

**Old-School**

**Season 1, Episode 3**

**“A Letter to Phillis Wheatley” Part II**

**Chi:** Poets talk about allusions all the time. Not “illusion” with an I. Allusion with an A. Meaning a subtle reference *without explicit identification*. Allusions connect a poem to the world, or to other poems or other books. But what if you don’t know the reference? They can also cause uncertainty and confusion, like a letter without a return address.

**Chad:** I like how M.H. Abrams talks about allusions—that they “imply a fund of knowledge that is shared by an author and an audience.” I feel like this is especially apt for my experience of reading Phillis Wheatley. There’s this fund of poetic precursors that her poems draw on, especially from classical Greece and Rome. But the fact is that Phillis Wheatley knows *way more* about the classical tradition than I do. [Chi chuckles] I had to do some serious Googling before I could understand her poem about Apollo killing Niobe’s children.

**Chi:** Yeah, as we talked about in our previous episode on Wheatley, people are surprised by that because they expect something different from an enslaved Black writer. But maybe her use of allusions *is* different in a way because every time she makes one, she has this other project; she seems to be registering indignance, discomfort, and assertiveness. Like, *yeah I can name the four winds in Ancient Greek myth! Can’t you?*

**Chad:** Ok, there’s Zephyr...Boreas?...And I can’t remember the other two. So, the answer is no, I guess! [Chi laughs]

[Intro music: “Who Dat” by Amber Spill]

**Chi:** Welcome to Old-School, a podcast about Black Studies and the classics. I’m your host, Chiyuma Elliott.

**Chad:** And I’m your other host, Chad Hegelmeyer.

**Chi:** African American writers have been embracing and rejecting the classics since 1773.

**Chad:** We honor that history by telling both of those stories.

**Chi:** Coming up on episode three of Old-School: A letter to Phillis Wheatley, Part 2.

**Chad:** Does the letter say, "Please help. I don't read Latin like you do"?

**Chi:** [laughing] In just a bit, we're going to break down three allusions to the classics in Wheatley's poem, "To Maecenas."

**Chad:** Starting with who this Maecenas guy is and why Wheatley wrote a poem to him.

**Chi:** We're following Phillis Wheatley back to the first century B.C. Serious old school. With America's first published Black female poet.

**Chi:** Here's Wheatley's 1773 poem, "To Maecenas":

"To Maecenas"

Mæcenas, 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.

**Chad:**

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.

**Chi:**

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 surprise;  
But here I sit, and mourn a grov'ling mind,  
That fain would mount, and ride upon the wind.

**Chad:**

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.

**Chi:**

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?

**Chad:**

Thy virtues, great Mæcenas! 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.

**Chi:**

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 shal' make Parnassus ring:

Then grant, Mæcenas, thy paternal rays,  
Hear me propitious, and defend my lays

**Chad:** So I know I made some jokes about this at the top of the episode, but in all seriousness, this poem is really tough. It's not one you're likely to see anthologized like "On Being Brought from Africa to America" or "On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield."

**Chi:** No, Wheatley's neoclassical poetry tends to get a bad rap in comparison to her elegies and autobiographical poems.

**Chad:** [laughing] It's not a style of poetry that necessarily conforms to our modern sensibilities. And there really is this knowledge gap—for me anyway. The poem expects me to be familiar with a lot of classical texts and references in a way that I'm just not. That often puts my students off when I assign them to read this. As a reader you can feel alienated when—to quote Abrams again—the "fund of shared knowledge" being drawn upon is not, in fact, shared.

**Chi:** Yeah, and in this poem that sense of alienation can begin with the title!

**Chad:** Exactly.

["Nifty" by Ballpoint]

**Chad:** So, Chi, who was Maecenas, then?

**Chi:** He's a real historical figure named Gaius Maecenas, a Roman who lived from 70 to 8 B.C. He was an important political figure in ancient Rome and an advisor to Caesar Augustus, the first Roman emperor. But he was equally known for being a patron of several Augustan poets, including Horace and Virgil. Horace actually writes the first of his *Odes* to Maecenas.

