

“Unthinkable” Resistance:
The Work of Phillis Wheatley and the Discourse of “Race” in Late
Eighteenth Century America

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B.A. in History, May 2011, The College of the Holy Cross

August 31, 2013

A Thesis submitted to

The Faculty of
The Columbian College of Arts and Sciences
Of The George Washington University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Arts

Thesis directed by

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Abstract of Thesis

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Though much has been written about Phillis Wheatley’s life and works, the balance of Wheatley scholarship has submerged her in historiographical context rather than treat Wheatley as a subject on her own merits. Wheatley’s work was connoted as “unthinkable” in her own time as a means of using recognition of singular acts of resistance as exceptions to a rule of deference on the part of blacks to white society. Moreover, Wheatley scholars have repeated this process: by attempting to situate her into theoretical paradigms with which she had no connection, scholars “account” for Wheatley rather than seriously reckon with her as a historical actor.

However, Wheatley was herself aware of this system of representation, and honed her ability to politick through manipulating her “unthinkable” attributes into an opportunity to publish her verse. Wheatley’s 1773 collection *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* began a brief yet pointed period in the public eye, and Wheatley used this opportunity to further hone her developing and increasingly radical voice. The poet’s works challenged white hierarchy in ways both direct and indirect, with elites such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson evaluating her work. In his 1801 treatise *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson was particularly critical of Wheatley’s capacity to write her own poetry, but Jefferson’s contemporaries continuously challenged his opinion and forced him reevaluate his views. Though she was never conventionally famous, Wheatley nonetheless made a marked contribution to the discourse of “race” in her day.

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Chapter 1. “Misery Enough... but No Poetry”

In 1781, Thomas Jefferson published one of his many landmark works, *Notes on the State of Virginia*. The *Notes* was an exhaustive treatise: Jefferson both relayed statistical information measured by him in response to others’ questions about the state and took the opportunity to discourse on a variety of subjects, including slavery.

Although his belief in slavery continuously shifted throughout his life, Jefferson used the *Notes* to concretely state his belief in the rightness of the separation of blacks and whites in society. Jefferson based his conviction on this point from observable, intractable “differences” between whites and blacks, both in physiology and in blacks’ supposedly inferior reasoning capacity.¹ Jefferson’s opinion of the intellect of blacks was especially critical:

Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me, that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous.²

It was on this last point that Jefferson spoke at greater length. Clearly the most important standard of equality to Jefferson, higher-level, creative thinking was to him not a feature of the intellects of the African Americans that he had engaged with or read about.

In Jefferson’s opinion, African Americans had a lower creative intellectual capacity than the Indians, whom Jefferson noted could

. . . carve figures . . . prove the existence of a germ in their minds which only wants cultivation. They astonish you with strokes of

¹ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 264.

² Jefferson, *Notes*, 266.

the most sublime oratory; such as prove their reason and sentiment strong, their imagination glowing and elevated.

Moreover, the Indians presented a laudable case in Jefferson's opinion because they could exercise their higher cognitive abilities without the "advantage" of living in or as a tangential part of white society.³ To Jefferson, the intellectual gift of African Americans was in reproducing the original creative efforts of others rather than the initial production of these efforts. Citing Phillis Wheatley and Ignatius Sancho, the two most notable figures of African American creative achievement, as his examples, Jefferson reduced both of these notables' talents to that of imitation. Sancho had skill with sentiment, but not "reason," and in Jefferson's opinion, the writer did not match favorably with his contemporaries in "the race among whom he lived."⁴

Yet it is Jefferson's criticism of Wheatley that leaps off the page when first examined. Jefferson treated Wheatley's achievements with special disdain, noting that:

Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. Love is the peculiar oestrum of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whately; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism. The heroes of the Dunciad are to her, as Hercules to the author of that poem.⁵

Jefferson's vitriol towards Wheatley is surprising. Even Sancho, who had directly attacked slavery, was worthy of Jefferson's "criticism." Obviously, Wheatley had gotten under Jefferson's skin: Wheatley was comparably famous to Sancho, and had garnered a cult following for her skilled verses, especially her 1773 book of poems entitled *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. Additionally, Wheatley's verses had been

³ Jefferson, *Notes*, 266.

⁴ Jefferson, *Notes*, 267.

⁵ *Ibid.*

verified as written in her own hand. However, despite these concrete achievements, Jefferson took only a few brief phrases to dismiss her through rationalizing her works as religious imitations.

The reason for this devaluation was simple: Wheatley *had* in fact been the creator of her own work. Because she could be verified as its creator, she directly contravened the conventional wisdom represented by Jefferson's earlier passages; therefore it was necessary to rationalize her original works as lesser in order to fortify his point.

Wheatley had challenged Jefferson, and in doing so, had forced him to address her works, however briefly, in order to make his point. The constitution of this challenge, of what made Wheatley a figure formidable enough for Jefferson to so cheaply attack her, is the subject of this analysis.

Phillis Wheatley has long been a subject of scholarship in a variety of fields, but the balance of Wheatley scholarship has resulted from literary criticism. Yet these works have suffered from a historiographical inadequacy in that they treat their subject as a feature of her historical context rather than an actor herself; to say that Phillis Wheatley has been under-represented in the secondary literature would be an understatement.

Wheatley scholars do pay attention to her story, the salience of her poetry for her world and ours, and, at a superficial level, the spectacle to be drawn from the phenomenon of a woman of color publishing her works in an era of discrimination. Nevertheless, there are substantial limitations to writing about Wheatley's life and the impact of her poetry. The dearth of primary documentation about Wheatley, the comparatively meager yield of her correspondence and her small contribution to the poetry of the time militate against the more traditional historiographical methods employed by historians and other scholars.

However imposing, these limitations are not impassable. As David Waldstreicher has aptly noted, good Wheatley scholarship merely calls for imagination on the part of historians. Diving into these somewhat unusual historiographical circumstances is necessary to bring Wheatley's sometimes faint "footprints in the sand" into sharper relief. Waldstreicher captured the essential issue that the majority of Wheatley scholarship faces: Wheatley scholars largely treat her as an object of literary criticism, contextualizing her to presentist movements and discourses, such as the school of "African American" literature with which Wheatley would not necessarily have identified herself.⁶ This incongruity does not merely stunt the potential of the literature to tackle the story of its subject. On the contrary, it shackles the historical power of Phillis Wheatley anew to a model of scholarship that submerges her significance in a mire of contextualization and implicit rationalization.

In his landmark essay "An Unthinkable History: The Haitian Revolution as a Non-event," Michel-Rolph Trouillot drew the outlines of the ontological mire which has similarly limited the historiography on Wheatley. Using the Haitian Revolution as his prime example, Trouillot pointed to an essential difficulty that continues to plague the historiography of African Americans. In writing about African Americans as subjects, historians must struggle against the attitudes of the white hierarchy's historicization of these events in terms that render those events as "unthinkable" in order to rationalize and thereby fortify their own worldview. This second level of control exercised over African

⁶ David Waldstreicher, "The Wheatleyan Moment," *Early American Studies* (Fall 2011): 531.

Americans by elites in turn sets the terms used to discuss African American actors and events in the historiography.⁷

Trouillot's highlighting of the racialized thinking of the time on the part of white elites and ideologues was not unique, but his analysis on the implications of the use of this thinking in the systems of power at the time and their influence on future historiography is nonetheless essential. Elites delegitimized the normal human behaviors of African Americans by couching them in a series of rationalizations. Generally, these elites articulated the idea that slaves and freemen possessed lesser "degrees" of humanity. Put more exactly, elites characterized the condition of African Americans thusly: blacks were inferior and therefore enslaved; black slaves behaved badly and were therefore inferior.⁸

These expressions of elite ideology did not remain static, but the Enlightenment's general, evolutionary influence on the development of thought merely put a finer point on what had already been articulated. The ostensibly radical notion that the "perfectability" of man also applied to the "subhuman" African, concepts exemplified by the work of the Abbe Raynal and Denis Diderot, was not mutually exclusive from the political advocacy of these and other authors on the issue. Elites' perceptions of marginal "degrees" of humanity in African Americans did not keep them from supporting slavery. Thus, the question that these writers faced when treating the slave system as an object of analysis was moderating the treatment afforded to African Americans rather than rectifying the

⁷ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "An Unthinkable History: The Haitian Revolution as Non-event," in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 73.

⁸ Trouillot, "An Unthinkable History," 76-77.

system itself.⁹ This paternalism reflected clearly back onto slaveholders themselves. Scholars have long since noted that masters for example added legal curbs to their power, but that these elites' interest in this ostensible attenuation of their control was to seem less "brutal" in the application of their complete power over their slaves.¹⁰

Wheatley becomes "unthinkable" to the reader for the same reasons that other slaves who resisted their experienced hierarchies did. Paradoxically, it was not essential to the system that slaveholders pretended that resistance was non-existent; individuals or small groups could in fact be made into exceptions that proved the racist rule. Acts of resistance such as Wheatley's writing had to be made into special cases in order to rationalize their existence. Such backhanded acknowledgement by white elites and white society at large was in fact advantageous to slave-owners and those who stood to benefit from slavery, because it allowed these individuals to atomize resistance as isolated acts of disobedience rather than a latent drive to obtain freedom. Acknowledgment of resistance as a normal condition was acknowledgment of humanity.¹¹

Trouillot's process of white elites' "rationalizing" African American acts of resistance into "unthinkable" acts especially applies to Wheatley scholarship because Wheatley acolytes have so clearly committed instances of the re-inscription that Trouillot describes. Returning briefly to Waldstreicher's general criticism, Wheatley scholarship is hamstrung by its literary criticism-influenced background. Scholars too often try and fit Wheatley to their various theoretical paradigms, creating a figure in Wheatley's image

⁹ Trouillot, "An Unthinkable History," 80-81.

¹⁰ Thomas D. Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law, 1619-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), accessed April 1, 2013, ite.ebrary.com/lib/gwu/docDetail.action?docID=10202633. 163-164.

¹¹ Trouillot, "An Unthinkable History," 83-84.

instead of engaging Wheatley the historical person. While it is tempting to give scholarship the benefit of the doubt on this issue given the paucity of documents, even when “histories” of Wheatley have been written by these individuals involved in highly critical discourses, she is not treated as a historical actor in her own right. Instead, scholars make Wheatley into an object, a person who comes into view as a creation of and subject to, rather than a participant in, the processes in which she was enmeshed. Moreover, somewhat obviously, this objectification focuses on Wheatley’s race. As Astrid Franke noted in her thoughtful piece “Phillis Wheatley, Melancholy Muse,” Wheatley’s race “overrides all other details of Wheatley’s physical depiction as well as her attention to the artistic strategies evident in her poetry.”¹²

This discursive objectification is best exemplified in the sheer, massive amount of speculation that is recklessly applied to Wheatley. In the absence of documents, authors relentlessly situate Wheatley amongst contextual processes and largely hypothetical relationships with persons that they cannot conclusively prove that she knew. For example, in James Levernier’s otherwise excellent piece on Wheatley’s connection to New England Patriot clergymen, there is excessive license taken with her connection to these individuals.¹³ This is not to say that Wheatley did not know them, nor that she would not write of her fascination with their remarks should they have said something to pique her interest. Wheatley’s correspondence with the Mohegan preacher and Protestant internationalist Samson Occom attests both to her belief in a connection between

¹² Astrid Franke, “Phillis Wheatley, Melancholy Muse,” *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 77, no. 2 (Jun., 2004): 225.

