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The Melancholy Muse: An Intellectual Biography of Phillis Wheatley

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Abstract

It was on the eve of the Revolution that Phillis Wheatley emerged onto the literary scene. A black female author who wrote many of her poems incorporating her classical education, evangelical faith, and earliest memories of Africa, Wheatley published her book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, in 1773. Wheatley's writing balanced religious, classical, and secular political idioms, effectively forcing the issue of the relationship of slavery and race to the Revolution and American identity. Her realization that she could address both her enslaved experience and her captor's prejudices through engagement with the ancient Mediterranean was pivotal: her political effectiveness derived not only from her classicism, but from her Africanism and womanhood, as well.

Keywords: Colonial America, Countess of Huntingdon, George Whitefield, Phillis Wheatley, poetry, American Literature, American intellectual history

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Introduction

The rich history and mythology of antiquity fed the imaginations of early Americans, as evidenced by the ubiquity of classical references in early American writing. Indeed, next to Christianity, classicism was the central intellectual project in 18th-century America.[1] Although a culture of classicism was an indispensable hallmark of a "gentlemen's culture," Americans of every stripe drew inspiration from the classics: they studied the classics; read the classics; wrote about the classics; and talked about the classics.

Even American women, most of whom were denied access to higher education until the second half of the nineteenth century, maintained a practice of looking to antiquity for insight and inspiration. In the middle decades of the eighteenth century, opportunities for female classical reading expanded rapidly as British polite culture permeated the colonies through a swelling tide of newspapers, magazines, and books.[2] Soon the classics were so common that classical motifs, images, and heroes formed a part of the vocabulary of educated women.[3]

The classics were especially important to eighteenth-century Americans because they could use the classical canon to console, justify, and validate the emotions they experienced as they approached the Revolution. For Americans living through the Revolutionary era, the world of the ancient Mediterranean was safely exotic — exciting and engaging but literally and figuratively far away. Indeed, the classics, "unmoored in time, accessible to anyone who could read a pamphlet or hear a poem," allowed Americans to form intellectual and emotional relationships with the narratives and heroes of antiquity, while also providing a paradigm through which they could make sense of their changing world.[4]

It was on the eve of the Revolution that Phillis Wheatley emerged onto the literary scene. A black female author who wrote many of her poems incorporating her "classical education, the Congregationalist faith into which she was inducted as a slave, and her earliest memories of Africa,"[5] Wheatley's success as an author resulted from the local networks in which she was connected. Kidnapped from West Africa and transported to Boston on the *Phillis*, a slave ship, Wheatley was about eight when she was purchased by John and Susanna Wheatley. It was under Susanna's supervision that Wheatley learned English along with classical languages. By fifteen, Wheatley wrote and published her own poetry. By nineteen, Wheatley attempted to secure subscriptions from Boston for her volume of poetry but was not able to find ample support. With the backing of Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon, Wheatley published her book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, in 1773. Even with the

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[1] Winterer, Caroline. *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life, 1780-1910*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004: 1.

[2] Although the most successful urban papers had only a few thousand paying subscribers, actual readership was far greater than the rate of circulation. White literacy rates in British North America were quite high by the end of the eighteenth century. Newspapers reached even illiterate audiences via taverns, coffeehouses, and neighborhood organizations that provided communal copies to be passed around or read aloud at public gatherings (Langer, Francesca. 2018. *On the Utility of Antiquity In Early America*: 3).

[3] Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life, 1780-1910*, 3.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Shields, John C., and Eric D. Lamore. *New Essays on Phillis Wheatley.* 1st ed. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2011, 36.

success of her book of poetry, Wheatley's writing was stymied by the Revolution, as the purchasing patterns of Anglo-Americans and the economic conditions of the colonies changed. These changes, coupled with her poor health, ended Wheatley's public career, and she died in poverty in 1784.[6]

It was during Wheatley's lifetime that Greco-Roman antiquity became labeled by its heirs in Europe and North America as "classical," often bearing association with an elite and high status.[7] This Greco-Roman antiquity, one claimed by the West as a cultural ancestor, transformed into a "'symbolic point of shared origins that was crucial in the definition of both the Western 'self 'and non-Western 'other.'"[8] The second half of the eighteenth century was also the period in which Western Civilization became more racialized, justifying the oppression of non-Western populations not only because of their supposedly natural and biological criteria, but also their inability to participate fully in the legacy of the West.[9]

Thus, Wheatley not only found herself excluded from asserting her claim on cultural legacies of the West, but as a slave woman was further barred from the classical tradition. Nonetheless, careful attention to her actions suggests Wheatley accomplished something only a woman – and perhaps, only a slave woman – could have done. She balanced religious, classical, and secular political idioms, effectively forcing the issue of the relationship of slavery and race to the Revolution and American identity.[10] Indeed, Wheatley operated at "the nexus of the politics of slavery, the imperial controversy, and the ambiguous, shifting opportunities and risks that both presented for women."[11]

The loneliness of Wheatley's position is palpable. Her work exemplifies the imagined genealogy of Western Civilization, linking her reality with the worlds of antiquity. Yet the racialized features of her physical body marked her as an alien to the West and excluded her from a place within the narrative of Western Civilization despite her intellectual prowess.[12] Thus, knowing necessarily who, what, and where she was – a black female poet in white America – she wrote poems as a means of survival, as a repository for her deepest Christian, spiritual, patriotic, and racial interests.[13] Her realization that she could address both her enslaved experience and her captor's prejudices through an engagement with the ancient Mediterranean was pivotal, especially coupled with her evangelical piety and engagement with the political. Her political effectiveness derived not only from her classicism, therefore, but from her "Africanism and womanhood," as well.[14]

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[6] Walsh, Megan. *The Portrait and the Book Illustration and Literary Culture in Early America.* Impressions (Series) (University of Iowa Press). 2017, 70.

[7] Mac Sweeney, Naoíse. *The West: A New History of an Old Idea*. 2023, 262.

[8] Ibid., 263.

[9] Ibid., 264.

[10] *Women in the American Revolution: Gender, Politics, and the Domestic World*, edited by Barbara B. Oberg, University of Virginia Press, 2019, 148.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Mac Sweeney, *The West: A New History of an Old Idea*, 261.

[13] Robinson, William Henry. *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings.* Critical Studies on Black Life and Culture; 12. New York; London: Garland, 1984, 126.

[14] Oberg, *Women in the American Revolution: Gender, Politics, and the Domestic World*, 149.