**Chad:** Interesting! So Wheatley might have titled her poem "To Maecenas" as an allusion or homage to Horace?

**Chi:** Right. Maecenas also wrote poetry himself, which might be why Wheatley sort of describes him like a poet in her own poem. But none of his poetry survives. And according to Seneca and Quintilian, it wasn't very good anyway...

**Chad:** Ok, that's messed up! [Both laughing] We remember this guy's friends trashing his poetry but don't actually have any of it to judge for ourselves?

**Chi:** I know, I feel for him too. But I don't feel *too* bad because poets and historians have celebrated Maecenas for two thousand years for his incredible influence on some of Rome's most significant poets. So much so, he's become a kind of mythic figure or poetic trope that transcends the real guy.

**Chad:** So is that why Phillis Wheatley is addressing this poem to him? She's invoking this classical image of the poetic patron, almost like invoking the Muses?

**Chi:** Well, sort of. Most of Wheatley's readers over the years have assumed that she is honoring a real, living patron of hers as Maecenas, addressing him or her with this classical epithet.

**Chad:** So who is her Maecenas?

**Chi:** That's one of the things that makes this poem so interesting and a bit cryptic. No one really knows who it is. Readers of Wheatley have suggested a bunch of possibilities over the years from John Wheatley, Phillis Wheatley's owner and guardian, to the Countess of Huntingdon, the English aristocrat who helped her publish her book in Britain. Others have suggested that it's the neoclassical poet, Alexander Pope. Wheatley was a big fan of his. But it's hard to say because she gives us few, if any, clues that would point us to anyone definitively.

**Chad:** That seems really weird, actually. Why write a poem to someone, celebrating them and thanking them for their patronage but also keeping their identity mysterious?

**Chi:** I think there are actually a couple of reasons a poet might do this. One possibility is that her patron wanted to remain anonymous for some reason—maybe they were modest about their own patronage. Or maybe they didn't want to be too closely associated with Wheatley because of her race? Another possibility is that it was obvious to everyone at the time who this patron was, and so it was kind of fun and flattering to write a poem that celebrates them without ever having to name them explicitly.

**Chad:** Ok, both of those reasons make sense.

**Chi:** But I don't think we should stop at saying that this poem is *just* here to recognize a real benefactor. There's clearly so much more going on. And I think Wheatley was being strategic by referring to her patron as Maecenas and keeping their identity ambiguous.

**Chad:** Right—this poem is also largely about Wheatley’s own status as a poet, especially her role as the first African American woman to publish poetry. “To Maecenas” works kind of like an introduction to Wheatley’s book, but because her own claim to poetic authorship is challenged by her status as an enslaved person, the poem also becomes a reflection on poetry itself: Where does poetry come from? Who gets to be a poet? And how do they become one?

**Chi:** Right. It’s very meta. And it’s also a poem about where patrons fit into all of this!

**Chad:** Ooo, say more.

**Chi:** Well, it’s a question of where we get the license or permission to write and publish.

["Live a Long Time" by Hell Nasty]

**Chi:** Imagine for a second that you are in Rome in the first century B.C. You’ve just completed a series of poems that you’d like to publish. How do you do that? How do you get people to read you and regard you as a poet?

**Chad:** Are there publishers I can go to, like the Roman equivalent of Penguin Random House?

**Chi:** [laughing] Nope!

**Chad:** Ok, and there’s no Amazon to help me self-publish. Can’t I just make a few copies of my book and try to sell them in the street?

**Chi:** Maybe. But without publishers, is there an established literary market to help connect you to potential customers? Also, ancient Rome didn’t have copyright laws, so there is nothing to stop another person from taking your poems and selling them for their own profit. *And* Rome doesn’t have anything like the right of freedom of speech, so you would have to be careful not to say anything that would get you censured or punished in some other way.

**Chad:** [laughing] Ok, all of that does sound pretty daunting. I’m guessing you’re going to tell me that this is where patrons come in?

**Chi:** Exactly. It's not just that patrons supported artists financially. They were a necessity because they also used their power to promote and protect the artists they patronized.