¹³ James A. Levernier, “Phillis Wheatley and the New England Clergy,” *Early American Literature*, vol. 26, no. 1 (1991): 24-27.

devotion and temporal political matters and her interest in using faith to execute a political and social discourse.

Yet, Levernier overzealously tries to form a substantive connection between Wheatley and these individuals. This presents two historiographical problems, one technical, the other argumentative. First, Levernier's methods *are* solvent for one case, but for one case alone. Wheatley would have known the Patriot preacher John Lathrop well, and this can be established without a plethora of documents because as the husband of one of Wheatley's "sisters" through her master and mistress, Lathrop would have been in frequent contact with Wheatley. Moreover, after the death of Susannah Wheatley, the poet lived with Lathrop during the heady years of the Revolution when events were focused on Boston. However, the additional, thinner connection between Lathrop and Wheatley, their shared membership at Boston's Old South Church, is one of a few flimsier bridges that Levernier uses to form these hypothetical relationships with Wheatley.

As will be examined in further depth later in the text, the Wheatley family was a highly influential in Boston's Congregationalist community. However, their commitment to the missionary movement and their international connections to influential Christians in Britain made them a bulwark of international Protestantism as well. Thus the Wheatley house became a stopover for many of the luminary preachers of the era; the Wheatleys were even acquaintances of the great George Whitefield. Yet, the presence of both the preachers and Phillis in the same location, whether it was in the home or with their congregation, is not proof in and of itself, and the coincidence of these preachers'

notions of “freedom” with Wheatley’s own rhetoric of her rights in her poems is doubly insufficient as evidence of a connection.

This first historiographical difficulty melts into the second, argumentative issue. Supposition on the part of Wheatley scholars, such as Levernier, is dangerous because it depersonalizes Wheatley. In order to construct her “environment” and find her strict “contemporaries,” these scholars *supply* places and figures for her, and in doing so reinscribe her “unthinkableness” by drowning her originality in a stream of “influences.” Thus, in Levernier’s words, “she could hardly have escaped” an education in the right of “all human beings ... to freedom that cannot be abridged by any social contract,” a muddled construction conflating presentist phrasing and racial and political discourses that Wheatley would not necessarily have been party to.¹⁴

Trouillot’s analysis is doubly important on this issue, because it goes to both Wheatley’s voice and what she said using her voice: First, if Wheatley came to her voice markedly through the influence of these men, it dilutes her actual power and uniqueness as a thinker, instead making her an imitator of white men’s ideas of abolition. Second, and more importantly, it conflates the two parties’ messages, which were in fact different: Whitefield and the others, it is easy to point out, were in favor of abolition, for a variety of reasons along a spectrum of value criteria. Wheatley, however, was both an abolitionist, *and* advocating against racism, and only developed these opinions from an implied to explicit form of expression over her time in the public eye. Thus, to downplay Wheatley’s voice through associating it as markedly a product of other’s influence cripples the impact of even contending that Wheatley was a powerful writer.

¹⁴ Levernier, “Phillis Wheatley and the New England Clergy,” 25.

Furthermore, this way of writing about Wheatley gives truth to the lie of Jefferson and others of the white elite's attempts to silence Wheatley's discourse by counting her ideas as parroted concepts influenced by a faulty system of logic (in the case of Jefferson's criticism in the *Notes*, this would be "religion").

Vincent Carretta's work on Wheatley is also at least partially prone to this historiographical issue. Carretta takes the same license as Levernier and other scholars of Wheatley's life and applies it on a point that is inessential to his argument of her unique genius. Carretta contends in his *Biography of a Genius in Bondage* that Susannah Wheatley took a special liking to the young girl because the Wheatley felt that she resembled their recently deceased daughter.¹⁵ Though Carretta is above board in noting that he has no factual basis for arguing this point, he nonetheless allows its influence to creep into his reading of Susannah Wheatley's motives for managing her charge's early career. While the issue does not ultimately end up moot, the consensus on her influence on Phillis Wheatley is certainly muddled, with insufficient help coming from the documentary record. Thus, Carretta's assertion has a more tonal influence on his analysis and stays an assertion rather than twisting the analysis, as was the case with Levernier's article.

Thus, it is tempting to consider writing about Wheatley to be a fundamentally subjectively interpretive act. Yet this notion is incorrect. Rather, Wheatley's historical presence, as Waldstreicher and Franke can attest, comes into view from a process of revealing, of reducing down the heavy amounts of rationalization surrounding her. According to Franke, "If we attend to the cultural context in which . . . the poet was

¹⁵ Vincent Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 14.

offered to readers, however, we can discern in it the public role Wheatley carefully crafted by means of her poetry.”¹⁶ Such a revelation shows Wheatley to be as much an influence on events in her world as she was influenced by it. Moreover, engaging Wheatley in this way takes her seriously not only as a poet, but also as a person. Removing the heavy layers of assumption interpolated into her story, one can see a voice that needed the resources of a patron for its development, but that used these resources to fortify and free itself from this context. Wheatley was more than a product of her environment, and although the context in which she grew and developed was certainly unique, it was no guarantor of her future achievements.

¹⁶ Franke, “Melancholy Muse,” 225.

Chapter 2. Faith and Reason

Though Jefferson was incorrect in his remarks about Wheatley, his assertion had some merit in that Jefferson accurately diagnosed the intimate relationship Wheatley had with her faith. However, perhaps because of the connotation of religion as a “spoiler” of slaves held by masters, or his general, outright dismissal of the worth of Wheatley’s work, Jefferson fundamentally misunderstood the place of religion in her life. Christianity offered Wheatley an opportunity to self-actualize; it was a lens through which she viewed the world rather than her world itself. While Wheatley would eventually arrive at a place as an artist and intellectual where she treated her faith from a more nuanced remove, her faith remained the undergirding of her intellect, and it was her early zeal for Christianity that would first inspire her to write.

Phillis Wheatley was brought from Africa to America at the young age of 7, and was purchased by John and Susannah Wheatley in Boston in the year 1761. Joining the Wheatley household was perhaps as fortunate of a fate that she could have asked for. Wheatley received preferential treatment tantamount to that of a child of the family; Vincent Carretta has speculated that her masters perhaps considered Wheatley a replacement for a recently deceased child of their own. However, irrespective of the reason for this favor, this treatment would nevertheless have been in keeping with the Wheatleys’ reputation for public piety.¹⁷

To borrow a phrase from Ira Berlin, Massachusetts at the time of Wheatley’s arrival and early development was more of a “society with slaves” than a “slave society.” During the eighteenth century, slavery was increasing its’ penetration into New

¹⁷ Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 14.

Englanders' everyday lives more than it had been in earlier years, but as in the rest of New England, slavery nonetheless had a different character than it did in the South.¹⁸ Northern slavery was focused in urban areas, largely due to the strength of the New England tradition of family-based and wage labor in the countryside. Slaves never accounted for a large portion of the population, but the direct importation of slaves that began in the eighteenth century systematized and calcified what had been an almost liberal hierarchy in the past.¹⁹ However, slaves in the North still retained a marked level of autonomy compared with slaves living in other parts of the country. For example, northern slaves regularly gathered together in public, often as part of religious ceremony.

Within the schema of slavery in the North, Wheatley's position in her masters' house easily comported with the prevailing notion of the "place" of black women in their owners' homes. If Wheatley had not had such a "favored" position with the family, a close relationship to her owners would still have been typical, as slave women in the North fulfilled a more domestic role with their work.²⁰ Thus, irrespective of the demonstrable level of quasi-familial connection between Phillis and the Wheatleys, she nonetheless would have been very familiar with their affairs. Wheatley's role in the house was more akin to that of an indentured servant rather than a slave; she joined the Wheatleys at social occasions, sitting with them in public, and was given an amount of "leisure time" that was peculiar even amongst indentured servants.²¹

¹⁸ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: Harvard University/Belknap, 1998), 47.

¹⁹ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 179.

²⁰ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 182.

²¹ Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 23.

It was in this “leisure time” that Wheatley developed her abilities. As good Congregationalists, the Wheatleys believed in the primacy of a believer’s access to the word of God through the Bible; thus, it was important for anyone raised in the Congregationalist church to be literate.²² While there is no record of Wheatley’s attendance of services with the family, John and Susannah Wheatley’s overall religiosity and commitment to the drive for conversion implicit in Congregationalism make her baptism in 1771 the conclusion of a logical process.²³ Nevertheless, by 1765, Wheatley attained proficiency in both reading and writing and was skilled in Latin. These skills marked her as preternaturally talented amongst even educated whites, many of whom could not write. Additionally, Wheatley at this age began what would become a long-tenured correspondence when she started writing letters to a variety of recipients. Strikingly, her first letter was sent to Samson Occom, the Mohegan preacher and Protestant internationalist whose correspondence with Wheatley would prove revelatory of her political and racial advocacy in later years.²⁴

In addition to the somewhat lax strictures of the “society with slaves” model of Massachusetts, slaves also notably retained the legal right of petition of government, and actively exercised this right.²⁵ Although these petitions never took on the form of an organized movement, they delivered a clear message of protest against the conditions of the slave system. In lieu of an organized protest, these statements were a central source for criticism of slavery. The unpublished 1776 tract authored by Lemuel Haynes, a mulatto man living in New England, demonstrated that writers of these documents clearly

²² Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 24.

²³ Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 34.

²⁴ Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 37-38.

²⁵ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 54, 193.

had a consciousness of both the racial justification of slavery and that the system was an unjust breach of their liberty:

... Liberty is a Jewel which was handed Down to man from the cabinet of heaven and is Coeval with his Existence. And as it proceed from the Supreme Legislature of the univers, so it is he which hath a sole right to take away... Liberty is Equally as pre[c]ious to a *Black man*, as it is to a *white one*, and Bondage equally as intolerable to one as it is to the other... those privileges that are granted us By the Divine Being, no one has the Least right to take them from us without our consent[t]...²⁶

Haynes' petition is also illustrative of a strand of thought that would later reassert itself in Wheatley's work. Freedom is connected by the author with the Divine, such that the liberty that Haynes noted *ought* to be held in common by black men and white men was a quality that came from God, and thus could not be contravened by *any* man.

Irrespective of Haynes' account being unpublished, publicly circulated and argued petitions were similarly argumentative, if phrased in a more politick way. The obvious differences between private sentiment and public remarks by slave petitioners are tonal; there is an obvious deference not only to officialdom, but also to the class and racial difference between the petitioner and petitioned. Thus, the language of the petitions is less forward, but just as radical, as that used by Haynes. Taking the 1773 public argument of a group of four slaves as an example, the juxtaposition between argument and deference is readily apparent:

Sir, The efforts made by the legislative ... to free themselves from slavery, gave us, who are in that deplorable state, a high degree of satisfaction. We expect great things... We are very sensible that it would be highly detrimental to our present masters, if we were allowed to demand all that of *right* belongs

²⁶ Lemuel Haynes, "Lemuel Haynes, A New England Mulatto, Attacks Slavery, 1776," in *William and Mary Quarterly* 40 (1983), reprinted in Richard D. Brown, ed., *Major Problems in the Era of the American Revolution, 1760-179: Documents and Essays* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 258-259.

to us... But since the wise and righteous governor of the universe, has permitted our fellow men to make us slaves, we bow in submission to him, and determine to behave in such a manner as that we may have... divine approbation of, and assistance in, our peaceable and lawful attempts to gain our freedom...²⁷

Again, the measured expression of expectation is important to note. The petitioners wrote to agitate for legislative change, but instead of advocating for direct emancipation, they argued for the amelioration of a status that they recognized to be *legally* right at the moment. Moreover, faith is again a central feature in the language; similarly to Haynes, the petitioners located the legitimacy of their status in the influence of the Divine on the matter. However, unlike Haynes, the petitioners asserted that God must at least implicitly approve of their status as slaves, likely because of the desire to publicize their argument. The notion that slave status was unjust and race based, yet had been applied to African Americans for reasons in accordance with divine will, was an idea that Wheatley would extensively explore through her poetry, though she would initially only write about it from a personal context.

