author means having freedom to express whatever you wish, and possibly even easier to pass judgment on an author separated from us by over a century, it must be remembered that that is not always true. Being an author means relying on being published, and to accomplish that, authors face the gatekeepers: the publishers themselves. While Chopin compromised much in creating a ‘token exotic piece of Louisiana’, she cleverly snuck in her ideals through details in a manner that would appease the gatekeeper at *The Atlantic*, who claimed to have a taste for the ‘real’ and a strong distaste of sentiment.

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1. Translates to ‘It is not Christian’ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ‘My God, My God!’ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)