**Chad:** And so that's why Maecenas, a patron, can come to be remembered almost as well as poets like Horace or Virgil.

**Chi:** Exactly. They were this essential part of the literary ecosystem, how literature was produced and circulated. We get a glimpse of this in Wheatley's poem, actually, at the end when she writes, "Then grant, Maecenas, thy paternal rays,/ Hear me propitious, and *defend* my lays." Defend, right? Today we have laws and publishing houses and editors to do all of this. Back in first-century Rome, they had patrons.

**Chad:** So maybe this poem is drawing a comparison between the role of a patron like Maecenas in ancient Rome and one in her own time. Which is interesting, because neoclassical poets like Alexander Pope are often celebrated as being some of the first professional writers, who made a living from the sale of their work so that they didn't need patrons.

**Chi:** Yeah, that's an image that Pope himself promoted. There's a line where he says that because of his translations of Homer, "I live and thrive,/ Indebted to no Prince or Peer alive." He also describes himself in an earlier line as "Un-plac'd, unpension'd, no Man's Heir, or Slave." It's pretty audacious. And you can imagine someone like Phillis Wheatley reading that and wondering how she, an *actual* slave, can "live and thrive" as a poet.

[“Tin Man” by Ava Low]

**Chad:** So how do you think invoking Maecenas helps?

**Chi:** Well, for one thing, I think it helps us understand that this might be a cheekier poem than people often think.

**Chad:** [laughing] How so?

**Chi:** We could read it in one way as a response to Pope: look, I'm an African and an enslaved person in the British colonies. I need a patron. And if it was good enough for Virgil and Horace, then it's good enough for me.

**Chad:** That *is* cheeky.

**Chi:** But I think it also sets us up for the playful and complicated relationship that the speaker of the poem has to Maecenas. He gets to be the equal of these great Greco-Roman poets, while she is described as somehow inferior.

**Chad:** Right. The whole first stanza is about how Maecenas has an “equal genius” to the poets. Then she celebrates two of those poets, Homer and Virgil, in the next two stanzas by describing her experience of reading them. She is moved to tears by Homer’s *Iliad*, but her experience with Virgil is a bit different. Reading him inspires feelings of competition: she basically says, this is awesome—could I write something like this?

**Chi:** Yes, she asks if she could “rival thine and Vergil’s page/ Or claim the Muses” the way they do. She even imagines her poetry arising “in *bolder* notes” than Virgil’s. But the answer to this question—at least at the end of this stanza and in the next one—is no: “But here I sit, and mourn a grov’ling mind/ That fain would mount, and ride upon the wind.”

**Chad:** Okay, Chi, you’re an actual poet. But as something of a failed poet myself, I find these lines so poignant: in the person the poem addresses here (is it Maecenas or Virgil? I’m not sure) the Muses fan “the bright immortal fire.” But the speaker, by contrast, “cannot raise the song.” “The fault’ring music,” she says, “dies upon my tongue.” I totally know how that feels—reading an amazing work of poetry and feeling so unequal to it that it’s bitter rather than pleasurable. Or maybe a weird combination of bitterness and pleasure. But Wheatley is definitely *not* a failed poet, so am I supposed to read this as sincere? Is this where you see the cheekiness coming in? Because this poem is introducing her successfully published book of poetry. It’s claiming some authority and authenticity for her as a poet.

**Chi:** Exactly! But in this sly and subversive way, right? And I think your confusion about whether the speaker is addressing Maecenas or Virgil isn’t accidental either. It’s saying, *you’re all my heroes and I’m coming for your jobs!*

**Chad:** [laughing] Right, which is what happens in the second to last stanza, when she says that she’ll “snatch a laurel” from Maecenas’s honored head while he indulgently smiles at her for doing it.

**Chi:** Yes, we’ll talk more about this moment at the end of the episode, but it’s the denouement of the contrast that the poem has been making between Maecenas and Wheatley’s speaker. Maecenas here seems less like a particular historical person and



more like a stand-in for poetic authority or legitimacy. He's her patron in so far as he's the one from whom she's going to outright steal that legitimacy. The whole idea of poetic patronage gets *really* murky here. Is the speaker claiming that authority for herself by writing this poem, or is the poem a sincere tribute to some powerful person whose influence and protection Wheatley required?

