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The Poetry and Activism of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

Sarah Elizabeth Bennison

William Still, in his 1871 publication *The Underground Railroad*, called his colleague and friend Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, “the leading colored poet in the United States” (Foster 5). In speaking of his choice to devote thirty pages of *The Underground Railroad* to Frances Harper, Still wrote, “There is not to be found in any written work portraying the Anti-slavery struggle, (except in the form of narratives) as we are aware of, any sketch of the labors of any eminent colored woman.” Despite her exclusion from most accounts of literary history, Frances Harper was the most popular African-American writer of the nineteenth century (Foster 4). While Harper has been “rediscovered” by literary scholars in the past decade, emphasis has been placed predominantly on her life as a popular speaker and activist for abolitionism, temperance, and women’s rights. Harper’s widely sold novel *Iola Leroy* has also received attention. But less has been written about her poetry or its connection to her other writing and activism. Serious consideration of Harper’s “social protest poetry” (Graham ii) was initiated by Maryemma Graham in her 1988 edition of *Complete Poems of Frances E.W. Harper* and continued by Francis Smith Foster in her 1990 reader *A Brighter Coming Day*, which pays particular attention to Harper’s proto-feminist concerns and what Maxwell Whiteman calls Harper’s early “black power” impulses (Graham iii).¹ Harper’s poetry, however, continues to merit further analysis.

This paper looks closely at the poetry of Frances Harper through an analysis of five poems included in three of Harper’s twelve volumes of poetry: her first
publication in 1854, Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects; her 1872 volume entitled Sketches of Southern Life; and Atlanta Offering: Poems, published in 1895 toward the end of Harper’s career. These poems reveal the appropriateness of the medium of poetry for an African-American poet like Harper, the ways in which she used the popular but predominantly white poetic form of the ballad to appeal to large audiences, her positioning of the ideals of the “Cult of True Womanhood” to achieve her literary goals, and her incorporation of black vernacular in order to capture and elevate a distinctly African-American culture. My analysis of Harper’s strategies of representation demonstrates her use of rhetorical, structural, and thematic masking techniques to convey her most subversive messages.

Harper was born in Baltimore, Maryland, on September 24, 1825, the only daughter of free parents. Orphaned by her third year of life, she was raised by her uncle, the Reverend William Watkins, and attended the school he ran. Due to the invisibility of women in public records, little information exists about Harper’s racial background, an ambiguity which in adult life enabled her to appeal to audiences across race and gender lines. Harper’s mother has also remained unidentified, and, as Frances Smith Foster points out in A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader, it is unusual that Harper’s father also remains anonymous given the family’s social prominence in Baltimore.

Harper’s racial identity was remarked upon during her public life. Foster writes, “it is quite possible that Frances Watkins, like many African-Americans, was fathered by a white man” (6). One writer described her as “a red mulatto,” and reporter Grace Greenwood remarked that she was “about as colored as some of the Cuban belles I have met with at Saratoga” (Still 812). In a letter to William Still, Harper wrote, “I don’t know but that you would laugh if you were to hear some of the remarks which my lectures call forth: ‘She is a man,’ or ‘She is not colored, she is painted’” (Foster 126-27). This ambiguity about Harper’s gender and race reflects nineteenth-century ideologies which both discouraged women from speaking in the public sphere and identified racially mixed individuals with the African American community. The silence surrounding Harper’s racial parentage also points to the commonality of racially mixed children in the slave culture of nineteenth-century America and the anxiety surrounding public acknowledgement of this issue. Raised among the African-American, abolitionist community of her uncle, William Watkins, Harper embraced her African-American identity and did not speak of her possibly white father, perhaps, as Frances Foster speculates, as “a conscious attempt to avoid any possibility that her status as a woman of distinction might be challenged by white bourgeois audiences” (6).

In part because of William Watkins, Harper’s primary caregiver after her parents’ death, Harper devoted her life to the betterment of her race. Watkins was a black abolitionist who imparted to Harper a sense of duty and activism. Watkins’ influence and strong racial identity led Harper to her life’s work as a teacher, writer, and activist for the abolitionist cause. Although she left Watkins’ school in 1839 at the age of thirteen to earn a living, Harper continued to write and published her first collection of poetry and prose in 1845 enti-
tled *Forest Leaves.* Apparently no copy of this work has survived. In 1850 Harper became a teacher at the Union Seminary near Columbus, Ohio, a school operated by the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Around 1852 she left this position for another teaching position in Little York, Pennsylvania (Daniel 1-2).

Although born free, Harper's awareness of the difficulties of her race was heightened in 1853 with the passage of a law in her home state of Maryland that made free blacks entering the state from the North liable to be sold as slaves. In addition to this threat, Harper's sense of activism was encouraged through her work with Philadelphia activist William Still and his involvement with the Underground Railroad. Reacting to the continued violence and discrimination against her people, Harper embarked on a speaking career that began in August 1854, when she delivered the first of many antislavery lectures in New Bedford, Massachusetts, entitled "Education and the Elevation of the Colored Race." The immediate success of this speech led to further involvement in the antislavery movement as a lecturer and a writer. Harper was hired as a speaker for the Maine Anti-Slavery Society and traveled throughout that state for two years. From 1856 to 1860 she also spoke in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, and other states. Reporter Grace Greenwood (Sara J. Lippincott) wrote of her speaking style: "She . . . speaks without notes, with gestures few and fitting. Her manner is marked by dignity and composure. She is never assuming, never theatrical" (Still 779).

