

KATARZYNA MALECKA

Freedom via Poetry: The Legacy of Phillis Wheatley

If poetry comes not as naturally as
Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all.
-John Keats

Poetry is a subject as precise as geometry.
-Gustav Flaubert

THERE are probably many more deftly formulated statements and much more accomplished criticism on the art of creating verse than there is good poetry. However, to define “good poetry” would probably require another load of pages. So we would stick with a simplified explanation which, according to the opposing definitions stated above, lies most probably somewhere between the two. Good poetry should come to one “as naturally as leaves to a tree,” which implies a process of organic creation inspired by heart and imagination. Good poetry should also be “as precise as geometry” so that the reader can differentiate it from prose and rely on verse as the source of aptly captured images. The Tenth muse should be stimulated and brought to life both by heart and by reason, contrary to what different literary periods claim by their choosing one over the other. The reader deserves beauty as much as skills and knowledge and thus, verse should be both pleasing and thought-provoking.

Phillis Wheatley's poetry has been commonly read in terms of racial debates and coded meanings. Her rhetoric has often been seen as “strategic, subtle and veiled” (Reising, 113) or as “an early

female example of the Uncle Tomism and accommodationism repudiated by contemporary African American literature and literary criticism” (Reising, 77). Seldom did critics emphasize the pure aesthetic and artistic value of Wheatley's verse, which probably did not help to secure her position in the literary canon. In “Literary Production by African Women, 1746-1892,” Frances Smith Foster remarks:

Phillis Wheatley was acutely aware that linguistic facility, artistic impulses, a love and fascination for Latin and the Holy Scriptures were not perceived by the general reading public to be within the scope of black intelligence. But while that awareness may have hindered her literary exercise, she demonstrates her refusal to allow those attitudes to prevent or to define her poetic expression. Her citation of Terence shows that Wheatley was aware that an African could become an accomplished poet.(39)

It is possible to propose a reading of Phillis Wheatley's verse as poetry which, while set in the slave-enhancing environment and secretly rebelling against it, could still hold and retain its beauty and readerly appeal devoid of pretentiousness and artificiality. Just for the purpose of this paper, let us free Wheatley from the fetters of racial allusions and show that in spite of creating mostly for her masters she was still freer than they thought her to be since she was able to create art, which set her free in the ages to come.

An explication of the following poem is to prove that despite being a slave labeled “Phillis Wheatley,” the artist in question was first and foremost “an accomplished poet,” who produced an incredible amount of vivid stanzas which strike the imagination,

touch hearts and makes the readers think:

An Hymn To Sleep

O soothest Sleep! If so it please thee, close
In the midst of this thine hymn my willing eyes,
Filled with the praise of him who gives the light;
And draws the sable curtains of the night,
Of soft embalmer of the still midnight
Shutting, with careful fingers and benign,
Our gloom-pleas'd eyes, emobower's from the light,
Enshaded in forgetfulness divine:
Let placid slumbers soothe each weary mind,
At morn to wake more heav'nly, more refined;
Night's leaden scepter seals my drowsy eyes,
Then cease, my song, till fair Aurora rise.
Turn the key deftly in the oiled wards,
And seal the hushed casket of my Soul.

Hymns were a popular genre in many literary periods. Wheatley's "An Hymn to Sleep" is exceptional because it is also a sonnet, which is considered to be the most difficult form of verse rated at the top of the decorum level. This hymn, as a sonnet, brings together two different kinds of love: love for God and earthly love, which is important for the content of the poem and will be explained later. What is more, this lyric is also an ode invoking "Sleep" to bring peace to the speaker of the poem.

The hissing "s" and open vowels in the first lines take the reader from the hectic day down the wriggling path of sleep into the "soothing night." The hissing sound flickers throughout the poem like that of a blown out candle or extinguishing fireplace.

After addressing Sleep in the first line and asking for rest even if it means inability to complete the poem, the speaker describes sleep as “filled with the praise of him who gives the light / And draws the sable curtains of the night.” The metaphor is both religious (“him” can refer to God) and astronomical / horticultural (“him” may be the life giving sun). Both elements are essential, as the human body needs to grow physically as well as spiritually, which, as pointed out earlier, balances two opposing views on creating art: that of the reason-driven epochs, and that of the more romantic, heart-inspired periods. The four opening lines also establish another set of imagery: the play on lightness and darkness. A literal reading of this is of course the end of a hard day and the beginning of the night which is to bring “forgetfulness divine” and rest. However, closing “[her] willing eyes” and “drawing the sable curtains” can also be read as a metaphor for the end of life and death, which portrays sleep as eternal rest. Contrary to common imagery portraying light as happiness and goodness, the speaker here “associates [light] not simply with purity and benevolence, but also with death and obliteration” (Reising, 94).

