

Distinct Deceptions: Disguised and Disruptive

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Introduction

Deception, at the heart, is dishonesty. Yet, when placing the concept into a context in which one must use it as a resource for survival or resistance against a system that authorizes the near omnipotence of one particular group, the question of its right or wrongness becomes irrelevant. Deception becomes a necessity to regain one's agency, safety, and basic needs, and it is especially prevalent in slave narratives as the institution of slavery is one that strips a human of all personhood. Enslaved women experience this on a more threatening level as interplays of arbitrary definitions of womanhood fueled by religion with the white enslaver's accessible and accepted violation of their bodies confine them within impossible circumstances. Phillis Wheatley's "On Virtue" and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, particularly Chapter X "A Perilous Passage in the Slave Girl's Life," exemplify these ideas, though their differing positions—even as two enslaved women—reflect their contrasting forms of deception. Phillis Wheatley and Harriet Jacobs both utilize a form of deception, though there is a key difference in the other elements. Jacobs allows 'Linda', the representation of herself in her autobiographical narrative, to embody the trickster—a more visceral form of deception—while Wheatley codes her deception, subtly weaving it within the accepted systems of knowledge and rules of the hegemony. Jacobs is more concerned with disruption, bending the rules, and creating necessary chaos. Wheatley, on the other hand, is concerned with performing conformity to the racial hierarchy while communicating resistance in underlying ways. The two authors' vastly differing experiences within the system of slavery affect their chosen form of deception.

Framework: Coded Deception and The Trickster Archetype

The definition of deception can be a wide-ranged term. Any form of trickery can be categorized as deception. However, to distinguish the two concepts, I would like to hone in on the definition of coded deception, as used by Phillis Wheatley, by aligning it with performativity, one of Judith Butler's key terms in their text *Gender Troubles*. Butler conceptualizes performativity within the context of gender identity as a set of actions within social norms that are repeated and ritualistic, stating "What we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts," (Butler xv). In other words, they argue that the qualities of a certain identity are, in fact, not its inherent characteristics. Instead, regular performances within social norms make up what the identity is perceived to be. Performativity is necessary because of the existence of the universal, which is the identity that is an exception to the rule. For race, it is whiteness. For gender, it is heterosexual masculinity. Universality, according to Butler, prioritizes unity and coherence, necessitating conformity. The coded deception that I aim to analyze is an intentional performativity that caters to the universal in order to socially or physically survive or to underhandedly resist against the hegemonic structure.

On the other hand, the trickster archetype is transgressor and boundary-pusher, wielding chaos. Diana Espírito Santo expands, through this form of subversion, the trickster “brings concepts of ‘truth’ into absolute question... Trickster draws us towards a cosmos that may not be as we perceive or describe it,” (Santo 143). Essentially, the trickster figure, through destruction or disruption, urges a questioning of authority or the status quo, implying that the way the world as we know it currently operates is not necessarily the most truthful. One tactic of chaos that the trickster uses is doubling or substituting. Santo asserts, “Tricksters do not limit themselves to a single identity... unity is a mere illusion... they force change through their playful creativity,” (Santo 144). Another method that tricksters frequent, that I would like to focus on, is the leveraging of sexuality. Santo observes that “in some cases, Trickster appears with an oversized phallus and has a voracious sexual appetite,” which comments on “liminal spaces of desire,” (Santo 147-8).

Analyses: Similarities and Differences

Both coded deception and tricksterism can be categorized as types of deception—a method of subverting the rules and norms in an underhanded way. As two enslaved women, Wheatley and Jacobs are both in dangerously disadvantageous positions. To outright rebel against the system that benefits from their oppression by even standing up for their safety or basic human rights is to risk their dignity, their lives, and their families. So, both must resort to deceptive tactics. With “On Virtue” and “A Perilous Passage,” both critique the meaning of virtuous womanhood, displaying a desire to shift the standard from one that is enforced in their social context to one that is more inclusive to the experience of enslaved women. For instance, Jacobs pleads, “...O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave,” suggesting that the ideal of virtue in true womanhood cannot be applied to enslaved women. Moreover, her consistent pleas to her female readership and her grandma to understand and excuse her action seems to call for a more considerate approach—in which the fact that it is a norm for an enslaved woman’s chastity to be not only unprotected, but taken against her will—to the qualifications of being a woman. Similarly, in “On Virtue,” Wheatley writes, “Virtue is near thee, and with a gentle hand / Would now embrace thee, hovers o’er thine head,” (Wheatley, lines 7-8). She personifies virtue as merciful and attainable, embracing the speaker and hovering near them. She—virtue, a woman—is located within arms reach, implying womanhood as something that is accessible and approachable, and through this image, she challenges the strict social conventions of true womanhood. However, the different tactics of deception the two women use are significant and speak to contrasting positions within their shared identity.

