“Fair *Freedom* rose *New-England* to adorn,”: Phillis Wheatley Peters’ Sanctioned Subversive Poetics of Revolution

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I pledge my word of honor that I have abided by the Washington College Honor Code while completing this assignment.

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From *Helcion's* refulgent heights attend,
Ye sacred choir, and my attempts befriend:
To tell her glories with a faithful tongue,
Ye blooming graces, triumph in my song.

ON IMAGINATION.
Phillis Wheatley

INTRODUCTION

The life of Phillis Wheatley Peters, though cut short by illness, is one marked by genius, determination, and spirit. She was born in Africa, though the exact whereabouts are unknown due to the lack of records kept for African individuals during transport through the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Recent scholarship speculates that Wheatley was likely from what she referred to as Gambia in a December 1774 poem, "PHILIS'S [*sic*] Reply to the Answer in our last by the Gentleman in Navy.," published in *Royal American Magazine* in January 1775, when she, in an unusual display, seemingly describes her homeland. To the Gentleman she wrote:

> And pleasing Gambia on my soul returns,
> With native grace in a spring's luxuriant reign,
> Smiles the gay mead, and Eden blooms again,
> The various bower, the tuneful flowing stream,
> The soft retreats, the lovers golden dream,
> Her soil spontaneous, yields exhaustless stores;
> For phoebus revels on her verdant shores...
>
> There, and in Britain's favour'd isle, behold
> The bending harvest ripen into gold!
> Just are thy views of Afric's blissful plain,
> On the warm limits of the land and main. (87)

What we know as Gambia today did not yet exist as a nation in 1774. The region she is likely referring to was known as the Senegambian region on the West African coast, which was widely referred to as Senegal by Europeans and American colonists alike. The owner of the ship Phillis Wheatley was brought to America on, merchant Timothy Fitch, called the coastal portion "Senegall" which was the closest point on the West African coast to Europe, often making it the first stop for ships participating in the triangle trade (Waldstreicher, 15).

In November of 1760, Fitch ordered one of his ships, *The Phillis*, captained by Peter Gwinn, to Senegal to sell cargo and purchase Africans to be enslaved in the Americas. Thus,

speculating that Wheatley is from what is now Gambia is not abstract. Though, as Waldstreicher notes, she may have been brought from another region of Africa before ending up in the region where Gwinn arrived with *The Phillis*, just as Gwinn may have taken her from a different port along the coast (16). Nevertheless, Wheatley, who was around seven years old, arrived in Boston in July of 1761.

On July 11, 1761, Bostonian merchant John Wheatley and his wife Susanna purchased the young girl and named her after the ship which she was forcibly taken on. Her age was estimated based on her missing front teeth, thus speculating her birth year to be around 1753 (*Complete Writings*, xiii). The Wheatley women, Susanna and her daughter Mary, spearheaded Phillis' education. Within 16 months of her arrival in Boston, Wheatley had gained proficiency in the English language, writing, speaking, and even rhyming. Susanna was also instrumental in Phillis Wheatley's conversion to Christianity. What Susanna did not know was that she would be handing Phillis her greatest weapon against the Wheatleys' participation and compliance in enslavement.

By 1765, 12-year-old Wheatley was writing prolifically, beginning with letters and small elegies—poems, typically religious, about death. Two years later, she published her first poem, "On Messrs. Hussey and Coffin" in *The Newport Mercury* on December 21, 1767, then in *The Boston Post-Boy* three weeks later (Waldstreicher, 4). In just another five years, at the age of 19, Phillis Wheatley would publish the proposal for her volume of poetry, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* which would be published in London in September of 1773, but would not be published in America until 1786, two years after her death in 1784.

Wheatley, undoubtedly aided by John and Susanna, published the proposal for her volume three times in *The Boston Censor* in February, March, and April of 1772. However,

despite her local fame, Wheatley failed to garner the support and subscriptions of the necessary number of patrons in and around Boston to publish her work. The Wheatleys turned their focus to finding a publisher in London.

In 1772 London, the topic of slavery was more than hot. That year had seen the landmark case, *Somerset v. Steuart* (also known as the Mansfield Decision), in which the chief justice of the King's Bench, Lord Mansfield, ruled that it was against British law for a person to be forcibly removed from England. James Somerset, an African enslaved by Charles Steuart, escaped from Steuart but was eventually found and recaptured. Upon his return, Steuart planned to have him sent to Jamaica on a slave ship. Somerset's godparents approached Mansfield pleading for a writ of habeas corpus, forcing Steuart to justify his actions in court, and granting Somerset a trial. With the help of self-made judiciary Granville Sharp, Somerset won the case in June of 1772, not on the grounds that slavery was illegal, but that it was against British law to be moved against one's will (Waldstreicher, 152-160).

