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On Phillis Wheatley

“That thou a pattern still might be,
To youth of Boston town,
The blessed Jesus thee free,
From every sinful wound.” (21-4)

In his poem "An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatley, Ethiopian Poetess, in Boston, who came from Africa at eight years of age, and soon became acquainted with the gospel of Jesus Christ" (1778), Jupiter Hammon, one of the first African American poets to gain some recognition during the eighteenth century, depicted Phillis Wheatley as a poet chosen by God to "magnify" (44) Him through the "bounteous mercies" (57) He had provided, the gift of the word; as the poetic voice emphasizes in two occasions, "Thou hast the holy word" (8, 52). In the stanza quoted above, the poet is regarded as an example, as a "pattern," as a role model for the "youth of Boston town" (22), as a pioneer of a whole tradition of African American artists recognized as such in eighteenth-century New England.

Phillis Wheatley (1753-84), a female black slave poet, who became notorious because of the publication of her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral by Phillis Wheatley, Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley, of Boston, in New England* (1773) is considered by recent criticism as the initiator of a movement of African American artists —the poet Jupiter Hammon and the painter Scipio Moorhead, to whom Wheatley addresses one of her poems, among them— that promoted the ideas of mutual collaboration and recognition (which was difficult to attain at

the time) and that deemed the spreading of useful knowledge as essential to social, political, spiritual, and moral health (Bloom 95).¹ Her book of poetry was one of the first published by a woman in the American colonies, and its publication alone allowed a further consideration of some of the misconceptions and prejudices against the African American subjects that were prominent at the time. About this matter, Betsy Erkkila writes: “A black woman reading, writing, and publishing poems was in itself enough to splinter the categories of white and black, and explode a social order grounded in notions of racial difference.” (in Franke 225). Especially during a period when women, of any class, rarely undertook the task of reading and writing, a twelve-year-old enslaved child that studied Latin, literature, history, and theology (Mitchell 16), and that was already writing poetry in a foreign language allowed the reexamination of the paradigms that considered African Americans as incapable or unfit for any expression of art, less alone poetry.

In order to understand to what an extent this was a widely expressed belief, it is important to remember the words of Thomas Jefferson regarding the matter of slavery. In *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), the great defender of human liberty wrote:

Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid: and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous. [...] But never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never seen even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture. [...] Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. —Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. Love is the peculiar œstrum of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion, indeed, has produced a Phyllis Whately (sic); but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism. (Baym 1685-6)

¹ In “Creative Collaboration: As African American as Sweet Potato Pie” (2006), Frances Smith Foster explores the figure of the poet as a one of the leading figures of an African American collegium, as a “consciously committed artist and community leader.” (Bloom 93)

In these lines we may be able to see the faculties that were denied to African American subjects, memory, reason and imagination, and that because of their supposed lack of these qualities they were unable to produce any form of art, painting, sculpture or poetry. Furthermore, the last lines of this paragraph are a clear evidence of the need of the paratextual devices —the long explicative title, the letter by John Wheatley, the signatures of prominent figures of her time, and the picture that portrayed the author at work, pen in hand— that aim to validate Wheatley as the author of her collection of poems.

In spite of the pains she had to endure in order to be published and to be recognized as a poet, Phillis Wheatley became a central figure for the abolitionist movement; since, by the mere fact of existing and becoming notorious, her figure allowed the reexamination of the paradigms that rendered African American incapable of poetic creation. Keith D. Leonard, in “‘Bid the Gifted Negro Soar’: The Origins of the African American Bardic Tradition” (2006), explains:

Wheatley’s capacity to speak becomes an assertion of individual personhood and of an intrinsic emotional capacity linked to the ideals of natural rights, two associations that render historically concrete in a slave’s black body the abstract components of personhood that were denied her by her culture. And these terms of selfhood were so conventional that, in performing them, Wheatley makes the African self recognizable as a ‘human’ self. (Bloom 111)

It is because of this reason that the poet started to be regarded as an originator of a collegium of educated, gifted African American artists, capable of reason, understanding and artistic creation. However, recent scholarship has undertaken the task to look beyond Wheatley the figure and to focus on her poetry and her handling of tradition as a poetic strategy for subverting of the aforementioned paradigms.