**Chad:** There's this part in the preface to Wheatley's book that claims she had to be convinced by her friends to publish her poetry: Okay, so it says, "The following poems were written originally for the amusement of the author, as they were the products of her leisure moments. She had no intention ever to have published them; nor would they now have made their appearance, but at the importunity of many of her best, and most generous friends; to whom she considers herself, as under the greatest obligations." I find this preface to be so weird—it's a totally different picture of the book coming into the world than her snatching a laurel crown from the head of Maecenas. To me, this poem—and the others in her book—seem to contradict the idea that Wheatley never had any intention to publish them if she could.

**Chi:** You know the old saying about a tree falling in the forest? If Phillis Wheatley writes a transcendently good poem and no one reads it, does it matter?

**Chad:** It obviously does, right??

**Chi:** Yeah, in "To Maecenas" Land, private triumph is *totally not good enough!* And the reason is that Wheatley is trying to establish the legitimacy of an African poet in this western tradition of poetry that she has inherited.

**Chad:** I almost feel like when she addresses the muses in stanza five and asks why only "one of Afric's sable race," Terence, gets to be a poet, the implication is that she's also asking this about herself. Like she's saying, hellooo—why would there only be one of me? [laughing] There's probably others; it's just that our genius and talent is getting ignored or denied for arbitrary reasons.

**Chi:** Right. And getting denied by powerful and influential people like Thomas Jefferson, as you pointed out in our last Wheatley episode.

**Chad:** So it's clear that Wheatley *did* need patrons if people like Jefferson were criticizing her as less than a poet. But it also seems like she doesn't want these patrons to take all of the credit for her poem. The preface makes it sound like they discovered this lone African poetic genius. And she wants to resist that and say, No, there were others before me, like Terence, and there could be others besides me now.

["Watch Out" by Joachim Nilsson]

**Chi:** So we could lump all of this under allusion 1: Maecenas. But let's go back to the second stanza, where Wheatley makes an allusion to the *Iliad* in lines 17 through 20.

["Obo" by Lukas Got Lucky]

**Chad:** I love this part! "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."

**Chi:** The scene she references comes at the beginning of Book XVI of the *Iliad*. The Greeks are maintaining a siege against the city of Troy, led by Agamemnon. The only problem is that their greatest hero, Achilles, is refusing to fight because Agamemnon dishonored him earlier in the poem. Agamemnon later attempts to apologize to Achilles and restore his honor, but Achilles is not having it. He refuses to fight unless the Trojan army reaches his ships and starts burning them. But Achilles has a close friend named Patroclus who is watching the Greeks get stomped by the Trojans. He's so upset by this that he finally breaks down sobbing in front of Achilles. Achilles is like, are you crying like a little kid? And Patroclus rebukes him! Here's what he says in Butler's translation of the *Iliad*: "Are you still, O Achilles, so inexorable? May it never be my lot to nurse such a passion as you have done, to the baning of your own good name. Who in future story will speak well of you unless you now save the Argives from ruin? You know no pity."

**Chad:** Intense.

**Chi:** Totally intense.

**Chad:** Some of my dad's family is Greek, and I can confirm that a lot of family issues get worked out through sobbing and yelling. [laughs]

**Chi:** So so after this, Patroclus makes a fateful request: he says that if Achilles himself will not fight, he should at least allow Patroclus to lead the Myrmidons, Achilles' soldiers, into battle while wearing Achilles' armor. As a kind of morale thing...

**Chad:** I love how Wheatley describes this scene in terms of the emotional stakes of the relationship between these two men. Patroclus is "prone" on the beach—he's made vulnerable by his emotional breakdown in front of Achilles. He "feels the pangs of love"—love for both the Greeks who are being killed in battle *and* for Achilles. It's such a

good illustration of how love for someone can also heighten your frustration with them, and vice versa.

**Chi:** Yes, I also like that she describes Patroclus as moving Pelides' (which is another name for Achilles) "tend'rest passions." Achilles is *not* a character associated with tender feelings typically. But the tears and appeals of his close friend bring those passions out in him.