Unlike many of the female activists who remained single in part because of the difficulty of resolving their public role with nineteenth-century conceptions of marriage and domesticity, Frances Watkins married Fenton Harper on November 22, 1860, in Cincinnati, Ohio, and they lived together on a farm near Columbus until his death four years later. They had one daughter, Mary, and after her husband's death, Frances continued the lecture circuit with her daughter. Harper's role as a mother and wife is significant in light of her prolific representation of the destruction of families through slavery in poems such as "The Slave Mother" which will be addressed later. As a wife and mother, Harper also adhered to popular conceptions of womanhood, a fact essential to her acceptance to both white and black, male and female genteel audiences. The significance of marriage in nineteenth-century America, as Lillian O'Connor writes in *Pioneer Women Orators,* cannot be underestimated. In short, as she writes, "Failure to marry was synonymous with failure in life" (8).

Harper continued to work throughout her life; her later writing included *Sketches of Southern Life* (1872), a series of related poems; *The Martyr of Alabama and Other Poems* (c. 1894); a long narrative poem *Moses: A Story of the Nile* (1869); and a novel, *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1892). Frances Harper died in Philadelphia in 1911 at the age of eighty-five. The following elegy by W. E. B. Du Bois, appearing in the *Crisis* in remembrance of Frances Harper, points to her significance in African-American literary history:

It is, however, for her attempts to forward literature among colored people that Frances Harper deserves most to be remembered. She was not a great singer, but she had some sense of song; she was not a great
writer, but she wrote much worth reading. She was, above all, sincere. She took her writing soberly and earnestly; she gave her life to it, and it gave her fair support.

(Daniel 16)

The exclusionary nature of literary history has made it difficult to trace a history of African-American, particularly women's poetry. J. Saunders Redding was one of the first scholars to refute the notion of a distinct genre of African-American literature:

American Negro literature, so called, is American literature in fact, and that American Negro literature cannot be lopped off from the main body of American literary expression without doing grave harm to both as complementary instruments of historical and social diagnosis and as the joint and articulated corpus of American experience.

(8)

Joan Sherman, in her 1974 book *Invisible Poets*, agrees with Redding in her assertion that “Black poetry in the nineteenth century strongly supports and illustrates this proposition, for it is American in subject, versification, and attitudes.” While it is true, as Sherman goes on to say, that “In the entire body of black verse published between 1829 and 1900 there is scarcely a trace of those qualities commonly assigned to the Negro temperament (or an African heritage) such as pleasant irony, sensuousness, tropic nonchalance, primitive rhythms, or emotional raciness” (xx), it is also important to recognize the ways in which poetry serves as an accessible medium for a writer such as Frances Harper.

Scholarship on Harper and other black women poets has increased since Sherman's identification of African American “invisible poets,” and Harper is included in the canon of African American literature represented by *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997). However, scholarship in this field largely fails to address Harper as a poet in her own right. Rather than engage in close examination of Harper’s poetry, scholars have used Harper’s prose, speeches, and poetry to position Harper as a literary and historical figure representative of “black women” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Foster and Graham for example, offer short introductory analyses of Harper’s life and work, but their books function as compilations of Harper’s work void of close analysis. Essays by Foster and Farrah Jasmine Griffith place Harper in her historical context without examining her role as a poet. While scholars like Harold Bloom include Harper in their lists of African American women authors and give some attention to her poetry, extensive examination of Harper’s unique use of poetic form and function is lacking from such accounts.2

Not only was Frances Harper a “civil rights leader, abolitionist” and “suffragette” (Bloom 106), she was also perhaps first and foremost a poet. That Harper chose to devote twelve of her fifteen publications to poetry reflects the effectiveness of the medium for her literary goals and cultural position as an African-American free woman. “The Slave Mother” (1854), “Vashti” (1870), “Aunt Chloe” (1872), “The Dying Bondman” (1884), and “Songs for the Peo-
ple” (1895) demonstrate Harper’s use of both African-American and white poetic traditions to highlight issues of gender and race to audiences across gender and racial lines.

The oral tradition evident in African-American religious culture is connected to and interchangeable with poetry. As an orator and active public speaker, Harper was the only poet of the twenty-six African-American poets uncovered by Joan Sherman who made her living through the publication and public readings of her poetry (xviii). Her role as a public poet-lecturer was not unlike that of African-American preachers whose speaking has close affinities with poetic form. Marcellus Blount illustrates the connection between preaching and poetry in his reference to Lydia Child, who wrote of Julia Pell, a black itinerant preacher. This “dusky priestess of eloquence” (585), as Child called her, is not only a unique contribution of the female voice to the public sphere; it also shows the facility with which Bell’s sermon translates to poetry in the written form. Blount records the following excerpt of Bell’s sermon:

Silence in Heaven!
The Lord said to Gabriel,
bid all the angels keep silence.
Go up into the third heavens,
and tell the archangels to hush their golden harps.
Let the sea stop its roaring,
and the earth be still.
What’s the matter now?
Why, man has sinned,
and who shall save him?
Let there be silence,
while God makes search for a Messiah.

