

I Remember Mama: Honoring the Goddess-Mother
While Denouncing the Slaveowner-God in
Phillis Wheatley's Poetry

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Still contrary to popular belief, Phillis Wheatley consistently honors her African homeland while critiquing the very institution of slavery that inspired her poetic gifts. Potentially in an awkward situation of ambiguity, she fights against the system that has taken her away from her family and now enslaves her, but at the same time she reaps what little benefits that system providing for her. In her work, Wheatley, in this act of writing, fights back by wielding her pen in remembrance of her mother and birthplace. Indeed Wheatley has to be careful. If she explicitly honors Africa, the white society in which she lives may think she is ungrateful, and she may not be able to publish her work. Therefore, she cloaks her remembrance in a form recognizable to whites: classicism. This way, she may not be readily considered a threat. Moreover, I will demonstrate that in at least three of Wheatley's poems, "An Hymn to the Morning," "On Recollection," and "An Hymn to the Evening," Wheatley honors her mother as a classical goddess-mother, thereby maintaining her memories yet fooling the slaveowners. Not only that, she denounces the enslavement that separates her from her mother. Furthermore, by honoring her mother, Wheatley covertly and subversively dedicates these poems to her.

Wheatley's kidnapping and enslavement as a young child simultaneously traumatized and opened her to new opportunities for growth. Her owners, John and Susannah Wheatley, treated her better than most slaveholders and even allowed her to publish poetry. Of course, writing poetry was a creative outlet for Wheatley; however, because she was a black female slave, she knew that she had to be careful about what she had said and how she said it. Therefore, Wheatley's poetry, composed in the late eighteenth century, a time before aggressive antislavery activism, does not allow her blatant freedom of expression.

However, this limitation enhances the meaning of her poetry because it forces her to cloak her biting and forceful remarks in such a clever way that many still cannot comprehend what she is really saying. Two such critics, Michele McKay and William J. Scheick, completely misunderstand her:

By her own account, she seems to have been robbed of her memories of Africa, with one important exception: a recollection of her mother offering libations to the rising sun. . . . Bereft of her African heritage, she turned to neoclassical English as a prominent literary discourse available to her as an aspiring poet. (71)

In this quotation, McKay and Scheick get part of it right. Wheatley's mother pouring out water for an offering to the rising sun and then proscribing herself in front of it is the only memory that Wheatley provided to her slaveowners (Shields 241–42). That does not mean, however, that that is the only memory she had; it is the only one she shared with white people. She states in "Phillis's Reply to the Answer" that she comes from Gambia, West Africa (line 22). Secondly, the notion that she turned to neoclassicism because her African heritage was taken from her is misleading. As a slave, Wheatley had no easy power or control over her life. To be sure, Wheatley was bereft because she was kidnapped and enslaved at the age of seven. So, taken from her home and forced into slavery, the only real control she could exercise was through her poetry. In fact, Wheatley discusses her enslavement in her poem "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth, His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for North America, &c.":

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'd 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? (74–75)

Here she claims she was taken from her father. This event may or may not be true. Still, it is a very significant line because she is writing to a male. This event sounds more traumatic to a male because a mother would be presumed too weak to stop violence, but if a child is taken from her or his father, it shows that the institution of slavery was too powerful even for her father to overcome. As

head of the household, he has been particularly shamed by the practice. As well, she wants to drive home how slavery destroys families as well as civilization, especially the lines, "And I can then but Pray / Others may never feel tyrannic sway" (lines 30–31). Wheatley utilizes the classical mode as a readily available outlet for her to relate her other memories of Africa; she does so, nevertheless, in a way that it is difficult to detect. What better way to avenge her plight than to turn the weapons used to keep her in her place against her oppressors?