The next four lines rely more on darkness and the tactile imagery, which makes perfect sense as the night keeps progressing and in the dark we depend more on our sense of touch than on seeing. “Soothest Sleep” is now referred to as “soft embalmer” preparing the body either for sleep or for imaginary death. Sleep also acts like a caring parent “shutting, with careful fingers and benign, / Our gloom-pleas'd eyes,” which brings us back to the two kinds of love mentioned before: God's love and human love. “[G]loom-pleas'd eyes, embower'd from the light” and “enshaded in forgetfulness divine” continue to play on the double meaning of sleep here. Light means life which the eyes can no longer see, but

another kind of bliss is available in form of “forgetfulness divine,” which will bring peace to both the body and soul. The compliance with the process of death becomes as natural as accepting the mere habit of going to bed and sleeping. The acceptance of eternal sleep and making it part of our life addresses common human fears about death perceived as something unexplainable and unknown and therefore scary.

The parallel between the two kinds of sleep continues onto the following lines. The speaker emphasizes peacefulness of the process of falling asleep and/or dying by letting “placid slumbers soothe each weary mind.” “Let” implies encouragement or acquiescence, and the verb “soothe” evokes another picture of compassionate parents administering relief-bringing medicine to their tired or sick offspring. The “morn” can be both the next morning or rising to eternal bliss in heaven, and the latter interpretation gains even more credibility here as the “weary minds” are “to wake more heav’nly, more refined.”

The final quatrain of the sonnet usually introduces some new ideas or concludes the poem in a decisive and surprising way. This sonnet is consistent in tone, which is a very sophisticated device here. By introducing new images step by step the poem imitates the process of gradually falling asleep. However, although there are no surprising and contradictory statements in the final four lines, they are not only very conclusive, so to speak, but also confirm the earlier speculations about sleep being both a natural human activity, which is part of an everyday routine, as well as being a metaphor for death, which is part of life. Night, or rather its “leaden scepter,” becomes the subject of the poem taking over the speaker's weary mind and soul. The heaviness of the “leaden scepter” can be contrasted with the lightness of “the sable curtains of the night” from the fourth opening

line, which indicates the advancement of the process of falling asleep and prepares the reader for the conclusion. An interesting thing here is the reversal of colors: “sable” is darker than “leaden” so as it is getting dark the former should be put at the end of the poem. However, the logic here is consistent. First of all, the material the scepter is made of can be lead, which is a very heavy metal and would awkwardly go with the noun “curtains” which are supposed to be made of nice, often velvety material. Also, the lighter color goes with the following line where the song is to be ceased “till fair Aurora rise” so although the night is dark, black and sable it has its elements of lightness as it brings relief and eventually leads to a new dawn.

As this is the last stage of falling asleep the speaker is about to give up the song and fulfill the wish from the opening couplet. The verb forms “seals,” “cease,” “turn” and “seal” enhance the impression of finality and oppose the only verb implying waking up: “rise.” This makes the quatrain, and especially the concluding couplet, abound in death-tinted associations. Sleep, accompanied by night, “closes[s]” the speaker’s “willing eyes” like a chest or a coffin, “turn[s] the key” quietly not to wake her up, and as a result, ceases the song sealing and soothing “the hushed casket of [her] Soul.” The lid on the passing day or life is closed, weary minds are soothed, the soul becomes locked in eternity and “the rest is silence.”

Body parts are of particular importance in the poem. Eyes which are our most important organ during the day become passive at night. They are still partly active at the beginning of the poem where they are described as “willing,” but even this adjective implies resignation from action and eagerness to cooperate with “soft embalmer’s” doings. From then on eyes become more and more used to the dark and submissive to “placid slumbers” as they are

“gloom-pleas'd” and finally “drowsy.” Sleep / death are personified here and so are God / the sun (son?), and both pairs use their hands / fingers to perform their duty. Drawing the curtains, embalming, shutting eyes “with careful fingers,” sealing “drowsy eyes,” turning the key and sealing “the hushed casket” are all activities which demand some amount of precision but not much effort. Therefore, the final outcome of the process of falling asleep or dying is that of an effortless and aesthetic activity which is supposed to be a reward and soothing experience at the end of the way, be it daily or eternal. The bodily elements are balanced by ethereal and light elements such as singing a song/hymn, creating a poem and praising sleep, God, life and death.