From the formulation of an alternative self through renaming her own identity as ‘Linda’, Harriet Jacobs appoints Linda as the trickster archetype. This technique is especially apparent in Chapter X “A Perilous Passage in The Slave Girl’s Life.” In the previous chapters, the readers are in the throes of Linda’s circumstances as the stakes become higher. Jacobs lays the groundwork for deeming the trickster figure increasingly necessary as Dr. Flint’s aggressive

advances peak to the point of building an isolated house for Linda, in which he may have unhindered access to her body. This is conveyed through the emotion of desperation, such as the declaration that she would rather “toil on the plantation from dawn till dark...rather live and die in jail, than drag on, from day to day, through such a living death” or that she “would do any thing, every thing for the sake of defeating him,” (Jacobs Ch. X). This set up draws the reader, the white abolitionists, into Linda’s world to disillusion the South, the institution of slavery, as a world much more heinous than they had perceived it. Linda’s desperation, wanting to submit herself to her bondage in the form of toiling on the plantation or being jailed, gives the reader an insight into the violation and inhumaneness of Dr. Flint’s actions. Jacobs seems to aim for this emotion to become a trigger for the reader to question alongside her protagonist, “What *could* [she] do?” (Jacobs Ch X).

It is in this corner Linda is pushed into that Jacobs personifies her as the trickster. Before she chooses Mr. Sands, she considers a hypothetical of her future as a consequence of relenting to Dr. Flint’s pursuit of her. Linda ponders, “I shuddered to think of being the mother of children that should be owned by my old tyrant, ” (Jacobs Ch X). Jacobs uses Linda’s foresight to create two paths. The path that seems to be the only option at the moment is one that guarantees submission, danger, and loss—a limited future incapable of any benefits for her or her children. This path makes her “shudder,” reflecting her fear and disgust, but also signaling her need for a disruption. It leads her to create an alternative choice for herself, a doubling of paths and subsequent substitution of the future to one that, at the very least, guarantees agency and safety. In doing so, she substitutes her current predicament for one that gives her agency and safety. This trickster move disrupts and destroys the conventions of her as an enslaved woman, while undermining Dr. Flint’s power. Later on, when Dr. Flint confronts her and commands her to occupy the cottage, she reveals, ““I will never go there. In a few months I shall be a mother.”” (Jacobs Ch X). The word that stands out in this statement is “will,” which is loaded with Linda’s power, a big change from the uncertainty before her substitution. She announces her soon-to-be motherhood status and thus, admits to the transferral of her sexuality. In changing the recipient of her sexuality from Dr. Flint to Mr. Sands, she also shifts from passive victim to active participant. In true trickster fashion, Linda exploits the condition of her objectification, taking back control of it, which gives her the autonomy to refuse entrance into the isolated cottage and destabilizing an impossible system. She is able to leverage her sexuality because of the liminal space that a white man’s desire for an enslaved woman operates in. It does not exist within the confines of normative heterosexual relations, as symbolized by the isolated location of the cottage. She sees the ambiguity of her placement in the conversation of male objectification as an opportunity, using it to uproot the narrative of an enslaved woman’s sexual submission. By creating a parallel choice, one that still is identical in the result of her as a mother but leverages her sexual objectification—the quality that was causing these struggles—to assure her personhood, she sparks confusion and chaos, especially for Dr. Flint, who “[looks] at her in dumb amazement,” disoriented by an enslaved woman’s rewiring of her own subjugation through

deception (Jacobs Ch X).

In contrast to Jacobs' use of drastic measures through tricksterism, Wheatley's deception is much more encoded. In the Week 8 Reading Notes Discussion of the University of California, Los Angeles course ENG 168, Naomi Young claims that, "even in these incredibly vulnerable moments, the oppressed writer must still appeal to her oppressors and work within the rules of the system, in order to make change in it," which poignantly captures the deception that Wheatley integrates. "On Virtue" demonstrates this subtle deceptive reclamation of black female sexuality. At first read, the poem seems to legitimize the tenets of the Cult of True Womanhood and expresses devotion to Christian beliefs, performing faithfulness to the value systems that perpetuate the dehumanization of enslaved women. Christian imagery, such as cherubs, the soul as an individual being, and a dedication to Virtue, Chastity, and Goodness as saint-like figures of femininity function as a facade for a deeper meaning that Wheatley hides between the lines. Lines 11-12 exemplifies this feigned conformity— "Auspicious queen, thine heavenly pinions spread, / And lead celestial *Chastity* along" (Wheatley, lines 11-12). The juxtaposition of chastity with virtue is significant. Virtue as an auspicious queen implies a necessity of virtue's presence in achieving womanhood, emphasizing that the sovereignty of moral rectitude is imperative in a woman. Virtue leads Chastity, suggesting a close relationship between the two ideals in Christian moral purity. However, when read deeper, a word that calls for attention is "pinions." This word seems to allude to Psalm 91:4 of the ESV Bible, ("He will cover you with His pinions, and under His wings, you may seek refuge") which uses pinions as a form of protection. Virtue places Chastity under her wings, her protection. It is furthermore notable that pinion refers to the outermost part of the wing that includes the flight feathers, symbolizing a tool for escape and freedom. The auspicious queen Virtue, in spreading her pinions, protects and gives Chastity freedom, which hints at an awareness of the lack of protection and abuse of black female chastity, trapped and degraded at the will and curiosity of white male desire, especially compared to the fierce protection of white female chastity as a condition to true womanhood. To add, Wheatley describes Chastity as celestial, elevating black womanhood while knowing the different standards for it. Wheatley seems to be commenting on the hypersexualized perception of the enslaved woman as impure and by Virtue offering a place of refuge and salvation for Chastity, Wheatley discreetly asserts the black woman's moral purity through bodily or sexual reclamation.