In one combative vein of this poetics, goddess-mothers hold an important place.¹ Goddesses, of course, are female deities with special powers that reign over humankind. According to Tikva Frymer-Kensky, the goddess-mother and her daughter in many aspects have a realistically typical mother-daughter relationship, which includes a uniquely "direct and complex" bond of mutual love, loyalty, and respect. Furthermore:

The mother's devotion and loyalty to her children is her dominant, perhaps even her defining, characteristic. This attachment does not stop even with the death of the child, for it is, above all, the mother who mourns the death of her child. The very act of lamenting was particularly associated with children. (17)

Also, with regards to mythology, the child becomes aware of the mother's "power and anger" when the mother is crossed (19). Unfortunately, we do not know the actions of Wheatley's mother after she discovered the loss of her child, but I assume that she must have grieved tremendously and the pain probably never went away.

No bond is stronger than that of a mother and child. The mother carries the child in her womb for nine months, making that child a part of her body and spirit. Then after the birth, a typical mother feeds and nurtures that child to maturity. In turn, the child looks to the mother for guidance, security, and love. Therefore, a goddess-mother may be like any average mother who cares for and loves her children; what distinguishes the two is that the goddess-mother exercises divine power. Imagine Wheatley at seven years old, standing on a slave block, mostly nude, probably shivering with shock and/or cold. What thoughts were going through her head? How traumatic it must have been to her, losing her mother not to death but to slavery. It must have been another blow to realize that she would never see her mother again. Wheatley eventually learns that one way to cope is by composing poetry.

Given her own maternal instincts (she later gave birth to three children) and her study of ancient classicism, Wheatley would have been prepared to

utilize the mother-goddess motif to give her mother divine qualities and thence to voice expression of her profound loss. Implicit in that loss is the concept of motherhood equating home and security. In Wheatley's case, she also missed Gambia and her short, carefree childhood. One important way that Wheatley utilizes her various poems to remember her mother is through the constant presence of goddesses. Because Wheatley was permanently removed from her mother since she was a little girl, she likely idolized and deified her because she was not physically accessible. As memories fade, people tend to remember beloved people and places through rose-colored glasses. In other words, people tend to recall the past not as they were, but as they positively imagined them to be, especially if they were traumatized as was Wheatley. In Wheatley's world of servitude, her distant mother very likely became a deity and Gambia became paradise. In her poem "An Hymn to Mol[un]ning,"² she honors her mother as a goddess without insulting the whites:

Attend my lays, ye ever honour'd nine,
Assist my labours, and my strains refine;
In smoothest numbers pour the notes along,
For bright *Aurora* now demands my song. (56)

The "honour'd nine" that Wheatley refers to are the Muses, the goddesses of the arts. It is typical in classical poetry to invoke the Muses for inspiration. However, in this poem, the Muses are more than mere inspiration, for they aid Wheatley in writing poetry. Later, as is often the case in this poet's work, Calliope, the muse of epic poetry, plays the harmonious lyre while her sisters "fan the pleasing fire" of encouragement and support (lines 13–14). Wheatley mentions Calliope specifically because she appears to need her help more than that of her other eight sisters in writing this particular poem. Indeed, all these ladies are working very hard to help Wheatley; the Muses seem to be her ever helpful friends. Still, it is more than divine intervention that drives these goddesses to assist her. Obviously, in Wheatley's mind, they are fond of her and want her to succeed because she suggests they appear to do everything in their power to inspire and support her poem.

As well, this poem features another classical deity, *Aurora*, the Roman goddess of the dawn. Wheatley invokes the Muses because she claims that *Aurora* commands her to write poetry, like a mother telling a child to do a task. Furthermore, *Aurora* is more than a goddess; she may be read as a representation of Wheatley's mother. Wheatley's mother, like *Aurora*, greeted the morn-