Poetry, like preaching, is distinguished from other forms of writing by its reliance on orality. In this way, poetry serves as a medium accessible to nineteenth-century African-Americans like Harper for whom oral culture was central.

“The Slave Mother” and Harper’s later poem “The Dying Bondman,” support Alain Locke’s theory that black cultural products are “distinctive hybrids resulting from interpretation of American national and black traits” (Sherman xxi). Harper, like most nineteenth-century African-American poets, wrote poetry that was American in its subject and versification, while demonstrating the sentimentality, musicality, colloquialism, and “elevated” language common to white and black poets. But perhaps because she is one of the few African-American women poets of the nineteenth century, Harper — despite her underlying subversive messages — reflects the predominantly white, American ideals of the “cult of true womanhood.” Barbara Welter describes these ideals:

Erecting the nonproductive woman into a symbol of bourgeois class hegemony, the new bourgeois men of the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s formulated the Cult of True Womanhood, which prescribed a female role
bounded by kitchen and nursery, overlaid with piety and purity, and crowned with subservience.

(13)

Harper used the image of motherhood throughout her poetry to portray black women generally in a favorable light and specifically to reflect her self-conception as a mother who was also a poet.

As a speaker for African-American women who accepted the pervasive nineteenth-century notion that "poetry's province is to convey truth, to teach, to uplift, and reform, and secondarily to give pleasure" (Sherman xxi), Harper sought to defend and re-conceptualize the role of black women in America following Emancipation. While ideas about freed men were more clearly defined, black women struggled to defend their worth. Harper embraced the ideals of the "Cult of True Womanhood" not simply because they were white, dominant ideals but because those parameters defined what it meant to be a "woman" in nineteenth-century America. Victoria Earle Matthews, a nineteenth-century activist, spoke vehemently against the white male patriarchy that not only destroyed women during slavery but also deemed them worthless following Emancipation because of their inability to fulfill the ideals of womanhood. She said before a largely white Christian society, "What a past is ours! There was no attribute of womanhood which had not been sullied — aye, which had not been destroyed, more than in men, all that woman holds sacred, all that ennobles womanhood" (Washington 74).

Minstrel shows, popular from the 1840's, perpetuated stereotypes of black women as immoral, licentious, and over-sexed (Washington 74). These images propelled Harper to paint a different picture of black womanhood based in the Christian morality governing the "Cult of True Womanhood". Although Harper wanted women to have autonomy and power, she remained true to the ideal of the "true woman." As Mary Helen Washington writes, "In spite of their attempts to give their women autonomy and power, both Harper and [Pauline] Hopkins were influenced by the "Cult of True Womanhood," which demanded that women satisfy the obligations of affectional and domestic life" (Washington 76). Driven by her commitment to Christianity, her middle class status, and her interaction with white women, Harper accepted and maintained her place as a traditional woman.4

In an attempt to prove black, female worth in white America while at the same time seeking to carve out a place of power and authority for all women, Harper utilizes masking devices which help her negotiate the "double consciousness" first named by W.E.B. Du Bois. Du Bois describes "veiling" or "masking" as a fundamental part of Negro identity:

[T]he Negro is a sort of a seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world — a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of
others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.

(5)

Harper saw herself through “the revelation of the other world,” the world of white womanhood; for her the Cult of True Womanhood was a mask or “veil” that not coincidentally allowed her to gain a white audience for her work.

From beneath the mask emerge her dramatic and oftentimes horrific accounts of her race’s plight. J. Saunders Redding suggests such a strategy of representation in his assertion that black literature “has been a literature either of purpose or necessity.” Black literary production, according to Redding, is created not simply for “art’s sake” but as a vehicle of political agendas to combat white racism and to prove the capacity of blacks. Redding puts all black literature into two categories: one, the necessity of ends; and two, the necessity of means. He writes:

Negro writers have been obliged to have two faces. If they wished to succeed they have been obliged to satisfy two different (and opposed when not entirely opposite) audiences, the black and the white. The necessity of means, perhaps, has been even stronger than the necessity of ends, and as writers have increased, the necessity has grown almost from the point of desperation.

(xviii)

Harper writes the “double-sided code of necessity” particularly well in “The Slave Mother,” a work from her first volume of poetry, Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects (1854), in which she uses the ballad form to address the always-popular nineteenth-century theme, motherhood. In the poem Harper creates alternate perceptions of the accepted view of the mother — in the words of Dorothy Dudley, “A true instructor of her Family, / The which she ordered with dexterity” (Walker 10). Harper subverts that image with her portrait of the slave mother, and with images of the fragmentation of families and the sexual abuse of slave women. “The Slave Mother” begins at the moment of climax:

Heard you that shriek? It rose
So wildly in the air,
It seemed as if a burden'd heart
Was breaking in despair.

