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The Silent Partner by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps: “Jewish Women in Hayle and Kelso”

Western industrialization came with major social upheaval and the reestablishment of social hierarchies. However, when analyzing literature from such a time period, the predominantly Jewish presence in labor reformation and social change is often overlooked or demonized. In Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’ novel, the latter is true. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, in her novel *The Silent Partner* (1871), communicates a level of anti-Semitism throughout her work, which first must be acknowledged through the baseline understanding of her factory worker characters as Jews and thus through the appearance of Jewish stereotypes and negative connotations hiding behind that particular nuance; Phelps achieves her anti-Semitic coding through presenting complex notions of bloodline purity, through prescribing Jewish stereotypes to her characters, through portraying Jews as sinful, through giving inherently Jewish terms anti-Semitic connotations, and finally, through stealing the autonomy and power of real life Jewish labor reformation. By cultivating these anti-Semitic tropes, Phelps ultimately strips away the validity of Jewish peoples’, specifically, Jewish women’s, contributions to American labor reformation and organization.

Before approaching Phelps’ content, it is crucial for readers to understand that a majority of laborers in places such as New York and Boston were Jewish women who had emigrated from Europe in order to improve their quality of life. Furthermore, specifically on the topic of labor reformation and outspoken workers (the premise of Phelps’ novel), Jewish women made up the

majority of strikers in large cities (Kessler-Harris). Thus, when reading *The Silent Partner*, it becomes irresponsible not to assume that Phelps paints a portrait of Jewish factory workers.

In fact, one of the initial arguments, one rooted in anti-Semitism, that Phelps brings into the fold focuses on bloodline and notions of purity — both concepts also being associated with physical features that tie into race. Phelps begins the first part of her novel with the following when referring to Perley Kelso: “Her descent from the Pilgrims could be indisputably proved... a creamy profile and a creamy hand lifted... The profile had a level, generous chin” (Phelps 10). In this excerpt, Phelps identifies Kelso as a proponent of Pilgrim ancestry, and does so with a matter-of-fact tone rooted in superiority. Such superiority is then carried directly to Perley’s clean, white, physical appearance and the definition of her bone structure. Thus, the reader comes away from such a description with a positive, generous view of Perley’s character and personality.

In comparison, Sip’s bloodline is not portrayed as positively by Phelps, but is instead associated with a tone of desperation and shame: ““They’d never get out of the mills. It’s from generation to generation. It couldn’t be helped. I know. It’s in the blood”” (Phelps 288). This repetition of “blood”/“generation” being associated with the mills is repeated on pages 50, 198, 201 and 202. Phelps adds on to these statements about bloodlines and generational duty by noting repeatedly that Sip is “brown” (Phelps 48, 283, 285, 294). In the same way that Perley’s Pilgrim heritage is coupled with whiteness and a tone of elevation, each time Sip comments on her own bloodline, the context is closely preceded or followed by commentary on Sip being brown with a tone of shame. This brownness is associated perhaps with Sip’s darker complexion, but most assuredly with her being “dirty”. Sip is referenced as being “dirty” or “filthy” almost as

often as she is referenced as being “brown”. Such words appear on pages 26, 77, 81, 128 — dispersed rather evenly between the commentary on Sip being “brown” and her “blood”.

When one considers Perley’s Christian background and Sip’s lack of religion coupled with the tired Jewish stereotype of being somehow “dirty” it becomes clear that Phelps communicates anti-Semitism in association with bloodline being indicative of physical appearance. A long maintained oppressive strategy on the part of gentiles towards Jewish people has been the association of Jewish people with dirt in the insult “dirty Jew” (Siegel). Thus, by playing on this commonly known trope when it comes to Sip and her bloodline being impure or shameful, Phelps conveys a sense of anti-Semitism or at least perpetuates anti-Semitic literary conceptions.

Sip’s physical characteristics are not limited to being dirty, as they also include shrewdness: Sip is described as having a “shrewd, unpleasant smile” (Phelps 87) and giving “shrewd, sideways glances” (Phelps 93). The term “shrewd” is a historically rooted and still commonly used stereotype that depicts Jewish people as hyper-intelligent or overly astute. Such a stereotype emerged in the 1890s (around when Phelps’ book would have been popularized) in Germany and other European countries as a method for indicating that Jews were too smart and thus were overly represented in particular intellectual professions (such as law or medicine) in order to revoke their professional privileges (qtd. in Smith). So, Phelps’ use of this stereotype on Sip is very purposefully rooted in what would have been current and dangerous ways of thinking at the time of publication — a way of thinking that stripped Jewish people of their right to practice medicine and law, of their right to be seen as human beings.