Early Life

Wheatley was captured and taken to America aboard a schooner, the *Phillis*, owned by Timothy Finch. The ship, which came to Boston on July 11, 1761, had returned from gathering slaves in Senegal, Sierra Leone, and the Isles de Los, off the coast of Guinea.[15] Fitch was disappointed in the voyage that brought Phillis to America: it was a relative disaster in its length, cargo, and mortality rate. Of the 95 enslaved Africans who left Africa, only 74 were alive when Phillis returned to Boston.[16] Among its cargo was a slender female child who was supposed to be around seven years old based on the "shedding" of her front teeth, "naked," and covered by "a quantity of dirty carpet about her like a filibeg."[17]

The legal condition of enslaved people in New England societies was quite different from that of enslaved persons in the South. Black New England slaves "led lives of curiously ambiguous status. Sometimes they were regarded as legal chattel, suffering all of the attendant evils ʾat other times, they were regard[ed] as quasi-persons, enjoying a limited number of the rights and privileges that all New England freemen enjoyed more fully."[18] In practical terms, as a minor, Phillis would not have had freedom of movement and, initially, would have been too young to be of much domestic help. We ought to acknowledge, then, the remarkable degree of success Phillis had in establishing herself as a subject of American cultural discourse. Arriving as a "poor, naked child," Wheatley began her career in a cultural and material state of deprivation; deprived of her family, community, language, and name, Wheatley had to reconstruct her symbolic identity.[19]

It was Susanna Wheatley along with her daughter Mary who provided Phillis with a broad education. Their instruction enabled Wheatley to become literate not only in English but to learn Latin and begin Ancient Greek, as well.[20] While Phillis ʾBoston consisted of 15,520 people in 1765, 1,000 of whom were black, no black children could be "counted among the more than 800 young scholars enrolled in the city's two grammar or Latin schools and the three

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[15] Gates, Henry Louis, and American Council of Learned Societies. *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers.* ACLS Humanities E-Book. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2003, 17.

[16] With a mortality rate of nearly 25 percent, the *Phillis* showed twice the average death rate on the Middle Passage (Carretta, Vincent. *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage.* 1st ed. Sarah Mills Hodge Fund Publication. 2011, 15).
Aboard the *Phillis*, enslaved persons were made to eat meals of water and rice, dance twice a day for exercise, and submit to their chaining and sleep whenever ordered (Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings*, 7).

[17] Gates, *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers*, 17. This little girl was about to join the more than half of Boston's population under the age of sixteen where men of African descent outnumbered women of African descent by more than five to three because slave traders preferred importing young men (Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*, 18). Enslaved persons were often sold at taverns or other places of business because Boston lacked a marketplace dedicated to the sale of enslaved people (Caretta, 18). It was there Phillis would be sold to be the personal servant of Susana Wheatley.

[18] Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings*, 11.

[19] Gates, *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers*, 17.

[20] Mac Sweeney, *The West: A New History of an Old Idea*. 2023, 254.

vocational writing schools."[21] Instead, Phillis gained her classical education through access to canonical texts made available to her at the Wheatley home and from neighbors ʾlibraries.[22]

Mary tutored Phillis in English, Latin, and the Bible. As John Wheatley wrote in 1772: "[Phillis] was taught in the Family, she, in sixteen Months Time from her Arrival, attained the English Language … She has a great Inclination to learn the Latin tongue, and has made some progress in it."[23] Scholars agree Wheatley was frequently in contact with a circle of learned men and women in Boston who, either through curiosity or genuine interest, took part in her education.[24] These people routinely brought gifts to Phillis, supplying her with both classical and contemporary texts. Acutely aware that she was on constant display as a talented black oddity who could read English and Latin from age eleven,[25] Phillis claimed a place in the literary classical tradition by appropriating political classical conceptions of "liberty, natural law, and virtue."[26] In doing so, Wheatley could contrast the ideals of the classical political tradition and the Revolutionary discourse with her material reality as both an enslaved person and poet.

Phillis ʾeducation was not just limited to the classics, though. Phillis would come to be educated about evangelicalism and baptized into the Christian faith. Indeed, Susanna Wheatley was a deeply religious woman of Christian zeal.[27] When, at 52, she purchased Phillis as her personal servant, "she professed a preoccupation with living the life and dying the death of a serious believer."[28] Susanna Wheatley dealt with Phillis ʾreligious education as she did that of her own children. Like many evangelical New England slave owners, Wheatley felt a certain obligation to introduce Phillis to Christianity.[29] Furthermore, Phillis arrived in Boston during the Great Awakening which stressed spiritual rebirth and the acceptance of Christ as one's personal savior. The Methodist Anglicans John Wesley and George Whitefield started the evangelical Protestant movement in Britain, Methodism, within the Church of England.[30] Known for their evangelical, energetic, and emotional style of preaching, namely outdoors, their ministry was particularly effective in parts of Britain and America not well served by existing parish organizations.

It was shortly after arriving in Boston that Phillis would become a lifelong Christian. Phillis was baptized at the Old South Church, rather than the New South, the Wheatley family church, perhaps one of Phillis ʾearliest acts of independence. Old South likely appealed to Phillis because it permitted the baptism of children whose parents were not full members of the

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[21] Gates, *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers*, 18.

[22] Shields and Lamore. *New Essays on Phillis Wheatley*, 36.

[23] Gates, *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers*, 19.

[24] Shields and Lamore. *New Essays on Phillis Wheatley*, 59.

[25] Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings*, 125.

[26] Shields and Lamore. *New Essays on Phillis Wheatley*, 35.

[27] Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings*, 13.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid., 28.

[30] Ibid., 29.

Church. It was also the Congregationalist church in Boston most sympathetic to Whitefield's Methodist mission.[31]

By its end, Phillis 'career was particularly orchestrated by three women with strong Christian values: Susanna Wheatley, her mistress, Mary Wheatley, her tutor, and the Countess of Huntingdon, her patron. These women believed in "the poet's power as a Christian example, especially since they approved the use of Wheatley's poems to spread the message of the Great Awakening in general and Methodism in particular."[32] Indeed, Whitefield, his preaching and influence, and Huntingdon linked Phillis to a larger transatlantic network of evangelical Christians. Consequently, they also connected her to some of the earliest authors of African descent.[33]

An Elegy to George Whitefield

While the elegy has a history dating back to the classical era, it holds a certain significance in British American colonies and for the religious, as well. Until the eighteenth century, the history of the American elegy was by and large a function of Puritan resources. The funeral elegy, adopted from their English counterparts by New England Puritans, was practiced for almost a century.[34] Coupled with this tradition, religion gave Phillis her primary subject and authority to write about it. Indeed, Phillis was a beneficiary of the Great Awakening with its Protestant emphasis on the need both for literacy to understand the Bible and the need for spiritual self-reflection.[35] Phillis 'correspondence bears witness to the ways in which she created "writing communities" made up of "various religious converts, faithful followers, and fellow readers and writers brought together by circumstances: such as, enslavement, geography, Congregationalism, Methodism, George Whitefield, or the Countess of Huntingdon."[36]

George Whitefield may have truly been the world's first international pop idol.[37] It was while he started school at Oxford that Whitefield began developing his "devotional spirit." Whitefield not only found inspiration in his newfound devotional fervor at Oxford, but he also received ample opportunities to train and discipline his voice, truly becoming an orator. Whitefield would come to describe writing sermons as assignments: "many of his early sermons clearly follow a textbook pattern undoubtedly influenced by the writing style of his college essays."[38] Through public practice, Whitefield improved his oratorical skills by employing

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[31] Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*, 35.

[32] Shields and Lamore. *New Essays on Phillis Wheatley*, 211.

[33] Whitefield's American preaching tours, for example, exposed many members of this first generation of black authors to Methodism (Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*, 34).

[34] Cavitch, Max. *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman.* 1st ed. 2007, 33.