Saw you those hands so sadly clasped —
The bowed and feeble head —
The shuddering of that fragile form —
That look of grief and dread?

(Foster 59)

Beginning with a question, Harper engages in direct conversation with her reader. She elicits responses from her audience and so enacts the traditional
nineteenth-century poetic form of dramatic dialogue. White poets, including Tennyson, Browning or Arnold, used a kind of veiling technique when they adopted personae in similar kinds of poems. T.S. Eliot describes this poetic technique in the following manner: “The mere fact that he is assuming a role, that he is speaking through a mask, implies the presence of an audience: why should a man put on fancy dress and a mask only to talk to himself?” (Mermin 11). In essence, Dorothy Mermin concludes, “In such poems the presence of auditors doubles the emphasis on communication that is already implicit in the form” (11).

While she does not use the black folk dialect we see in later African-American poetry, Harper alludes to the call and response tradition of black preaching through her pattern of questions and in her repetition of language mixed with improvisation. Her first three stanzas begin “Hear you?” “Saw you?” “Saw you?” The fifth and sixth stanzas answer “He is not hers,” while the following two begin with “His love” and “His lightest word.” As a text characterized by a masked, performative speaker and an implied audience, or by call and response, this poem fits into modern conceptions of folklore and vernacular performance. Blount notes, “In written texts that draw on the aesthetics of vernacular performance, the relations of orality and literacy are continuous. The tensions between repetition and improvisation that operate in a verbal performance are translated into competing structures of creation and recollection for literary artists and their audiences” (583). Through her employment of these literary techniques, Harper creates what Blount calls a “preacherly text” where the knowledge presented is shared by both preacher, or poetic speaker, and audience or reader.

The sentimentality of “The Slave Mother” was appealing, particularly in light of a common interest in poetry about the emotions of motherhood among white women poets. Anxiety over death and care-giving were frequent subjects in works as early as those of the Puritan poet Anne Bradstreet. In “Before the Birth of One of Her Children” she asks her husband to care for her children should she die:

And when thy loss shall be repaid with gains  
Look to my little babes, my dear remains.  
And if thou love thyself, or loved’st me,  
These O protect from step-dame’s injury

(Watts 16)

In “Hebrew Dirge,” Lydia Huntley Sigourney writes of the death of an infant and a mother’s grief:

I saw an infant, marble cold,  
Borne from the pillowing breast,  
And in the shroud’s embracing fold  
Laid down to dreamless rest;  
And moved with bitterness I sighed,  
Not for the babe that slept,
But for the mother at its side,
Whose soul in anguish wept

(Watts 86)

Harper’s treatment of motherhood differs significantly in “The Slave Mother.” She paints a picture of a mother’s desperation when her child is torn from her arms. While the mother retains her composure, as an ideal woman should, her grief is vividly expressed:

She is a mother, pale with fear,
Her boy clings to her side,
And in her kirtle vainly tries
His trembling form to hide.

The powerlessness of woman in this scene appeals to the powerlessness of women on many different levels.

In stanzas five and six of “The Slave Mother,” Harper further complicates this already horrific scene:

He is not hers, although she bore
For him a mother’s pains;
He is not hers, although her blood
Is coursing through his veins!

He is not hers, for cruel hands
May rudely tear apart
The only wreath of household love
That binds her breaking heart.

The reader’s realization that “He is not hers” poignantly illustrates the way in which slavery breaks the natural bond of mother to child, translating it into a bond of property only, property on which the mother has no claim. Her inability to “own” also reminds the reader that the mother does not even own herself. A literal reading of the lines, “He is not hers” and a reference to the child’s “Father” several lines down allude to the possibility that this child was in fact fathered by the white master who is tearing him from his mother. While it is possible to read this passage without inferring rape, the reader could certainly imagine that connection. By creating the story in this way, Frances Harper alludes to the reality of female slave life: ultimate powerlessness over family or her own body.

Following the two stanzas that openly confront the unspoken injustices of slavery, Harper again resorts to gushing sentimentality about a mother’s feelings for her child. Like any good mother/child relationship, “Their lives a streamlet blent in one — / Oh, Father! Must they part?” Finally, in characteristic fashion, Harper ends the poem with the emphasis on motherhood, not on the horrors of slavery. Her last lines read:
No marvel, then, these bitter shrieks
Disturb the listening air:
She is a mother, and her heart
Is breaking with despair

Lucretia Davidson (1808-1825), in “Auction Extraordinary,” demonstrates the ways in which white women use slave imagery to describe their bondage as women within a patriarchal society:

The auctioneer then in his labor began,
And called out aloud, as he held up a man,
“How much for a bachelor? Who wants to buy?”
In a twink, every maiden responded, “I-I.”
In short, at a highly extravagant price,
The bachelors all were sold off in a trice:
And forty old maidens, some younger, some older,
Each lugged an old bachelor home on her shoulder