In the next two lines, Virtue descends from the heavens with Chastity – "Lo! Now her sacred retinue descends / Arrayed in glory from the orbs above" (Wheatley, lines 13-14). Throughout the poem, a repetition of an up or down direction recurs, such as "Wisdom is higher" in line 3, "O, my soul, sink" in line 6, "hovers o'er thine head." in line 8, and more. This up/down aspect seems to tie in with the spiritual element, highlighting an ascension to the heavens or a descension to the world. In lines 13-14, Virtue comes down from the heavens with Chastity, Virtue's retinue. Although descension can signify a loss of glory or grace as one must come to a lesser world, Virtue descends with her glory intact. Wheatley seems to comment on the

racial hierarchy masked as spiritual ascension and descension. Though Virtue descends down the supposed racial ladder to where black women reside, she is still adorned with everything that makes her heavenly, emphasizing that black women are not any less virtuous despite their lower social status than white women. The heavenly “orbs” are calling on Wisdom and the soul, both entities that, in the poem, are placed in positions of height. They seem to be a part of Virtue’s retinue, her advisors or companion, which seems to comment on the fact that moral purity requires more than just chastity, a bodily sanctity. Wheatley seems to assert that wisdom, a mental depth, and soul, a spiritual enlightenment, are grouped with morality as well, accepting the white woman’s standard of virtue, but also critiquing that standard by adding to what it should include, given that black women simply cannot adhere to the white standard of bodily sanctity. Although the message that Wheatley weaves into her seemingly devotional poem is evocative of Jacobs’ reclamation of black female sexuality, Wheatley’s method of deception is much less about finding a loophole to break the heavily enforced social norms, as Jacobs’ Linda does. Rather, Wheatley succeeds in using the social convention itself to illustrate how it should apply for enslaved women. Wheatley says virtue and chastity are important, but considering the context of an enslaved woman’s life, the importance of those ideals is a much more complex conversation, encoding this statement underneath an ode of devotion to Christian standards for women.

Conclusion: Significance of Difference

In conclusion, Phillis Wheatley and Harriet Jacobs engage in contrasting forms of deception in their work. Wheatley utilizes a deception that performs conformity to the values of white womanhood, yet advocates, through encoded language, for the experiences of enslaved women, the injustice of the hypersexualization and sexual abuse they are forced to subject to, and the necessity for an updated version of feminine moral purity. Jacobs, on the other hand, utilizes a more visceral deception by manifesting Linda as the trickster whose deception breaks the established conventions for enslaved women. Linda leverages the objectification of her sexuality that the system perpetuates to substitute the father of her children from her oppressor to a white man she can somewhat trust, a much more direct and embodied deception. Their contrasting form of deception underlines the different treatment that Wheatley and Jacobs received, even within their shared identity as enslaved women. It is clear, through the more immediate action that Jacobs had to take and her more disruptive deception, that survival or bodily safety of herself and her family were the stakes for her. Her deception was about protecting herself from violence and her children from the inevitable tragedies of separation. She is trying to reclaim physical and reproductive control. Meanwhile, Wheatley was afforded more privilege as she was given the opportunity for education, publication, and marriage to a free black man. Though she still suffered the constraints of subservience, she was not forced into the same corporeal dangers as Jacobs. Her writing reflects a performed conformity to the system that maintains her submission, a liminal resistance, allowing her to resist in secretive, symbolic

language. Wheatley is hoping to reclaim cultural control, rewriting the standards of femininity to include or, at least, consider the harm enslaved women lived through. Both authors' efforts have been crucial to the empowerment of black women and have shaped the improved landscape of today.

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