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Phillis Wheatley and Elizabeth Keckley: A Balancing Act

Minority authors such as Phillis Wheatley and Elizabeth Keckley in the antebellum period found themselves in a precarious position. As a slave and former slave, respectively, before and after the Civil War, they were writing to an audience that overtly excluded them and in a culture that did not allow them a voice. Because of this they had to try to strike a careful balance between what they may have thought and what their contemporary audience wanted to hear or expected them to say. However, when they were able to achieve this balance a more modern audience, separated from the author by more than a century, often interprets tact as weakness. Or when an author made a stir in her time by challenging expectations of African Americans and the status quo, she now goes relatively unnoticed because what she did no longer feels radical. It is important as readers, then, to recognize the situation of authors like Wheatley and Keckley and try to balance our interpretation ourselves/as well.

Phillis Wheatley was brought to Boston as slave in the mid 1700s when she was about eight years old. The Wheatley family bought her to be a domestic

servant, yet once they discovered her intelligence and abilities she was educated and given a favored position in the Wheatley household where they allowed her to write and move among their social circle (Levernier 65-66). However, despite this relative privilege and comfort (her life did not consist of the backbreaking agricultural labor of some slaves) her life was still not her own; she was still considered chattel. Her subservient position was certainly a part of every aspect of her life and affected her writing as well. For example, in her poem addressed to the Earl of Dartmouth while expressing her desire for American independence she references her own subservient state.

Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,
 Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung,
 Whence flow these wishes for the common good,
 By feeling hearts alone best understood,
 I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
 Was snatch'd from Afric's fancied happy seat:
 ...
 Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
 Others may never feel tyrannic sway? (Wheatley 20-25, 30-31)

Her language is not exceptionally strong; she wrote with noticeable reserve on such a personal and controversial topic, but this reserve allowed her to have a voice. Had Wheatley written with less constraint she would not have been

allowed to publish¹, but because she did not directly challenge the existing and accepted conditions, her voice was not immediately smothered by those in power.

Contemporary criticism of Wheatley reflects the fact that she did not try to be overtly controversial. She was often regarded with disbelief, many did not think that a black slave was capable of writing such fine poetry, and those that did believe she could write saw her as a curio (Rawley 675). “Many were astonished at the poetry of Phillis Wheatley and showered her with praises because they had not expected such capabilities from an African... To them, Blacks who made contributions were always the exception and never the general rule” (Jamison 409). Wheatley was seen as an excellent poet and an interesting topic of conversation, but not terribly contentious.

In the twentieth century, however, the criticism heats up. After the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans were looking at “Black Americans who are considered pioneers in demonstrating the talents and gifts of the Afro-Americans” (Jamison 408), and Phillis Wheatley, one of the first and certainly the most famous Black authors in America, could not be ignored. However, while in her day Wheatley was a fairly benign character, in the 1970s she was cast as a whitewashed villain who “lacked pride in her heritage” (Jamison 411). She had

¹ Her book was almost not printed. The London publisher could not believe a “Negro” could have written it and would not print the volume until they received a paper signed by the Governor and other important people proving her authenticity (Rawley 675-676).

not been enough. She was not slave enough; because she did not receive the kind of brutality that others experienced, she was not seen as being in a “real slave situation” (Smith 404). She was not “Black enough”; she had been so completely “brainwashed to the point of expressing totally the sentiments of Whites” and lacked any kind of race consciousness (Jamison 411, 414). Because she did not say exactly what these mid 20th Century critics wanted her to say and denounce slavery and the ruling class for the horrors they caused openly and explicitly, she was weak.

However, this criticism seems a bit unfair; these people living hundreds of years later, who have never themselves been enslaved, telling someone who was one of the few with an opportunity to speak at all that she “settled for being much less than the black woman she could have been” (Smith 405) does not feel quite right. They were expecting what was needed and possible in their time from someone who lived in a vastly different era. Wheatley wrote with the prevailing culture in mind, and this consciousness is reason we know she existed at all. If Wheatley had written the way her harshest critic wanted they would have never even heard her name.

Some scholars, though, have taken a more balanced view of Wheatley and acknowledged her rather fragile position.

Though Phillis Wheatley may not have been a black nationalist (and of course such a stand would have been impossible considering the time and her position), nonetheless she was very race conscious, very

aware of her position as a slave, and not at all 'smug' in this position (as comparatively desirable as it may have been) in the Wheatley household. In fact, it can be shown that she protested slavery... (Matson 223)

Matson acknowledges that Wheatley had to make some capitulations in order to be allowed to write, and shows that if she had said what a modern critic would want her to say, and perhaps even what she really thought, she would have been hidden from history. "She had much cause to be bitter, yet more cause to hide it" (Matson 229). She could not risk overtly offending those in power because they, in fact, owned her.