Phelps doesn’t just limit her focus to Sip, and branches out to code Bub Mell as Jewish; in doing this, Phelps presents several tropes that include the idea that Jews are lacking in religion

or are sinful in the eyes of G-d, as well as the stereotype of Jewish people as “dogs” or “animals”.

Phelps endeavors to portray Bub as immoral because he has not accepted the Christian G-d. Phelps, in the first portion of her novel, provides foreshadowing of her future description of Jewish factory workers such as Bub. Phelps describes one of the “hands” at the Hayle and Kelso factories with the following: “You are a godless little creature” (Phelps 73). Phelps then moves to describe an interaction between Bub and Perley later in the novel:

“Did he go to church?

She might bet he didn’t!

...Nor Sunday school?

He went to the Mission once... Got so old he give it up.

What did he expect, asked Perley, in a sudden, severe burst of religious enthusiasm, would become of him when he died?

Eh?

When he died, what would become of him?

Lor” (Phelps 104).

In this excerpt, Phelps writes in an encounter on the topic of Christianity between Bub and Perley; Bub has never been to Church and had only gone to Sunday school once, but gave up because it was not working. Because of this, Perley expresses “religious” concern that he will presumably go to hell when he dies because he has not been a ‘good’ Christian. Perley goes so far as to repeat the question with regard to his potential death twice in an interrogative, concerned and animated tone. This constant questioning combined with Bub’s negative answers fosters a

sense of immorality and callousness in Bub with regard to his actions in the Christian faith. Thus, not only has Phelps communicated that Bub is not an active Christian, but she conveys that because he is not, after he dies, his soul will end up in some undesirable place due to his immorality. Given that the reader now knows Bub is not a Christian, and understanding the large demographic of Jews in factories, it is safe to make an educated assumption that Bub is here being characterized as explicitly Jewish.

Bringing in my own personal experience as a Jewish person, when I was a child and had just moved to Dallas, Texas from Manhattan, New York, I was asked by an older girl on the playground if I had accepted Jesus Christ as my savior and what Church I went to. When I told her that I was not a Christian, she angrily communicated to me that I was destined for an eternity in hell. Thus, a common experience of Jewish peoples is a savior complex on the part of Christians who are overly concerned with ‘saving’ Jews so that they do not go to hell.

This emphasis on Bub’s lack of Christianity having to do with sin or hell continues as Phelps describes “baptismal drops” of nature right before describing Bub being “evil”: “Bub’s little old face wears an extra shade of age and evil” (209). Following this quote, Phelps goes on to describe Bub as someone who swears loudly enough on the streets for others to hear him. By describing Bub as “evil” and as someone who engages in profuse swearing (an activity that the Christian readers of Phelps’ novel would have been shocked at and would have perceived as negative) after already coding Bub as Jewish and communicating his immorality, further connotes anti-Semitism and conveys yet again the trope that Jewish people are somehow associated with hell and fiendish or devilish behavior. Furthermore, by repeatedly using holy Christian terms revolving around baptism before and around her characterization of Bub as evil,

Phelps contrasts Bub's sin with Christian notions of purity and rebirth, perhaps even hinting at the notion of Bub being able to be "saved" from his "evil" by the force of Christianity. Phelps' careful placing of notions regarding purity and sin around Bub continue later in the novel: "All the foreheads of the buttercups and clovers seem dripping with sacred water, when Bub lifts his little aged yellow face with the dirt and blood and tobacco upon it, over — just over — the edge of the hogshead to see what became of the rat" (Phelps 207). Phelps contrasts the beauty and purity of "sacred water" in nature with Bub being covered in "dirt and blood" and even catching a rat. By writing purity around Bub, Phelps is able to create in her writing a stark contrast between notions of good and evil as they pertain to religious purity — particularly Christian purity. From a historical standpoint, Phelps, in doing this, draws upon centuries old notions of Jewish people being involved with sin. In fact, a widespread stereotype in late Medieval and Renaissance England about Jews was an association with hell and immorality (Felsenstein). Bub embodies the aforementioned words "godless creature", as Phelps truly describes Bub as a creature at times.

Bub's character is routinely described as being akin to a puppy which creates a dehumanizing and anti-Semitic tone. For example, Bub catches rats in his free time as a dog would (Phelps 103), he is said to be "like a puppy" in that he "trots" and "wags" (Phelps 204-205) and also it is said that he "crawls up the stairs on 'all fours'... so very much like a puppy" (Phelps 212). By comparing Bub to a dog, Phelps draws on stereotypes popular at the very time her novel was written; in late-nineteenth century Germany, with the influx and outflux of Jewish immigrants, the comparison of Jewish people to dogs in an effort to garner anti-Semitism in various communities was employed as a popular tactic (Fraenkel). Furthermore,

given that many Jews were coming from Germany to the United States in order to work in the very factories that Phelps writes about (Kessler-Harris), it becomes clear to the reader that Phelps does not use the dog analogy without a purpose. Such an analogy serves to create a tone of anti-Semitism that would have been well-known and popularized at the time that Phelps' book was published. Comparing Bub to an animal, particularly the domesticated and dominated animal that is the dog, strips Bub of his agency and dehumanizes him, essentially leveling his character with that of a household pet. Phelps not only codes her main characters, but also codes her language and references.

