

"WHETHER THE FRAMERS OF THE CONSTITUTION OR ANY OF THE PERSONS WHO HELD BLACK FOLKS IN BONDAGE PAUSED TO CONSIDER THE PECULIARITY, THE INCONSISTENCY, OR THE INHUMANITY OF THEIR ACTIONS, IT IS CLEAR THAT PECULIAR DID NOT MEAN STRANGE ENOUGH TO CALL AN END TO THE PRACTICE."

AUN' PEGGY: CHARLES CHESNUTT'S VAMPIRE SLAYER?



BY TRUDIER HARRIS

TRUDIER HARRIS is an American literary scholar whose work focuses on African American literature, especially women writers, African American culture, and Southern literature and culture. Her numerous honors include, most recently, the Richard Beale Davis Award for Lifetime Achievement in Southern Literary Studies. A native of Tuscaloosa, AL, Harris earned her BA in English from Stillman College and her MA and PhD from The Ohio State University. She is the author of ten books and the editor or co-editor of more than a dozen more. Formerly the J. Carlyle Sitterson Distinguished Professor of English at UNC Chapel Hill, she is now a University Distinguished Research Professor at the University of Alabama.

HISTORIANS AND SCHOLARS have routinely referred to slavery in the United States as "the peculiar institution."¹ While not exactly a misnomer, the phrase, nonetheless, gives one pause. If the institution were so *peculiar*, then why did it garner such popularity? Or does *peculiar* refer to the inexcusably inhumane ways in which people of African descent were treated, thus making it peculiar that human beings could paradoxically treat other human beings in such monstrous ways? Or, did *peculiar* mean that it was strange for Americans to hold human beings in bondage when they, themselves, had come across the ocean seeking various kinds of freedoms? Was the absence of freedom for people of African descent the basis for the *peculiarity*, especially since slavery is diametrically opposed to every tenet of American democracy? What did that nearly oxymoronic concept convey? Whether the framers of the Constitution or any of the persons who held black

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¹ In fact, in 1956, Knopf published *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* by Kenneth M. Stampp, an eminent historian.