On the other end of the spectrum from Phillis Wheatley, there is Elizabeth Keckley. She did not explicitly challenge the societal norms, but the way she presented herself did cause outrage and she was immediately very controversial after publication. Keckley's book *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* begins as a slave narrative, briefly recounting the author's childhood and experience as a slave in the South and her work to buy her freedom, but it quickly moves to her perspective, as confidant of Mrs. Lincoln, of the "Old Clothes Scandal" that tarnished the former first lady's public reputation. As her dressmaker, Keckley was privy to much of the Lincolns' private life that went on behind closed doors while they were in the White

House, and Keckley used this information to attempt to salvage Mary Todd Lincoln's character in the public eye.

However, what Keckley meant for good quickly became the object of outrage. Newspapers published scathing reviews. "*Putnam's Magazine*, for example called it the 'the latest, and decidedly weakest production of the sensational press,' which 'ought never to have been written or published' and could not be read by 'any sensible' person 'with pleasure or profit'" (Sorisio 19). The *New York Citizen* called the book "the vile slanders of an angry negro servant" and said, "The violation of privacy is the besetting sin of a portion of the American press, but no newspaper... has ever been guilty of anything so outrageous as the gossip of this woman Keckley" (Santamarina 529). Keckley was seen as overstepping invisible boundaries around her subject's privacy, a violation especially egregious because of her race. "Perhaps nowhere is the wrath against Keckley more evident than in the vicious parody spawned by her text, *Behind the Seams; by a Nigger Woman Who Took in Work from Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Davis*. This parody reveals the author's anxiety over an African American woman's rising in class and social status" (Sorisio 19) Keckley, as an outsider, intimidated her white audience and was open to scathing criticism that she, socially, was not allowed to rebut.

But why did Keckley intimidate her audience so? Carolyn Sorisio in her essay "Unmasking the Genteel Performer: Elizabeth Keckley's *Behind the Scenes* and the Politics of Public Wrath" argues that Keckley's book was the realization

of the white elites' greatest fear. A person who was supposed, in their view, to be property, or at least in a role of servitude, had acquired the means and power to throw aside whites' façade, or "mask of gentility", and reveal their hypocrisy to the world. "Rather than unveiling the secrets of African American women, Keckley withdraws the veil from the face of Mary Todd Lincoln's false gentility, exposing her to the public's gaze." (Soriso 27) Keckley had overstepped her place as silent servant and had given herself the authority to speak about a white woman as equals in a way that jeopardized Lincoln's status.

Another author, Xiomara Santamarina, argues that, instead of overstepping social boundaries, Keckley transgressed labor boundaries. She was economically independent even though she, as an African American and, moreover, as an African American *woman*, was supposed to be dependent, yet she wrote with confidence about her own abilities and status in the marketplace. She was

Inserting herself into a network of femininity and class taste that refuted conventional understandings of the 'degraded' slave woman. In large part, then, the scandal that greeted Keckley's text arose from her reviewers' refusal to grant her the status associated with being a 'modiste' [dressmaker] and their concomitant reinscription of Keckley as 'an angry negro servant,' the most generic and commonly invoked type of black menial female worker. (Santamarina 519-520)

Keckley was trying to overcome the separation that existed between her and her audience, which produced an angry and anxious media reaction that tried to push her back to her proper distance.

In another reversal of Phillis Wheatley's experience, the modern reaction to *Behind the Scenes* has been rather indifferent. The only two real opinions about the book are that Keckley meant what she said and did truly have good intentions, or, as in the case of many Lincoln historians, they "read *Behind the Scenes* as a prototype for today's political 'kiss and tell'" (Santamarina 517). Yet, for the most part people are indifferent to Elizabeth Keckley herself and her attempt to exercise power through publishing. She is not seen as a strong advocate for the African American cause; her work is mainly known for the public scandal that followed, which scholars use most often to analyze contemporary race relations and society. In Keckley modern scholars would seem to have a strong figure who played a significant role in African American society, yet she is often ignored in this context.

Minority authors, especially black, female, antebellum writers are always forced to meet the expectations of an audience to which they do not belong. If, as in the case of Phillis Wheatley, they met the expectations of their contemporary audience, they are often vilified by modern readers. Yet if they do not meet the contemporary expectations, as with Elizabeth Keckley, a modern audience may still discount them. These two authors always fail to meet expectations because they are always excluded from their audience, whether because of race or

because of time. We as readers must recognize their situation and the fine line they had to walk and come to their work with a balanced view in order to see the true extent and power of their contributions, even while they were still mindful and tactful regarding their environment.

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