[35] Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*, 42.

[36] Bynum, Tara. *Reading Pleasures: Everyday Black Living in Early America.* New Black Studies Series. 2023, 48.

[37] Mahaffey, Jerome Dean. *The Accidental Revolutionary George Whitefield and the Creation of America*. Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2011, 175.

[38] Mahaffey, *The Accidental Revolutionary George Whitefield and the Creation of America*, 11.

extemporaneous sermons and outdoor preaching.[39] Such outdoor preaching emphasized the non-denominational nature of his enterprise. In creating a non-denominational setting, Whitefield further could cultivate a culture of unity for his followers. Whitefield further simplified the theology of conversion into a metaphor of new birth: the term was clear, precise, and easy to grasp, meaning Whitefield was "able to explain it to uneducated people whom he respected and valued."[40]

Whitefield brought the energy and leadership needed to spread his message of new birth to the American colonies.[41] Though he visited America six times, preaching up and down the East Coast, this paper concerns itself most with his efforts in Boston. Boston was the key to America: if Whitefield could awaken a tough crowd in Boston, then, truly, the revival could extend throughout the colonies.[42] On September 19, 1740, four thousand people showed up to hear Whitefield. The next day, six thousand attended his morning service, and eight thousand that afternoon. On Sunday, fifteen thousand came to hear him preach.[43]

Whitefield's message of a unified Christian community encouraged his followers and pushed them toward a return to morality and virtue. For the first time, members of different churches, nationalities, and backgrounds viewed themselves as part of an inter-colonial Christian community. Indeed, Whitefield converted large numbers of black and Indigenous Americans, following the Christian theology of the concern for the state of one's soul, not the supposed status of one's racialized body.[44]

Whitefield visited Boston during his second, sixth, and last tours of America (1739-41, 1763-5, and 1769-70, respectively). Scholars agree that there is a good chance Whitefield likely stayed at the Wheatley residence because of Susanna Wheatley's correspondence with the Countess.[45] It is even more likely that Phillis heard him preach at either his sixth or last tour, though no record survives of Phillis Wheatley's having heard Whitefield preach at her Old South Church.[46]

It was on October 1, 1770, that the *Pennsylvania Journal* reported that the Rev. George Whitefield was "summoned to the bosom of his Saviour" after "being seized with a violent fit of asthma."[47] As the news of his death spread, public mourning across America was incredible: his

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[39] Additionally, Whitefield embellished the climax of each sermon with artistic language, sneaking in the highly structured phrasing as he begins, increasing near the end, but never so much as to seem overdone. With a device called "antithesis," holding up two contrasting ideas for comparison, he contrasts "many things" a person does against the "one thing" left undone — achieving the new birth (Ibid., 47).

[40] Ibid., 38.

[41] Ibid., 63.

[42] Ibid., 61.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Chiles, Katy L. *Transformable Race: Surprising Metamorphoses in the Literature of Early America.* 2014, 35. Wheatley, Phillis, and Vincent Carretta. *The Writings of Phillis Wheatley.* Oxford University Press, 2019.

[45] Wheatley and Carretta. *The Writings of Phillis Wheatley.* And Willis, Patricia C. "Phillis Wheatley, George Whitefield, and the Countess of Huntingdon in the Beinecke Library." *The Yale University Library Gazette* 80, no. 3/4 (2006): 165.

[46] Willis, "Phillis Wheatley, George Whitefield, and the Countess of Huntingdon in the Beinecke Library," 165.

[47] Belcher, Joseph. *George Whitefield: A Biography, with Special Reference to His Labors in America.* Project Gutenberg, 2013, 445.

funeral train was over a mile long, and six thousand people followed it.[48] American papers suspended coverage of political events to eulogize Whitefield, memorial services were attended by thousands in the colonies and in Great Britain, and many ministers wrote and published their own memorial sermons.[49] Americans had lost an agent of the Awakening and a voice that shaped "America's response to religious conflict, war with the French, arbitrary oppression, and power struggles with the powerful Church of England."[50]

In her early years, Phillis was perhaps best known for a series of eulogies for the deaths of persons within her enslavers 'circle of prominent figures in Boston.[51] She was a unique elegist for several reasons. First, she wrote both private and public eulogies. Further, she signed her name to all productions, at a time when many women who chose to publish did so anonymously. But most significantly, "a number of Wheatley's broadside elegies—including several for private individuals—were publicly sold, a rare accomplishment in the annals of broadside elegy publishing in the eighteenth century."[52] To maintain this, Phillis made a special point to employ an invocation to her Christian faith in the poems that demonstrated her theological and linguistic similitude to her New England audience.[53]

Phillis first gained a transatlantic reputation with her elegy "On the Death of Rev. Mr. George Whitefield. 1770." Her poem exemplified both eulogy's potential to carry significance beyond the boundary of a community and to address a larger public and also showed how an author could shape their role as a public poet by "drawing on the rhetorical predilections of the evangelical revival."[54] Indeed, Wheatley's poem was the most popular of any Whitefield elegy in the English colonies, appearing in at least seven individual editions.[55] At a time when a voyage across the Atlantic typically took five weeks, the *Gazeteer and New Daily Advertiser* in London advertised a version of the elegy on November 16, 1770, as "An Ode of Verses, composed in America by a Negro Girl seventeen years of age, and sent over to a gentleman of character in London. Now made public for the benefit of a family that has lately been reduced by fire, near Shoreditch church."[56] By the end of 1770, her poem was republished in New York, Philadelphia, Rhode Island, and Boston.[57]

Before more closely analyzing the elegy itself, it is important to acknowledge that Wheatley's elegies have been read, and, I argue, ought to be at least analyzed through a lens

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[48] Mahaffey, *The Accidental Revolutionary George Whitefield and the Creation of America*, 172.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Mac Sweeney, *The West: A New History of an Old Idea*, 254.

[52] Weyler, Karen A. *Empowering Words: Outsiders and Authorship in Early America.* 1st ed. 2013, 46.

[53] Ibid., 56.

[54] Franke, Astrid. "Phillis Wheatley, Melancholy Muse." *The New England Quarterly* 77, no. 2 (2004): 231.

[55] Weyler, *Empowering Words: Outsiders and Authorship in Early America*, 47.

A custom wood cutout that accompanied most editions of Wheatley's poem certainly aided her in not only gaining popularity but was the most visually appealing of all the Whitefield elegies. The woodcut pictures Whitefield resting just beyond his coffin, ornamented with a skull, his initials, date of death, and age at which he died. Whitefield is dressed in clerical robes and an elaborate wig.

