Phillis Wheatley, â??To Maecenasâ?•

Description

PHILLIS WHEATLEY

â??To Maecenasâ?•

MAECENAS, you, beneath the myrtle shade,
Read oâ??er what poets sung, and shepherds played.
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! circumfusâ??d in air,
Celestial Gods in mortal forms appear;
Swift as they move hear each recess rebound,
Heaven 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 heavâ??nly plains,
A deep-felt horror thrills throâ?? all my veins.
When gentler strains demand thy graceful song,
The lengthâ??ning line moves languishing along.
When great *Patroclus* courts *Achillesâ??* aid,
The grateful tribute of my tears is paid;
Prone on the shore he feels the pangs of love,
And stern *Pelides* tenderest passions move.

Great Maroâ??s strain in heavâ??nly numbers flows,
The *Nine* inspire, and all the bosom glows.
O, could I rival thine and *Virgilâ??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 surprise;
But here I sit and mourn a grovâ??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 towâ??ring *Helicon* retire,
They fan in you the bright immortal fire,

But I, less happy, cannot raise the song,
The faltâ??ring music dies upon my tongue.

The happier *Terence* all the choir inspired,
His soul replenishâ??d, and his bosom firâ??d;
But say, ye *Muses*, why this partial grace,
To one alone of *Africâ??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,
Iâ??ll snatch a laurel from thine honourâ??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 oâ??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.

NOTES :

Title *Maecenas* Gaius Cilnius Maecenas (c.70 BC-c. 8 BC), Roman politician, counselor to the emperor Augustus, and wealthy patron of such poets as Virgil and Horace. His name became synonymous with ideal literary patronage by the eighteenth century (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). Likely a reference to Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon (1707-1791), to whom Wheatley dedicated her 1773 volume of poems (Vincent Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*, p. 106).

1 *Myrtle* â??An evergreen shrubâ?• (*OED*).

7 *Homer* Greek poet, famous for epic poems *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.

17 *Patroclus* Beloved friend of Achilles; *Achilles* The hero and main subject of the epic poem *The Iliad*. Wheatley is alluding to Book 16, ll. 40-45, in which Patroclus asks Achilles to lend him his armour to lead the Myrmidons into battle with the Trojans (*OCD*).

20 *Pelides* Another name for Achilles.

21 *Maro* Publius Vergilius Maro (70 BC â?? 19 BC), ancient Roman poet, more commonly known as â??Virgil.â?•

22 *the Nine* The Muses, nine Greek goddesses who ruled over the arts and sciences.

24 *Mantuan Sage* Virgil was born in Andes, a village near Mantua in northern Italy (*OCD*).

33 *Helicon* Mountain sacred to the Muses, â??hence used allusively in reference to poetic inspirationâ?• (*OED*).

37 *Terence* â??An African by Birthâ?• [Authorâ??s Note], Publius Terentius (c.190 BC â?? c.159 BC), ancient Roman playwright of North African descent (*OCD*).

46 *Laurel* â??Leaves woven into a wreath worn on the head, given to poets as a reward for excellenceâ?• (*OED*).

48 *Thames* The river that flows through London. Wheatley traveled to London with Nathaniel Wheatley in 1773 to support the publication of her poems.

49 *Naiads* Water nymphs â??thought to inhabit rivers, springs, etc.â?• (*OED*).

51 *Aurora* Roman goddess of the dawn (*OED*).

53 *Parnassus* A mountain in central Greece, home of the Muses.

Source: *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London, 1773), pp. 9-11 [Google Books]

Edited by Chrisangel Colon