Her poetry displays several elements of the Neoclassical tradition, in fashion at the time, such as the heroic couplet, mastered by Alexander Pope, and an extensive background of

classical allusions and poetic genres. These devices, which have been regarded as a manner of securing the acceptance and recognition of an Anglo-American taste (Ramey 22-3), together with the rhetoric of the Independence movement, and the Biblical imagery and vocabulary, which stand at the backbone of her poetry, allowed her to speak of her own concerns with freedom and with her own poetic expression. Moreover, Wheatley makes use of this tradition, and religious and political discourses of her time in order to subvert and transform the misconceptions about African American people; Keith D. Leonard explains:

So even though poets writing during slavery, like Wheatley or Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, imitated the poetic forms and themes of the patriarchal British tradition that threatened to silence them, they used the ideals of that tradition —especially its sentimentality and its Puritan morality— to claim their denied humanity and to build coalitions with politically sympathetic whites, assimilating the racist culture of the slaveholding society in order, paradoxically, to defy it. (Mitchell 169)

Three of her poems will be useful to understand the use of tradition, and the discourses of the time for her own poetic purposes. In “To Mæcenus” the use of neoclassic conventions allow her to situate herself within a tradition of classical poets and to present herself as an individual with desires of freedom, both poetic and earthly. In “To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Darmouth” it is possible to see how the poet uses the rhetoric of the Independence movement in order to claim her concerns with freedom. And, finally, in “On Being Brought from Africa to America” we may be able to see the handling of Biblical vocabulary to revisit the notions on slavery and of the African American individual.

To Mæcenus

Mæcenus, you, beneath the myrtle shade,
 Read o'er what poets sung, and shepherds play'd.
 What felt those poets but you feel the same?
 Does not your soul possess the sacred flame?
 Their noble strains your equal genius shares
 In softer language, and diviner airs.

While *Homer* paints, lo! circumfus'd in air,
 Celestial Gods in mortal forms appear;
 Swift as they move hear each recess rebound,
 Heav'n quakes, earth trembles, and the shores resound.
 Great Sire of verse, before my mortal eyes,
 The lightnings blaze across the vaulted skies,
 And, as the thunder shakes the heav'nly plains,
 A deep-felt horror thrills through all my veins.
 When gentler strains demand thy graceful song,
 The length'ning line moves languishing along.
 When great *Patroclus* courts *Achilles'* aid,
 The grateful tribute of my tears is paid;
 Prone on the shore he feels the pangs of love,
 And stern *Pelides* tend'rest passions move.

Great *Maro's* strain in heav'nly numbers flows,
 The *Nine* inspire, and all the bosom glows.
 O could I rival thine and *Virgil's* page,
 Or claim the *Muses* with the *Mantuan Sage*;
 Soon the same beauties should my mind adorn,
 And the same ardors in my soul should burn:
 Then should my song in bolder notes arise,
 And all my numbers pleasingly surprize;
 But here I sit, and mourn a grov'ling mind,
 That fain would mount, and ride upon the wind.

Not you, my friend, these plaintive strains become,
 Not you, whose bosom is the *Muses* home;
 When they from tow'ring *Helicon* retire,
 They fan in you the bright immortal fire,
 But I less happy, cannot raise the song,
 The fault'ring music dies upon my tongue.

The happier *Terence* all the choir inspir'd,
 His soul replenish'd, and his bosom fir'd;
 But say, ye *Muses*, why this partial grace,
 To one alone of *Afric's* sable race;
 From age to age transmitting thus his name
 With the first glory in the rolls of fame?

Thy virtues, great *Mæcenas!* shall be sung
 In praise of him, from whom those virtues sprung:
 While blooming wreaths around thy temples spread,
 I'll snatch a laurel from thine honour'd head,
 While you indulgent smile upon the deed.