[56] Wheatley and Carretta. *The Writings of Phillis Wheatley.*

[57] Carretta, Vincent. *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage.* 1st ed. Sarah Mills Hodge Fund Publication. 2011, 94.

that understands her elegies as "both as a subtle imaginative assault on the white European canon and as the subliterary impertinence of an African girl who found in vicarious mourning a means of gaining qualified social acceptance."[58] Her career and the emergence of the United States 'nationhood highlights elegy's place at the intersection of American poetic tradition and national communities at large. Not recognized as a mourner, Wheatley acquired the means of recognizing and managing the mourning of others. Truly, she "identified the expressions of grief that were intelligible to those around her, and she used them to create a conscious community of memory in which, though a socially dead person herself, she could nevertheless relate to the living with a measure of authority."[59] Through her evangelical belief system, Wheatley saw death not as irrevocable separation but as a promise of resurrection leading to a better life. Wheatley functions as a mediator in her elegies: she lends her voice to the community, to the mourner or the dead, to parents, spouses, children, and preachers.[60]

Wheatley's elegy to Whitefield carries with it a triumphant certainty, opening with the lines, "Hail, happy saint, on thine immortal throne, / Possessed of glory, life, and bliss unknown." As mentioned in the above paragraph, it is almost certain the Christian saint awaits heavenly ecstasies. To create a shared sense of understanding between readers and herself, Wheatley draws on the rhetorical strategies of the minister she commemorates, emphasizing voice, sound, song, and expressiveness. Like an evangelical preacher, the poem's speaker "faces the audience directly, challenging it to look and shee, to answer, or to join in prayer."[61] The poet both mimics the preacher and praises him: "Thy lessons in unequal'd accents flow'd! / While emulation in each bosom glow'd; / Thou didst, in strains of eloquence refin'd, / Inflame the soul, and captivate the mind."[62]

Wheatley's vision of the American community goes beyond Whitefield's. Wheatley's Whitefield addresses his messages to two audiences in her poems: "'my dear AMERICANS'" (39) and "ye *Africans*" (41). On the one hand, Wheatley's self-identification as "American" speaks to Whitefield's desire for universal conversion. On the other hand, Wheatley's circumscription, within as well as beyond the world of religious revivalism, by racial ideology grounds the grievances in Whitefield's eulogy. The experience of the loss in the poem is "barely articulated but palpably [felt]," for example, in references to "guiltyless [sic] gore" (16) and "the ORPHAN'S smart" (49). Indeed, it is "hardly necessary to read such references as consciously subversive of American hypocrisy to recognize signs of unvoiced rage in Wheatley's images of the violence and political upheaval of late-eighteenth-century colonial America."[63] Nonetheless, the use of the first-person plural *we* in the eulogy renders both African and European persons equally American.[64]

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[58] Cavitch, *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman*, 51.
[59] Ibid., 187.
[60] Franke,"Phillis Wheatley, Melancholy Muse," 233.
[61] Ibid., 231.
[62] Phillis Wheatley, The Writings of Phillis Wheatley (1784): [14] An Elegaic Poem on the Death of George Whitefield (1770) in Vincent Carretta (ed.), *The Writings of Phillis Wheatley,* lines 6-9.
[63] Cavitch, *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman*, 51.
[64] See "We mourn with thee, that TOMB obscurely plac'd" (48), for example.

The other major event and theme to which Wheatley's Whitefield elegy refers is the Boston Massacre, which prompted tremendous public anger and unrest. There would have been virtually no one in Boston by late 1770 who had not seen or heard from a newspaper the reporting of such events.[65] Wheatley's elegy thus emerged in the midst of such a heated political crucible, wherein there was immense anger toward the British crown. To say that her reminder of British violence would have resonated with readers is an incredible understatement. Indeed, Phillis alternates in depicting how King George treated the colonists, "When streets were crimson'd with their guiltless gore!" (16) and the love of Whitefield "Unrival'd friendship in his breast now strove" (17). Phillis depicts Whitefield as not only urging colonists to embrace the love of Christianity but extends his charity to "America" as its own political entity. He is their religious father, and the colonists are his children, not the king's.[66]

Over one-third of Phillis 'surviving works consist of funeral elegies. Fourteen appear in her *Poems*, including revisions of six elegies that appeared in newspapers or broadsides between 1770 and 1773.[67] While it may be easy to look over the sheer mass of elegies Wheatley produced, it is important to recognize the elegy as Phillis 'primary vehicle for poetic expression. Although the popularity of funeral poems might make them attractive for Phillis coupled with the attention she elicited attention with her Whitefield elegy, increasing the demand for other elegiac verses, clearly "something was at stake for Wheatley that underlies her compulsion for elegiac expression."[68] Perhaps contextualizing the elegies in the frame of cultural memory and a desire for community allows the historian to better understand Phillis ' desire to write in elegiac verse. While elegies are written for specific occasions, to express someone else's grief, Phillis is representing her "self," almost in an act of self-ventriloquism to allow the deceased to speak words of comfort to the loved ones left behind. Indeed, Phillis is speaking to her "self" as "Other."[69] Phillis 'elegy, if nothing else, reveals an interest in death, the great unknown, a subject of wonder and memory, themes which come to be repeated in many of her later poems.

Poems

In early 1772, Susanna Wheatley set out to have Phillis 'work collected and published as a book if enough subscribers could underwrite the cost of publication.[70] The cost of making Phillis Wheatley into a writer, though, "was achieved at the cost of reinscribing the structure that oppressed her, and this structure continued to oppress her and other black people even

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[65] Weyler, *Empowering Words: Outsiders and Authorship in Early America,* 52.

[66] In his own preaching, Whitefield came to be an intermediary between the colonies and the crown. For example, "his preaching against consumption took a political turn in light of the British taxation of imported goods" (51 Weyler). For a discussion of Whitefield's support of the colonies in their disagreements with the British government prior to the Revolution, see Lambert, "Pedlar in Divinity," 219– 25.

[67] Bassard, Katherine Clay. *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender, and Community in Early African American Women's Writing*. 1st ed. Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History Series. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1999, 59.

[68] Ibid., 59.

[69] Ibid., 70.

[70] Gates, *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers*, 22.

while legitimizing this one African-American's right to speak."[71] Thus, in the same year, Phillis underwent an "examination" as Boston merchants, judges, clergymen, and other community members met to determine the validity of her claims to poetic authorship.[72] Some of the most skeptical had already conducted examinations of Phillis. Thomas Woolbridge, who was an emissary of the Earl of Dartmouth, visited the Wheatley mansion, remarking that Phillis "was no Imposter; I asked if she could write on any Subject; she said Yes … I was astonished, and could hardly believe my own Eyes. I was present when she wrote, and can attest that it is her own production."[73] Of the eighteen men who came to judge Phillis, a majority were slaveholders.[74] The actual examination likely included tests on Greek and Latin, classical mythology, and works from Pope and Milton.[75] Phillis passed.

This was not the end of Phillis 'struggles, though. Any writer in the late eighteenth century could not simply compose poems that were printed upon demand. By the end of the eighteenth century, "publication by subscription was liable to far greater abuse if either the author or bookseller required payment in advance from subscribers. They rarely did so."[76] Susannah and Phillis Wheatley would come to find no American publisher would publish Phillis ' book. Some rejected it on outright racist grounds, while others thought it would not have commercial success.[77] Although Susannah Wheatley was shaken by the rejection of Phillis ' proposals, she resolved to publish them nonetheless, if not in Boston, then in sophisticated London.