Wheatley's mother did so by prostrating herself in front of the sun, and *Aurora* completed the task with her presence. Despite the slightly different methods, each has the same outcome. *Aurora*, like the goddess-mother Frymer-Kensky mentions above, touches nature with a gentle wind, as a mother would soothingly caress a child. Then, also as a mother would do, she protects Wheatley and her poetry writing by shading her "from the burning day" (line 12). Lastly, *Aurora*, like any mother, creates something that delights her child, which includes "[t]he bow's, the gales, the variegated skies / [which] [i]n all their pleasures in my bosom rise" (lines 15–16). Indeed, the Muses also symbolize an aspect of a mother figure because of their sheltering and nurturing of Wheatley physically, emotionally, and artistically. The fact that the names of the goddesses are italicized suggests Wheatley wanted readers to acknowledge a certain amount of importance regarding their appearance and actions. The emphasis on their names suggests their significance in her life.

Another poem, "On Recollection," continues this preoccupation with the goddess-mother. When one recalls something, it is a reflective moment in memory. It seems natural that, when people are sad and depressed, they may try to remember something pleasant in order to make themselves feel better. In Wheatley's case, she remembered her mother in another way by writing a poem:

Mneme begin. Inspire, ye sacred nine,
Your vent'rous Afric in her great design.
Mneme, immortal pow'r, I trace thy spring:
Assist my strains, while I thy glories sing:
The acts of long departed years, by thee
Recover'd, in due order rang'd we see:
Thy pow'r the long-forgotten calls from night
That sweetly plays before the fancy's sight.
(lines 1–8)

What makes this poem significant is the appearance of *Mneme*. *Mneme*, the older form of *Mnemosyne*, is the goddess of memory and the mother of the Muses. In this poem, Wheatley does not ask for inspiration; she demands it with the opening line "Mneme begin. Inspire, ye sacred nine." She shows pluck and confidence in commanding the goddess-mother to invoke her memories as when she calls herself the "vent'rous Afric." Here, again anticipating Frymer-Kensky's model, Wheatley imbues *Mnemosyne* with enough power to do the tasks she wants done, which is namely helping her to recall "the acts

of long departed years" (line 6), Wheatley, referring to herself as African, clearly suggests she wants to recall memories of her childhood in Africa, and by extension, Mnemosyne symbolizes the lost mother she wants to keep remembering.

Additionally, Wheatley states that while we sleep, Mnemosyne "pours" memory as if it were "the ample treasure of her secret shores" (line 10). Mnemosyne's act is very similar to the memory that Wheatley shared about her mother pouring out water; therefore, this line suggests further that Wheatley was remembering her mother and her homeland subversively. She could not confidently allow her slaveowners to know that she remembered more about her mother than she had told them. Also, by transposing the memory of her mother from morning to a sleep-filled night, Wheatley emphasizes that freedom enhances the subversive component of her poetics, for during the sunshine-filled day, she reverts back to being a slave.

Besides Mnemosyne and her daughters the Muses, Phoebe, the goddess of the moon, makes her appearance in line 12. According to Wheatley, Phoebe, along with the other goddesses, helps "the high-ratur'd poet," which of course is Wheatley. Also, Wheatley praises Mnemosyne as the one who never forgets a good or bad deed. For those who are good, she graciously takes care as she does of Wheatley by sounding "sweeter than music to the ravish'd ear" (line 22). The mention of "Maro" in the next line renders an epithet of the Roman poet, Virgil. Wheatley claims, therefore, that the divine songs conveyed to her by Mnemosyne are sweeter than those evoked by the earthly, revered Virgil. With these lines, she places the goddess-woman over any man.

What links Mnemosyne to Wheatley's mother, besides her being the mother of the Muses and the power she possesses over Wheatley's memories, are her specific actions. Mnemosyne, like Aurora in the previous poem, makes sure that Wheatley achieves her artistic endeavors because she has the capacity to do so. Any mother would help her children achieve their goals if it were within her power, even if that mother has to tell her children what to do, just as Wheatley summons Mnemosyne to tell her daughters to help Wheatley.