As the Wheatleys prepared for her volume to be published in London, Phillis Wheatley no doubt knew about the *Somerset* case and the potential implications for her own situation. Around the same time, William Legge was promoted to Earl of Dartmouth and Secretary of State for the Colonies of the United Kingdom. Upon his visit to Boston, he heard about the prowess of Phillis Wheatley via their mutual connections to the late George Whitefield and Salina Hastings the Countess of Huntingdon and would later become the subject of one of her most well-known poems.

The Dartmouth connection made the Wheatleys' London publishing prospects a reality and opened the door for Phillis Wheatley to make a voyage back across the Atlantic. The captain of the Wheatleys' ship made a special trip to London to give Phillis' manuscript to a publisher,

Archibald Bell. Bell personally visited Salina Hastings to seek her patronage for Wheatley's volume. Hastings was taken with Wheatley's work and agreed to sponsor the volume and the author, as well as accepted Wheatley's proposal to dedicate the book to her. Hastings is also credited with the inclusion of Wheatley's picture as the frontispiece (Waldstreicher, 181-183).

On Sep. 1, 1773, Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* was published in London. Shortly thereafter, Wheatley obtained her freedom. The exact date of her emancipation is unknown but was sometime between September and October of 1773. Wheatley herself never mentioned the date and obscured many of the details. Her story changed depending on her audience, ranging from at Susanna Wheatley's dying request and out of John Wheatley's kind heart, to at the request of her English friends. Further speculation rightfully considers Wheatley's own hand in her emancipation: she had the document drawn up, she now possessed a copyrighted manuscript that in the process of being published, she befriended anti-slavery advocates like Granville Sharp, she knew about the *Somerset* case, and above all, she knew the optics of continuing to hold her in bondage would be detrimental to the Wheatleys' image (Waldstreicher, 214-222). However, she managed to gain her freedom; Wheatley's genius extended far beyond the page.

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Despite Wheatley's recognition as the first person of African descent and the first enslaved individual to publish a book in the English language, the amount of scholarship on her work is staggeringly small. Even less exists on the influence of the impending Revolutionary War on her poetry, and conversely, her influence on the Revolution. Writing within the context of the growing conflict between the Colonies and England, Wheatley created a sanctioned,

franchised voice through her poetry and asserted personal agency over her own status of enslavement while providing nuanced interpretation of atrocities around her, including the Transatlantic Slave Trade, the Boston Massacre, and the Stamp Acts.

The goal of this paper is to move the needle on how we examine Wheatley's poetry and her connection to the Boston, African, and Revolutionary communities. I argue that not only was Wheatley composing within the context of the Revolution, but that her identity as a poet was shaped by the growing conflict. Wheatley masterfully used the Colonies' frustration and rebellion as a platform to advocate for freedom from enslavement and equal treatment for Africans through her invocation of white Colonial ideals, liberation rhetoric, Christian narratives, and elegy to create palatable arguments for her white readers, while refusing to succumb to the racist ideals of Black inferiority imposed on her by the white world.

Wheatley lived through arguably the most important, influential, and infamous war in American history and provided unique insight into the complex racial and gender dynamics of the late eighteenth century. Living and writing in an overwhelmingly Eurocentric, patriarchal society, she faced backlash, discrimination, and extensive obstacles based on her sex and race. However, she was widely considered to be a contemporary genius, and she weaponized her pen to express disdain for the inhumanity she experienced and witnessed. Wheatley's criticism of her world, teetering on the edge of war, paired with her sanctioned subversion—a poetic strategy that cloaks revolutionary and abolitionist critique within acceptable religious and neoclassical forms—allowed her poetry to resonate with her contemporaries and modern readers.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

War has been a popular subject in the European tradition of literature since its beginning. As Bennett and Royle note, the first word of one of the tradition's oldest epics, Homer's *Iliad*, is "menis" meaning wrath, fury, or rage, situated within the act of war; the rage of war (424). Since the existence of Homer's epics, themes of and the focus on war have continued to persist in literature. This thread has been inescapable. Bennett and Royle provide further examples of war-centric poetry including Tennyson, and most relevant to my project, Owen. Owen's use of what Bennett and Royal describe as the "'authenticity effect'" (430), resonates closely with Wheatley's poetics. Owen's work doesn't just state that war is horrific; it makes readers feel like they are encountering something real, immediate, and truthful. This sense of authenticity is not simply because the poems are factually accurate, but because of how the poems are written. Their analysis of intimate language and sensual lyricism that evoke a sense of relatability between the speaker and the masses in Homer's poems can also be applied to the works of Wheatley.