Jefferson's later criticism of Wheatley was at least in part not a spurious statement; she was strongly connected to her religion. Yet Wheatley's connection with her faith was much more unique than her critics would give her credit for; her long relationship with religion began in the Wheatley house in her childhood. Irrespective of the insights and value individual slaves or future congregations of slaves would receive from investigating Christian religion, Christianity was initially something "given" by whites to slaves. Moreover, this "gift" was received willingly or otherwise; before the

²⁷ "Massachusetts Slaves Argue for Freedom, 1773." in *William and Mary Quarterly* 40 (1983), reprinted in Richard D. Brown, ed., *Major Problems in the Era of the American Revolution, 1760-179: Documents and Essays* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 258-259.

eighteenth century, the majority of slaves were either resistant to Christianizing by whites or unfamiliar with Christian teachings.²⁸ However, while this was Wheatley's introduction to Christianity as well, she would gradually inject her personality into her faith and express her own views on the subject rather than the perspective of her teachers.

The Wheatley family practiced Congregationalist Protestantism, a distinctly Puritan form of Calvinism that was unique for its members' power to elect the ministers of their congregations. Like other Calvinists, Congregationalists believed in predestination, the idea that one's status of being "saved" by Christ was both pre-determined and the privilege of a select portion of believers referred to as "the Elect." Believers lived their lives in a tension between the concept that they were born as irredeemable creatures, yet that good works and piety offered them the chance to engage with the spirit of God to the extent that they could without being a member of "the Elect."²⁹ Similar to other strains of Calvinism, Congregationalism encouraged a millenarian spirituality that viewed life on Earth as a preparatory experience that conditioned one's access to heaven. Thus, although believers were not guaranteed salvation, they could nonetheless put themselves in the best possible place to be able to be saved through righteous acts while on Earth.

Yet the family's faith was not the only strand of Christian influence in Wheatley's life, perhaps because of the fact that their "New Light" Congregationalism was liberal enough to permit its members to religiously engage with other Protestant

²⁸ Cedrick May, *Evangelism and Resistance in the Black Atlantic, 1760-1835* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008) 1, 11.

²⁹ Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 25.

denominations.³⁰ Irrespective of the origination of its influence on Wheatley's life, her work is also irrevocably marked by the influence of Methodism. Both Congregationalism and Methodism had their formative powers in Wheatley's work, but while Congregationalist Calvinism gave Wheatley her noted early humility, it was Methodism that truly brought her into the fold of Christianity. Known throughout the English Atlantic world as the Anglican reform movement, Methodism preached a more open access to salvation through good works and charity. Furthermore, Methodism leveled the playing field with respect to predestination such that other Christians saw the Methodist belief that all strata of society, including slaves, potentially had access to salvation as a socially destructive force. Yet this openness was a practical means by which Methodism engaged more believers, and although the Church did not have an explicitly antislavery message, it nonetheless provided an avenue for African Americans to encounter Christianity as something that could be theirs as well.³¹

Wheatley's faith is not a matter of debate, but it best comes into view through her correspondence, in particular her letters to her close friend Obour Tanner. Though we cannot precisely date the beginning of Tanner and Wheatley's correspondence, Wheatley refers in the first letter known to historians to Tanner's opening of their relationship in February of 1772, when Tanner wrote Wheatley to open a discussion on their mutual faith. It is clear from Wheatley's language in her letters to Tanner that she felt she had found a kindred spirit; indeed, Wheatley communicated with Tanner in a uniquely open and freely emotional way. Both black as well as enslaved women, Wheatley clearly felt

³⁰ Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 26.

³¹ Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 29.

comfortable in her correspondence with Tanner, and so her letters to Tanner are perhaps the best expression of her views on her faith.

It is clear from her writing that Wheatley was a woman of intense faith in God. Writing to Tanner in July of 1772 after a months-long bout with consumption, Wheatley was fervent in her expression to Tanner that God would help to heal her. Wheatley's Congregationalist influences were readily apparent in these early letters with Tanner. Though weakened, Wheatley was grateful for her outward malady so that "... the inward be refresh'd and strengthen'd more abundantly by him who declar'd from heaven that his strength was made perfect in weakness!"³² Similar to many other believers in her eager anticipation of her potential heavenly rewards, Wheatley was also in well-numbered company for her dedication to virtue and her astute Bible scholarship. Wheatley wrote eloquently to Tanner about the importance of vigilance against the Devil, and expressed her gratitude to John Thornton for recommending that she study the Bible as extensively as she did.³³ This sense of commitment would inspire a great deal of her literary output, as Wheatley used devotional language to express her ideas.

An earlier letter from May of 1772 reveals an additional, more intriguing level of Wheatley's faith. For her, Christianity was not only a chance at salvation, but also a means to the end of self-actualization. Though not guaranteed salvation, Wheatley felt already saved after a fashion by her conversion to Christianity. Christianity, felt Wheatley, had opened her eyes in a way that divided her and Tanner from un-Christianized Africans:

³² "Phillis Wheatley to Obour Tanner, July 19, 1772," in *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. John C. Shields (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 165-166

³³ "Wheatley to Tanner, July 19, 1772," and "Phillis Wheatley to John Thornton, April 21st, 1772," in *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Shields, 163-164.

I greatly rejoice with you in that realizing view, and I hope experience, of the saving change which you so emphatically describe... let us rejoice in and adore the wonders of God's infinite Love in bringing us from a land semblant of darkness itself, and where the divine light of revelation (being obscur'd) is as darkness.

This is more than gratitude for her conversion. Wheatley felt *ennobled* by Christianity in her life before fame, so much so that she shifted from her already glowing appraisal of her conversion to count this development in her life as luck. Africans who had not yet received Christ had not only lost a happy opportunity; rather, they had been “pass'd by.”³⁴

Wheatley's enthusiasm in this early letter is suggestive of two qualities worth noting. First, her language is emblematic of what Vincent Carretta referred to as a Calvinist idea of a “fortunate fall.” African believers not only felt that man's Original Sin was in fact a boon for mankind, but also that their being taken into slavery was itself a good experience because it enabled them to experience Christianity.³⁵ Thus, Wheatley's notion that un-Christianized Africans were “pass'd over” illustrates that in the years surrounding her baptism and following her gradual conversion, Wheatley strengthened herself as a believer by drawing a swift contrast between herself and these people because they had not been “fortunate” enough.

Wheatley's way of speaking about Africans introduces a second essential quality of her thinking. Similar to the earlier petitioners, Wheatley's written works included heavily dichotomous language. Though she would use such language sparingly, in important works Wheatley could, and did, strategically use the judgments that she made

³⁴ “Phillis Wheatley to Obour Tanner, May 19th, 1772,” in *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Shields, 164-165.

³⁵ Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 29.

about the “unfortunate” Africans to gain traction with her reading public by ingratiating herself with them through situating herself among her less “fortunate” fellow Africans. As will be noted further on in the analysis, Wheatley’s use of her status as an “African” was her tool to show her initial deference to whites while at the same time maneuvering to deliver her real message. Thus Wheatley’s skill at politicking, which she would formidably hone in later years, comes into view through the lens of her religious beliefs.

Chapter 3. Verse from “the Pen of an Untutor’d African”

Phillis Wheatley’s brief yet storied writing career had, what for such a special case as her education would proffer, an inauspicious beginning. Wheatley was at heart always a heavily local poet. She started her career composing elegies and items of remembrance for Boston elites. This provinciality was a focal point for the development of her talent. Whether in memorializing the recently departed child of a local notable, as she did in “On the Death of J.C. an Infant,” or commenting on local news developments, as was the case with “On Messrs. Hussey and Coffin,” Wheatley built her reputation and developed her skills with these more local poems. However, Wheatley’s gifted comingling of devotional vocabulary and inspirational verse also brought her to the attention of notable figures far from her home shores.

Scholars have misinterpreted these notables’ interest in Wheatley’s work. For these individuals, including Susannah Wheatley, John Thornton, and Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon, she was a resource to be mined. Her faith, literary genius, and to these people most importantly, her race, were all signs of her value as a tool to achieve an end. Wheatley scholars are correct in that this cooption takes some bite out of Wheatley’s impact. Yet it would be utterly lacking in a consideration of Wheatley’s great talent to assert that these influences held sway over her. In fact, it would be more appropriate to note the extent to which Wheatley manipulated her own handlers.

One of Wheatley’s greatest skills as a writer was this form of control. Wheatley’s prose is marked by, and her correspondence confirms, an awareness of the need to politick, to persuade individuals to listen to her. This awareness of some whites’ misgivings at reading a black poet’s work surely played into her handler’s designs for

Wheatley, but it was Wheatley's own manipulation of this image in her interactions with her handlers that truly signifies how deeply intelligent and powerful of a thinker she really was. Wheatley's obvious familiarity with the way in which she was represented allowed her to craft her voice so that on its face her verse would pay heed to this representation while at the same time, the content "in-between the lines" conveyed a different message. This approach allowed Wheatley to pay the dues of this representation while making her reputation off of her pure, unadulterated skill. It was this familiar, manipulative juxtaposition of deference and argument that would allow her to blossom into the political actor she was to become.

At a basic level, what gave Wheatley this power to manipulate through her writing was an awareness of and sensitivity towards her audience. Wheatley endeared herself to the reading public by skillfully writing from the perspective of her subjects. Moreover, irrespective of the subject matter, the young poet had a gift for communicating her viewpoints on her faith, her love of her community and an incisive discourse on race with the same persuasive eloquence. In her elegies, she had a knack for capturing a felt sense of loss on the part of both individuals and her community in Boston; her non-memorial works were marked by persuasive language contextualized to her audience's profound sense of faith.³⁶

Wheatley also realized the racial bifurcation of her audience, and further modified her language to tailor her message for maximum effect. On a first examination, it is abundantly clear that in her more political work, Wheatley had a gift for phrasing that allowed her to gradually develop a consistent message that would only become obvious

³⁶ Franke, "Phillis Wheatley, Melancholy Muse," 233.

in her later work. This message was threefold: that Christians who supported, practiced or tolerated slavery were hypocrites; that Africans, as exemplified by Wheatley, could convert to Christianity and become redeemed; and that inability on the part of readers to accept the previous two propositions indicated a moral failing.³⁷ While the message was certainly bold in its content and formation, Wheatley's art lay in using her skillful deployment of verse to conceal the potentially virulent reception of her message.