Unfortunately, Wheatley's memories of her mother were also bittersweet. The fact that she was taken from her mother at such an impressionable and young age must have continuously plagued her throughout her life. It was slavery that tore Wheatley from her mother, and it was slavery that forced her to remember her mother on the sly in her poetry. Besides images of a very nurturing mother, the last stanza of "An Hymn to Melpomene" may refer to slavery:

See in the east th' illustrious king of day!
His rising radiance drives the shades away—
But Oh! I feel his fervid beams too strong,
And scarce begun, concludes th' abortive song.
(lines 17–20)

Here, at first, Wheatley celebrates the act of writing poetry and being encouraged by her mother's circle. Despite this initial praise of the "king of day," however, Phoebus Apollo, the god of the sun, and the aforementioned twin of Phoebe, with his "fervid beams too strong" (line 19), drives Aurora away. Phoebus' forceful, aggressive rays or ways parallel the overpowering American slaveowners that drive Aurora or Wheatley's mother away from her. This poem can then subversively suggest that she did comment forcefully on being taken from her homeland and forced into servitude. Notably, only female goddesses help Wheatley, never the male ones. Represented by the sun, it is the "king of day" that destroys whatever Wheatley attempts to accomplish.

Ironically, like her mother before her, Wheatley had to bow down to the sun after the dawn flees. Significantly, while the morning shadows that Aurora provides enhance her writing, the appearance of the sun stops it completely when she says "[a]nd scarce begun, concludes th' abortive song" (line 20). Furthermore, this passage may allude to the loss of her mother when the sun's "rising radiance drives the shades away" (line 18). Those shades, provided by Aurora, may well symbolize the caring and endearing mother protecting her child from harm, just as Wheatley's mother attempted to accomplish. Ultimately, Wheatley's mother could not save her daughter from slavery, and Aurora could not protect her from those same forces when she tried to write poetry.

To continue to build on the sun's link to slavery in this poem, the sun's "fervid beams" represent the concept of paternalism in slave culture (lines 17–21). Her white slaveowners protected her physically for their benefit and supported her artistically because she seemed to justify benevolent slavery, but they also shielded her from her culture and from freedom. Wheatley's "protection" came at a high cost; her slaveowners took good care of her, taught her how to read and write, and allowed her to create, but they expected her complete submission and gratitude as payment for all the "wonderful" things they had done to/for her. Yes, Wheatley was treated very well for a slave, but the fact was, she was *still* a slave. As payment for the Wheatley family taking care of her, she was forced to write her poetry in an idiom they would recognize, which

was the classical mode. In fact, she did not have the freedom to critique aggressively what she wanted to say without raising suspicion, hence the necessity of remembering her mother and homeland in the guise of Greek and Roman mythology.

In Wheatley's "An Hymn to Mo[ur]ning," the pleasant situation that Aurora/her mother and the "morning" brings quickly changes to the grief of "mourning" when Phoebus drives Aurora/her mother away. Phoebus' actions parallel the forcefulness of slavery that took Wheatley away from her mother. Also, "Mourning," my spelling of Wheatley's "Morning," suggests that Wheatley acknowledges her mother's spiritual presence while at the same time she mourns her physical loss. Wheatley was, perhaps subliminally, letting her mother know that she missed her.

In another part of the poem "On Recollection," Wheatley also discusses the impact of slavery on the maternal goddess of memory:

But how is Mneme dreaded by the race,
Who scorns her warnings, and despise her grace,
By her unveil'd each horrid crime appears,
Her awful hand a cup of wormwood bears.
Days, years misspent, O what a hell of woe!
Hers the worst tortures that our souls
can know. (63)

The race that dreads Mnemosyne is the white race. It dreads her because in her role as memory, she constantly reminds them of the evil deeds they do with regards to enslaving Africans, like Wheatley. So in return they "scorn her warnings, and despise her grace" (line 26). Additionally, the fact of Mnemosyne's sadness over knowing that slavery is wrong is demonstrated in the lines, "[d]ays, years misspent, O what a hell of woe / Hers the worst tortures that our souls can know." Wheatley's mentioning of eighteen years passing probably refers to her age at the time she wrote the poem. Following this sort of reading makes sense, especially when she discusses the follies that occurred within her lifetime. Those follies are, of course, being kidnapped into slavery and being separated from her mother and Africa. Furthermore, this train of thought accords with her lines in "Recollection" about shame and mourning.