David Waldstreicher's *The Odyssey of Phillis Wheatley: A Poet's Journey Through American Slavery and Independence*, published in 2023, is the latest and most extensive biography of Wheatley. Where Vincent Carretta did much of the biographical heavy lifting through the late 20th century and into the early 2000s, Waldstreicher's work frames Wheatley's life like an epic of her classical models: an Odyssey. His detailed account provides new context and new research to an already contested story, shedding more light on feasible speculations about Wheatley based on historical records, rather than familial hearsay.

While Wheatley's volume of work was published in 1773, nearly two years before the beginning of the Revolutionary War in April 1775, the rising tensions and impending battle in

the colonies and England, were sufficient to supply her with plenty of material. As the title of her work, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, implies, the main focus of Wheatley's writing was on matters to do with moral injustice and the need for implementation of stronger Christian values. Despite the inferred erasure of her native religion, Wheatley embraced Christianity and found solace in her Christian God.

When she was 18, Wheatley was baptized at Old South Church in Boston and joined their congregation. Old South Church is notably associated with the American Revolution—Benjamin Franklin and Samuel Adams were known to have attended services there—and was the place of meeting for planning the Boston Tea Party (Old South Church in Boston).

Lorenzo Dow Turner's 1929 "The Anti-Slavery Movement Prior to the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade (1641-1808)," discusses how opposition to slavery in colonial America initially emerged not as a fully developed political movement, but as a set of moral and religious arguments grounded in Christian ethics. As Turner explains, early critics, especially Puritans and Quakers, objected to slavery primarily because it conflicted with Christian teachings about human souls and moral responsibility, rather than because of a commitment to political equality. While Puritan critiques often remained limited and paternalistic, Quaker writers advanced a more radical vision rooted in the spiritual equality of all people and increasingly proposed emancipation as a practical goal. This religious framing is crucial for understanding Wheatley's work as it shows that biblical language and Christian ideology were not inherently pro-slavery but instead formed a contested space in which both pro- and anti-slavery arguments developed.

Nearly a century later, Chernoh Sesay Jr.'s "The Revolutionary Black Roots of Slavery's Abolition in Massachusetts," builds on this foundation by shifting the focus to the Revolutionary period specifically, emphasizing that abolitionism was not only shaped by white intellectual

traditions but also by active Black political participation. This context is essential for understanding Wheatley's position: she was writing at a moment when ideas about liberty, rights, and human equality were being actively debated and redefined, and when Black voices were increasingly asserting their place within those debates. In Massachusetts, enslaved and free Black individuals petitioned colonial authorities in the 1770s, explicitly linking their condition to the broader Patriot rhetoric of liberty and natural rights circulating during the American Revolution. These petitions framed slavery as incompatible with the emerging ideals of citizenship, highlighting the contradiction between revolutionary claims of freedom and the continued practice of holding people in bondage. Sesay argues that this activism helped transform abolition from a primarily moral critique into a politically organized movement, rooted in both Enlightenment principles and Black resistance.

James Levernier's analysis in "Phillis Wheatley and the New England Clergy" ties Turner's and Sesay's frameworks together and engages with Wheatley herself, showing how her intellectual formation was deeply shaped by her interactions with New England clergy and elite white circles. Contrary to earlier assumptions that her religious poetry reflects a passive acceptance of slavery, Levernier demonstrates that Wheatley's theological education exposed her to Revolutionary-era sermons, like those of George Whitefield, that emphasized natural rights, liberty, and the moral incompatibility of slavery with Christianity. The clergy she engaged with were not isolated from political discourse, rather, their sermons often intertwined religious concepts with Enlightenment-inspired ideas about freedom. As a result, Wheatley's poetry can be read as participating in a subtle, coded critique of slavery, using biblical language to appeal to, and challenge, the moral framework of her audience.

Levernier also highlights Wheatley's extensive connections with prominent ministers and public figures, which positioned her within transatlantic intellectual networks that included both religious authorities and political elites. These relationships parallel her well-known interactions with founding-era figures, like George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson, suggesting that Wheatley occupied a complex role as she was both a subject of elite patronage and an active contributor to the ideological conversations of her time. Her work reflects this dual position, navigating the expectations of her white audience while advancing arguments aligned with abolitionist and revolutionary principles.