As much as Susanna Wheatley aided in the cause of helping Phillis publish her *Poems*, it is necessary to recognize that Phillis was an active force in producing her book: she wrote regularly to her friends in New England even after her book's publication asking them to help with its distribution and sales. Phillis wrote to David Wooster, for example, on October 18, 1773, that she begged his favor to "use [his] interest with Gentlemen & Ladies of your acquaintance to subscribe also, for the more subscribers there are, the more it will be for my advantage as I am to have half the sale of the Books" and also that she "request [he] would desire the Printers in New Haven, not to reprint that Book, as it will be a great hurt to me, preventing any further Benefit that I might receive from the Sale of my Copies from England."[78] Phillis had reason to be interested in the economics of publication: she gained half of the proceeds of the book's sale. She chose poems carefully, ones that seemed they might increase

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[71] Burke, Helen M. "The Rhetoric and Politics of Marginality: The Subject of Phillis Wheatley." *Tulsa Studies in Women s Literature* 10, no. 1 (1991): 39.

[72] Bassard, *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender, and Community in Early African American Women's Writing*, 58.

[73] Gates, *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers*, 28.

[74] Ibid., 15.

[75] Bassard, *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender, and Community in Early African American Women's Writing*, 58.

[76] Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*, 97.

[77] Mac Sweeney, *The West: A New History of an Old Idea*, 256.

[78] Walsh, *The Portrait and the Book Illustration and Literary Culture in Early America*, 33 and Wheatley and Carretta, *The Writings of Phillis Wheatley.* Oxford University Press, 147.

"marketability, high sales, fame, and public pressure [that] might help pay for her freedom, as they seem to have done."[79]

But let us return to Phillis and Susanna's attempt to publish *Poems* in the more sophisticated London. Back on October 2, 1770, Phillis had mailed her Whitefield elegy to Selin Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon. Hastings, the most socially prominent Methodist leader of England, was a well-known patron of many writers besides Wheatley, including some African-Britons.[80] Hastings also famously had Whitefield himself as her personal chaplain. With this in mind, Phillis addressed the "R.t Hon'ble the Countess of Huntingdon Most noble Lady," enclosing in it "a few lines on the decease of your worthy chaplain, the Rev'd Mr. Whitefield, in the loss of whom I sincerely sympathize with your Ladiship" though "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!"[81] Yet by the end of 1772, Phillis had been ill for months, failed to find a publisher, and still had not heard back from the Countess directly since she had since her elegy of Whitefield in 1770. Phillis did know through intermediaries, however, that the countess had received her letter and poem and was intrigued enough that she sent persons in her inner circle to learn about Phillis 'Christian piety and authenticity as an author.[82]

The countess eventually offered to extend her patronage to Phillis as well, smoothing the way for her book to be published in London. By January 1773, the Countess oversaw the printing of *Poems* by the London publisher Archibald Bell, whom Susanna Wheatley, too, had engaged with through the captain of a commercial ship that John Wheatley used for trade with England.[83] The only thing holding up the publication of *Poems* was the countess 'request that a portrait of Phillis be painted and engraved to be used for the book's frontispiece.[84] Indeed, Susanna Wheatley would write to the Countess on April 30, 1773, that she directed "Phillis to act wholly under the direction of your Ladiship" and thanked the Countess that she took "so much notice of my Dear Phillis as to permit her Book to Dedicate to you, and desiring her Picture in the Frontispiece: I flatter'd my Self that your good advice and counsel will not be wanting."[85]

The production of her *Poems* was carefully planned. Whereas some arguably anti-British poems were advertised in the 1772 subscription, they were not included in the 1773 volume.[86] Furthermore, whereas in 1772 the proposal for her *Poems* identified Phillis as "at present a

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[79] Shields and Lamore, *New Essays on Phillis Wheatley*, 62 and Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings*, 62.

[80] These included James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw (1710–75), John Marrant (1755–91), and Olaudah Equiano (1745?–97) (Wheatley and Carretta. *The Writings of Phillis Wheatley).*

[81] Wheatley, Phillis, Susanna Wheatley, and Sara Dunlap Jackson. "Letters of Phillis Wheatley and Susanna Wheatley." *The Journal of Negro History* 57, no. 2 (1972): 211.

[82] Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*, 104.

[83] Gates, *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers*, 31.

[84] As Captain Calef reported in a January 5, 1773, letter, which Susanna Wheatley copied in her letter to the minister Samson Occom on March 29, 1773, "one thing" Hastings "desir'd which She said She hardly tho't would be denied her, that was to have Phillis 'picture in the frontispiece" (Susanna Wheatley to Samson Occom, March 29, 1773. Samson Occom Papers, Connecticut Historical Society.)

[85] Jackson, "Letters of Phillis Wheatley and Susanna Wheatley," 214.

[86] Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*, 11.

Slave," the 1773 proposal described to the primarily London market her as a "Negro Servant to Mr. Wheatley of Boston." Changes in the titles of elegies further emphasize the theological significance of mortality rather than social significance of the person who had died. The changes made between the 1772 and 1773 proposals, "particularly the addition of poems on classical topics, were apparently intended to transform "[t]he local prodigy of Boston" into "an accomplished woman of letters" who deserved to be published in London."[87] Thus, as advertised in the Boston News-Letter (April 16 and 22, 1773) and the Boston Post Boy (April 19, 1773), a downpayment of one shilling toward the cost of two shillings for a printed copy granted readers a book that would be "Dedicated by Permission" to the Countess of Huntingdon and adorned with the elegant frontispiece the Countess had required.[88]

Phillis traveled to London, manuscript in hand, in the summer of 1773 with Nathanial Wheatley, the son of Susanna and John Wheatley, to promote her book. Behind her trip was perfect preparation and execution: Phillis 'owners certainly made an "extraordinary investment in her celebrity and taking a considerable risk that her health and the ship would survive an always dangerous transatlantic voyage."[89] While in London, Phillis was treated like a visiting celebrity, taking social calls between breakfast and dinner. Phillis found liberation from her accustomed status, duties, and regimen. The London trip transformed her legal, social, and political identities. She developed a remarkable transatlantic network that transcended race, class, political, religious, and geographical boundaries: she moved from the margins to the center of the eighteenth-century transatlantic world.[90]

Despite receiving such pleasantries, Phillis was obliged to cut her trip short to London, not having seen the Countess who was ill and confined to South Wales to return to Boston and be with her dying mistress. Having to leave was disappointing to Phillis. As she wrote to the Countess, although she was thankful for being able to dedicate her *Poems* to the Countess,[91] she was "sorry to acquaint your Ladiship that the Ship is certainly to Sail next Thursday (on) which I must return to America. I long to see my Friend there, (I am) extremely reluctant to go without having first seen your Ladiship."[92] When she did return to Boston in September, Phillis waited four months before Boston newspapers could begin notifying local subscribers of the availability of her published volume having arrived from London. Finally, on January 24, 1774, the Boston Gazette could report: "This Day is Published, /Adorn'd with an elegant Engraving of the Author,/ Price 3s. 4d. L. M. Bound. / Poems, / On various sub- jects, - Religious and Moral, /

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[87] Ibid.

[88] Ibid., 106.

[89] Ibid., 108.