However, at the outset of her public career Wheatley had yet to show flashes of this message-oriented writing. As Mukhtar Ali Isani, has noted, the large cluster of high-quality work contained in Wheatley's 1773 collection *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* is indicative that Wheatley intended to save up her poems so as to release a collection of her work en masse. Thus it is clear that as her voice was developing in her earliest work, Wheatley was at the same time trying to prime the pump by building anticipation for these larger works. Though Wheatley was noted for her work locally because of the heavily Boston-centric content that it featured, she started to find an audience outside of her home with her poem "On Messrs. Hussey and Coffin."³⁸

The high quality of "Hussey and Coffin" is obvious. Published in 1767, when Wheatley was only 14, this ode to two then-recently lost sailors displayed the skillful language that would later make her reputation. Moreover, her strong faith is also obvious:

Suppose the groundless Gulph had snatch'd away
Hussey and Coffin to the raging Sea;

³⁷ Mary M. Balkun. "Phillis Wheatley's Construction of Otherness and the Rhetoric of Performed Ideology," *African American Review* 36.1 (2002): 122.

³⁸ Mukhtar Ali Isani, "The Contemporaneous Reception of Phillis Wheatley: Newspaper and Magazine Notices during the Years of Fame, 1765-1774," *The Journal of Negro History* 85 (2000): 261.

Where wou'd they go? where wou'd be their Abode?
With the supreme and independent God...
*Had I the Tongue of a Seraphim, how would I exalt thy
Praise; thy Name as Incense to the Heavens should fly...*³⁹

Yet for whatever lack of her political message, the attendant marketing of Wheatley was nonetheless present. An advertisement in the *Newport Mercury* highlighting her work would set the standard for her public image. The ad never used Wheatley's name, with the only recognition of the author's identity being the reference to her slave status (a "Negro Girl") and the fact that she lived in John Wheatley's home, where the shipwrecked sailors had taken refuge.⁴⁰ However, it was this image formed out of a racist, morbid fascination, in combination with smart politicking on Wheatley's part that would bring her fame.

Phillis Wheatley was brought into a house that was avowedly Congregationalist in its faith, yet strongly evangelist in the practice of that faith. John Wheatley had several colonial and international business interests; he was both a well-known Boston tailor with an illustrious clientele and a merchant with significant business in Britain. As noted above, the Wheatley family practiced a popular form of Congregationalism under which the Wheatleys were free to have ecumenical interactions with other Protestant sects. Thus, the combination of the permissiveness of the "New Light" Congregationalism practiced by the Wheatleys, the evangelical spirituality of the post Great Awakening Thirteen Colonies and John Wheatley's international connections created a perfect storm for the use of the Wheatley house as a waypoint for itinerant internationalist preachers.

³⁹ Phillis Wheatley, "On Messrs. Hussey and Coffin," in *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Shields, 133.

⁴⁰ Shields, ed., *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 298.

John and Susannah Wheatley were loosely affiliated with the so-called “Huntingdon Circle,” a confederation of several evangelical Methodist preachers and religious institutions with Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon, at its center. The member of this Circle professed a unique brand of Methodism referred to as the “Huntingdon Connexion.” The precepts of the Connexion included a doctrine of Immediate Conversion, similar to Wesleyan Methodism, but unlike the Wesley brothers, Huntingdon and her primary minister, George Whitefield, argued for the orthodox Calvinist notion of pre-destination.⁴¹ Moreover, the Huntingdonian Methodists had little to say on the subject of slavery. Both Huntingdon and Whitefield were themselves slaveowners, and promulgated a religious doctrine contending that although slaves had equal access to salvation, there was no temporal importance in alleviating the conditions of the institution so long as they were not too “brutal.”⁴² Thus, it can at least be said of the Huntingdonians with respect to their relationship to Phillis Wheatley that they were open about their belief that Methodism’s success was more important than temporal equality.

The Huntingdon Circle counted several preachers, public notables and seminaries as part of its sway, irrespective of the bias in the British public against Methodism. Moreover, the Circle was built around personal connections between its individual members, beginning with Huntingdon and Whitefield. Following her conversion experience in 1739 at age 32, Hastings began allocating her resources towards the establishment of the Connexion; Hastings would select Whitefield as her chaplain a few

⁴¹ May, *Evangelism*, 65.

⁴² May, *Evangelism*, 74-75.

years later.⁴³ Whitefield made Huntingdonian Methodism internationally famous through his passionate preaching, but his personal friendship with John Thornton brought the Circle a step closer to the Wheatleys' door. Thornton was a central figure in various movements for social reform, both as a prominent patron of international evangelicalism and member of both Huntingdon's Circle as well the largely secular reform group known as the "Clapham Sect." From her language in her letters to Thornton, it is obvious that Wheatley saw him as a close associate, although this also likely flows from his mutual patronage, with Huntingdon, of Eleazar Wheelock's Indian Charity School and its most famous graduate, Samson Occom.⁴⁴

Occom and Whitefield were central figures in international evangelical Protestantism, but while Whitefield cannot be conclusively linked to the Wheatleys, Occom stayed at their house several times as a stopover point on his frequent missionary and fundraising trips, and he was a correspondent of both Phillis and Susannah Wheatley. Thus, Wheatley had access to multiple levels a transnational religious organization, with substantial resources supporting it and a growing public reputation as a base from which to build one's own reputation through common association. What was left in order to connect into this vein of power was finding an access point; for Phillis Wheatley, this access was opened for her when she wrote her now-famous elegy on Whitefield following his passing in September of 1770.

Wheatley's Whitefield was a slightly exaggerated figure, yet not altogether different from the Whitefield familiar to international audiences. From extant

⁴³ Franke, "Melancholy Muse," 226.

⁴⁴ Kenneth Silverman, "Four New Letters by Phillis Wheatley" *Early American Literature* 8 (1974): 259.

documentary evidence, there is little basis for the claim that Wheatley wrote a personal portrayal. Although Whitefield had visited Boston for several long trips from 1739-1770, it is only clear that Whitefield's preaching at Old South Church, where John and Susannah Wheatley were congregants, would have made it more than likely that Phillis heard Whitefield speak.⁴⁵ It is more likely that she was familiar with him from another source, as Whitefield was far and away the most famous figure of the religious revival movement. Nonetheless, Wheatley's artistic exaggeration concerned the magnitude and scope of Whitefield's significance rather than the specific elements of his ministry.

To be sure, Wheatley is glowing in her appraisal:

HAIL, happy saint, on thine immortal throne,
Possess of glory, life, and bliss unknown
We hear no more the music of thy tongue,
Thy wonted auditories cease to throng.⁴⁶

Wheatley artfully portrayed the gratitude of Americans enslaved and free for Whitefield's "gift" of the Spirit with which God had endowed him, noting his famous willingness to preach to a wide variety of audiences. However, Wheatley's depiction of "*Africans*... long[ing]" for Whitefield's saving them through the "fountain of redeeming blood" illustrates Wheatley's use of deferential language to achieve an end, although this end is not immediately evident on reading Wheatley's elegy by itself.⁴⁷ However, a message to Huntingdon at the end of the elegy points to Wheatley's true interest in writing the poem:

Great *Countess*, we *Americans* revere
Thy name, and mingle in thy grief sincere;
New England deeply feels, the *Orphans* mourn,
Their more than father will no more return.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 34.

⁴⁶ Phillis Wheatley, "On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield. 1770," in *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Shields, 22.

⁴⁷ Wheatley, "On the Death of . . . Whitefield," 23.

⁴⁸ Wheatley, "On the Death of . . . Whitefield," 24.

Although Wheatley used “Americans” to describe the audience so heavily affected by Whitefield’s passing, there is reason to see the use of “Orphans” as an underlining of the same, paternalistic imagery used to describe Whitefield earlier in the poem.

The reason for such imagery becomes clear when considering Phillis Wheatley’s career and Susannah Wheatley’s hopes for her charge’s future. The publication of her Whitefield elegy had earned her an immediate reputation outside of Massachusetts; she was known by name for her groundbreaking work in New York, Philadelphia, and Newport by the end of 1770.⁴⁹ However, this notice was conditioned on familiar terms. Advertisements for the poem (the chief available measure of determining her reputation) stuck to what were becoming well-worn themes in representing her work; her piety as evidenced by her skillful composition, and her race. Of particular note in the advertisements was its highlighting of the poem being written by a “Native of Africa, and yet would have done Honor to a Pope or a Shakespeare.”⁵⁰

The use of these familiar representations as a means to market Wheatley could only achieve so much, however. Traditionally, authors of larger works such as the one that Wheatley had been planning in the two years following the publication of her Whitefield elegy solicited subscribers as a means of paying for publication. Yet, in Wheatley’s case, this method was wanting; she could not secure enough subscribers to fund her work independently. Although there was a general downturn in the use of this method as a result of authors not submitting high quality work to their subscribers, it is likely that there was additional reticence on the part of the wider subscription audience to

⁴⁹ Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 78.

⁵⁰ Ali Isani, “Contemporaneous Reception,” 261.

purchase Wheatley's work.⁵¹ After all, Wheatley was not only a young woman, but also an enslaved African. While the mentions of her African identity were included in advertisements about her as a nominal compliment to her abilities, these "compliments" have as their reflection the mark of racial bias. As an enslaved African, it was reasonable to assume that Wheatley was incapable of writing the poems and therefore was not their actual author.

Thus, both financially and socially, Wheatley needed a more viable option if she was to publish her work. Huntingdon presented such an option. Susannah Wheatley, Phillis' "mother," was an admirer of the Countess, and as Phillis' elegy made obvious, Huntingdon was known for her patronage of Whitefield. Thus, Wheatley's October 1770 letter initiating contact with the Countess contained an undercurrent of the same politick approach to communicating with white elites that would soon be publicly identifiable as part of Wheatley's style. Wheatley opened the letter apologizing for her boldness in writing the countess; clearly the apology was indicative of an agenda either or Phillis or Susannah Wheatley's parts to engage Huntingdon's patronage, as Wheatley had included the elegy along with her condolences. However, the revelatory element of the language was at the end of the short letter, where Wheatley remarked:

The Tongues of the Learned are insufficient, much less the pen
of an *untutor'd* African, to paint in lively character, the
excellencies of this Citizen of Zion!⁵²

Wheatley's thoughts on this representation of herself and other Africans at this point were as yet unknown. However, it is obvious from her language that she was adept in a self-deprecating use of these representations as a means of ingratiating herself with

⁵¹ Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 82-83.

⁵² Phillis Wheatley, "To the Rt. Hon'ble Countess of Huntingdon, October 25, 1770," in *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Shields, 162 (Italics Mine).

whites, a skill that several of the works in *Poems on Various Subjects* would make much more obvious.

In any case, Wheatley and her handlers (Susannah Wheatley and family connections acting as literary agents in London) secured both the patronage of Huntingdon to fund the book's publication and the noted Evangelical literary figure Archibald Bell as its publisher. All that was left was for the poet to heighten her visibility as a means to ensure sales, and it was on this subject that Susannah Wheatley contributed the weight of her influence over Phillis. There had been plans in place to bring Wheatley to Britain in 1773, but Wheatley saw her status raised immensely by some subtle press manipulation on the part of Susannah Wheatley. Susannah Wheatley finagled the publication of Phillis' meditation on her upcoming trip, "A Farewell to America," in both the Northern press and the *London Chronicle*.⁵³ To be sure, there is an abundant amount of artifice on display in Wheatley's verses, lending a touch of promotional hyperbole to her voice:

For thee, *Britannia*, I resign
New-England's smiling fields;
To view again her charms divine,
What joy the prospect yields!⁵⁴

Yet at the same time Wheatley expressed palpable and very real regret at leaving her mistress. Dedicated to Susannah Wheatley, "A Farewell" refers throughout to Phillis' sense of loss at leaving her; Susannah Wheatley at that time was very ill.

