"To Maecenas"

By Phillis Wheatley

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TO MAECENAS.

MAECENAS, 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 Maecenas! 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 Phoebus 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, Maecenas, thy paternal rays,
Hear me propitious, and defend my lays.
Maecenas was the wealthy patron of classical Roman poets Virgil and Horace, whom Wheatley draws on in complex ways. Wheatley's poem "To Maecenas" opens her collection, which position gives it a powerful significance as she claims the right to speak within this tradition. Like Horace's Odes to Maecenas, Wheatley's offers praise to her patron, but does so in ways that are fraught with the equivocalities of being an enslaved African working within the language and culture of the colonial master. For a deeper reading of "To Maecenas," see Paula Bennett's journal article, "Phillis Wheatley's Vocation and the Paradox of the 'Afric Muse.'" Following other scholars, Bennett identifies Wheatley's poet-patron as Mather Byles, one of the signatories verifying her authorship. The image included here shows the attestation to the public, included in the 1773 edition of Wheatley's poems, certifying that they were indeed written by "PHILLIS, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa,...and now is, under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in [Boston]." Note Bales' name.
- [TH]

Homer is the ancient Greek poet of The Odyssey and The Iliad.
- [TH]

Achilles is the main character of The Iliad, which tells the story of the Trojan War and, specifically, Achilles' wrath. Achilles and Patroclus are lovers and friends; angered by Agamemnon, Achilles refuses to fight, but allows Patroclus to wear his armor and lead the Myrmidons against the Trojans. When Patroclus is killed by Hector, Achilles is grief-stricken and, enraged, he returns to battle to destroy the Trojans. The image included here, Gavin Hamilton's Achilles Lamenting the Death of Patroclus (1760-1763), is housed in National Galleries, Scotland.
- [TH]

Pelides is Achilles' father; therefore, it is also another way of referring to Achilles himself. Achilles is frequently described as "stern" by Homer.
- [TH]

Publius Vergilius Maro, more commonly known as Virgil, the Augustan Roman poet famed for his Eclogues and the epic poem The Aeneid.
- [TH]

The nine muses in Greco-Roman mythology are goddesses, daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne who inspire those in the arts and sciences.
- [TH]

Mantua is a city in Italy, and the home of Virgil; the Mantuan sage is the poet Virgil.
- [TH]
Meaning "[g]ladly, willingly, with pleasure," according to the OED (fain, adv.B).

- [TH]

Mount Helicon in Greece is a mountain believed to be the home of the muses and hence a place sacred to poetry.

- [TH]

An alternate spelling and contraction, for meter, of "faltering," meaning unsteady or staggering.

- [TH]

Publius Terentius Afer, better known as Terence, is a famous Roman comic playwright, born in northern Africa. As the Encyclopaedia Britannica notes, Terence was enslaved and later freed by a Roman senator. Wheatley suggests a connection between herself and Terence, both of African origin; yet, Terence is "happier"--both in his poetic skill, and perhaps also in having been freed.

- [TH]

An African by birth. [Wheatley's note.]

The leaves of the bay laurel tree were a conventional symbol of poetic fame and achievement originating in the mythological tale of Daphne and Apollo. The image included here is a portrait of the 18th century poet Alexander Pope, wearing a crown of laurel. The portrait (c.1737), by Jonathan Richardson, is housed in the National Portrait Gallery, London.

- [TH]

The Thames is a major river flowing through southern England and London.

- [TH]

In Greco-Roman mythology, naiads are female freshwater nymphs. The image included here, by Jean-Francois de Troy, shows part of the Ovidian story of Pan and Syrinx (1722-1724). De Troy's Pan and Syrinx is housed in the Getty Museum.

- [TH]

Phoebus Apollo is an important god in the Greco-Roman tradition. He is associated with both the sun and with music and poetry.

- [TH]

In Greco-Roman mythology, Aurora (called Eos in the Greek) personifies the dawn.

- [TH]

Parnassus is a mountain in Greece that was seen as the home of the gods, particularly Dionysus and Apollo, as well as the Muses. The Muses are also associated with Mount Helicon.

- [TH]