[90] Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*, 8.
Her network was so tight knit, she even received gifts from some of the people she met in London, gifts that directly reflected her engagement with classical literary tradition. Lord Darmouth gave her all of Alexander Pope's works for example, along with the translation of Cervantes '*Don Quixote* by Tobias Smollett (1721– 71), *Paradise Lost* by John Milton (1608– 74), *Hudibras* by Samuel Butler (1612– 80), and *Fables* by John Gay (1685– 1732) (Caretta, 123).

[91] Jackson. "Letters of Phillis Wheatley and Susanna Wheatley," 215.

[92] Ibid.

by Phillis Wheatley, a Negro Girl./ Sold by Messrs Cox & Berry, / at their store in King-Street, Bos- ton."[93]

Poems was a dramatic success of transatlantic publication once it was printed. The inclusion of its frontispiece picturing Wheatley testifies to the networks of patronage, print, and evangelicalism that enabled its production. Though the image was engraved and printed in London, it became one of the most recognizable book illustrations from America's early literary history.[94] Indeed, the visual inclusion of a frontispiece clearly and directly conveyed to readers that Phillis 'book not only deserved to be published but that it warranted an expensive embellishment, as well.

On the one hand, the engraving represented a significant public, political act: it carried with it revolutionary implications. Indeed, a black woman reading, writing, and publishing poems was enough to splinter social order in notions of racial difference. It quietly refuted, like the poems, the prejudice that black persons could not be fully intelligent and respectable writers and persons. On the other hand, while the frontispiece may have been revolutionary in some respects, several of its elements, however, seem to limit the aforementioned implications. The frontispiece emphasized Phillis 'African heritage and her inferior status by containing her within an oval whose framing words seem to restrict the extent of her gaze outward in thoughtful contemplation. Conservatively dressed and seated at an expensive table so that the viewer only had access to the parts of her that are part of the creative process, the image of Phillis is "moderated by familiar iconographic elements that encourage Wheatley's readers to view her within a longstanding cultural tradition."[95]

In addition to the frontispiece, the opening pages of the book included a title page, which repeated the encircling text from the image ("Phillis Wheatley, Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley, of Boston"), a dedication to Selina Hastings, a conventional preface for female, and, in Phillis 'case, black authors asserting that the "following Poems were written originally for the Amusement of the Author," a biographical letter "sent by the Author's Master to the Publisher," written by John Wheatley, and a notice signed by eighteen of Boston's leading white men, who by their signatures "do assure the World, that the POEMS specified in the following Page, were (as we verily believe) written by PHILLIS, a young Negro Girl."[96]

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[93] "Advertisement." *Boston Gazette* (Boston, Massachusetts), no. 982, January 31, 1774: [1]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.

[94] Walsh, *The Portrait and the Book Illustration and Literary Culture in Early America*, 63.
Advertisements for Wheatley's book all mentioned the inclusion of her frontispiece author portrait. Printed in the Massachusetts Gazette on April 16, 1773, the first American advertisement for the volume also emphasized its material format, and declared that the volume was "to be neatly printed in 12 mo. on a new Type and a fine Paper, adorned with an elegant Frontispiece, representing the Author" (Walsh, 73).

[95] Ibid., 229.
It is also necessary to note that the dark string around Phillis 'neck subtly reminds viewers of her enslaved status; enslaved persons typically were depicted wearing collars to signify whose servant they were. Strings aso recall the common association to enslaved persons and collared pets (Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage,* 111).

[96] Wheatley, Phillis, and John Davis Batchelder Collection. *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral. Black Women Writers.* London: Printed for A. Bell, Bookseller, Aldgate, 1773.

The title, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, suggests the importance of secular as well as Christian moral instruction in pre-Revolutionary American culture. Indeed, this "secular aspect was taught through the study of classics as useful knowledge, in order to promote a virtuous republic."[97] *Poems* amply demonstrates her classical knowledge: 26 of 39 poems in the book contain direct references or allusions to classical myth.[98] *Poems* also engaged significantly with ideas of the mind and body, especially in respect to race. On a personal level, Phillis was owned by someone else, limited physically but also by ideas about the black body, and working within a poetic tradition that consistently worked to control the bodies of women. Thus, her best strategy was to minimize the body she inhabited to move beyond the narrow constructions available to her.[99] In her poems, the poet is able to adopt others ʾselves, literally speaking for them at times, controlling the boundaries of her authorial self.[100]

With these considerations in mind, that Phillis, one, used *Poems* as a means to suggest the importance of secular (classical) as well as Christian moral instruction in pre-Revolutionary American culture, and that she engaged with notions of the mind and body, speaking as other "selves," "To Maecenas," the opening poem of *Poems*, truly showcases Phillis ʾgenius. "To Maecenas" reveals that Phillis' respect for the neoclassic is not of blind adherence, but rather suggests "a license for innovation."[101] Indeed, "To Maecenas" presents Phillis with an opportunity to rewrite Western history, linking herself, an African poet, to its supposed origins.

Despite mastering the cultural legacy of the West, Phillis still struggled to see herself in the Greco-Roman tradition. In opening her *Poems* by citing the Roman slave poet as African by birth, Phillis had connected a certain set of dots: the classical world, her Africa, and her America existed in the same universe.[102] Classical examples, to her, did not consist of "unattainable brilliance" or "primitive exoticism to be appreciated."[103] Rather, the classics were classic because they applied to her worlds: they were pagan but witty. To Phillis, squaring what was good and what was not, what was different, what was sacred, and what was profane about the ancient and modern was like any other act of comparing times and places. "To Maecenas," then, functions truly as an introductory poem, preparing its readers to appreciate its author's strengths: contemplative poems on religious belief and, if nothing else, a great number of funeral elegies. Yet "To Maecenas" also shows Phillis ʾdesire to move beyond a known audience and instead appeal to a sophisticated transatlantic public. Like Maecenas, an ancient Roman

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[97] Shields and Lamore. *New Essays on Phillis Wheatley*, 39.

[98] Ibid., 36. Wheatley also included her own original translation of a section of Ovid's Metamorphoses.

[99] Ibid., 374.

Being able to manipulate interpretations of the body was not only crucial for Phillis ʾsuccess, but was a strategy she learned from her favorite poet, Alexander Pope. Indeed, what she took from Pope was an ability to transform her real self into an imagined self.

[100] Ibid. See section on "self" as regarding the Whitefield elegy.

[101] Watson, "Intertextuality and Early American Women Writers," 54.

[102] Phillis called herself an African Terrence.

[103] Oberg, *Women in the American Revolution: Gender, Politics, and the Domestic World*, 153.

patron, "she presents herself as an 'equal 'poet-critic and reader, appreciative of the mastery of line and number but also moved by tears by poetry."[104]

Along with her poetic peers, Wheatley seeks out her muse in the Western literary tradition. But unlike her peers, she does not simply invoke a muse but declares herself to be one. She embodies in verse what the unprecedented figure in her frontispiece announces. She "algamates opposites – an earth-bound 'black 'melancholy disposition and airy poetic fire; pagan gods and the Christian divine; sinfulness and redemption: the particular grace of the low and humble and the moral superiority of the virtuous – to turn herself into a familiar and yet unique divine embodiment of poetic inspiration and genius."[105] Indeed, none of Phillis 'poems express more fully her wish to participate in Western culture and bitterness at her exclusion from it than "To Maecenas." Grappling with that fact, Phillis adapted the conventions of her day, like neoclassicism, to her use – to create such a collection of opposites. She authentically revised a classical original, the ode to the patron Maecenas.