THE POETICS OF REVOLUTION
Location, intellect, and the Founding Fathers

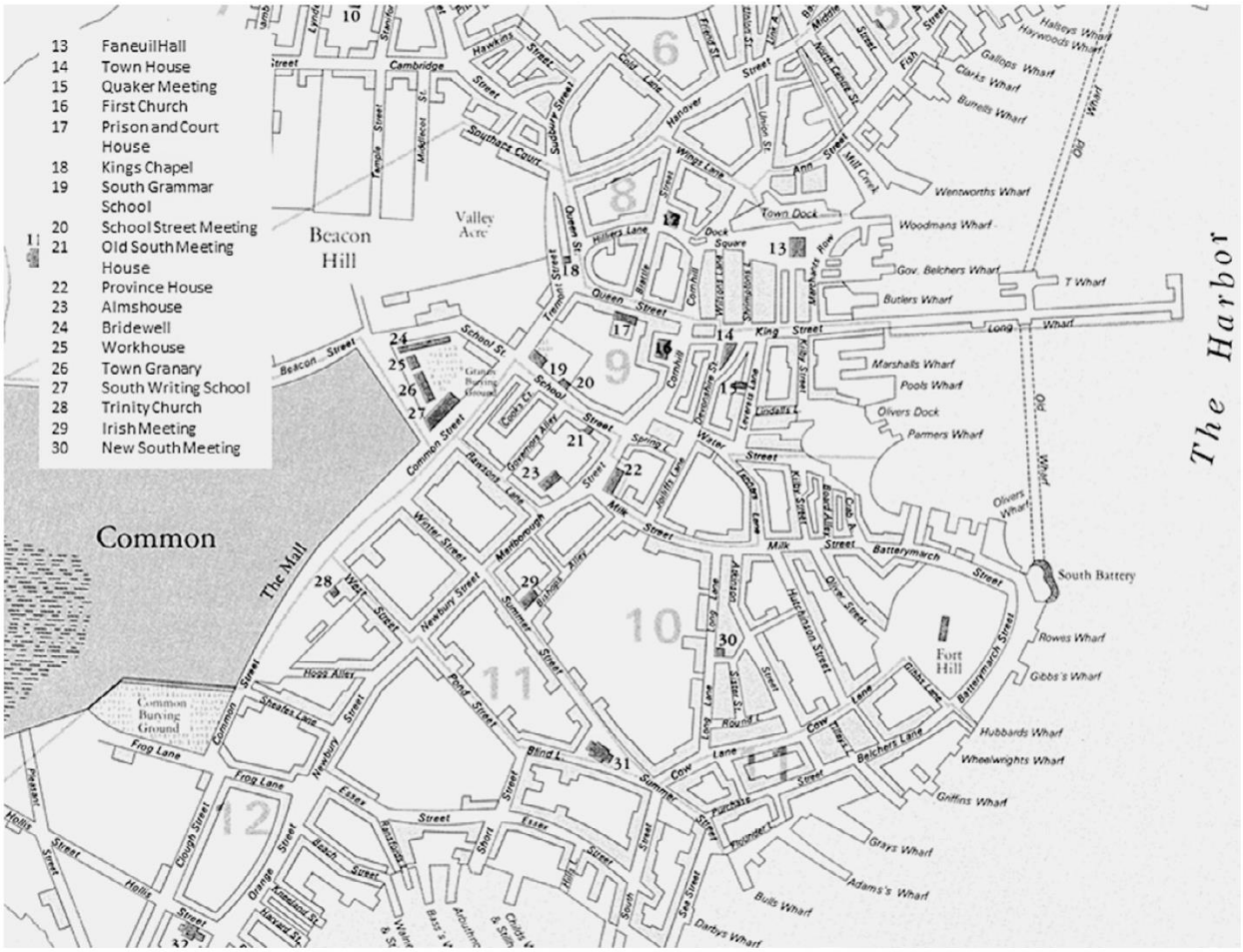


FIGURE 1. *Map of Revolutionary Boston in 1775. Phillis Wheatley lived on King Street, near or around which much of the revolutionary and crowd action took place, including the Stamp Act riots of 1765 and the Boston Massacre on March 5, 1770. Courtesy Northwestern University Library.*

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Based solely upon geographic location, Wheatley was at the epicenter of the American Revolution for the duration of writing her first volume. In her groundbreaking article, "Phillis

[1]Image and caption: Erkkila, Betsy. "Phillis Wheatley on the Streets of Revolutionary Boston and in the Atlantic World." *Early American Literature*, vol. 56, iss. 2, 2021, pp. 352.