**Chad:** And all of this is even *more* poignant because, if you've read the *Iliad*, you know the way this story ends. Achilles gives Patroclus his armor, but he warns him to stop after he has beaten the Trojans back from the Greek ships. What follows are all of these stunning fight scenes—you know, guys getting speared through the thigh or having their brains battered inside their helmets. Patroclus beats the Trojans all the way back to the gates of Troy instead of stopping like Achilles had warned. And it's there that Apollo steps in and helps the Trojans to kill him.

**Chi:** Even if you haven't finished the *Iliad*, the poem includes this pretty heavy bit of foreshadowing right after Patroclus asks Achilles to borrow his armor: "He knew not what he was asking, nor that he was suing for his own destruction."

**Chad:** So good. But, Chi, I'm curious why you think Wheatley alludes to this scene in particular. I mean, I think it's obvious that she just finds this part of the poem especially moving. She writes that when "great Patroclus courts Achilles' aid,/ the grateful tribute of *my* tears is paid." So the tribute for Patroclus's tears isn't just Achilles's help but the affective response of her as a reader. She cries with Patroclus.

**Chi:** I totally agree. But I think there's also something important about the special relationship between Patroclus and Achilles. It's one of the more celebrated friendships in classical literature. They're incredibly close, right? Patroclus is the *only* person that brings out the tender side of Achilles, who is otherwise pretty unyielding and arrogant. But Patroclus' heroic fighting in Book XVI is also partly due to the fact that he's wearing Achilles armor and making the Trojans think that the greatest hero on the Greek side has rejoined the fight.

**Chad:** Yeah, I can't help noticing that Patroclus borrowing Achilles' armor seems to parallel the part in stanza six of Wheatley's poem where the speaker steals the laurel from Maecenas' head.

**Chi:** Right! But do you think it makes a difference that Patroclus *convinces* Achilles with tears while the speaker of Wheatley's poem "snatches" the laurel?

**Chad:** I'm honestly not sure! It seems like, once again, the poem is giving us two different versions of the same relationship without explicitly telling us how to reconcile or decide between them.

**Chi:** Yes, it's another ambivalent picture of the patron: Achilles clothes Patroclus in his own armor but he also gets him killed by refusing to fight!

**Chad:** And Maecenas, the guy whose name is synonymous with artistic patronage, does a Mona Lisa smile while Wheatley's poetic persona takes his crown and puts it on herself.

**Chi:** Why don't we move on to that line, actually, because it's our third and final big allusion.

**Chad:** Sounds good!

**Chi:** And maybe it will shed some retroactive light on the *Iliad* allusion.

[“Mercedes” by Aesyne]

**Chi:** There's a lot to unpack in this allusion. Maybe we should first talk about the laurel itself.

**Chad:** Right. In ancient Greece, laurel wreaths were placed on people's heads to symbolize authority, excellence, or victory—especially in athletic or poetic competitions. But if you're having a hard time picturing what laurel is, it's the same thing as bay leaf, that thing that some people add to soups or stews. It would smell amazing to wear a crown made of these things.

**Chi:** And it's still a symbol of poetic excellence today, though in less obvious ways. The “laureate” in “poet laureate” comes from this.

**Chad:** [laughing] Somehow I had never put that etymology together. So the laurel is an allusion to...just ancient Greek poetic competitions in general? Or to the myth of Apollo and Daphne? I think that's why some people believe the laurel is associated with Apollo and, by proxy, to sports and poetry, right?

**Chi:** This is what really distinguishes this allusion from the last one. Wheatley's allusion to the *Iliad* is pretty obvious. And that's what a lot of allusions are like—if you are familiar with the intertext being alluded to.

**Chad:** Right, if you share that fund of knowledge.

**Chi:** But a lot of allusions are not so obvious, even if you're a really well-read person. Sometimes it's ambiguous whether an allusion is an allusion at all. And that's the case with this snatching of the laurel wreath.