In "To Maecenas," Phillis appropriately thanks her patron for his support, loosely imitating works by Horace or Virgil. Maecenas had long been the greatest patron of poets in the ancient tradition. While Maecenas was a man, a reference to "Thames" in the opening stanza suggests the dedicatee is English, the Countess of Huntingdon. Although in the concluding stanza Maecenas is explicitly gendered male, "great Sir" (52), as an aristocratic widow, Huntingdon had virtually all the authority and power of a man. With no classical models of female patrons available to her, Wheatley's decision to address the countess in the guise of a male seems understandable. In other words, Phillis had to find a way to place her own self, the poet, and the Countess', her patron, in a male-dominated tradition.

"To Maecenas" sets the stage for a number of tropes that reappear throughout *Poems*. The most common of these is the speaker's desire to move beyond the boundaries of the physical world, beyond the limitations of the body, to "ride upon the wind" (30). This sentiment appears in "On Being Brought from Africa to America," for example, wherein the speaker places an emphasis on the inner self. Like Terence, black skin becomes part of a large whole " –our sable race" – while the "benighted soul" can be taught to "understand" (2). This "otherness" as a black person in colonial America was absolute. The rupture caused by their abduction and enslavement left African Americans with a cultural past that could not address their present culture, one that denied them the legitimacy of their own cultural past. Therefore, Phillis could not write an African American epic while respecting the conventions of the Western tradition in its entirety. The national tradition and Western past were denied to colonial African Americans, leaving Phillis without borderlines, the spaces in which the ruptures between her concepts of antiquity and her present reality occur.[106]

In the second stanza of "To Maecenas," Phillis introduces a second theme in her epic, that of mourning and virtue, key components of the elegy, when she praises Homer and closes with couplets concerning his heroes Achilles and Patroclus ("When great *Patroclus* courts *Achilles* aid, / The grateful tribute of my tears is paid" in lines 17 and 18). She rewrites Homer's

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[104] Franke, "Phillis Wheatley, Melancholy Muse," 250.

[105] Ibid., 247.

[106] Kendrick, Robert. "Re-Membering America: Phillis Wheatley's Intertextual Epic." *African American Review* 30, no. 1 (1996): 72.

epic hero as a figure for mourning, making mourning heroic in the process. In fact, Phillis 'hero mourns the loss of his "self" and "other," representing his heroic qualities (his virtues). Mourning therefore becomes implicated with virtue, making mourning the remains of his peers an obligation that must be performed out of respect for the "other."[107] This, of course, is Phillis 'manipulation of the Western rhetorical convention in the interest of her own poetic agency, in the interest of her most frequent mode of writing poetry, the elegy.[108]

Wheatley's ultimate objective in *Poems* was not only to situate herself in the Western poetic tradition, but to command and transform it. Starting to trace a line connecting Homer to Maecenas through Pope gave Wheatley the opportunity to find an African native to the Western literary tradition.

Reception and its Consequences

Because she was back in Boston when her *Poems* finally appeared in London, Phillis could not have read the many English and Scottish reviews of her collection. About a dozen newspapers and magazines wrote about the publication, many excerpting over a half-dozen poems for display. At least two of the British reviewers noted the hypocrisy of Bostonians, including the Wheatleys, who would tout their talented enslaved poet but did nothing to free her from that status.[109]

In the earliest British reviews of her volume, Phillis 'intellect not only functioned as an example of how her capacity to write was not in itself an argument for mental equality but the enslaved status of her body exemplified the emptiness of colonial Whig rhetoric, the failure of the "language of liberty and political 'slavery 'to live up to the reality of its referents."[110] Published in the London Monthly Review a few months after her book appeared, a white poet, John Langhorne, had remarkably little to say about Phillis 'poetry, but nevertheless saw her poems as proof that "genius" was not a product of the sun. Phillis 'poetry coincided with a British "vogue for uneducated poets and 'natural geniuses,'" appearing at a moment when abolitionists wished to demonstrate both the mental equality of Africans as well as their educability.[111] Her British publisher, Archibald Bell, advertised Wheatley as "one of the greatest instances of pure, unassisted Genius, that the world ever produced," for example, but still

[107] Ibid., 78.

[108] Phillis wrote 20 of her 55 extant poems in the form of elegy (Bennett, Paula. "Phillis Wheatley's Vocation and the Paradox of the 'Afric Muse.'" *PMLA* 113, no. 1 [1998]: 69).

[109] Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings*, 39.

[110] Ibid., 91.

[111] Slauter, "Neoclassical Culture in a Society with Slaves: Race and Rights in the Age of Wheatley," 105 and L. "ART. VII. Poems on various Subjects, Religious and Moral." *Monthly Review, Or, Literary Journal, 1752-1825* 49, (12, 1773): 457-459.

The *Monthly Review* wrote, "We are much concerned to find that this ingenious young woman is yet a slave. The people of Boston boast themselves chiefly on their principles of liberty. One such act as the purchase of her freedom, would, in our opinion, have done them more honour than hanging a thousand trees with ribbons and emblems."

included in his advertisement a letter from Mr. Wheatley which mentioned the instrumental role the Wheatley family had in her poetic development.[112]

Further reviews attest to this attention on Phillis ʼgenius and her status as enslaved. The *Gentlemen s Magazine* in September 1773, for example, remarked: "it is said, disgraceful as it may be to all that have signed it, that 'this poor girl was brought an uncultivated barbarian from Africa, and has ever since been, and now is-A SLAVE! ʼYouth, innocence, and piety, united with genius, have not yet been able to restore her to the condition and character with which she was invested by the Great Author of her being."[113] The *London Magazine* added that although "these poems display no astonishing power of genius," when "we consider them as the productions of a young untutored African, who wrote them after six months [of] casual study of the English language and of writing, we cannot suppress our admiration of talents so vigorous and lively."[114] Phillis, then, was a literary phenomenon. The whole of her *Poems*" is indeed extraordinary, considered as the production of a young Negro, who was, but a few years since, an illiterate barbarian."[115] Indeed, Phillis was, surprisingly, "of a serious, and religious turn of mind."[116] All this in mind, the *Monthly Review* published later in December of 1773 remarked that even "one such act as the purchase of her freedom, would, in our opinion, have done more honour than hanging a thousand trees with ribbons and emblems."[117]

By 1773, after the publication of *Poems*, Phillis ʼpoetry made her a famous one-woman antislavery argument in the colonies.[118] Aware that her own enslavement was being used against the patriots (not the British and Scottish reviews) even as she wrote sympathetically of the American (or at least the New England) cause, Phillis kept her options open. Consequently, her public actions garnered responses from leading statesmen like Lord Dartmouth, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson.[119] In other words, Phillis became a significant player in the intertwined politics of slavery and revolution.