One of the few conditions that Huntingdon had placed on her patronage was that Bell would have to publish the book with an accompanying picture of the poet.⁵⁵

⁵³ Kirstin Wilcox, "The Body into Print: Marketing Phillis Wheatley," *American Literature* 71 (1999), 3.

⁵⁴ Phillis Wheatley, "A Farewell to America. To Mrs. S.W.," in *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Shields, 121.

Wheatley's handlers as well as Bell exceeded this marketing strategy by including a prefatory attestation that legitimated Wheatley as the author of *Poems on Various Subjects*. Long the subject of debate by Wheatley scholars, the attestation and portrait were an obvious marketing ploy on the part of Wheatley's handlers to ensure sales by touting certain aspects of her identity. It has been suggested by a few Wheatley scholars, particularly Kirstin Wilcox, that these prefatory materials, as well as the editorial removal of certain poems, indicated cooption of Wheatley's work by her white handlers. Yet, when examined closely, the language used to refer to Wheatley is very much in keeping both with how she had been previously marketed as well as her own politicking.⁵⁶

A reader familiar with the trafficked image of Wheatley would have had no problem picking out the threads of previous representations of the poet, beginning with the book's Preface. Addressing Wheatley's reason for writing the poems, the author of the preface made two central points in striking a "deferential" tone. First, the author claimed that the poems would not have been published without the "importunity" of the poet's "friends" pushing her to publish them, an assertion easily disproved by Wheatley's publishing of poems locally as well as her hoarding of her work in anticipation of the publication of *Poems on Various Subjects*.⁵⁷ Second, the author conspicuously downplayed Wheatley's skills, pleading with critics to not "severely censure their Defects... with all their Imperfections, the Poems are now humbly submitted to the Perusal of the Public."⁵⁸ The following prefatory materials, a letter written by John

⁵⁵ Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 93.

⁵⁶ Wilcox, "The Body into Print," 2.

⁵⁷ "Preface" of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, in *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Shields, 4.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 5.

Wheatley and the aforementioned attestation, underlined the supplicating, deferential tone of the preface. Wheatley was painted in these pages as originally “an uncultivated Barbarian from *Africa*... under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in this Town, [Boston]” a label that she had certainly flirted with applying to herself, but appeared in the beginning of her major published work as a means of making it palatable for her perspective audience.⁵⁹ This politicking, this ploy to gain a market cache through novelty has been roundly criticized in the secondary literature, but again, it must be stressed that such criticism missed the point.⁶⁰ Both Wheatley and her handlers were well aware that such a diminution in the uniqueness of her person via her marketed image would in fact make her an interesting figure to the reading public. It should be remembered as well that these poems contained within them content that provided the counter punch to such a deferential tone.

The combination of supplication and artful verse was the decisive element that allowed Wheatley to reach such a broad audience as to be criticized by white elites after its publication. *Poems on Various Subjects* embraced this dichotomous approach. Whether individual poems embraced this dichotomy through their subject matter or merely capitalized on the power derived from the prefatory materials as ground for musing on the titular various subjects, Wheatley assembled a challenging set of works.

There is no better example of the expression of this in the poems than “To the University of Cambridge, New England.” Written in the 1767, around the era of “Messrs Hussey and Coffin,” “To the University of Cambridge” addressed students of what would

⁵⁹ “To the PUBLICK,” *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, in *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Shields, 7.

⁶⁰ Wilcox, “Marketing Phillis Wheatley,” 12.

later become Harvard University. Wheatley used the poem as a means to admonish the students to remember their Christian ethics towards others, irrespective of their race, yet once again Wheatley achieved this feat by couching her message in deferential language.

The poem's first stanza set up this context:

WHILE an intrinsic ardor prompts to write,
The muses promise to assist my pen;
'Twas not long since I left my native shore
The land of errors, and *Egyptian* gloom:
Father of mercy, 'twas thy gracious hand
Brought me in safety from those dark abodes.⁶¹

Once again, Wheatley used her origin and status as a tool to manipulate the reader's sympathies towards her message. Africa was depicted not only as a "land of errors," but a place of "*Egyptian*" gloom: the reference is an unmistakable connotation of *Africa* as the land of enslavement, underlining her earlier remarks to Tanner in their correspondence. Moreover, close examination of the author's word choice enhances this effect. Wheatley "left" Africa, she did not depict herself as being "taken," emphasizing God's "freeing" her from the slavery of her "African" ignorance.⁶²

Christianity was not only the hook of "Cambridge," it was undergirding of Wheatley's message in writing the poem. Wheatley's grounding of the second stanza in Jesus' redemptive act, and her admonition of the students to remember this act, contained within it her message:

When the whole human race by sin had fall'n,
He deign'd to die that they might rise again,
And share with him in the sublimest skies,
Life without death, and glory without end.⁶³

⁶¹ "To the University of Cambridge in New England," in *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Shields, 15.

⁶² Balkun, "Phillis Wheatley's Construction of Otherness," 124-125.

⁶³ Wheatley, "To the University of Cambridge," 16.

Salvation was a gift, and moreover one that she had been “fortunate” to receive, but it was a gift for all mankind, not only “African” “sinners.” Wheatley used her conversion and knowledge of the saving power of Christianity as ammunition to admonish the students. Even an “*Ethiop*,” as Wheatley referred to herself, could see that since Christ had died giving all humans a chance at salvation, mankind would be remiss to treat some of its members differently than others.⁶⁴

Wheatley made a similar maneuver in “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” one of the other poems discussing race in her book. “On Being Brought from Africa” was slightly more obvious in its language. Wheatley made repeated self-deprecating references to commonly held racial bias as a means of constituting herself as a person redeemed by Christianity and therefore deserving of equality:

T’was mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there’s a God...
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
“Their colour is a diabolic die.”
Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain*,
May be refin’d and join th’ angelic train.⁶⁵

Plaintive in its expressiveness, “On Being Brought from Africa” reflected Wheatley’s public rhetorical strategy by once again using deference to prepare the reader for the idea that black and whites could coexist through the experience of faith. Wheatley gathers the readers onto her side through persuasion. After all, she herself was both a “barbarian” saved from the reputation of her “diabolic” skin color by Christ and therefore proof positive of the ability of her fellow “Pagans” to refine themselves and join society.

⁶⁴ Wheatley, “To the University of Cambridge,” 16.

⁶⁵ Wheatley, “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” in *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Shields, 18.

Along with the book's more artistic content and its contribution to racial discourse, there were inklings of Wheatley's political consciousness coming to the fore, especially in the poem, "To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth." William Legge, the poem's subject, had become a recent celebrity in the year preceding the book's publication for his assumption of the office of the King's Secretary of State for North America, an appointment lauded in the colonies on account of Dartmouth's central role in Parliament's repeal of the Stamp Act.⁶⁶ Thus Wheatley's verses dedicated to Dartmouth, as well as her letter to him, are revelatory of a vested political interest in her community that would later come to the fore following her book's publication.

Wheatley showed herself to be a very politically active person in her interaction with Dartmouth. For an enslaved woman and poet whose rhetoric on other issues was subtly delivered, she was surprisingly frank when discussing political developments, and effusively excited in addressing her subject:

HAIL, happy day, when, smiling like the morn,
Fair *Freedom* rose *New-England* to adorn:
The northern clime beneath her genial ray,
Dartmouth, congratulates thy blissful sway:
Elate with hope her race no longer mourns.⁶⁷

Wheatley perhaps felt more comfortable being so effusive when communicating with Dartmouth because of his affiliation with the Huntingdon Circle, but more important than her tone was her expression of a united, multiracial and *American* political interest. By race, Wheatley was in this case directly referring to *all* people living in New England and asserting a common interest in removing the "iron chain" of "wanton *Tyranny*" then

⁶⁶ Shields, ed., *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 312.

⁶⁷ Phillis Wheatley, "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth, His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for North America, &c.," *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, in *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Shields, 73.

afflicting America.⁶⁸ Furthermore, Wheatley ended the poem with an intercession, not as an “African,” but as a woman of New England:

For favours past, great Sir, our thanks are due,
And thee we ask thy favours to renew,
Since in thy pow’r, as in thy will before,
To sooth the griefs, which thou did’st once deplore.⁶⁹

Wheatley expressed a citizen’s interest in the continued wellbeing of both her colony and in the inchoate Patriotic vision of an “America.” To her, Dartmouth’s ascension was a blessing because it would ameliorate the strife affecting ALL New Englanders.

Poems on Various Subjects was not full of divisive political and racial content. Her subtle criticisms and inchoate political hopes aside, there was little indication of the more naked expressions she would soon make of her views on these *Subjects*. Indeed, editors excised a fair amount of the more potentially controversial works, including a poem on the Boston Massacre entitled “On the Affray in King-Street, on the Evening of the 5th of March [1770].”⁷⁰ Yet, through the publication of her book, Wheatley had laid down groundwork to make the bolder, explicit political and racial statements and criticisms with which she would soon become identified. More importantly, she had used her poetic genius and remarkable proficiency with politicking and manipulation to, as a still enslaved black woman, publish a book of her own poetry that explicitly subverted racial conventions while at the same time subtly, yet directly laid down a challenge to those same conventions.

⁶⁸ Wheatley, “To the Earl of Dartmouth,” 74.

⁶⁹ Wheatley, “To the Earl of Dartmouth,” 75.

⁷⁰ Shields, ed., *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 312.

Chapter 4. “Modern Egyptians”

The publication of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in 1773 was a milestone for Wheatley in several respects, not least of which was her reaching a personal summit of public attention for her career. However, Wheatley’s public life following this particular apex was not uneventful. In fact, Wheatley made arguably her most important statements in the years following the publication of her book and later disappearance from the public eye. Wheatley in this period took the opportunity offered by her newfound fame to rearticulate her message into explicit criticisms of subjects both familiar to readers and new to some of her close confidants. In doing so, she furthered the progress she had made through writing *Poems on Various Subjects* and her politicking to get the book published. Wheatley dropped the contextualization of her identity and talents that she had participated in to show deference to whites and thereby began defining herself.

This process of public self-actualization began immediately following the publication of the book. On returning to Boston in July of 1773, John Wheatley freed Phillis, an event that she would only speak on briefly in one of a spate of letters she wrote to confidants. In a letter to David Wooster, Wheatley discussed the matter seemingly as yet another part of her journey to and from London. The mention of her freedom comes second to the newfound financial concerns of her independence:

Since my return to America my Master, has at the desire of my friends in England given me my freedom. The Instrument is drawn, so as to secure me and my property from the hands of Executvs. [,] administrators, &c. of my master, and secure whatsoever should me given to me as my own.⁷¹

⁷¹ “Phillis Wheatley to David Wooster, October 18th, 1773,” in *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Shields, 170.