As long as *Thames* in streams majestic flows,
 Or *Naiads* in their oozy beds repose,
 While Phœbus reigns above the starry train,
 While bright *Aurora* purples o'er the main,
 So long, great Sir, the muse thy praise shall sing,
 So long thy praise shall make *Parnassus* ring:
 Then grant, *Mæcenas*, they paternal rays,
 Hear me propitious; and defend my lays.

1773

In this poem, while the poetic voice addresses the great patron of antiquity there is a description of the poetic strains of Homer, Virgil and Terence, with special emphasis on the poetic I, and by doing so the poetic voice presents itself as a poet with desires of freedom. The speaker situates itself within this tradition, by constantly referring to itself and by allowing us to see its reactions to the poems of the Homer, by constituting itself in contrast with Virgil, and by characterizing itself in the same terms as it characterizes the three poets.

In the second stanza, the effects of Homer's creations are voiced from the perspective of the speaker, which allow the reader to monitor the reactions of a poetic I. The speaker describes its reactions to the epic poet's verse in three moments: heaven and earth shudder "before *my* mortal eyes" (11), "A deep-felt horror thrills through all *my* veins" (14), and facing the scene of Patroclus and Achilles "The great tribute of *my* tears is paid" (18). In these three moments, the speaker voices its reactions and exposes its own poetic sensibility, so the images of the power of Homer's verses are being explained from its particular perspective.

In the first couplet of the second stanza, the speaker introduces Virgil only to establish a contrast between itself and the Mantuan poet. The focus again shifts from the poet to the speaker, and it introduces, with an interjection, its desire to resemble the poet: "O could I rival thine and *Virgil's* page,/Or claim the *Muses* with the *Mantuan Sage*" (23-4). In the following couplet, the

expression of the poetic ambitions continues, although with an emphasis on the possibility that its desires may eventually be fulfilled: “Soon the same beauties should my mind adorn,/And the same ardors in my soul should burn” (24-5). The adverb with which the couplet is introduced may allow us to believe that there is a certainty in the achievements of these purposes, and also to grasp a sort of acknowledgment of the speaker’s own poetic capabilities. Furthermore, the repetition of the adjective “same” further emphasizes the poetic voice’s intentions to resemble these poets, or of being considered among a poetic assembly.

In the next couplet, the poetic voice articulates what may happen when its purposes are fulfilled, and describes itself in the same terms it used to depict the other poets, “bolder” as Homer’s strains and in “numbers” (21) for Virgil: “Then should my song in bolder notes arise,/And all my numbers pleasingly surprize” (27-8). In the next couplet, the poetic voice returns to its current situation, and it reiterates its desire to change it: “But here I sit, and mourn a grov’ling mind,/That fain would mount, and ride upon the wind” (29-30). Until now, we have been referring to the poetic ambitions of the speaker but the idea of modifying its current situation, of freeing itself may be regarded in more earthly terms. We may be able to read this necessity of changing in terms of escaping from the bonds of slavery.

The images of freedom and escape can be found in the poem in terms of the earthly contrasted with the ethereal, where inspiration dwells and where the poets’ creations find their fulfillment. In this same couplet it is possible to see this contrast, where a “grov’ling mind” might be related to the idea of being attached to the ground (in an act of crawling, for example) and contrasted to this is the desire of the poetic voice to reach a higher position “and ride upon

the wind.” The current situation of the poetic voice is to be attached to the ground and its aspirations are to liberate itself and fly.

The place to which the speaker longs to rise to is described in upward movements and heights, and this is the place where the speaker locates the dwelling of inspiration: “When they [the Muses] from tow’ring *Helicon* retire” (33), and the fulfillment of the poetic strains of Virgil (“Great *Maro*’s strain in heav’nly numbers flows” [21]) and Homer: “While *Homer* paints lo! Circumfus’d in air,/Celestial Gods in mortal forms appear;/Swift as they move hear each recess rebound,” (7-9). This opposition of spaces is helpful if we take into account that the speaker is constantly locating itself at a ground level, while the poets and inspiration are depicted in a higher one. The poetic voice’s aspiration is to rise to that level, and its current situation produces it anxiety and the necessity to free itself from that condition: “But I less happy, cannot raise the song,/The fault’ring music dies upon my tongue” (35-6). From where it stands there is no possibility for poetic creation. However, these efforts for rising at the level of the other poets and to reach inspirations may render poetry itself as a way of escaping its current constrictions and, as a result of this, in the request of the last stanza, we have the poem itself, and the speaker’s recognition of its own song: “So long, great Sir, the muse thy praise shall sing/...Then grant, *Mæcenas*, they paternal rays,/Hear me propitious; and defend my lays” (52, 54-5).