**Chad:** Ok, so if it *is* an allusion, what are the possible texts being alluded to?

**Chi:** You're not going to be surprised by this: [laughing] there's a lot of disagreement among Wheatley's readers. [Chad laughs] Some read it as just an original use of a common classical trope. A couple others think it's an allusion to another New England poet of the time named Mather Byles. He has a poem in devotion of John Milton in which he writes, "with ambitious Hand, I'd boldly snatch/ A spreading Branch from his immortal Laurels." The poem concludes with Byles determining that he isn't up to the task of successfully imitating Milton's *Paradise Lost*, so perhaps Wheatley was alluding to him in her own poem about poetic heroes and predecessors.

**Chad:** Ok, I see the similarity between the lines, but Wheatley seems to be using the image in a different way. For one, in Byles's poem he's just snatching a branch from Milton's laurel, not taking the whole thing off of his head. And for two, Byles's poem doesn't include the indulgent smile of Milton the way that Wheatley does for Maecenas. (In fact, it's hard to imagine John Milton smiling "indulgently" about *anything*.) [Chi chuckles] That smile makes the whole image so much more complex.

**Chi:** Right. I think Wheatley's poem goes *way harder* than Byles's [laughs]. I also find the similarity between these two poems more superficial than profound. It's possible that Wheatley got the image from Byles, but I don't think his poem actually sheds any light on hers. There's something so strange, renegade, and competitive about the line in "To Maecenas"; the intertext that suggested itself to me was actually Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part 3*.

**Chad:** Oh, that's a totally different kind of allusion. Are you talking about the famously long soliloquy that Richard of Gloucester gets?

**Chi:** Exactly. Richard is this preposterously villainous character: a homicidal figure who is constantly plotting to put himself on the throne. And like you said, in Act III, Scene ii,

he gets this amazing speech where he describes just how Machiavellian he is willing to be. Chad, could you read it for us?

**Chad:** Oh man, I wish we could get a real Shakespearean actor instead, but I'll do my best. [Clears throat] Ok, here we go:

["Live a Long Time" by Hell Nasty]

Why, I can smile, and murder whiles I smile,  
And cry 'Content!' to that which grieves my heart,  
And wet my cheeks with artificial tears,  
And frame my face to all occasions.  
I'll drown more sailors than the mermaid shall;  
I'll slay more gazers than the basilisk;  
I'll play the orator as well as Nestor,  
Deceive more slyly than Ulysses could,  
And, like a Sinon, take another Troy.  
I can add colors to the chameleon,  
Change shapes with Proteus for advantages,  
And set the murderous Machiavel to school.  
Can I do this, and cannot get a crown?  
Tut, were it farther off, I'll pluck it down.

**Chi:** That plucking of the crown that Richard is so desperate to get reminds me of Wheatley's snatching the laurel leaf. But what do you think? Is this what she's alluding to?

**Chad:** I mean, I can't say for certain whether Wheatley read *Henry VI, Part 3*, but it's totally plausible. And either way, I feel like this is a much more interesting intertext for the poem.

**Chi:** Yeah, I feel like it draws out the subversive subtext of a poem that people too often read as obsequious.

**Chad:** The scholar Paula Bennett describes this part of the poem as a moment of rage condensed "into a single bitter gesture." And I just love that this allusion is able to contain both an image of sincere, if complex, gratitude *and* bitter rage.

["Find Your Own Way" by DJ DENZ The Rooster ]

**Chi:** I feel like this is something that allusions are especially good at. Allusions connect the poem to the world or other texts, but by doing so they can also create *tension* and ambiguity for us readers. They can make us wonder what we know and don't know in common with the poet.

**Chad:** This is what freaked out the New Critics, right? These American literary scholars in the 1940s and 50s named Wimsatt and Beardsley had this concept that they called the intentional fallacy. Basically, they didn't think that readers of literature should try to figure out what the poet meant or what they "intended." They should simply try to interpret the poem with the material that the poem itself offers.

**Chi:** Right, and for this reason they were very suspicious of allusions. They thought that encountering an allusion distracts us from the poem we're reading and instead puts our attention on whatever text the poem is alluding to. Or, worse, it makes us wonder, "Was the poet alluding to this text? I wonder if they even read it?" Pretty soon we're thinking about what was on the poet's bookshelf instead of what is actually in the poem they wrote!