Wheatley had to fend for herself now that she was on her own financially, an arrangement that would only prove beneficial if she was assiduous in taking care of her finances. Thus, the balance of the letter contained instructions for Wooster to take her original proposals, rather than a copy of the Bell-published book, to press in Connecticut. Wheatley further aimed to secure her revenue stream by dictating a price for the sale of copies of the book to prospective subscribers, suggesting that she had gained strong business acumen and wanted to use it.⁷²

Wheatley was now free. Yet, whether because of the uncertainty of yet again securing subscribers to earn money, or because the Wheatleys had continued to offer her a home, she did not stray far from her former master's house. This sense of loyalty has traditionally perplexed Wheatley scholars, and even Vincent Carretta's book suffered in the specific instance of trying to explain the phenomenon. The consternation evident in the literature derives from a temptation to question Wheatley's real place in her "family," as though loyalty felt on her part took away from her sense of self. Indeed, the literature has proffered the emancipation of Wheatley as the site of this confusion.⁷³

Carretta and others, notably Kirstin Wilcox, heavily contextualized Wheatley's thoughts on her potential freedom to the decision of the Court of King's Bench in *Somerset v. Stewart*. In his opinion in *Somerset*, Lord Mansfield had judged that a system of slavery had to be undergirded by a network of supporting, "positive" laws, and that in England and other places where those laws did not exist, slavery was also non-existent; slaves who traveled to England and stayed were free. Thus, several secondary

⁷² "Phillis Wheatley to David Wooster," 170-171.

⁷³ Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 14, 142-143.

authors have posited that the *Somerset* decision, made in 1772, must have weighed on Wheatley's mind, usually citing the reference made by Wheatley in "A Farewell to America" to an unidentified "temptation" as a temptation to run away and stay in England.⁷⁴

Yet this is not persuasive for two reasons. Primarily, there was the formal mention by Wheatley that her "friends" in England (presumably Dartmouth, and the man whom had acted as her tour guide, Granville Sharp) were essential to suing John Wheatley for Phillis' freedom. Second, Susannah Wheatley's health and wellbeing were an ever-present concern for Phillis, and her correspondence from her spate of letters in October of 1773 to March of 1774, the month of Susannah's death, revealed a care on Phillis' part that provided the basis for her continued presence with her "family."

Wheatley discussed her worry over Susannah's health at length to varied audiences, mentioning to Wooster that she wished "we could depend on" Susannah's brief recovery from a bout with illness that had lasted at that time more than 14 weeks.⁷⁵ Additionally, Wheatley asked Thornton for his continued prayers, but she was most descriptive on the subject when talking with Obour Tanner, her closest confidante. Referring to the loss of Susannah Wheatley as similar to losing a "parent, sister, or brother," with "the tenderness of all these... united in her," Phillis expressed a sincere gratitude towards Susannah:

I was a poor little outcast & a stranger when she took me in...
I became a sharer in her most tender affections. I was treated by
her more like her child than her servant; no opportunity was left
unimproved . . .⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Wilcox, "The Body into Print," 5.

⁷⁵ "Phillis Wheatley to David Wooster," 171, 173.

⁷⁶ "Phillis Wheatley to Obour Tanner, March 21, 1774," in *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Shields, 177.

Though Wheatley took solace in the “Christian” nature of Susannah’s death, the loss of her mother figure bore heavily on her. However, this loss was the first of several occasions of separations that, though some would involve significant personal difficulty on her part, would help to draw Wheatley’s personality out from the contexts in which it had previously been defined.

Wheatley also separated from her former cohorts in the international, Evangelical Protestant movement. Following the publication of *Poems on Various Subjects*, she had been in contact with both Thornton and Samuel Hopkins, and her exchange with the two men was yet another sign of her emerging independence from her former handlers. Both Thornton and Hopkins had a vested interest in an evangelizing project based at the slave-trading town of Annamaboe on the Gold Coast, where Hopkins hoped to implement his plan to convert the continent through colonizing Africa with Christianized slaves. Thornton and Hopkins shared a hope that Wheatley would return to her homeland as a “Female Preacher to her kindred,” but she demurred.⁷⁷

Wheatley expressed this reluctance to Hopkins with a measure of tact and potential regret. Citing Susannah’s condition and her own illness, she wished the two men tasked by the mission to minister to Annamaboe, Bristol Yamma and John Quamine, luck in evangelizing but stressed that the only role that she felt comfortable performing would be to build support for the mission in her own community.⁷⁸ Despite another mention of her long-held belief that “benighted” Africans would be grateful for the “crumbs, the precious crumbs” of Christianity, this letter’s polite, yet clear refusal of

⁷⁷ Silverman, “Four New Letters,” 260, 259.

⁷⁸ “Phillis Wheatley to Samuel Hopkins, Feb. 9, 1774,” in *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Shields, 175, and Carretta, 161, 164.

obligation comes into view when compared to Wheatley's letter to Thornton on the same subject.⁷⁹

Wheatley and Thornton clashed over her literary success, a phenomenon Wheatley wished to enjoy and one that Thornton felt was unseemly for a Christian. Thornton had felt it necessary to remind the poet of her obligation as a Christian woman to remain humble in the face of her recent fame, suggesting that he felt Wheatley to be remiss in her duties to her faith in favor of her new reputation.⁸⁰ Wheatley however did not need to be reminded of the importance of humility; she discussed her need to stay humble and mindful of God's gifts to her at length with Obour Tanner.⁸¹ She offered Thornton obviously paltry reasons for her refusal: the missionaries were "too good" for her, and the mission appeared "too hazardous" to her. This sentiment was incongruous on its face with Wheatley's stated interest throughout her correspondence in supporting the conversion of Africans.

Wheatley demurred, but she also showed her hand, for she mentioned to Thornton that she felt she was "ineligible" for the mission because she did not want to leave her "British & American friends."⁸² Thus, Wheatley's answer to Thornton's request for her help is striking: she did not *want* to go on the mission because she wanted to enjoy her new life instead. Refusing to join the mission was a step directly away from the group of backers that had sustained her career thus far and a step towards further defining herself as an individual.

⁷⁹ "Wheatley to Hopkins, Feb. 9, 1774," 176.

⁸⁰ Silverman, "Four New Letters," 261.

⁸¹ "Phillis Wheatley to Obour Tanner, Oct. 30, 1773," in John C. Shields, ed., *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 171.

⁸² "Phillis Wheatley to John Thornton, October 30, 1774" in *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Shields, 184.

Refusing the requests of her former spiritual tutors and backers was a private step away from these former bulwarks of support, but a broader criticism made by Wheatley became much more public when Samson Occom published a letter that Wheatley had written to him in 1774. Longtime correspondents, Wheatley and Occom had known each other since 1765, when she wrote him her first letter; moreover, Occom was a personal friend of the Wheatley family and frequently stayed at their home.⁸³ Thus, Wheatley and Occom had a rapport conducive to the honesty of expression that she had only had with a few close confidantes, especially Obour Tanner.

The letter introduced the reader into a conversation on race between Wheatley and Occom that they had obviously been carrying on for some time; Wheatley referred to Occom's previous note as the influence on her remarks. However, the letter marks an important shift away from her previous remarks on race to a more outwardly radical stance. Wheatley began the letter thanking Occom for his remarks on the natural rights of Africans and shared her pleasure at the evangelization of more and more Africans, giving others the opportunity at self-actualization that she had enjoyed. Yet what is most remarkable in the letter is Wheatley's overt criticism of not only individual whites, but also the *system* of race:

In every human Breast, God has implanted a . . . Love of Freedom; it pants for Deliverance; and by the Leave of our Modern Egyptians I will assert, that the same Principle lives in us. God grants Deliverance . . . and get him honor upon all those [who] help forward the Calamities of their Fellow Creatures. I desire . . . to convince them of the strange Absurdity of their Conduct whose Words and Actions are so . . . opposite.⁸⁴

⁸³ Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 46.

⁸⁴ "Phillis Wheatley to Samson Occom, February 11, 1774," in *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Shields, 177.

Occom was abundantly aware of the hypocrisy of the white, “Modern Egyptians.” As an Indian Christianized by Wheatley family friend Eleazar Wheelock and an international missionary, Occom was well known in the public eye. However, like Wheatley, Occom was known in this context for his novelty rather than his deep theological insights, a situation that he had become understandably frustrated with in 1764, the year before he and Wheatley began writing each other.

Occom was the victim of anti-Indian bias prevalent at the time, but he received the worst discrimination from close quarters. Eleazar Wheelock, his teacher, took the money that Occom had recently accrued on a fundraising trip through Britain and, instead of directing the funds towards their school for evangelizing the Indians, used the money to move the school to Hanover, New Hampshire, where it would later become Dartmouth College.⁸⁵ Moreover, Wheelock attempted to discredit Occom’s protests against these actions by gossiping in public that Occom was a drunkard, ruining Occom’s reputation in the process.⁸⁶ This betrayal, connected with whites’ general attitudes towards him that Occom was at best a novelty, and at worst a liar about even being a Christian, lead him to a similar conclusion to that of Wheatley. To Occom, white Christians were “Void of natural affection... it is in vain for any of you to think, that you Love God, when you know, you have no regard for the happiness of your Neighbour.”⁸⁷

Wheatley and Occom had similarly formed ideas on the subject of institutionalized racism and felt comfortable speaking on it with each other. Moreover, Wheatley was intimately familiar with Occom’s enduring troubles with money, thanking

⁸⁵ David J. Silverman, *Red Brethren: The Brothertown and Stockbridge Indians and the Problem of Race in Early America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 83.

⁸⁶ Silverman, *Red Brethren*, 86.

⁸⁷ Silverman, *Red Brethren*, 138.

Thornton in a letter for his financial assistance in sustaining Occom's indigent congregation given his difficulties in staying afloat.⁸⁸ This care and rapport between the two thinkers validates Wheatley's statement, and Occom's publication of the letter and its later republication in over a dozen New England newspapers makes its her definitive statement of her views on race.⁸⁹

Wheatley was not only defining herself as a financially independent, articulate public thinker, but also a politically active citizen. The 1779 proposals for her abortive follow up to *Poems on Various Subjects* included several works overtly sympathetic to the Patriot political cause, especially its leadership. These poems showed an evolved interest of Wheatley in a victory for the Patriot cause, and with it, hope for a better future. Furthermore, the poems underlined a personal interest beyond political investment because of her long-standing acquaintance with General David Wooster, about whom she wrote one of these works.

At the beginning of the American Revolution, Wheatley was located in Boston. Initially living with John Wheatley, in 1775, she accompanied her former tutor, Mary Lathrop (nee Wheatley) and her husband, the preacher and Patriot thinker John Lathrop, when they escaped the occupation of Boston for Providence, Rhode Island.⁹⁰ As such, she witnessed much of the early events of the Revolutionary War, and, perhaps because of her living with Lathrop, took the opportunity to remark on these developments in verse. The War marked a gap in Wheatley's publication history, and the intervening years between the publication of *Poems on Various Subjects* and the opening of the

⁸⁸ "Phillis Wheatley to John Thornton, March 29, 1774," in *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Shields, 180.

⁸⁹ Shields, ed., *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 315.

⁹⁰ Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 154.

conflict were similarly dry with published content, but both the unpublished works and her notable correspondence with George Washington bear out her politics.