Phelps utilizes actual Jewish terms several times throughout her novel in ways that have strongly anti-Semitic tones. For example, when Bub dies and the factory supervisors need to communicate the news to his family, they say, "Ask *her*... *she* would do to break ill news to the mother of the Maccabees" (Phelps 217). In Jewish tradition, the Maccabees were a group of Jewish warriors who revolted against the Greek oppression of Jewish people in Jerusalem and rededicated the Temple, an event that began the celebration of the holiday of Hanukkah (Gilad). The Maccabees were considered deviant blockades to the preservation of Greek rule. The Greeks banned all Jewish celebrations, practices and observances, and the Maccabees represented the ultimate revolt against that suppression. Thus, when Phelps compares a factory mother to the mother of the Maccabees, the connotation is negative and is bathed in Ancient Greek anti-Semitic thought and rhetoric. Furthermore, the quote is said with a tone of disdain and disgust, further implicating Phelps as anti-Semitic in her writing. Another Jewish term that Phelps uses negatively occurs on page 231; when Perley witnesses the crazed Bijah Mudge speaking in nonsensical and incoherent language, she remarks: "A Hebrew prophet". Coding

Bijah as Jewish, and not just Jewish, but as a Hebrew prophet, after representing him as insane, fatigued and unliked, represents an offensive use of Jewish traditions and history to further Phelps' anti-Semitic notions.

Finally, Phelps takes humanity, autonomy and power away from real-life examples of Jewish labor movements that would have been prevalent during the time of publication of the novel. Phelps references the "Lorenzo factory girls" on page 234, a seemingly made up class of female factory workers who are depicted as lying about their abysmal conditions in order to further their own selfish ends for better treatment. A well known "factory girl" group at the time that Phelps alludes to with this surrogate name is the Lowell Factory Girls group. The Lowell Factory Girls were a majority Jewish immigrants from Europe and spent their time in textile mills and factories (Farrant and Strobel 92). The Lowell Girls often anonymously wrote about their own experiences in newspapers and magazines and in such writings condemn the portrayal of the Lowell Girl by non-laborers who seek only to further their own ends (Unsigned). Phelps thus denies autonomy to these Jewish workers and further strips them of their humanity when she makes the rhetorical decision to include a popularized newspaper column about what a male writer believes the state of being a laboring, Jewish female to be. Additionally, Phelps denies the vibrant Jewish women's labor reformation efforts their power by tearing away the validity of legislation to improve the lives of Jewish workers. Phelps describes the character Bijah Mudge as being a rambling, raving and ranting lunatic of sorts who testified before the Massachusetts Legislature, which only led him to receive his notice of termination and end up in the poor house (Phelps 175-176). By writing in a direct consequence to his proactive action of testifying in order for labor laws, Phelps undermines the hard work of female Jewish laborers in northern states

during the late nineteenth century to advocate for gentile laborers to push for legislation and to testify. Additionally, on page 299, Sip is written to say, “[f]olks may make laws, but laws won’t do it... there’s no way under heaven for us to get out of our twist, but Christ’s way”. By first coding Sip as Jewish throughout the novel and then by having her abandon her thus far established principals rooted in logic and experience to instead turn to Christ for answers to injustice in labor, Phelps strips Sip of her basic humanity and individuality as a Jewish laborer. Phelps removes all traces of the fact that Jewish women advocated for better laws to govern workers and instead forces Christianity as the ultimate answer to all problems.

When I initially approached this novel, I was unaware of the extent of contributions of Jewish women to the notion of workers’ rights and humane treatment for laborers. However, through research, class discussion, and in-class learning, I discovered the great legacy Jewish women have left for America’s working classes. Upon being enlightened to this, it became clear that Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, though progressive in her portrayal of the extensive inhumanity within the factory networks, did not necessarily portray Jewish people, women specifically, with the light that deserves to shine on their accomplishments. In class, the question was posed: Should art be created for truth’s sake? If the answer is yes, then I fear that too often, women who have been marginalized for more than just their gender have thus been overlooked or ignored by nineteenth-century literature, even, or rather, *especially*, when we talk about social reform. If art should be created for truth’s sake, as Phelps believed, then I find her to be hypocritical. The truths of Jewish women in the labor reformation movements of the late nineteenth century are not told in her book, but are instead purposefully mangled and destroyed.

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