As evident in the above lines, Mnemosyne can be understood to represent Wheatley's mother. Not only did Wheatley suffer from being separated from her mother, Wheatley's mother must have been devastated by being sep-

arated from her daughter. A prime example of this phenomenon is the classic Greek myth of the mother and daughter goddesses Demeter and Persephone, a myth surely familiar to Wheatley. Demeter is the goddess of the grain who is responsible for making crops as well as causing nature to flourish. One day, while Persephone is picking flowers, she is kidnapped by her uncle, Hades, the god of the dead, and taken down to his underground kingdom to become his bride. Demeter is so sad and distraught by the loss of her daughter that nothing grows, and snow falls across the land. To save the earth and all its living creatures, Persephone is allowed to join her mother for half the year. When Persephone is with her mother, spring and summer prevail, and the mother and daughter live happily. When Persephone returns to the underworld, however, Demeter's grief brings to the world fall and winter (Husain 76-79; *Oxford Classical Dictionary* 447-48, 1142-43; *Oxford Companion* 177, 422).³ This myth, of course, explains the seasons, but it also enacts the strong bond that can exist between a mother and her daughter—the bond even separation and slavery cannot sever. Unfortunately, unlike Demeter and Persephone, after her capture, Wheatley never saw her mother again. So it would be reasonable that she would remember her in the most honorable and idealized way—as a goddess. Tapping into idealized versions of motherhood at the time certainly would have served Wheatley well. While Wheatley does not, in her extant poetry, use the Demeter and Persephone mother-daughter pair, she may well have done so in such a poem as the as-yet not discovered "To Penelope," listed in her regrettably unpublished volume projected in her October 30, 1779, "Proposals" (190-92).

Along these lines, Demeter could have represented Wheatley's mother and Wheatley Persephone. Traditionally, just as in the case of Demeter bringing Spring and Summer to the earth when she is with Persephone and Fall and Winter when her daughter is away, light symbolizes goodness, revelation, and happiness, while darkness connotes evil, gloom, and what is hidden. The classical parallel to Wheatley's life coincidentally calls up Hades. He may, in his kidnapping of Persephone, represent the evil darkness of male domination and enforced slavery—an event to which Wheatley could certainly relate. However, the opposite obtains in Wheatley's world since slaves typically worked in the daytime.

The Persephone-Demeter comparison proves to be especially instructive when examining several additional poems by Wheatley. As seen in "An Hymn to Mo[ur]ning," the "shades" of Hades' underworld also invoke nighttime and

the unconscious. Still, when Persephone eventually becomes the Queen of the Dead and balances out the oppression found in Hades, she represents both Wheatley and her mother—the victim and the avenger. Wheatley becomes the mother by “birthing” her poems. Physically, Wheatley has lost her mother, but strikingly she comes to life again in Wheatley’s poetry. The cycle of loss, birth, and rebirth continues in a uniquely creative way. Another poem, “Thoughts on the Works of Providence,” enhances this idea of regaining her mother at night:

When action ceases, and ideas range
Licitious and unbounded o’er the plains,
Where *Fancy’s* queen in giddy triumph reigns
Hear in soft strains the dreaming lover sigh
To a kind fair, or rave in jealousy;
On pleasure now, and now on vengeance bent,
The lab’ring passions struggle for a vent.
What pow’r, O man! thy reason then restores,
So long suspended in nocturnal hours? (47)

It is only at night and during sleep that Wheatley can take the journey to the underworld of her “unbounded” unconscious mind to let the inspired memories of her mother flow from her pen. Along these lines, in her text, *Woman Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*, Clarissa Pinkola Estés, analyzes the wild woman myth by utilizing Jungian psychoanalysis.⁴ She defines this term:

The word wild here is not used in its modern pejorative sense, meaning out of control, but in its original sense, which means to live a natural life, one in which the *criatura*, creature, has innate integrity and healthy boundaries. These words, *wild* and *woman*, cause women to remember who they are and what they are about. They create a metaphor to describe the force which funds all females. They personify a force that women cannot live without. (8)

Through her poetry and the “nocturnal hours,” Wheatley allows her wild woman to roam free as well as turning her mother into a goddess-mother to honor her memory.

According to Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor, feminists view the Demeter-Persephone relationship as “a paradigm of contemporary woman, struggling to escape the death clutch of patriarchy in a search for her original, fruitful

self” (167).⁵ Women go to the underworld to rediscover their “creative, visionary power,” “soul,” and the damaged child within. Then women can come to terms with males without subjugating themselves to patriarchy (167). They also contend in clinical studies about the child identifying with the mother that “successful overcoming of problems—i.e., mature development—does not come from severing the early infantile sense of unity with the Mother, but from reestablishing it” (30).

Furthermore, in her role as the Queen of the Dead, Persephone connects with the dark queen-goddess of Africa, Wheatley’s homeland. This connection demonstrates the link, at least in Wheatley’s mind, to her mother. In fact, classical myth derives from Africa.⁶

... researchers into early mythic history . . . see not only the black African origins of the Great Mother but to the extent to which early matriarchal Africans traveled throughout the ancient world, spreading the Black Goddess . . . then it is easy to understand the existence of these Black Madonnas. They are not “psychological symbols of the dark side of the mother of Christ”—or not solely, or originally. They are solid iconic remains of the ancient time when the religion of the Black Goddess ruled Africa and from thence, much of the rest of the world. (32)

A prime example of this concept occurs in the last poem to be considered, “An Hymn to Evening,” which creatively and intricately encapsulates these ideas of the nurturing dark goddess-mother and the brutal sun or light god of slavery. However, Wheatley, because of her status, is very cautious in her comparisons. The first stanza demonstrates this tendency:

Soon as the sun forsook the eastern main
The pealing thunder shook the heavy Plain,
Majestic grandeur! From the zephyr’s wing
Exhales the incense of the blooming Spring.
Soft purrl the streams, the birds renew their notes,
And through the air their mingled music floats. (58)

What is productive in the case of Wheatley’s poetry is that in darkness one can cloak or disguise what one is actually saying. In the lines quoted above, the sun may symbolize the patriarchal light of slavery that threatens to overpower her with its beams of bigotry. Obviously, when the sun goes down, the

"pealing thunder" announces its disappearance while the zephyr's or the west wind's wing gently flaps, spring exudes a pleasant scent, the streams calm, and the birds sing in harmony. These actions demonstrate that the sun negatively dominates the rest of nature as well.

Second, as her imagery suggests, while the piercing morning sun symbolizes slavery and America, the calming but equally effective night represents freedom and Africa, thereby allowing for the personal and creative freedom not only for Wheatley but for all earthly and heavenly creatures as well. The next stanza further drives this point:

Through all the heav'ns what beauteous dyes are spread!
But the west glories in the deepest red:
So may our breasts with ev'ry virtue glow,
The living temples of our God below! (lines 7–10)

As the moon rises, its beauty complements but does not overpower the world around it. The red sky that the west glorifies echoes her passionate attachment to sundown. This passion is so apparent that she wants the world below to feel this joyful harmony as well—to see how beautiful the world can be without slavery. For, if the world follows the lead of the heavens, peace will reign throughout the whole universe. In heaven, all of nature is equal. Wheatley writes:

Fill'd with the praise of him who gives the
light,
And draws the sable curtains of the night,
Let placid slumbers sooth each weary mind,
At morn to wake more heav'nly, more refin'd,
So shall the labours of the day begin
More pure, more guarded from the snares of sin.
(58–59)