Of her unpublished poems, “On the Capture of General Lee,” written in 1776, and the July 1778 work “On the Death of General Wooster,” are the most explicit illustrations of her political advocacy. “General Lee” took the occasion of Charles Lee’s capture in December of 1776 as an opportunity to rally support for the Continental Army’s cause. Throughout, she refers to Lee, a well-regarded commander and public figure only in generalities, using his leadership as a symbol for the righteousness of the rebellion:

Grant to America’s united prayer
A glorious conquest on the field of war!
. . . warlike LEE reply’d,
‘Ill fits it me, who such an army guide,
To waste an hour in banquets or repose . . . ’
. . . we for freedom fight.
Columbia too, beholds with streaming eyes
Her heroes fall— ‘tis freedom’s sacrifice!
Find in your train of boasted heroes, one
To match the praise of Godlike Washington.⁹¹

The “freedom” referred to in “General Lee” was given a much more specific connotation in the later “On the Death of General Wooster.” The character of “Wooster” speaking in the poem again took on a symbolic role, speaking in “his” dying speech about freedom being the guide of “Columbia (America),” but that to ensure the full virtue of America’s guide there was a specific that the Revolution had yet to achieve:

‘But how, presumptuous shall we hope to find
Divine acceptance with th’ Almighty mind—
While yet (O deed Ungenerous!) they disgrace
And hold in bondage Afric’s blameless race?
Let Virtue reign—And thou accord our prayers
Be victory our’s, and generous freedom theirs.’⁹²

⁹¹ Phillis Wheatley, “On the Capture of General Lee, December 30, 1776,” in *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Shields, 148.

⁹² Phillis Wheatley, “On the Death of General Wooster, July 1778,” in *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Shields, 129-130.

Though Wheatley included this poem in a letter to Wooster's wife Mary, citing his courage and status as a "martyr in the Cause of Freedom," it is clear that to Wheatley, the Cause needed to achieve the abolition of slavery as one of its definitive ends.⁹³ Had this poem been published, as Wheatley hoped it would be, "Wooster" would have been a devastating broadside at the "Modern Egyptians." As it is, while it nonetheless showed her commitment to her patriotism, it is of a piece with the Occom letter as a revelation of her specific, and radical, political views.

Wheatley's political advocacy was, from the minute amount of content on the subject relayed to the public, still inchoate; she was known for her "unthinkable" achievement of publishing *Poems on Various Subjects*. Yet, despite her reputation in her own time and today, Wheatley was perhaps best known for her contact with George Washington and the poem that about the general that she personally sent to him in October of 1775. The dearth of documents and non-publication of "Lee" and "Wooster" made this poem the closest to a definitive statement of Wheatley's politics on the record, but she imbued the sentiments of those later works into her verses.

Although her personal definition of the "freedom" sought by the Continental Army had yet to appear in its explicit form, it was present in its implied form in her benediction on Washington's mission:

One century scarce perform'd its destined round,
When Gallic powers Columbia's fury found;
And so may you, whoever dares disgrace
The land of freedom's heaven-defended race!⁹⁴

⁹³ "Phillis Wheatley to Mary Wooster, July 15, 1778," in *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Shields, 186.

⁹⁴ Phillis Wheatley, "To His Excellency General Washington, October 26, 1775," in *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Shields, 146.

It was clear from the high praise leveled by Wheatley that she felt that Washington's leadership would be key in the struggle for her freedom and freedom for the broader population. Ironically, Wheatley was at the same time obviously unaware of Washington's feelings on slavery and reputation as a slave owner.⁹⁵ Yet she caught Washington at the beginning of a time in his life in which his opinion on slavery was undergoing substantial modification.

Washington, the owner of over 160 slaves at his death, was forced several times during the revolution to update his views based on the obvious intellectual and physical skills of the many African Americans he met in his travels.⁹⁶ A pragmatic thinker first and foremost, Washington had both the economic interest and means to contemplate emancipation, as Mt. Vernon was moving away from growing tobacco and incorporating farming grain, which required less labor. On the other hand, Washington was sensitive to posterity and, as Philip D. Morgan put it, had an "insatiable" thirst for public respect; thus, it is likely that he was not only fascinated by Phillis' talents but also personally touched by her contact with him.⁹⁷ Washington thanked "Mrs. Phillis" for her poetic compliments in a return letter, inviting her to his encampment in Cambridge, but demurred in publishing the poem, noting:

. . . had I not been apprehensive that, while I only meant to give the World this new instance of your genius, I might have incurred the imputation of Vanity. This, and nothing else, determined me not to give it place in the public prints.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 154.

⁹⁶ Philip D. Morgan, "'To Get Quit of Negroes': George Washington and Slavery," *Journal of American Studies*, 39 (2005): 405.

⁹⁷ Morgan, "To Get Quit of Negroes," 413, 426.

⁹⁸ "George Washington to Phillis Wheatley, February 28, 1776." Transcript. From Library of Congress, George Washington Papers, 1741-1799. <http://memory.loc.gov> (accessed February 2013).

However, this professed aversion to vanity did not prevent Washington from suggesting to his aide, Colonel Joseph Reed, that he publish the poem on Washington's behalf, which Reed obliged him in by sending "To His Excellency" as well as Wheatley's letter to Washington to the *Virginia Gazette*.⁹⁹

Although the imprint of these remarks was not large, it was nonetheless public. Wheatley's remarks on politics and race in the years following the publication of *Poems on Various Subjects* thus were an important shift away from the more muted, politick form of advocacy that Wheatley had used to that point and a move towards outright radical statements. Her deference was gone; this re-articulation required Wheatley to define herself as an individual away from her previous associations so that she could argue her own interests rather than those of her handlers. Wheatley's respondents recognized her independence. Washington thanked "Ms. Phillis," without mentioning her background, and lauded her talents without adding the caveat of her "condition." While her time in the limelight was brief, she had incontrovertibly arrived.

⁹⁹ Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 157.

Chapter 5. An “Unthinkable” Conversation

Phillis Wheatley died in relative obscurity. In 1778, Wheatley married John Peters, taking his last name and living with him in Boston. Peters, a tradesman, was a man of moderate means, yet his extensive debts meant a life of moving across Massachusetts for Wheatley and their children when he was not in jail. Although there is no reliable explanation for the virtually complete ending of Wheatley’s publication history, it is likely that her husband’s finances combined with a lack of subscriptions for her 1779 proposals were the reasons for the stifling of her promising career.¹⁰⁰ It is truly a pity that the proposals, which contained among other works, “On the Death of General Wooster,” “On the Capture of General Lee,” her 1774 letter to Samson Occom and most notably “To His Excellency General Washington,” did not lead to her follow-up work being published. Though one is left to speculate on the degree of impact, it is assured that such a work would have greatly affected public perceptions of both Wheatley herself, as well as so-called “Black Talent.”

Yet, despite this grave loss as well as her time in the public eye having been spent fighting her “unthinkable” identity, Wheatley had a marked effect on the discourse of race in America. On first examining the literature, this effect is difficult to perceive, but this difficulty results from trying to locate Wheatley’s effect in a mass public reaction to her works. Paradoxically, it was those who had the least reason to acknowledge Wheatley, namely white elites, who in fact constituted her as having made this contribution. By attacking Wheatley as “unthinkable” after the fact of her publication of *Poems on Various Subjects*, and in trying to diminish her talents through couching her

¹⁰⁰ Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 182.

achievement in her novelty, they in fact acknowledged her trespassing the norms that they represented. In this way, even a negative mention of Wheatley, no matter how pejorative, was actually a tacit recognition on the part of these elites that their paradigm was in need of reinforcement.

For his part, Thomas Jefferson was forced to remember his remarks on Wheatley, as well as his other offending passages on Africans and African Americans in the *Notes*, for decades following its original publication in 1781. Several of Jefferson's acquaintances took issue with his previously stated belief in the inferior intellectual capacity of African Americans, and continuously pressed him to clarify his remarks. Although these responses were not made explicitly to defend Wheatley or assert the natural rights of blacks, they nonetheless took the stance that Wheatley and her minute cohort constituted at least an exception to the norms, if not a cause for their reevaluation. Jefferson attracted these responses himself, as the many interested parties freely acknowledged; his association with the racial norms that made Wheatley "unthinkable" in turn made Jefferson a lightning rod for criticism.

One of Jefferson's earliest challengers on this issue was none other than Benjamin Banneker, who wrote Jefferson in 1791. Banneker used Jefferson's own words against him, citing his hypocrisy for discoursing on the equality of men while at the same time explicitly betraying his principles. Identifying himself as black, Banneker offered up his *Almanac* as evidence of his intellectual capacity. Jefferson's response utilized his distinctive rhetorical style to make what Annette Gordon-Reed has referred to as an

“artful dodge.”¹⁰¹ Clearly surprised at Banneker’s letter, Jefferson articulated a hurried iteration of his conventional “wisdom” on the subject, telling Banneker that it was up to African Americans to prove themselves exceptional to disprove the norms that white elites had shackled them with:

No body wishes more than I do to see such proofs as you exhibit, that nature has given to our black brethren, talents equal to those of the other colors of men, and that the appearance of a want of them is owing merely to the degraded condition of their existence, both in Africa & America.

This was Jefferson’s paternalism in full view. Jefferson was able to deflect attention away from his racism by diverting Banneker’s attention to the institution of slavery as a “condition” that, if removed, would not necessarily of itself help blacks. A “good system” would still be needed to “raise” the states of their bodies and minds.¹⁰²

To his credit, Jefferson maintained this stance when sending Banneker’s *Almanac* to the Marquis de Condorcet, the French philosophe, as he had promised Banneker. Jefferson expressed his belief to Condorcet that it was perhaps slavery that had “degraded” the condition of blacks and had not produced more Bannekers.¹⁰³ Yet the continued discussion of his views over many years clearly frustrated Jefferson, as was obvious from his letter to his aide Joel Barlow in October of 1809. Barlow, then in France on business, had been contacted with respect to Jefferson’s views by the philosophe Abbe Gregoire, whose “diatribe” had perturbed Jefferson enough on reading

¹⁰¹ Annette Gordon-Reed, “Engaging Jefferson: Blacks and the Founding Father,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 57 (2000): 173.

¹⁰² “Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Banneker, August 30, 1791.” Transcript. From the Thomas Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress. <http://memory.loc.gov> (accessed January 2013).

¹⁰³ “Thomas Jefferson to Marquis de Condorcet, August 30, 1791.” Transcript. From the Thomas Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress. <http://memory.loc.gov> (accessed January 2013).

it that he then wrote Barlow an incisive response. Jefferson was taken aback: “He [Gregoire] must have been eagle-eyed in quest of offence... You have done right in giving him a sugary answer. But he did not deserve it.” Expanding on his low opinion of Gregoire’s intellect and character specifically on the issue of the *Notes*’ infamous “doubts,” Jefferson mocked Gregoire’s survey of the extant work of contemporary black writers as a mark of Gregoire’s “credulity.” To Jefferson, a general belief in the intellectual capabilities of African Americans was scientifically irresponsible, for it took this conclusion for granted. Thus, he dismissed Gregoire’s efforts, writing him a “soft answer.”¹⁰⁴

But Jefferson was not only being engaged personally through domestic and international channels; his views also became the stuff of early American party politics. Jefferson’s centrality to Anti-Federalist political advocacy of the opposition Federalist Party, and the editors of the many Federalist newspapers made it their business to sully his reputation in the public eye. Of particular interest to these men was Jefferson’s affair with Sally Hemmings, his slave. First revealed to the press in 1802 by James Thomson Callender, an angry former Jefferson associate, the Hemmings affair allowed Federalists to, like Banneker, criticize not only Jefferson’s perceived immorality but also his hypocrisy.¹⁰⁵

It seemed unlikely that one might find a principled literary critic in these more political quarters. Nonetheless, some of the most incisive criticism of Jefferson’s views came from a writer referring to himself as “The American Observer,” employed by the

¹⁰⁴ “Thomas Jefferson to Joel Barlow, October 8, 1809.” Transcript. From the Thomas Jefferson Papers. <http://memory.loc.gov> (accessed January 2013).