Ultimately, the English criticism of Boston's racist hypocrisy provoked her manumission. Phillis was freed by Mr. Wheatley almost three months before the death of her mistress in

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[112] In September, the book was ready, and on the 16th the London Chronicle reviewed it (Isani, Mukhtar Ali. "The British Reception of Wheatley's Poems on Various Subjects." *The Journal of Negro History* 66, no. 2 [1981]: 177).

[113] "On RECOLLECTION." *The Gentleman's Magazine: And Historical Chronicle, Jan.1736-Dec.1833* 43, (09, 1773): 456.

This same language is copied in *Scots Magazine*, 35 (Sept., 1773) (Isani, "The British Reception of Wheatley's Poems on Various Subjects," 148).

[114] The *London Magazine*, 42 (Sept., 1773), 456 in Isani, "The British Reception of Wheatley's Poems on Various Subjects," 146.

[115] Ibid.

[116] Ibid.

[117] Monthly Review. Wheatley, Phillis. December 1, 1773. Page: 457-459.

[118] *Poems* was advertised in a number of papers, including the Boston Gazette, Connecticut Gazette, Pennsylvania Journal, Boston Post-Boy, Rivington's New York Gazetter, the Maryland Journal, the Salem Gazette, Burlington Advertiser, Virginia Gazette, and Albany Register, amongst others.

[119] See Published in "Verses to Gen. Washington." 1776. *Pennsylvania Magazine, or, American Monthly Museum* 2 (April): 193 and *Letter from George Washington to Phillis Wheatley, 28 February 1776* Manuscript in George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, Series 3: Varick Transcripts, 1775–85.

March of 1774.[120] Interestingly, it was on February 11, 1774 she wrote a letter of protest to the Indigenous minister Samson Occum which would come to be reprinted in several New England Newspapers, in which she analogized Biblical Israelites and her fellow black persons, and Biblical Egyptians and her white slave masters, to defend African progress and the "universally human compulsion for freedom."[121] Indeed, Phillis publicly criticized the revolutionaries ' ideological deficiencies. She wrote that, "I desire not for their Hurt, but to convince them of the strange Absurdity of their Conduct whose Words and Actions are so diametrically opposite. How well the cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the exercise of oppressive Power over others agree, I humbly think it does not require the Penetration of a Philosopher to determine."[122] Although such a letter may seem polarizing, Phillis attempted to maintain the delicate balance between her audience, loyalists and revolutionaries, between evangelicals and secular readers. She sought to meld the discourses between ridiculing the Revolutionary ideology and unmasking the Christian rhetoric of fortunate conversion. Her awareness of the "contradiction inherent in an American slaveholder crying for liberty or an American slaveholder crying for liberty or a slaveholding minister preaching Christianity" prompted her to demand the abolition of slavery but not to devalue Christian ideology and its rhetoric.[123]

Later Life

Wheatley's later life was marked by personal losses – the death of Sunnah in 1774, John Wheatley and their daughter, Mary Wheatley, in 1778, and their son, Nathanial Wheatley, in 1783, leaving Phillis orphaned a second time.[124] Although she was celebrated and deemed extraordinary for a person of her time, she lived impoverished, isolated from many of her former colleagues, and unable to put out another volume of poems.[125]

By April of 1775, Phillis 'prospects had dimmed considerably: a large number of people who signed her attestation were dead, and the others who had supported her earlier were more concerned with the war than with her writing. In 1779, she advertised six times in the *Boston Evening Post & General Advertiser*, which mentioned that she intended to dedicate her new book of poems to Benjamin Franklin, but it failed to generate the necessary number of subscribers.[126] We can only speculate why her second volume was not published. Her first book had to be published in England because she could find no American published back in 1772. The

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[120] Robinson, William H. "Phillis Wheatley in London." *CLA Journal* 21, no. 2 (1977): 200.
[121] Ibid.
Reprinted by March 21, 1774, Boston Post Boy; March 24, 1774, Massachusetts Gazette and Boston Weekly News-Letter; March 26, 1774, The Providence (R.I.) Gazette.
Occom was a Presbyterian preacher who was also a member of the Mohegan Nation.
[122] Mac Sweeney, *The West: A New History of an Old Idea*, 259 and "The following is an Extract of a Letter from Phillis a Negro Girl of Mr Weatley's." *Providence Gazette* (Providence, Rhode Island) XI, no. 533, March 26, 1774: [2]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.
[123] Franke, "Phillis Wheatley, Melancholy Muse," 347.
[124] Weyler, Karen A. *Empowering Words: Outsiders and Authorship in Early America*, 63.
[125] Ultimately, Phillis was unable to bring out another volume of poems for reasons that had little to do with her aesthetic skills and everything to do with the economics of war and the disruption of her network (Ibid., 63).
[126] Gates, *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers*, which cites *Wheatley's Final Proposal (September 1784) The Boston Magazine*, September 1784.

war effectively closed the British market to colonial authors in 1779, meaning her would-be publishers "had failed to exploit her continuing celebrity by not referring to her premarital identity as Phillis Wheatley in advertising her proposed book."[127]

Wheatley's story almost had a happy ending. In 1778, she married a free black grocer, John Peters, with whom she would have three children. But her royalties from the first book were beginning to dry up, and coupled with her failed attempts to find a second publisher, her family slid deeper into poverty.[128] Several of the Wheatley relatives sought the poetess out, not having heard from her in years, and found Phillis living in extreme poverty, two of her children dead, and the third deathly sick.[129] By the time her husband was put into a debtors 'prison in 1784, Phillis went to work as a scullery maid in a Boston boardinghouse to provide for herself and her remaining child. But her health was so poor that when she died later that year at the age of 31, her young son outlived her by only a few hours.[130]

Conclusion

Phillis effectively forced the issue of the relationship of slavery to the Revolution and American identity; she brought out the double meaning and risks of the classical revival in the context of slavery. By recreating herself through ancient classics – as a neoclassical poet – and by making the relationships of the patriots 'dilemma to the ancient and modern politics of slavery a key theme of her public project, she was truly exceptional in both intellectual, literary, and political traditions.[131]

Perhaps Phillis' work ought to be thought of as a Trojan horse. Her scheme of verse carried her inside the literal and intellectual walls of white, colonial American and British societies. Phillis used classical models, Christian humility, and wealthy patrons – familiar and accepted elements of literature and colonial culture – to acquire the power to critique the colonial world and secure her freedom.[132] There were inherent tensions in her efforts to use the social discourse of her day to distract the reader's attention from the body she inhabited, one that was defined by that same discourse as inherently inferior. Indeed, while Phillis could not lay claim to her actual body, she could claim ownership of her mind and soul. Emphasizing mind over body, Phillis could not ultimately escape the ties that bound her but could assert her being and declare her aesthetic and human worth in a world that often seemed like a menacing, impenetrable forest.[133]

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[127] Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*, 177.

[128] Mac Sweeney, *The West: A New History of an Old Idea*, 262.

[129] Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings*, 53.

[130] Mac Sweeney, *The West: A New History of an Old Idea*, 262.

[131] Oberg, *Women in the American Revolution: Gender, Politics, and the Domestic World*, 149.

[132] Shields and Lamore. *New Essays on Phillis Wheatley*, 89.

[133] Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings*, 126.

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