Phillis: Traversing Time and Space

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SEA Conference, June 11, 2023; University of Maryland:

Phillis Wheatley Peters’ Legacies Across Time

Knowing people who had vast amounts of knowledge in their libraries shaped not only Phillis Wheatley’s writing, but also informed her familiarity of literary genres, such as Classicism, primarily influenced by Greek mythology. This connected her to people who helped her on the journey to getting published.

Libraries are beautiful places for contemplation and a stomping ground for creativity. Wheatley knew what libraries meant – a place of not only knowledge, but also a place where she could understand and be inspired by the creative landscape which would be a genesis for her collection of poetry. Mather Byles, former Harvard librarian, was also her mentor, introducing her to the world of poetry, and to the work of Alexander Pope, known for using poetic devices such as heroic couplets. These were especially predominant in his works such as “The Rape Of The Lock.” Byles and Pope were in correspondence, as they knew each other (Gates 9). Byles was the mentor, the bridge to understanding the poetic world, which would be a launch to Wheatley writing her book of poetry, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*.

Byles was a poet in his own right, publishing in 1744 a book entitled, *Poems on* *Several Occasions* (Gates 9). What I think is of even more importance, was how Mather Byles’ knowledge of the literary, of different genres, including mythology, informed Wheatley’s work. John C. Shields mentioned that Byles had an “extensive library, most of it inherited from the great library accumulated by Increase and Cotton Mather [his uncle] [which] would have provided [Byles] with the tools of scholarship useful for such an undertaking [Wheatley’s education]” (389).

Shields also noted that “the young poet’s popularity and notoriety in Boston provoked the visit of numerous town dignitaries to John Wheatley’s home and that the literati of Boston took especial interest in her education by furnishing her with books” (389).

It was no coincidence that Byles, Wheatley’s neighbour, had a large personal library, as did the Governor of Massachusetts, Thomas Hutchinson. Hutchinson was a loyalist who had to flee Boston for England during the Revolutionary War. He had a massive manuscript collection – and this was another significant influence on Wheatley’s writing, including the poems in her book, *Poems on* *Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*.

As stated by former Governor Francis Bernard about Hutchinson’s loss of his library, due to protesters breaking into his home before the Revolutionary War, “the loss to be most lamented is, that there was in one room kept for that purpose a large and valuable collection of manuscripts and original papers which he had been gathering all his lifetime, and to which all persons, who had been in possession of valuable papers of a public kind, had been contributing as to a public museum” (Riordan 371). Also, there was Thomas Prince who left “his library of some fifteen hundred volumes of rare and arcane titles he left upon his death in 1738 to Boston’s Old South Church, the very church into whose membership Wheatley was inducted on August 18, 1771” (Shields 389).

I think of the poem,“To Maecenas” – alluding to Greek mythology, and Mount Helicon, a mountain that was home to the Muses. The following lines come to mind: “Not you, my friend, these plaintive strains become,/Not you, whose bosom is the Muses’ home; When they from tw’ring Helicon retire,/They fan in you the bright immortal fire./” (Wheatley 11). Wheatley was clearly referring to Maecenas’ gift of writing, as he was known for writing poetry and prose, as well as being a patron of the arts. This poem is also very subversive, as there is a double entendre – the word “patron” can mean someone who supports people in the arts, but it can also mean a person who gives someone their freedom (Gayle; University of Toronto). Because of her clever wordplay, one of her tools for creating subversion in her work, and beautiful imagery, Wheatley travelled different worlds. I refer to this in my poem, “Library,” that I read during my presentation. It is a poem about the importance of libraries, as inspiration, a source of knowledge, and a commemoration to the power of the word, the power of literary art.

By creating such powerful art, poetry, Wheatley delved deeply into Greek mythology, which led to Classicism being inherent in her work, as well as unforgettable imagery.

I would see this as a gift from having access to such wonderful houses of knowledge:

the library.

When it comes to paying tribute, there are many examples of homages and elegies in *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. The poem, about George Whitefield entitled, “On the Death of the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield.1770.” is an example of the tradition in the Fulani culture, paying homage to those who have passed on. It illustrates the Fulani tradition such as the “Yela” (Sow and Angel 74) an oral poetry which was a type of eulogy exemplified in music and poetry. In this poem about the Reverend George Whitefield, who was the chaplain to the Countess of Huntingdon, Wheatley reflected on his life, what his achievements were, especially in the lines: “We hear no more the music of thy tongue,/Thy wanted auditories ceased to throng./ Thy sermons in unequall’d accents slow’d,/And every bosom with devotion glow’d;/” (Wheatley 22). This was especially referring to how, for one of his engagements during a tour in America, which took him to Philadelphia in 1739, approximately 8,000 people showed up to hear his words (Hand 2020). These aforementioned words are an example of such a beautiful tribute to this reverend.

Wheatley, as we know, also did this in order to connect to the Countess of Huntingdon who was a patron to some prominent black authors such as James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw. He was the first person of African descent to be published, and his autobiography was the first slave narrative to be published in Britain (Han 532). Wheatley knew, that by writing this poem about George Whitefield, and including it in the collection, it would be an opportunity for the Countess Of Huntingdon to not only be impressed by her work, but to decide to become her patron for her future collection of poems.

Many of the subjects of Phillis Wheatley’s poems were Caucasian, but that was the audience that would be buying her books. But, I would also mention, the poem, “To S.M., a Young African Painter, on Seeing His Works,” in dedication to the visual artist Scipio Moorhead, who illustrated her frontispiece for her book of poetry, was a dedication to someone in the black community, a way of paying respect, even though he was alive. This poem was more about praising the work, but Wheatley was also illustrating through poetic imagery, that you can achieve immortality through art. Wheatley was also conveying that the best art is inspired by Christianity, even though she invoked a lot of classical Greek mythology in her poems. This was conveyed in the line: “And may the charms of each seraphic theme conduct thy footsteps to immortal fame!” (Levernier 184;Wheatley 114).

The importance of a life shining on through a work – that is another theme inherent in this poem. This importance of a life being a legacy, as well as the importance of elders, ancestors, paying tribute to those who have gone before us, I know that these are values that Wheatley held dear. This is what I was meditating on when I wrote my poem, “F,” the second poem I read during my presentation. For me, “F” is about Phillis Wheatley reflecting on the importance of her Ancestors.

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