The rhymes in “An Hymn To Sleep” seem to have life on their own and create a sub-plot or sub-poem. The first couple - “close / eyes” sounds like an instruction or order which is the first step to be done if one wants to fall asleep. Then follows a gripping trio of “light / night / midnight” each indicating a point in the twenty-four hour day and referring to the passing of time and fading light, which bring us closer to death. The arrangement of “benign / light / divine” bears resemblance to the Holy Trinity with God as the light in the middle and the power of the three can make “each weary mind” “refined.” Then, opposing the opening rhymes, the pair “eyes / rise” may be read as the rising from the simple activity of closing eyes and falling asleep or rising to the eternal bliss and peacefulness, especially that “wards,” which in the line functions as a noun, can be read as a third person verb form implying the guardian of the “Soul.”

Dealing with the basic human emotions and activities such as going to bed, falling asleep, resting, accepting life cycles, necessity to leave the world and the urge to create, “An Hymn To Sleep” places itself as the leading work which should be ranked equal, if not higher,

with conceit and emotion charged poems by other pre-twentieth century artists, most of whom were white males. The author's ability to evoke vivid and natural images with the precision and dexterity of a mathematician makes the poem beautifully crafted and pleasing to read. Even where there are some traces of conventionality to it, its originality and artistic value are unquestionable and cannot be denied even by severest critics and guardians of the "purity" of the literary canon. Why? Because it would also mean questioning the greatness and credibility of one of the canon's gods John Keats.

The poem "An Hymn To Sleep" quoted above is a compilation of a part of Wheatley's "An Hymn To the Evening" and a part of Keats's "To Sleep." Profane as it may seem at first, this simple exercise was performed to prove that even if one refuses to admit Wheatley's greatness as a poet on the basis of her innovative technique of coding and finds her "conventionality" of style not "refined" enough to fit the rules of decorum, there are many more faces to her verse such as multi-leveled metaphors or, to paraphrase Keats, beauty and truth, truth and beauty. The idea is to show how, consciously or unconsciously, writers copy from each other, come up with similar ideas, and repeat patterns. What establishes their position as "accomplished poets" is that they make the patterns work in an absolutely new and unique way so that art never stops to amaze us and makes life richer and more fulfilling. Originality and everlasting value are not always about discovering a new planet in the universe of creativity but about the ability to remind the readers what life is all about through the unforgettable metaphors addressing basic human emotions.

Wheatley fulfills all the requirements and more. Her verse could easily pass for a Keats's, which does not mean she overly accommodated the white culture since as we know there is more to

her imagery than only art for art's sake. Even if Wheatley used the forms commonly accepted in the canon and adhering to the rules of decorum, she is still unique. Although she was "writing a form of oppositional verse that was [and still is] unreadable for a public with certain racial, political, theological, and cultural assumptions," her poems "were [and still are] eminently readable within the discursive practices of her culture in a way that guaranteed their popularity" (Reising, 114).

While Phillis Wheatley's importance as a poet-innovator lies mostly in the fact that she was able to "commandeer the language of poetic conventions, warping them to her own oppositional purposes" (Reising, 96), her importance as a poet-liberating goddess read by people brought up in environments other than English America of the eighteenth century lies in her ability to create art. The very fact of creating good poetry made Wheatley exceptional and set her free from being classified as "Mrs. Wheatley's Phillis" who merely performed for the colonial Boston society. She performed and keeps performing for every generation which is willing to read poetry. If good poetry should come as easily as "Leaves to a tree" it was especially true in the case of Phillis Wheatley who, under constant surveillance of her masters, deftly created thought-provoking and heart-felt images with geometrical precision. Likewise, Phillis Wheatley's verse demands of us to consider its aesthetic value while reminding the reader that all aesthetic value is political since only in this way can we explain having a poet like John Keats in the canon and an artist like Phillis Wheatley on the fringes of it.

By mixing their poems and addressing the literary canon one also hopes to establish that creating works equal to or better than commonly acknowledged writings does not guarantee one

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immortality because the readers have been taught to throw not merely aesthetic but politicized aesthetic values onto their readings.

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