¹⁰⁵ Jeffrey L. Pasley, *“The Tyranny of Printers:” Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 256.

Republican; or, Anti-Democrat. Published by noted Federalist editor Charles Prentiss following his work with the *Washington Federalist* based in the District of Columbia, *The Republican* was a Baltimore based newspaper; the “Observer” was one of its regular contributors during the month of January, 1802.¹⁰⁶ The “Observer” opened his first column with a pledge to bring a more intellectual air to the city of Baltimore:

I purpose to make life and manners the object of my investigation... my felicity consists in examining the volume of the world, and tracing the emotions of the soul in *human face divine*.

The writer pledged the column to the pursuit of considering higher things of various subject matter, or as he put it: “from *Charles of Sweden* to *Swedenborg*, and from *Bonaparte* to *Barnaby Brittle*.” To aid him in this pursuit, and perhaps alleviate the intellectual “privations” of Baltimore, the “Observer” solicited the letters of any and all interested parties, especially women, in order to help in creating a more intellectual environment.¹⁰⁷

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the Federalist politics of *The Republican*, the “Observer’s” first object of criticism was Thomas Jefferson. However the “Observer” made the unexpected tack of criticizing Jefferson for his intellectual failing in not recognizing the genius of Phillis Wheatley. The “Observer’s” second column seized on Jefferson’s viewpoint of Wheatley as an example of not only high hypocrisy, but basic ignorance based on Jefferson’s racial views. Treating Phillis’ works on their own merits, the “Observer” met Jefferson’s claim that Wheatley was not a “poet” by pointing out the obvious about her education:

¹⁰⁶ Pasley, “*The Tyranny of the Printers*,” 241.

¹⁰⁷ *The Republican; or, the Anti-Democrat*, “*For the Republican: The American Observer. No. 1.*” Jan. 2, 1802. From *America’s Historical Newspapers*. infoweb.newsbank.com (accessed March 17, 2013).

Fate condemned her to servitude, but by some accidental circumstance her mind was directed to books, and she learnt to read the scriptures with facility in a year... her education was almost personal and unassisted; her hours of leisure were few; and she never enjoyed the advantages of regular study.

However, the “Observer” also went on the offensive, citing passages from “To His Honour the Lieutenant-Governor, on the Death of His Lady” as well as “Goliath of Gath” and other works included in *Poems on Various Subjects* as proof that while not technically gifted, Wheatley’s unquestioned merit was the emotion she put into her writing. Furthermore, the “Observer” correctly diagnosed that it was the “*ipse dixit*,” or the word of Jefferson that had caused Wheatley’s reputation to slip, a mistake that the “Observer” corrected.¹⁰⁸

It is unclear whether the “Observer” had much success in creating a salon atmosphere in the Baltimore of his day, but he had at least one respondent during his short tenure writing for the *Republican*, and this person chose to write the “Observer” about Wheatley. Calling himself “Octavius Old School,” the reader opened his January 5, 1802 letter by reflecting the columnist’s argument that Jefferson’s *ipse dixit* was the central reason for the public’s ignorance of Wheatley.¹⁰⁹ However, Octavius broadened the scope of his criticism to explicitly fault Jefferson’s grasp of art: “that Mr. Jefferson possesses either the *Mens Divinior of the bar*, or the *os magna sonaturum*, I never heard any one allow.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ *The Republican; or, the Anti-Democrat*, “*For the Republican: The American Observer. No. 2.*” Jan. 4, 1802. From America’s Historical Newspapers. infoweb.newsbank.com (accessed March 17, 2013).

¹⁰⁹ *The Republican; or, the Anti-Democrat*, “*For the Republican: The American Observer. No. 3.*” Jan. 5, 1802. From America’s Historical Newspapers. infoweb.newsbank.com (accessed March 17, 2013).

¹¹⁰ “*For the Republican: The American Observer, No. 3, January 5, 1802,*” 2.

Octavius weighed Jefferson's ignorance against the more august literary opinions of two other figures, "major Ladd" and "Stedman" (potentially Joseph Brown Ladd and John Gabriel Stedman, the writers). Noting the quality of works such as "Thoughts on Imagination" from *Poems on Various Subjects*, Octavius contended that it was impossible for any "soul of poetry" not to "rise with indignation at the sentence pronounced by Mr Jefferson, that *the works of Phillis Wheatley are below the dignity of criticism!*" Old School closed his letter to the "Observer" noting that the skin color of a writer ought not to be an influence on the judgment of their works, a highly progressive notion for the era. After all, "a defense of character is due to those who have afforded us intellectual pleasure, and can now speak only by their writings."¹¹¹

There is little reason to think that Jefferson had read the *Republican*, nor would he likely have seen the "Observer's" criticisms of him, but the column is again suggestive that Jefferson's remarks in the *Notes* elicited a response from the public, albeit in a minute context. Irrespective of the authorship of this criticism, the authors' pressure on Jefferson forced him to reconsider, and in some cases to attenuate, his formerly strident views. Jefferson illustrated this development in a letter to Edward Coles dated August 25, 1814. Coles, a noted anti-slavery thinker and Jefferson's neighbor, had been pressuring Jefferson to manumit his slaves. Although Jefferson demurred in his response to Cole, his letter to Cole is indicative of changes in his views over time as a result of pressure to clarify them.

At this later stage in his life, Jefferson had faced down criticisms of his opinion of African Americans for thirty years, and his response to Coles at the very least suggested

¹¹¹ "For the *Republican*: The American Observer, No. 3, January 5, 1802," 2.

that he had reconsidered the subject. Jefferson no longer dodged his association with slavery and paternalist racism, even acknowledging that he was both too old and immersed in the system to substantially change his views:

From those of the former generation who were in the fulness of age when I came into public life, which was while our controversy with England was on paper only, I soon saw that nothing was to be hoped. Nursed and educated in the daily habit of seeing the degraded condition, both bodily and mental, of those unfortunate beings, not reflecting that that degradation was very much the work of themselves & their fathers, few minds have yet doubted but that they were as legitimate subjects of property as their horses and cattle.¹¹²

For his part, Jefferson expressed to Coles his regret that these older, more fixed men were not amenable to ameliorating slavery or even to extending slaves more legal protections, reflecting his reputation as a social radical.¹¹³ Jefferson still held the paternalistic notion that African Americans had a burden of proof that it was in fact slavery that had led to their “degraded condition.” Yet at the same time he acknowledged that “the hour of emancipation” was advancing, citing the Haitian Revolution as a potential harbinger of the future. Jefferson closed his letter by praising Coles’ commitment to emancipation (Coles would free his slaves at the culmination of a cross country journey to Illinois five years later), and encouraged Coles to continue his advocacy for the “cause” of African Americans.

Phillis Wheatley was not able to enjoy her effect on the discourse, but she too was aware that the work that she had begun needed to be continued by others. Above all, her interest in writing had been to glorify God and contribute what she could to the progress of her community both in Massachusetts and America; this she had done. Wheatley

¹¹² “Thomas Jefferson to Edward Coles, August 25, 1814.” Transcript. From the Thomas Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress <http://memory.loc.gov> (accessed March 10, 2013)

¹¹³ Gordon-Reed, “Engaging Jefferson,” 172-173.

made a statement that, while some its more extreme elements remained unrecognized, had still registered in the minds of Americans both common and elite the idea that African Americans were the intellectual equals of their white counterparts. Though she was not proffered the chance to argue her beliefs with these individuals, Wheatley's writing threatened them to the extent that they had to acknowledge her, to make her "unthinkable" in order to reckon with her achievements. All the while, Wheatley hoped to encourage the same development in others irrespective of their backgrounds, closing her 1779 *Proposals* with the hope that

The ingenious that they may by reading this collection have a large play for their imaginations, and be excited to please and benefit mankind by some brilliant production of their own pens.—Those are always in search of some new thing, that they may obtain a sight of this *rara avis in terra*—And every one that the ingenious author may be encouraged to improve her own mind, benefit, and please mankind.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ "1779 Proposals," in *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Shields, 192.

Chapter 6. **Conclusion: Toward the “Thinkable”**

To write about Phillis Wheatley is to dredge a talented individual from the murky historiography that has ostensibly considered her as a historical actor. Indeed, Wheatley the individual has traditionally been submerged in historiographical context in order to alleviate the potential difficulties in writing original content on a person about whom very few documents remain. Historians have tried to account for Wheatley rather than treat her life on its own merits. In doing so, these scholars have repeated the earlier discrimination applied to Wheatley by elites in white society, who delegitimized Wheatley’s voice by emphasizing her race and background in order to make her work a novelty. The noted scholar Michel Rolph-Trouillot referred to this process of re-casting as making a resistant African American “unthinkable,” paradoxically using the actor’s resistance as a means to atomize their expression and maintain an intellectual status quo of African American deference to white hierarchy.

Ironically, Wheatley was not only aware of this power as exercised by white elites, but also was adept at the manipulation of this representation in order to gain prominence for her literary works. Building from her initial writing efforts at age 11 in 1765, Wheatley trafficked in an outwardly deferential acceptance of her “unthinkableness” while at the same time refining a voice that would eventually explicitly criticize this same system of power. An adept poet, Wheatley published a large collection of her works entitled *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in 1773, gaining international fame for her work. On returning to America, Wheatley immersed herself in the political developments of the Revolutionary era, and in doing so brought

herself to the attention of no less a notable than George Washington, earning a personal letter from His Excellency expressing his thanks.

This recognition was conditioned by the “unthinkable” conventions of white society, but was growing all the same. Near the endpoint of her career, Phillis Wheatley perhaps received the greatest amount of recognition from an unexpected quarter. Thomas Jefferson attacked Wheatley in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, and in doing so, backhandedly confirmed that Wheatley had in fact largely shed her “unthinkable” context. Jefferson owned *Poems on Various Subjects*, and was obviously familiar with the volume of her work, yet he viciously wrote her off. Far from solidifying his point, Jefferson’s casual dismissal betrayed recognition on his part that the “unthinkable” moniker was a cheap means of disenfranchisement rather than a conclusion drawn from logic. Moreover, Jefferson’s correspondents, both near and far, challenged his logic on this point, forcing him to gradually reveal his own lack of serious belief in the concept.

Thus, although Phillis Wheatley’s work was never conventionally famous, she nonetheless made an impact on the world around her. An incisive thinker, Wheatley was lauded both for her artistic prowess and her commitment to a country that was, in her lifetime, largely an idea. Finally, while Wheatley never wrote solely to criticize society, her work nonetheless held the potential to directly contradict whites’ prevailing notions about the rightness of racial separation and thereby introduce nuance into a discourse of race that would only see major development many years later.

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