Wheatley on the Streets of Revolutionary Boston and in the Atlantic World," Betsy Errkila emphasizes that not only was Wheatley residing in Boston during this time of unrest, but she was also actually on the very street where transformative events occurred, King Street (Erkkila, 352). King Street saw many influential events including The Stamp Act riots of 1765, The Boston Massacre (1770), and is home to Old South Church, obvious connections that have been blatantly overlooked. Erkkila also keenly points out that while Wheatley was likely not an active participant in town meetings or crowd action, she likely was a spectator or participant in other street events around her residence (353). She bases this notion on a letter from Jupiter Hammon, a fellow African poet and evangelical, who urges her to "'leave' the politics of 'the street' in order to 'taste things more divine'" (Erkkila, 354). Her reputation through her pen, one of participation and involvement, further corroborates her engagement beyond geographical proximity. Moreover, her presence in Boston's intellectual and print culture placed her within the same networks that circulated Revolutionary rhetoric, allowing her to absorb and repurpose the language of liberty that dominated public discourse.

Wheatley's position as the first of many categories further illustrates the impending war's impact on her poetics. Credited as the first "African enslaved person to write about the American freedom struggle as a potentially radical movement" and the first to "address an antislavery plea to King George himself," Wheatley was blazing a trail for herself (Erkkila, 354-355). Part of what makes Wheatley stand out is her intellectual genius. Wheatley's poetic production itself constituted a form of political engagement, as her work weaves the popular revolutionary themes of political and heavenly deliverance with the often-ignored issue of African-American emancipation, positioning her writing as a "subtle war" against slavery and its supporting ideologies (Willard, 233). "'Her poems challenge the story that privileges her racial body and the

scholarly expectation that race should operate as a governing principle in African American literature'…she also created community and experienced pleasure from reading and writing and from her spirituality" (Nunley, 106). The idea of Wheatley as a "poet of the American Revolution" emerged early, as her widely circulated elegy for George Whitefield and subsequent publications brought her into transatlantic prominence and connected her directly to figures such as Benjamin Franklin and Lord Dartmouth, demonstrating that her literary authority was acknowledged within the same elite circles shaping Revolutionary ideology (Akers, 398). Of Wheatley's accounts of Revolutionary actions, one poem in particular stands out, "On the Death of Mr Snider Murder'd by Richardson" (written 1770). Christopher Seider, known as Snider in the 1770s, was an 11-year-old boy who was shot by British customs officer, Ebenezer Richardson during a protest two weeks before the Boston Massacre. Snider's death is widely known as the first American death of American Revolution. Erkkila places Wheatley on the streets of Boston as part of a procession of mourners for Snider, citing Wheatley's epic eulogy and identifying the significance of its language. "Wheatley's use of *We,* one of the first times that she imagines herself as part of a common American struggle of enslaved women, laborers, and ordinary people for 'fair freedoms' cause," gets closer to confirming for Erkkila that Wheatley was among the procession behind the coffin and possibly even read and, or, circulated her poem at the services (358). "Genius here not only signals Wheatley's extraordinary intellectual abilities but the manner and method she employs to invoke an epistemology of liberation" (Nunley, 106). This collective language also reflects a broader contradiction at the heart of Revolutionary discourse, in which calls for liberty coexisted with the continued practice of slavery, a tension Wheatley directly exposes in her writings by aligning British "tyranny" with the lived experience

of enslavement (Willard, 236). The impact of horrific events, like the murder of Mr. Snider, allowed Wheatley to find her call to action, to find her voice, and establish her poetics.

Wheatley was forged by the circumstances of her situation. As a Black woman and formerly enslaved person, after gaining her emancipation in 1773, living in a war-struck period that undoubtedly influenced not only her sense of self, but who she was as a poet. It can be assumed that Wheatley wrote the majority of her works during The Revolutionary War (1775-1783) based on her proposal for her second volume (1779-1784), which was to be longer than her first. At the same time, the Revolutionary generation she wrote among, including figures such as George Washington, remained deeply entangled in slavery even as they articulated ideals of liberty, illustrating the broader historical paradox in which Wheatley was writing: a world where the language of freedom expanded alongside the persistence of human bondage (Morgan, 406).

