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ENG 312

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**"Stirring the Pot": Rhetorical Strategies of Protest in the Works of Phillis Wheatley,  
Harriet Jacobs, and Jonathan Swift**

*[A quiet coffee shop, midday. Sunlight filters through tall windows, catching dust motes midair. A few customers murmur over open laptops or half-read books. At a small corner table, Phillis Wheatley sits upright with a tea in front of her, a well-worn book tucked beneath one hand. She gazes out the window, thoughtful. Moments later, Harriet Jacobs enters, scanning the room before making her way over.]*

JACOBS

Mind if I join you? It's a bit busier here than I thought.

WHEATLEY

Not at all, I was just thinking about your writing actually. It's so weird that we both write for audiences that have power over us. You know? It's like we have to make them see us as human

JACOBS

Yeah I get what you're saying. It feels like we're constantly trying to get their attention in the right way, and we have to say just the right thing to make them realize what's wrong.

WHEATLEY

Exactly. I always have to choose my words carefully. I have to make them listen, but also be sure not to push too hard. Honestly, if I didn't speak their language, I don't think they would listen at all.

JACOBS

Same here. In *Incidents In The Life of A Slave Girl*, I had to show them the realities of slavery, so that they see the damage they have done. But I also had to hold back so that I don't make them feel too guilty or they'd just shut down.

SWIFT [*walking up after overhearing their conversation*]

Guilty? I don't think we should have to be polite about it. If they don't listen, make them so uncomfortable that they have no choice but to listen. You can't tiptoe around people's feelings if you want to make a real impact. I made sure they couldn't ignore it, you know, I put it right in front of them. Like my proposal of turning children into food. Sure, it was absurd, but I guarantee they were thinking about it long after they finished reading.

JACOBS

That's... one way to get someone's attention. But I'm not trying to shock anyone into guilt. I need them to feel like they are a part of the solution. Don't get me wrong, I don't shy away from the truth, but I also want them to feel empowered. There has to be a balance. Enough guilt to make them care, but not so much that it paralyzes them.

SWIFT

Have either of you seen what happens when you're too subtle? The audience pats themselves on the back for understanding you, then goes right back to their mutton and

tea. I wasn't writing just to entertain. Satire is a weapon, and mine had to be sharp. When I suggested the poor sell their babies as food, I wasn't being absurd for fun. I was holding up a mirror to the British elite and saying, "Look what you've become." Did they laugh? Sure. But they also squirmed.

#### WHEATLEY

But some readers only see the absurdity and miss the meaning. I had to be careful. I wanted my audience to reflect on my humanity, not hide behind a joke. That's why I used their own values to appeal to them. In "On Being Brought from Africa to America," I wrote, "Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain, / May be refined, and join the angelic train." I didn't insult them. I reminded them of their own teachings.

*[Jacobs nods.]*

#### JACOBS

Exactly. You catch more flies with honey, Swift. I had to win over white women who'd never stepped outside their comfort zone. "The mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings toward her but those of jealousy and rage." I had to show women in the north that slavery went against their values, I had to lay bare the truth. I wrote about motherhood to show them that slavery destroyed the very things they held sacred: home, family, love.

#### SWIFT

I admire your restraint, truly. But there's something satisfying about watching people squirm. Guilt is powerful, why not use it to your full advantage?

## JACOBS

Because sometimes, guilt turns into denial. When I wrote *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, I didn't just want my readers to be uncomfortable. I wanted them to feel accountable. But I also needed them to imagine themselves in my place. To see that slavery could corrupt even the most sacred bonds between mother and child. I wanted to say, "this could be you, if you were born in my skin." That's a more enduring discomfort.

## WHEATLEY

Harriet's right. We can't risk losing them to shame. I tried to create a connection. When I wrote my poem to George Whitefield, I wasn't just flattering, I was asserting my place in their literary and moral world. I made sure they couldn't ignore that a Black woman could write with both reverence and authority.

## SWIFT

But doesn't it frustrate you... Having to ask permission to speak? Having to wrap your genius in their language, their values? I didn't write to be liked. I wrote to expose hypocrisy. When I said poor Irish children should be sold at a year old, it wasn't because I believed it. It was because my audience needed the horror spelled out.

## JACOBS

It may cut through hypocrisy, but who gets hurt in the process? And who turns away before it sinks in?

*[she pauses, taking a sip of her tea]*

You said earlier that satire is a weapon. But I think of my writing as a lantern. It lights up the corners they don't want to look at. Like the attic I hid in for seven years. I described every splinter, every inch of that crawlspace. I needed them to feel what it meant to live like that, to fear that much. I wrote, "The air was stifling; the darkness total... I suffered for weeks." Not to shock them, but to make them witness what they couldn't excuse.

#### WHEATLEY

That's the hardest part, isn't it. Getting them to bear witness. I knew many readers would dismiss me. So I presented myself as polished, educated, devout...someone they couldn't ignore. And still, I had to prove myself. I wrote with elegance because it was the only way they'd read me.

#### SWIFT

But what if they read you, and still do nothing? That's what I couldn't stand. I didn't just want to say something—I wanted to leave them no place to hide.

*[He leans forward, voice sharp.]*

When I listed the culinary benefits of Irish infants, I wasn't writing for the Irish. I was writing to those who had the luxury of apathy. It was cruel and absurd, but cruelty was already there. I just exposed it.

#### JACOBS

But not all readers need cruelty to wake up. Some need a hand to guide them out of the dark.

WHEATLEY

Or a mirror that shows them what they could become, if they chose compassion.

*[They sit in silence for a moment as a child giggles from a nearby table. Swift watches her, a strange softness in his expression.]*

SWIFT

I suppose there's a place for both methods.

JACOBS *[smiling faintly]*

We all write with what we've lived. I didn't have the freedom to be ironic. I had to be real.

WHEATLEY

And I didn't have the freedom to be angry. I had to be gracious.

SWIFT

And I...well, I had too much freedom, maybe. But I used it to mock the powerful. And I'd do it again.

JACOBS

Then maybe that's what ties us together. We wrote toward justice. You with your satire, me with my testimony, and Wheatley with her verse.

WHEATLEY

And all of us hoping our words outlast the silence.

*[A lull settles over the table. The coffee shop hums quietly, soft jazz overhead, steam hissing from the espresso machine. Outside, the late afternoon sun filters through the windows.]*

SWIFT

Strange to think we're still being read. Still being discussed.

JACOBS

That's the hope, isn't it? That our words outlive us. That they keep speaking, long after we're gone.

WHEATLEY

And that someone, somewhere, is still listening.

*[Their drinks now half-empty, the three writers sit in the kind of thoughtful silence that follows real conversation. Not agreement, exactly, but understanding.]*