Here, even though Wheatley still cloaks herself in darkness, her message in this stanza is more explicit. The word "him" refers to Phoebus who, in Wheatley's mind, provides light, but whose absence provides darkness for all. While she honors Phoebus this time, she also prays to him that he will end "the labours" of slavery; if he labors to confine slaves, he assumes the role of the slaveowner. In the context of this poem, Wheatley hopes that the gentle night will convince Phoebus to sooth the savage beast of oppression and deflate "the snares of sin," or more specifically, the evils of slavery. In addition, his reoc-

currence still prevents Wheatley from writing because it is his presence that kills the creativity the nighttime brings. These lines also suggest Wheatley's ambivalence toward her masters. She hates being a slave and losing her mother, but at the same time she is allowed to write. Instead of a joyful communion with divinity and nature, moreover, the sun reminds her of the work that comes with being a slave. In other words, at night she is free to be herself, but in the light she must conform to her enslavement.

Still, the night has another meaning. In the last two lines of the poem, Wheatley encapsulates her praise of Africa and freedom by stating "Night's leaden sceptre seals my drowsy eyes / Then cease, my song, till fair Aurora rise" (lines 17–18). By going to sleep, Wheatley hopes that Phoebus/slaveowner will end slavery for herself and the other slaves by the time she wakes up to Aurora, the goddess of the dawn. Also, Wheatley switches the meanings of light and dark for the overall imagery of darkness, which corresponds to the idea of remembering Africa. Traditionally, lightness symbolizes goodness and racial whiteness while darkness indicates evil and racial blackness. For centuries, Africa was called "the dark continent" because its people were considered backward, unintelligent, and even evil—a blatant excuse to justify slavery. In Wheatley's poem, however, darkness does not connote evil; it connotes equality and liberty. It is the sunlight that possesses negative qualities, with the exception of Aurora, for she gently eases people into the light, unlike the harsh sun. These three poems feature Wheatley's demonstration of her clever ability to cloak the praising of her homeland under the guise of classic poetry so as not to elicit suspicion. Like the evening she meditates upon, she cloaks her poetic message. Indeed, many of her poems may be read as blueprints for her subversive but extremely relevant and powerful prayer for hope and liberty.

Besides the poems explicated above, Wheatley assumes the role of goddess-mother in her elegies, poems that honor the recently departed. Elegies were a common poetic form in classical literature (*Oxford Companion* 208). In Wheatley's case, the recently departed may not be merely references to the deceased; they may be an attempt by the African American artist to console parents who have been separated, beyond their control, from their children. For instance, the subjects of many of Wheatley's extant elegies are parents who have lost their children. These titles include: "On the Death of a Young Lady of Five Years of Age," "To a Lady and Her Children, on the Death of the Her Son and Their Brother," "To a Gentleman and Lady on the Death of Lady's Brother and Sister, and a Child of the Name Avis, Aged One Year," "On the

Death of J. C. and Infant," and most notably the one about a classically mythological mother and her children entitled, "Niobe in Distress for Her Children Slain by Apollo, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book VI. And from a View of the Painting of Mr. Richard Wilson."

In most of these poems, Wheatley comforts those remaining to grieve for their children who have gone to heaven. Wheatley, through her elegies, perhaps tries to send a secret message to her mother saying that she was fine despite the travails that separated them forever. Assuming the role of the elegist also relates to the Frymer-Kensky model, in which the poet implies that the goddess-mothers were in charge of mourning the dead; therefore, Wheatley's utilization of the elegiac form may be read as yet another way in which Wheatley attempts to reconnect with Africa and her mother.