The appearance of Terence in the fifth stanza is of great importance. Among this literary tradition there is the inclusion of “*Afric*’s sable race” (40). The poetic voice also compares itself with the poet: “But say, ye *Muses*, why this partial grace/To one alone of *Afric*’s sable race” (39-40). This comparison, which further emphasizes the constraints of the poetic voice, functions as a manner of recognition, and by foregrounding the origins of the poet one may also suggest that

Terence is being established here as a model for a future generation of African American poets. This is further emphasized by the recognition of his fame and importance: "From age to age transmitting thus his name/With the first glory in the rolls of fame?" (41-2).

To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth, His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for North-America, Etc.

Hail, happy day, when, smiling like the morn,
 Fair *Freedom* rose *New-England* to adorn:
 The northern clime beneath her genial ray,
Dartmouth, congratulates thy blissful sway:
 Elate with hope her race no longer mourns,
 Each soul expands, each grateful bosom burns.
 While in thine hand with pleasure we behold
 The silken reins, and *Freedom's* charms unfold.
 Long lost to realms beneath the northern skies
 She shines supreme, while hated *faction* dies:
 Soon as appear'd the *Goddess* long desir'd,
 Sick at the view, she languish'd and expir'd;
 Thus from the splendors of the morning light
 The owl in sadness seeks the caves of night.

No more, *America*, in mournful strain
 Of wrongs, and grievance unredress'd complain,
 No longer shalt thou dread the iron chain,
 Which wanton *Tyranny* with lawless hand
 Had made, and with it meant t' enslave the land.

Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,
 Wonder from whence my love of *Freedom* sprung,
 Whence flow these wishes for the common good,
 By feeling hearts alone best understood,
 I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
 Was snatch'd from *Afric's* fancy'd happy seat:
 What pangs excruciating must molest,
 What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?
 Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd
 That from a father seiz'd his babe below'd:
 Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
 Others may never feel tyrannic sway?

For favours past, great Sir, our thanks are due,
 And thee we ask thy favours to renew,

Since in thy pow'r, as in thy will before,
 To sooth the griefs, which thou did'st once deplore.
 May heav'nly grace the sacred sanction give
 To all thy works, and thou for ever live
 Not only on the wings of fleeting *Fame*,
 Though praise immortal crowns the patriot's name,
 But to conduct to heav'ns refulgent fane,
 May fiery coursers sweep th' ethereal plain,
 And bear thee upwards to that blest abode,
 Where, like the prophet, thou shalt find thy God.

1773

As we have said, in this poem Wheatley uses the rhetoric of the Independence movement to her own advantages. In a time when the United States was beginning to define the notions of national identity and selfhood and started to voice their concerns with freedom and citizenship, the early African American writers started to shape these ideas in terms of their own identity and their own necessity of freedom; as Frances Smith Foster and Larose Davis explain it:

Throughout the early tradition of African American women's literature, writers incorporated the rhetoric of revolution, freedom, and citizenship. They appreciated its potential for making their personal arguments for freedom, humane treatment, and equality all the more publicly persuasive. By manipulating the discourses of revolution, African American women could subtly—and sometimes not so subtly—subvert the systems of oppression that had been constructed to tether blacks (Mitchell 29-30).

