

"To Maecenas"

By Phillis Wheatley

Transcription, correction, editorial commentary, and markup by Students of Marymount University

TO MAECENAS.

1 MAECENAS, ^{Maecenas}, you, beneath the myrtle shade,
2 Read o'er what poets sung, and shepherds play'd.
3 What felt those poets but you feel the same?
4 Does not your soul possess the sacred flame?
5 Their noble strains your equal genius shares
6 In softer language, and diviner airs.

7 While Homer , ^{Homer} paints, lo! circumfus'd in air,
8 Celestial Gods in mortal forms appear;

- 10 -

9 Swift as they move hear each recess rebound,
10 Heav'n quakes, earth trembles, and the shores resound.
11 Great Sire of verse, before my mortal eyes,
12 The lightnings blaze across the vaulted skies,
13 And, as the thunder shakes the heav'nly plains,
14 A deep-felt horror thrills through all my veins.
15 When gentler strains demand thy graceful song,
16 The length'ning line moves languishing along.
17 When great Patroclus courts Achilles' aid, ^{Patroclus} ,
18 The grateful tribute of my tears is paid;
19 Prone on the shore he feels the pangs of love,
20 And stern Pelides , ^{Pelides} tend'rest passions move.

21 Great Maro's strain, ^{Maro} in heav'nly numbers flows,
22 The Nine inspire, ^{nine}, and all the bosom glows.
23 O could I rival thine and Virgil 's page,
24 Or claim the Muses with the Mantuan Sage, ^{Mantua};
25 Soon the same beauties should my mind adorn,
26 And the same ardors in my soul should burn:
27 Then should my song in bolder notes arise,
28 And all my numbers pleasingly surprize;

- 11 -

29 But here I sit, and mourn a grov'ling mind,
30 That fain, ^{fain} would mount, and ride upon the wind.
31 Not you, my friend, these plaintive strains become,

32 Not you, whose bosom is the *Muses* home;
33 When they from tow'ring *Helicon* , ^{Helicon} retire,
34 They fan in you the bright immortal fire,
35 But I less happy, cannot raise the song,
36 The fault'ring, ^{faltering} music dies upon my tongue.

37 The happier *Terence* , ^{Terence*}, ^{auth1} all the choir inspir'd,
38 His soul replenish'd, and his bosom fir'd;
39 But say, ye *Muses* , why this partial grace,
40 To one alone of *Afric* 's sable race;
41 From age to age transmitting thus his name
42 With the first glory in the rolls of fame?

43 Thy virtues, great *Maecenas!* shall be sung
44 In praise of him, from whom those virtues sprung:

- 12 -

45 While blooming wreaths around thy temples spread,
46 I'll snatch a laurel, ^{laurel} from thine honour'd head,
47 While you indulgent smile upon the deed.

48 As long as Thames , ^{Thames} in streams majestic flows,
49 Or Naiads , ^{Naiads} in their oozy beds repose
50 While Phoebus , ^{Apollo} reigns above the starry train,
51 While bright Aurora , ^{Aurora} purples o'er the main,
52 So long, great Sir, the muse thy praise shall sing,
53 So long thy praise shall make Parnassus , ^{Parnassus} ring:
54 Then grant, *Maecenas* , thy paternal rays,
55 Hear me propitious, and defend my lays.

Footnotes

MaecenasMaecenas 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]."

- [TH]

Homer Homer is the ancient Greek poet of *The Oddysey* and *The Illiad* .

- [TH]

PatroclusAchilles is the main character of *The Illiad* , which tells the story of the Trojan War and, specifically, Achilles' wrath. Achilles and Patroclus are lovers and friends; angered by Agammemnon, 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 Pelides is Achilles' father; therefore, it is also another way of referring to Achilles himself. Achilles is frequently described as "stern" by Homer.

- [TH]

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

- [TH]

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

- [TH]

Mantua Mantua is a city in Italy, and the home of Virgil; the Mantuan sage is the poet Virgil.

- [TH]

- fain Meaning "[g]ladly, willingly, with pleasure," according to the OED (fain, adv.B).
- [TH]
- Helicon Mount Helicon in Greece is a mountain believed to be the home of the muses and hence a place sacred to poetry.
- [TH]
- faltering An alternate spelling and contraction, for meter, of "faltering," meaning unsteady or staggering.
- [TH]
- Terence Publius Terentius Afer, better known as Terence, is a famous Roman comic playwright, born in northern Africa. As the *Encyclopedia 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]
- auth1 An *African* by birth. [Wheatley's note.]
- laurel 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]
- Thames The Thames is a major river flowing through southern England and London.
- [TH]
- Naiads />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]
- Apollo Phoebus Apollo is an important god in the Greco-Roman tradition. He is associated with both the sun and with music and poetry.
- [TH]
- Aurora In Greco-Roman mythology, Aurora (called Eos in the Greek) personifies the dawn.
- [TH]
- Parnassus 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]