Losing a child or a parent to slavery is akin to losing one to death. We will never know exactly how Wheatley confronted her separation from her mother. As a mother, Wheatley also lost her children. In fact, she was found dead after giving birth to her last child. Therefore, she also knew how it felt to lose children (Mallory 1723). Hence, placing her long-lost mother on a divine pedestal helped Wheatley to endure her kidnapping, enslavement, and short life of hardship. The mythological goddess-mother represented a caring, nurturing, and protective mother, one who Wheatley had lost and surely tried to be with her own children. Through sophisticated poetic maneuvers, Wheatley could relive the few moments of her brief, happy childhood. On another level, her poetry demonstrates how the intrusive male god Phoebus, which can be seen to symbolize slavery, intrudes on her moments of happiness. Wheatley may have told her owners that she only had one memory of her mother; however, her poetry belies that statement.

NOTES

1. Here I am referring to the cult of the mother-goddess (goddess-mother) or "deae matres." Evidence of this cult appears in monuments and inscriptions in the Celtic and Germanic regions, extending from northern Italy to Britain during the period of the Roman Empire. Based on inscriptions on artifacts that served as food baskets, scholars believe these mother-goddesses were seen as fertility goddesses (*Oxford Classical Dictionary* 433). Furthermore, there is evidence of mother-goddess cults in other places such as Egypt and Syria. For further reading, see Marija Gimbutas's *The Lan-*

guage of the Goddess and Erich Neuman's *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*.

2. The "u" is my addition. As part of my contention that Wheatley writes poems to honor her mother, explanation of this change will become apparent.

3. According to the myth, Persephone has to stay in the underworld part of the year because she ate the seeds of a pomegranate.

4. Pinkola Estés is a Jungian analyst who utilizes what she calls the "Wild Woman Archetype" to help traumatized women heal psychological issues. In her text, she analyzes such myths and legends such as "The Red Shoes," "Bluebeard," and "The Ugly Duckling" for mainstream empowerment and inspiration.

5. See Sjöö and Mor's *The Great Cosmic Mother*, specifically the chapter entitled, "Mother and Daughter, and Rebirth," wherein the authors consult Jill Johnston's *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution*, and her 1960s *Village Voice* articles.

6. See the chapter titled "The Original Black Mother" in Sjöö and Mor's *The Great Cosmic Mother*; John J. Jackson, *Man, God and Civilization*; Sir E. A. Wallis Budge, *Egypt*, 197; and Leo Frobenius, *The Voice of Africa*, 345.

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The Interaction of the Classical Traditions of Literature and Politics in the Work of Phillis Wheatley

Karen Lerner Dorell

Phillis Wheatley, the first published African American woman writer, draws upon the Western classical tradition to assert poetic authority, and to argue for slaves' rights to liberty.¹ In the mid-eighteenth century, classical poetics and literary conventions were strictly observed by those who wished to demonstrate cultural authority in the New World. In addition to literary classicism, political classicism was an important aspect of the "cult of antiquity" in the Revolutionary period.² Early Americans absorbed the political classical tradition from the literatures of Greek and Roman antiquity, and through the classical republicanism of the seventeenth-century British Whig tradition. Throughout the eighteenth century, classical tradition provided political exemplars and terms that became central elements in Revolutionary discourse (Reinhold 94-115).³ Wheatley claims a place in this literary classical tradition; she also appropriates political classical conceptions of liberty, natural law, and virtue. Her use of the literary and political classical tradition presents a counter-discourse to Enlightenment racial theories. Wheatley's works contrast the professed ideals of political classical tradition and Revolutionary discourse with the material reality of her own status as both poet and slave.⁴

Wheatley's knowledge of the classical tradition was extensive. She was kidnapped from Africa at age seven, brought to America on the schooner *Phillis*, and sold to John and Susannah Wheatley, wealthy New England Congregationalists. In contrast to their treatment of their other household slaves, the Wheatleys permitted her to learn, and to receive instruction in Latin and the classics. She learned quickly to read and to speak English. Canonical classical texts were made available to her in the Wheatley home, and from the neighbors' libraries. She absorbed the classics and contemporary histories of