(Walker 43)

Davidson’s auction poem challenges the hierarchy of power between men and women when women overturn the notion that they must wait for men to propose to them. Here, women buy men for husbands. Frances Osgood also uses images of slavery in “The Fetter ‘Neath the Flowers”:

Vain resolve! The tie that bound her
Harden’d ‘neath her struggling will;
Fast its blossoms fell around her,
But the fetter linger’d still

(Walker 43)

Nineteenth-century readers were, as these examples illustrate, familiar with the use of the language of slavery in contexts other than poetic discussions or confrontations of slavery itself. Harper, however, in poems such as “The Slave Mother” sought to illustrate the destructive power of the institution of slavery on the women slaves themselves.

Given the tone and content of “The Slave Mother” and Harper’s numerous other poems of motherhood, it is important to note the historical connections between the poet’s and the mother’s roles. Prior to the late nineteenth century, when the place of the female poetess was more widely accepted, poetry was seen as a distinctly male medium. Choosing to work in that medium as Harper did was in itself an act of subversion. The Puritan poet Anne Bradstreet, who represents the poetic history inherited by nineteenth-century women writers, expresses her rage at gendered restrictions on access to the form:

I am obnoxious to each carping tongue
Who says my hand a needle better fits,
A Poet’s pen all scorn I should thus wrong,
For such despite they cast on female wits:
If what I do prove well, it won't advance,
They'll say it's stol'n, or else it was by chance

(Walker 6)

Starting with Bradstreet, women writers borrowed from their male peers the image of the poem as "child," suggesting that their actual ability to bear children made it thinkable that they might write literary offspring into being with some authority as well. Bradstreet relies on her poetry and her children to live on together after her death: "Thus gone, amongst you I may live, / And dead, yet speak, and counsel give" (Walker 11).

By equating the role of mother, a role which involves teaching or "counsel," to that of the poet, women writers thus defend their poetic authorship. Harper worked in a context where the role of the poet was also equated with that of a prophet or priest: as Whitman wrote in "Song of the Answerer," "The maker of poems settles justice, reality, immortality, / His insight and power encircle things and the human race, / He is the glory and extract thus far of things and of the human race" (Murray 199). Harper could also draw on the power of motherhood to assume the mantle of prophet. Cheryl Walker writes of women poets that "Ultimately . . . [they] have acted in a similar capacity to women prophets. They have constituted themselves as "femmes sages," wise women, midwives of a sort, whose knowledge as it is passed on to others carries a female burden of dark and sometimes secret truths" (19). Harper too expresses "dark and sometimes secret truths," as if pregnant with terrible images she must disguise as more pleasant births.

Harper believed in women's power as shaping forces in society. Being a poet made her a female version of the observer and interpreter of social realities. Longfellow remarks that the poet's purpose is

To uplift,
Purify, and confirm by its own gracious gift,
The world, in despite of the world's dull endeavor
To degrade, and drag down, and oppose it forever

(Hart 138)

In a poem like "Vashti," Harper combines prevailing white ideas of the poet and women's role with the African-American connections between orality and preaching. In short, she takes on a priest-like role, subverting gender norms by appropriating a man's position for herself. According to Blount, "As the black preachers tell us at the beginning of their sermons, they preach as God's instruments" (585). Harper takes the liberty of re-telling the Biblical story of Esther, verse 1: 13-22, in her portrayal of Queen Vashti, on the most obvious level, subverting the Biblical story by re-telling it from both the queen and the king's perspective. In the Book of Esther, the story is told from the king's perspective: "Then the king said to the wise men who knew the times — for this was the king's procedure toward all who were versed in law and judgment . . . 'According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti, because she has not
performed the command of King Ahasue’rus conveyed by the eunuchs?” (Esther 1:13-15). Vashti’s act of defiance prompts the king to make a decree to his kingdom to assert the submission of women to men. The Biblical story ends: “So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, cast as it is, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low” (Esther 1:20).

Harper, in her telling of the story, begins with the following:

She leaned her head upon her hand
And heard the king’s decree—
“My lords are feasting in my halls,
Bid Vashti come to me

(Foster 181).

Harper then switches to the king’s perspective, which describes the queen as his most beautiful possession:

“I’ve shown the treasures of my house,
My costly jewels are rare,
But with the glory of her eyes
No rubies can compare.

“Adorned and crowned I’d have her come,
With all her queenly grace,
And, ’mid my lords and mighty men,
Unveil her lovely face.

“Each gem that sparkles in my crown,
Or glitters on my throne,
Grows poor and pale when she appears,
My beautiful, my own!”