The only surviving works of Wheatley's exist in *Phillis Wheatley Complete Writings*, including the proposal for her second volume. While all of the works listed in her proposal have been lost, she details a volume, "Poems and Letters on Various Subjects, Dedicated to the Right Honorable Benjamin Franklin Esq: One of the Ambassadors of the United States at the Court of France, By Phillis Peters" (Caretta, 167) with 33 poems and 13 letters, intended to be 300 pages, 100 pages longer than her first volume. This proposal came in 1779 right in the middle of the American Revolution, indicating that Wheatley was heavily influenced and inspired by the war, if not more so than she was before it began, with titles including:

> Thoughts on the Times.
> On the Capture of General Lee, to I.B. Esq.
> To his Excellency General Washington. [published in *Pennsylvania Magazine*, 1776]
> On the death of General Wooster...
> To Lieut R— of the Royal Navy. [published in *Royal American Magazine*, 1774]
> To the same. [published in *Royal American Magazine*, 1774]

On the death of Lieut L—ds...
To the Hon. John Montague Esq. Rear Admiral of the Blue. (*Complete Writings,* 167-168)

Her direct address to figures such as Washington further underscores her engagement with Revolutionary leadership, even as those same leaders navigated their own conflicted relationships with slavery, revealing the layered political terrain in which her poetry circulated (Morgan, 415). Her elegiac and praise forms, often dismissed by earlier critics, function as strategic modes of critique, allowing her to speak within accepted literary conventions while simultaneously exposing the contradictions of a revolutionary society that proclaimed freedom while sustaining slavery (Willard, 237-239).

Wheatley, through her employment of elegy and neoclassical praise, redefines what Revolutionary poetics can be. Rather than simply commemorating death or celebrating political figures, her poetry transforms these forms into sites of critique, where the language of liberty is both invoked and interrogated. Writing from within the constraints of enslavement and marginalization, Wheatley develops a poetic that operates through subtlety, collective voice, and strategic ambiguity—one that allows her to participate in Revolutionary discourse while simultaneously exposing its exclusions. Her work reveals that the Revolution was not only fought on battlefields or debated in assemblies, but also constructed in language, metaphor, and form. In this way, Wheatley's poetry enacts its own revolution by reshaping dominant literary conventions to articulate a vision of freedom that extends beyond the limits imagined by her contemporaries, asserting that true liberation must account for those whose voices were systematically denied.

"FROM THE SPLENDORS OF THE MORNING LIGHT"

Wheatley's use of light and dark motif in support of liberation

Wheatley's ability to appeal to a white audience, use their own logic against them, and even speak on behalf of them, demonstrates her courage to speak freely about liberation—in a sea of white voices speaking and writing about freedom, she is able to claim her space unapologetically. Her poetry, riddled with rhetorical techniques elegantly woven together, became her weapon against those who doubted her and a call to action to those who stood with her.

Phillis Wheatley's use of light and dark imagery becomes a motif throughout her elegiac poems to skillfully assert and justify her position on abolition, liberation, and Christianity. One of Wheatley's most famous poems, "On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA," is the third poem in her volume, and one of the first to showcase her light and dark motif. The poem immediately begins with a startling claim, "'Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land," (Wheatley, 13). The ambiguity of "mercy" here could be either true to definition, indicating a sense of gratitude for the forgoing of punishment, or, more likely, in an ironic sense. The notion that Wheatley would be the offender in this situation and hope to be shown compassion instead of punishment is, from a 21st-century lens, absurd. This initial contrast sets up the light and dark contrasts that follow. She continues, "Taught my benighted soul to understand / That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too" (13). Wheatley's use of "benighted" follows the thread of intellectual challenge. It can have multiple meanings: "overtaken by darkness; black, or in a figurative sense, intellectual or moral darkness" (OED). Both definitions work here. She could either be identifying the color of her soul to match the societally constructed color of her skin, or she could be referencing her uneducated and immoral soul before she found Christianity and God. The further implication that there is a savior separate from God makes the latter application

more probable. She does not explicitly say that God is the *Saviour*, rather that there is a savior in addition to God. Wheatley could be leaving the interpretation of "savior" up to her audience, inviting them to consider their personal saviors, but she is likely also indicating that emancipation will be her physical savior; freedom from enslavement will be the physical manifestation of God's act of saving.