In the first two stanzas of this poem, the dichotomy tyranny/slavery is presented as the discussions of the time had it— in *The Declaration of Independence*, for example. A personified Freedom rises over New England and with its charms has eliminated “*faction*.” America is now free from the “iron chain” (17) in “Which wanton *Tyranny* with lawless hand/Had made, and with it meant t’enslave the land” (18-9). However, the political commentary comes in the next stanza, where the poetic voice explains its reasons for loving freedom and wanting the common welfare. In this stanza, a poetic I is introduced in order to articulate its own story of slavery. In

this part, the speaker expresses the pains that surrounded its removal “from *Afric's* fancy'd happy seat” (25) and the sorrows that this action brought to its parents, with “pangs excruciating” (26) that remind us the grievances that tyranny produced in America, enunciated in previous lines.

The poetic voice presents itself as able to understand the sufferings of tyranny and the necessity for freedom as it is enduring the same pains. This is expressed with a piercing rhetorical question: “Such, such my case. And can I then but pray/Others may never feel tyrannic sway?” (30-1). By rendering the current tyrannical situation lines after a praise for freedom of those same constrains, the poetic voice determination is effective: tyranny is reprehensible and there is a collective love for freedom, then there is a necessity for it to cease completely. This idea is plainly voiced in the request of the last stanza: “And thee we ask thy favours to renew,/Since in thy pow'r, as in thy will before,/To sooth the griefs, which thou did'st once deplore.” (33-5). In this poem, a poetic voice sympathetic with the cause of freedom is claiming for the sympathy of one that has undergone a sort of oppression similar to the one that the speaker is enduring.

On Being Brought from Africa to America

'Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land;
 Taught my benighted soul to understand
 That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too:
 Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
 Some view our sable race with scornful eye;
 "Their colour is a diabolic die."
 Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*,
 May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

1773

Finally, in this poem, the Biblical vocabulary that considered the African American population as the stigmatized brethren of Cain and incapable of learning and instruction is used to present quite the opposite. From the first lines, the poetic voice explains that slaves are also fit for instruction: “’Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land;/Taught my benighted soul to understand/That there’s a God, that there’s a *Saviour* too:” (1-3). In these lines, the words “mercy,” “*Pagan*” and “benighted” come from the same language in which the difference between black and whites is based, and here it is used to accompany “Taught” and “understand.” By using the same vocabulary with which the racial difference was outlined, this same difference is being blurred, as slaves here are presented as capable of reason and understanding, which, if we remember the words of Jefferson quoted above, were denied for the black population.

Furthermore, in the last three lines of the poem, the speaker enunciates the belief that the black population hailed from Cain and it is marked in inverted commas: “Their colour is a diabolic die’.” (6), only to suggest that it is not so because it can be modified through instruction; consequently, a reversal of that idea comes with a clearly marked contrast between “diabolic” and “angelic;” the poetic voice states: “Remember, *Christians, Negroes*, black as *Cain*,/May be refin’d and join th’ angelic train” (7-8). By the use of the same devices that are employed to condemn, to differentiate, a resignification of those paradigms is presented, suggesting that they are not only capable of reason and of learning but also of spirituality and, as exemplified by the poem that contains these claims, of poetic imagination.

As we have seen, recent criticism has focused both on the figure of Wheatley as a initiator of a movement of African American artist that were capable of indulging in the highest forms of expression, and in her poetry as a statement on the necessity for freedom. Phillis

Wheatley was a poet that manipulated mechanisms and discourses that were fashionable in her time not only as a way of securing the acceptance and reception of her creations by a particular poetic sensibility, but also as a reexamination of the paradigms and prejudices that those discourses displayed. Her poetry was revolutionary in itself and, by creating a common ground of ideologies and beliefs, she was able, as Smith Foster and Davis suggest, to subvert the systems of oppression that had been constructed to restrain the creative powers of African American artists and to ground the supposed differences between black and white. Her creations and her poetic presence allowed for other African American artists to voice their claims for freedom and to articulate in a more direct manner the ideals that were presented in her poems; as George Moses Horton attests in his “The Poet’s Feeble Petition:”

Then listen all who never felt
 For fettered genius heretofore—
 Let hearts of petrification melt
 And bid the gifted Negro soar. (13-16)

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