**Chad:** I personally think it's fine to wonder about the intentions a poet had while writing a poem. But I think Wimsatt and Beardsley still make a good point about interpretation and the difficulties that allusions pose. They write that when we're trying to find evidence to support our interpretation of a poem, it's easy to think that we need to go out in search of evidence that is outside the poem itself. Like we might try to track down a letter by Phillis Wheatley where she explains what she meant in this poem or where she mentions her love of *Henry VI, Part 3*. But this kind of evidence is paradoxically private. It's not accessible to the vast majority of readers, so why would we need it in order to correctly interpret the poem?

**Chi:** The better kind of evidence for interpretation, they argue, is evidence that is inside the poem itself. By this they mean linguistic stuff like the order and meanings of words in the poem; the way that phrases or images might harmonize or contrast within the poem; and our own knowledge of the language and culture that the poem is in. This kind of evidence is public, it's shared between the poet and her readers.

**Chad:** But what happens when what is inside a poem is something that makes us question or doubt the extent of what is shared between us and the poet?

**Chi:** Good question. That's why allusions are so productive for Wheatley's poetry. She is doing things with a language and a literary tradition that she belongs to only precariously, and as an African and an enslaved person. You might say that she

borrowed this language and tradition like Patroclus borrows Achilles' armor. And in fact a lot of people read Wheatley as merely a good imitator of other neoclassical poets. But that judgment, I think, is inadequate to the poetry that she actually wrote, certainly to this poem which seems to *anticipate* this judgment and even argue against it.

**Chad:** Yes! She's not just playing neoclassical dress up. She's doing her own thing with the classical texts and conventions that she loves so much. Paula Bennett, who I mentioned a bit earlier, writes something similar, that while Wheatley "apparently did all she could to absorb her owners' linguistic and religious culture," she didn't forget, or allow her readers to forget, that she was African and an enslaved person. Instead, Bennett writes that "Wheatley used the irony of her situation...as the basis for her speaker's voice and persona....Trying neither to evade the consequences of her racialized difference nor to hide behind European literary conventions, Wheatley placed at the center of her work the tensions and possibilities her difference produced."

**Chi:** Wheatley insists that she belongs in the poetic tradition that extends from Homer, Virgil, and Terence down to Shakespeare, Milton, and Pope while being frank about the ways that her culture exploits and attempts to dehumanize her. And she does so by alluding to this tradition and exhibiting her own command of it. This is what Henry Louis Gates calls the "double-voiced" quality of the Black tradition. It often has to say two things at once or be read in two ways at once.

**Chad:** And I think Gates also says that the Black literary tradition is one of "texts that talk to other texts." Allusion is definitely one of those ways that Wheatley simultaneously connects herself to the classical poets she admired, participates in the poetic conventions of her day, *and* talks back to the people who want to deny her the right to be read and thought of as a poet.

**Chi:** So I think we can safely say that it made sense for Wheatley to leave the identity of her Maecenas ambiguous.

**Chad:** Definitely! He's a symbol of that equivocal embrace and rejection of the classics that African American literature has been doing since Wheatley.

[theme music: "Who Dat" by Amber Spill]

**Chi:** Thank you for listening to Old-School.



**Chad:** The Old-School podcast is brought to you by the Berkeley Institute and the Department of African American Studies at UC Berkeley. The podcast is funded by gifts from Boyd and Jill Smith and the Foundation for Excellence in Higher Education.

**Chi:** Thanks to Amber Spill for our theme music. And to Poesis Creative for designing all of our graphics. And to the National Humanities Center and the Digital Humanities Center at San Diego State for helping me learn how to podcast!

**Chad:** Check out our show notes if you want citations for stuff that we quoted in this episode, bonus content, and Old-School reading recommendations. You can find it at the African American Intellectual Traditions website: [aaiti.berkeley.edu](http://aaiti.berkeley.edu).

**Chi:** See you later back at the podcast; our next episode is about W. E. B Du Bois. And we have a sidebar mini-episode about Jupiter Hammon that we hope you check out ! It's Black + Classics, folks! Thanks for listening to Old-School. Bye for now.