The rest of the poem further supports her meaningful relationship with God and immense understanding of Christianity: "Once I redemption neither sought nor knew. / 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" (13). Wheatley's masterful manipulation of definitions and meanings in these five lines paints the contrast of light and dark. "Once I redemption neither sought nor knew," indicates naivety and accountability for not being conscious of her moral actions prior to her introduction to Christianity. In other words, she was enlightened by religion. "Some view our sable race with a scornful eye, / 'Their color is a diabolic die,'" contrasts the previous line by focusing on darkness rather than light. The word "sable" simply means the color black. This definition put into the context of the following line creates greater impact for both lines. There is a negative connotation placed on "sable," followed by the description of Africans' skin color as "a diabolic die," facing racialized discrimination head-on. It is uncomfortable to read these lines, but it is nowhere near as uncomfortable, painful, or horrific as it was to be held in bondage. Wheatley harnesses her poetic and dictionary power to compel her readers to empathize with her argument for freedom and equal treatment.

The final two lines of the poem are the most ambiguous of all. "Remember, *Christians, Negros,* black as *Cain,* / May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train" can be interpreted in numerous ways. Depending on where the emphasis is placed on the first three words, whether on

"Remember," "Christains," or "Negros," the meaning of the line changes. When placed on "Remember," the groups, "Christians," and "Negros," are grouped together, both "black as Cain." When the emphasis is on "Christians," the line serves as a dig specifically at white Christians, informing them that just because they are not white, does not mean that Africans cannot be "refin'd and join th' angelic train." But when the emphasis is placed on "Negros," Christians are separated from "Negros," implying that it is only the latter that are "black as Cain." Regardless of where Wheatley intended the emphasis to be placed, the final line retains its meaning—those willing to submit themselves to God, to seek redemption, can be refined and find peace in the afterlife.

Even more nuanced is Wheatley's use of "Cain." "Black as Cain, / May be refin'd" could be a reference to sugar*cane* that needs to be *refined*. The stalk of sugarcane is darkly colored but upon refining, is distinctly white. It is a biblical reference to Cain of Cain and Abel, who was marked after he killed Abel. Some Christian lines of thinking even go as far as to anoint all Black individuals as the direct descendants of Cain. This implies that even those who commit mortal sins can find redemption. This comparison is particularly interesting as it could be implying that white Christians are the marked ones and need to be refined, greatly contrasting their Biblical justification for enslaving Africans. "On being brought from Africa to America" showcases Wheatley's incredibly witty use of language in order to provide a nuanced argument for equality of Africans and the white colonizers.

Another of Wheatley's most well-known poems, "To the Right Honourable WILLIAM, Earl of DARTMOUTH, His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for North-America, &c.," employs the light and dark motif. In this poem, compared to "On being brought from Africa to America," there is much more back and forth between the light and the dark rather than a

stronger focus on darkness. The poem, addressed to William Legge, Earl of Dartmouth who was also the King's secretary of state for the colonies, sought to appeal to the Earl's Christian values in an attempt to seek freedom for herself and her fellow Africans, alongside the colonies seeking freedom from Britain. Wheatley heavily employs contrast of light and dark to emphasize her experience, the experience of enslaved Africans, and the joy of freedom and liberation. The lines, "No more, *America*, in mournful *strain* / Of wrongs, and grievance unredress'd complain, / No longer shall thou dread the iron chain," (Wheatley, 39) are among some of the most powerful in the poem as they imagine an America free from slavery.

She paints a free country beautifully in her address to the Earl, expressing deep disdain for the practice of slavery while describing the blissful joy that could be felt by Africans across the land if slavery were ended. She begins the poem on the dawn of a new day, "HAIL, happy day, when, smiling like the morn, / Fair *Freedom* rose *New-England* to adorn:" (Wheatley, 39). Wheatley begins with a positive association between "*Freedom*," and light, the sun, and smiling in order to set the tone for her argument that freedom would bring joy to all. She continues, ascribing feminine pronouns to Freedom, "The northern clime beneath her genial ray, / *Dartmouth*, congratulates thy blissful sway / Elate with hope her race no longer mourns" (39). Where Wheatley could have chosen to make the sun a male figure, she instead opts to give it womanly characteristics, possibly representative of her own feelings towards women's roles, and more specifically her own, in the early abolition movement. She employs homophones, "morn" and "mourn" to create further contrast—the brightness of the morn when Freedom's sun is rising over America versus the mournful face of the enslaved. But she does not dwell on the dark elements just yet, as the mournfulness is "[elated] with hope."