(Foster 182)

Vashti’s perspective, as Harper writes, is of utter defiance against the wishes of her husband. She “would rather die” than be displayed as one of the king’s possessions. Although this results in Vashti giving up the crown, she meets her fate with strength. Harper writes:

She heard again the king’s command,
And left her high estate,
Strong in her earnest womanhood,
She calmly met her fate,

And left the palace of the King,
Proud of her spotless name —
A woman who could bend in grief,
But would not bow in shame

(Foster 183)
“Vashti” furthers Harper’s subversive poetic agenda. The story of Vashti represents a challenge to Ephesians 5:22-24, “Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is head of the church, His body, and is Himself its savior. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands.” Harper presents the woman’s perspective, challenging gender norms. By using dialogue, Harper makes these voices real, while the ballad form translates the Biblical story to what was familiar to nineteenth-century audiences. In retelling the story of Vashti, Harper borrows a strategy from the black folk tradition which used scripture as a mask for spreading anti-slavery messages. Consider, for instance, the slave parody of the Lord’s Prayer:

Our Fader, who art in heaven,
White man owe me ‘leven, pay me seven,
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
And ef I hadn’t tuck that, I wouldn’t git none

(Wagner 35)

Or this retelling of Moses’s story: “But when Moses wif his powah / Comes an’ sets us chillun free, / We will praise de gracious Mastah / Dat has gin us liberty” (Blount 589). The speaker goes on, however, “But fu’ feah some one mistakes me, / I will pause right byehah to say, / Date I’m still a-preaching’ ancient / I ain’t talking ‘bout to-day.” In both cases, a subversive reinterpretation is mitigated by deferential posturing. Harper borrows these techniques of scriptural revision, and preacherly resistance to oppression, mixed with an avoidance of direct confrontation with white society when she treats the story of Vashti.

It is clear that Frances Harper devoted her life’s work to the causes of both her gender and her race. By the 1890’s, through the leadership of W.E.B. DuBois, conceptions of black leadership were being solidified that excluded women. The creation of the American Negro Academy, founded as the leading intellectual organization for the black community, was open only to “men of African descent” (Moss 51). Perhaps because of her exclusion from circles of black leadership, Harper found community among groups of white and black women. Throughout her poetry, she shows a commitment to putting women’s lives first. Although she often adhered to the standards set for women by the “Cult of True Womanhood,” Harper also created female heroines who were intelligent and powerful. With the publication of Sketches of Southern Life in 1872, Harper includes heroic pictures of black slave women. “Aunt Chloe,” in particular, represents Harper’s innovative treatment of the women of her race.

Myron Simon argues that American poetry has developed from two different sources: formal modes of expression, remote from the vernacular of the black culture, and modes of expression faithful to the vernacular tradition of the black community, beginning with spirituals, blues, protest songs, and work songs (114). In his analysis of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Simon asserts, “one of the reasons for Dunbar’s great importance in the history of black poetry is that in his books two channels through which black poetry emerged in America—the literary and the oral traditions—begin to come together: they inhabit the
same mind, are bound between the same covers” (Martin 115). Many have seen Harper’s poetry solely in the context of the first source of black expression, the formal mode. While it is true that much of Harper's poetry, in adherence to formal poetic nineteenth-century tradition does make use of “elevated” language and traditional poetics, Harper enacts a significant rhetorical shift toward the vernacular in her “Aunt Chloe” poems.

“Aunt Chloe” follows the hybridization of Harper’s earlier work, blending adherence to formal standards with the Plantation Tradition, which derives from the black folk tradition later embraced by Dunbar. Dunbar is true to the vernacular in poems such as “A Plantation Melody”:

O brothah, w’en de tempes’ beat,
An' w’en yo’ weary head an' feet
Can’t fin’ no place to res’;
Jes’ ‘membah dat de Mastah’s nigh,
An’ putty soon you’ll hyeah de cry,
“Lay low in de wildaness”

(Martin 103)

Harper, while not realizing this tradition to the same extent, does capture the rhythm of black vernacular in the voice of Aunt Chloe and her cousin Milly:

And I says to cousin Milly,
“There must be some mistake;
Where’s Mistus?” “In the great house crying —
Crying like her heart would break.

“And the lawyer’s there with Mistus;
Says he’s come to ‘ministrate,
‘Cause when master died he just left
Heap of debt on the estate.

(Foster 196-97)

By putting what J. Saunders Redding calls, “a fine racy, colloquial twang” (To Make A Poet Black 42) in the mouths of her African-American characters, Harper creates a more familiar picture of their lives. As an educated free woman, Harper would have been aware of the dichotomy between folk poetry and written poetry. “Aunt Chloe” offers another example of Harper’s “double sided code of necessity” when it seeks to portray the realities of slave life by retaining elements of black folk and oral traditions while at the same time continuing to appeal to her largely white, middle class audience. Jean Wagner explains the distinction between two opposing poetic forms Harper incorporates in “Aunt Chloe”:

The popular [folk] poetry, considered as a whole, thus offers us a much more subtle and realistic picture of the world of oppression than one could possibly find in the written poetry of the same period. The lat-
ter took shape in part on the fringes of the people's existence, whereas folk poetry was the very emanation of this existence. The cleavage between these two forms of expression, which was maintained throughout the nineteenth century, also reflects a divergence in their social origins, for by definition folk poetry expresses the feelings of the masses, while written poetry gives outer shape to the aspirations of the middle class or bourgeoisie.

Like "The Slave Mother," "Chloe" again mingles the popular theme of motherhood and children with the context of slavery. Not only are Chloe's children being sold, but this tragedy has already happened to Milly: "Oh! Chloe, I knows how you feel, / 'Cause I'se been through it all; / I thought my poor old heart would break / When my master sold my Saul" (Foster 197). The vernacular rhythm is offset by the traditional ballad form, and Harper's characteristic sentimentality pervades the poem, particularly in the voices of Chloe's children: "And I heard poor Jakey saying, / 'Oh, mammy, don't you cry! / And I felt my children kiss me / And bid me, both, good-bye" (Foster 197). The prominance of Christianity in African-American folk poetry as well as in the poetry of white women authors adhering to the "true womanhood" dictum of piety come together in Aunt Chloe's story, creating another meeting point for the convergence of these two distinct elements of Harper's "double consciousness." The theme of salvation in particular mediates between the vernacular and the formal modes of representation and between the white and black race. Under Uncle Jacob's guidance ["In heaven he's now a saint" (Foster 197)], Chloe learns of the Saviour and is filled with a new sense of hope:

Then he said to me, "Poor Chloe,
The way is open wide:"
And he told me of the Saviour,
And the fountain in His side.

Then he says, "Just take your burden
To the blessed Master's feet;
I takes all my troubles, Chloe,
Right unto the mercy-seat."

His words waked up my courage,
And I began to pray,
And I felt my heavy burden
Rolling like a stone away

(Foster 197)

Chloe, a good, Christian woman, finds solace in her Saviour. The poem offers a reader-friendly narrative with a "happy" ending: "Chloe, trust and never fear; / You'll get justice in the kingdom, / If you do not get it here" (Foster 197). Chloe's resignation to finding justice in heaven rather than on earth
implies a message of non-confrontation toward the society responsible for earthly injustice. Harper avoids blame or confrontation and instead appeals to her white audience for understanding.

At the same time, the representation of the mother figure in “The Slave Mother” and “Aunt Chloe” reflects what historian Jaqueline Jones calls the “subversive nature of Black women’s roles within their families” (Bloom 114). Farrah Griffin pursues that idea:

Harper sees Black women, though denied political enfranchisement, as the bearers of values, stability and strength in their home lives. By doing this they subvert the intentions of white patriarchal society to keep Blacks in subordinate positions and strip them of all sense of power.

(46)

Harper wrote in “Colored Women of the South,” published in the January 1878 edition of Englishwoman's Review:

They do a double duty, a man's share in the field and a woman's part at home, when the men lose their work through political affiliations, the women stand by them and say "stand by your principles," by organized effort, colored women have been able to help each other in sickness and provide respectable funerals for the dead.

(Bloom 115)

The hybridity of poetry allowed Harper to meet her two central literary goals: to educate a large audience and to subvert hegemonic, predominantly white, views in order to create social change. Poetry, as a widely read medium in the late nineteenth century (Hart 138) was accessible to the masses yet could at the same time be used to portray subversive messages. Harper, by using predominantly white, popular literary forms such as the ballad and the sonnet, was able to mask the often rebellious statements hidden within such forms while at the same time exercising freedom of expression. Poetry, unlike prose, accommodates such expressions of "double consciousness" from a people who "were forced by circumstances to divide their efforts and loyalties" (Sherman xxxii). Because of its close connections to orality and song, poetry allowed Harper to incorporate elements of African-American “folk” culture into a high culture artistic form.

The accessible, songlike form of the ballad often appeared in periodicals such as the growing number of women's magazines. “The Dying Bondman” appeared in an 1884 edition of Lady's Godey's Book, a popular nineteenth-century magazine for white women (Redding, “Negro Writing in America” 41). It was perhaps because of its pleasant rhythm, sentimentality, religious overtone, and attention to the popular theme of death, rather than its underlying message, that this poem appeared in Godey's. The poem begins:

Life was trembling, faintly trembling
On the bondman's latest breath,
And he felt the chilling pressure
Of the cold, hard hand of Death.

(Foster 348)

The rhythmic, story-like narrative attracts the reader. The sentimental tone and use of repetition in the words “trembling, faintly trembling” and the use of alliteration in the “cold, hard hand of Death” emphasize the emotion of the scene. The following stanza, while in the same, fictionalized, narrative tone, points to a different kind of man:

He had been an Afric chieftain,
Worn his manhood as a crown;
But upon the field of battle
Had been fiercely stricken down.

The allusion to the past, glorified life of the bondman as an African chieftain serves as contrast to the next lines, which reference his brutal enslavement while using a gentle, melodious style. The lack of aggression in style does not mitigate the poem’s message, however. Harper clearly asserts her commitment to abolitionism by illustrating the evils of slavery in this dramatic account:

He had longed to gain his freedom,
Waited, watched and hoped in vain,
Till his life was slowly ebbing —
Almost broken was his chain.

The following stanzas represent an interesting rhetorical move, for Harper essentially inverts the blame for slavery. Instead of holding the master accountable for the bondman’s enslavement, Harper reveals the inward emotional consequences of slavery. The bondman is ashamed of himself in his enslaved condition; however, no sign of shame is evidenced in the master responsible for enslaving another:

“Master,” said the dying bondman,
“Home and friends I soon shall see;
But before I reach my country,
Master write that I am free;

“For the spirits of my fathers
Would shrink back from me in pride,
If I told them at our greeting
I a slave had lived and died;——

“Give to me the precious token,
That my kindred dead may see——
Master! write it, write it quickly!
Master! write that I am free!”
At his earnest plea the master
Wrote for him the glad release,
O'er his wan and wasted features
Flitted one sweet smile of peace.

Eagerly he grasped the writing;
"I am free!" at last he said.
Backward fell upon the pillow,
He was free among the dead.

(Foster 348-49)

Her apparent resistance to blaming the master, however, masks other, more subversive moves. For example, because she does not name either the slave or the master, Harper sets up a clear dichotomy between the two. The bondman, without name, is defined by his job, defined by his service to his master. The master, likewise without birth name, is defined by his position of power over another human life.

While the master has the power to "write" the bondman's freedom, it is clear that the bondman's concern is with "the spirits of [his] fathers." Despite his bondage, the bondman's allegiance is to his own ancestors and heritage. This reference asserts the slave's persistent humanity and sense of self. The master took away his freedom; he did not take away his sense of identity with his "kindred dead." By emphasizing the importance of writing in the bondman's pleas, "Master! write it, write it quickly! / Master! write that I am free!" Harper draws another distinction between the literate master and the illiterate slave. Harper believed in education to secure the future of her race: in a speech entitled "A Factor in Human Progress," given in 1885, Harper announces, "Knowledge is power, the great mental lever which has lifted up man in the scale of social and racial life." (Foster 275). If he possessed the ability to write, the bondman, or "bound-man," could metaphorically "write" himself out of slavery, into freedom.

"Songs for the People," written between 1893 and 1911, is the culmination of Frances Harper's literary goals as well as her self-conception as a writer, speaker and activist for her people. The first stanza of Harper's poem begins:

Let me make songs for the people,
Songs for the old and young;
Songs to stir like a battle-cry
Wherever they are sung

(Foster 371)

Harper refers to her poetic work as creating songs, a medium accessible to all; she also refers to herself as a singer who sings to heal her people:

Let me sing for little children,
Before their footsteps stray,
Sweet anthems of love and duty,
To float o'er life's highway.
[...]
Music to soothe all its sorrow,
Till war and crime shall cease;
And the hearts of men grown tender
Girdle the world with peace

(Foster 371)

Songs are the most accessible form of poetry. Rather than adhering to the traditional, late nineteenth-century, white Western European view of "art for art's sake," Harper shows her commitment to an "art for people's sake" aesthetic followed by later black poets (Bloom 112). She also indicates the transmutability of song into poetry simply by putting the spoken or sung word on paper. In light of the relationship between these mediums, it is particularly fitting that Harper, an African-American woman familiar with the pervasive musical culture of her race expressed in spirituals, work songs, and the blues and appearing later in jazz, chose poetry as her medium.

Ultimately, Frances Harper's poetic goals can be summed up in her May 1866 speech to the Eleventh Woman's Rights Convention entitled "We Are All Bound up Together."

We are all bound up together in one great bundle of humanity, and society cannot trample on the weakest and feeblest of its members without receiving the curse in its own soul.

(Foster 217)

As a poet who wrote "songs for the people," Harper sought wide dissemination of her message of societal transformation. Through the strategic use of structural, rhetorical, and thematic masking techniques, Harper was able to effectively portray her messages to both white and black audiences. Harper's greatest feat is perhaps in the creation of a widely accessible body of African-American poetry, enabling her to become the "leading colored poet" (Foster 5) of the nineteenth century. In addition, Harper should be credited for her significant contributions to African-American poetry, particularly in her incorporation of black folk elements into traditional white poetic form. "The Slave Mother," "Vashti," "Aunt Chloe," and "The Dying Bondman" are only three of many examples of Harper's innovative blending of the traditional with the subversive. In her unceasing commitment to populist art, in her faithfulness to the artistic traditions of her race, and in her ability to achieve accessibility for white audiences, Frances Harper is truly a pioneer.

Notes

1. For a complete compilation of the poetry, prose, and speeches of Frances Harper, see Foster; *A Brighter Coming Day,* also see Graham, ed. The foreword by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "In Her Own Right", is especially valuable.
graphical and literary information for this essay was also derived from the following sources: Daniel, Bloom, Griffith, Gates, Miller and Katopes.
2. For gendered analyses of the role of the writer/poet in American history, see Baym. Also, for the concept of nineteenth-century female "anxiety of authorship" see Gilbert and Gubar. On women's literacy and gendered conceptions of reading and writing, see Hobbs. For a specific analysis of African American women writers, see Carby.
3. Benston offers insight into the performative aspects of African American literacy and culture.

Works Cited