The second half of the first stanza transitions to the darkness. There is more contention and greater conflict between the light and the dark. “While in thine hand with pleasure we behold / The silken reins, and *Freedom’s* charms unfold. / Long lost to realms beneath the northern skies / She shines supreme, while hated *faction* dies” (39-40). Wheatley’s character of *Freedom* is beginning to see the injustices of the world over which she presides, further proving the reciprocal influence of Revolutionary and abolitionist rhetoric on her work and Colonial Boston. The “charms” are unfolding, the “silken reins” do as well, indicating that what once was softly guided has fallen to the “iron chain” mentioned in the next stanza, fallen to the darkness of “realms beneath the northern skies.” However, Wheatley’s Freedom continues to “shine supreme, while hated *faction* dies.”

The stanza concludes, “Soon as she appear’d the *Goddess* long desir’d, / Sick at the view, she languish’d and expir’d; / Thus from the splendors of the morning light / The owl in sadness seeks the caves of night” (40). The Goddess, Freedom, is “sick at the view” of the world she witnesses, Wheatley here alludes to slavery once again, to the point where she is “languish’d and expir’d.” It is too much for her to handle, and “thus from the splendors of the morning light / The owl in sadness seeks the caves of night.” These powerful lines conclude the first stanza, and the fictional tale that Wheatley tells. The nuance of the Goddess being so disgusted by actions in the world below her that she declines in health and retreats into the darkness, rather than continuing to operate as a figure of light, further emphasizes the scale of the unjustness of slavery.

The second stanza, the shortest of the poem, reintroduces Wheatley’s voice as the speaker to articulate her argument.

> No more, *America*, in mournful strain
> Of wrongs and grievance unredress’d complain,
> No longer shalt thou dread the iron chain,
> Which wanton *Tyranny* with lawless hand

Had made, and with it meant t'enslave the land. (40)

Instead of addressing the Earl, she addresses America, making clear that the practice of enslavement is not to continue. However, the America she addresses is not that of the white colonies, but of those that "dread the iron chain." The American she is speaking to is Black America. She directly calls out the "wanton *Tyranny* with lawless hand" for its intention unjustly "t'enslave the land." She is making a nuanced claim here that the land, America, belongs just as much to the Africans taken there against their will as it does to the white colonizers that brought them there.

In the third stanza she finally addresses the Earl, inviting him to gain a stronger sense of why she is writing to him and why she is speaking out against enslavement at all. "Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song, / Wonder from whence my love of *Freedom* sprung, / Whence flow these wishes for the common good, / By feeling hearts alone best understood" (40). This sets the Earl up for Wheatley's description of her own childhood, but she is appealing to him on a personal level. She does not forcibly tell him anything, rather invites him to leisurely learn and ponder as he engages in the work. Wheatley simultaneously acts in a selfless manner while making it a personal matter. She articulates her argument for "the common good," but in order to make her argument more relatable, she removes generalizations from the whole by telling her own personal story. She breaks down the barriers between Black and white, dark and light. She humanizes herself:

> I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
> Was snatch'd from *Afric's* fancy'd happy seat:
> What pangs excruciating must molest,
> What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?
> Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd
> That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd:
> Such, such my case. And can I then but pray

Others may never feel tyrannic sway? (40)

By describing the circumstances under which she was brought to America, against her will, stripped from her home and her family, she appeals to a sense of morality. Wheatley again compels her audience to empathize with her. Further, whereas she chose to make Freedom female, she instead in this stanza appeals to the father rather than the mother. She describes her situation in terms that the Earl can understand, as a man, appealing to his masculinity and paternal instincts. Her conclusion of a rhetorical question carries immense weight as well. Is it so wrong of her to wish that others don't have to experience what she did?

Scholar Tamika Nunley investigates this question and Wheatley's intellect as an avenue to explore Black girlhood in early America in her work, "The Intellectual World of Phillis Wheatley and the Politics of Genius." She argues, "The ideas expressed by African-descended women and girls offer a critical lens through which to understand the epistemologies of liberty they created during the revolutionary era" (Nunley, 106). Black women had more at stake in their freedom than Black men—they were dually oppressed because of their race and because of their sex. She goes on to say:

> The politics of genius reveals ways that race, age, and gender defined the meanings associated with figures validated as intellectuals in the late eighteenth century. Wheatley's life and work invite us to examine her own intellectual propositions that illumine the contours and possibilities of Black life in the era of the revolution rather than settling for an explanation of exceptionalism or dismissing her as an anomaly. (107)

Nunley is grappling with the same *What if?* that Wheatley was. How would life have been different, been better, produced more records of minds like Phillis Wheatley's had the circumstances of their upbringing been different?

The final stanza gives praise to the Earl for his past contributions in support of Wheatley's cause while also encouraging him to do more. She writes with an authority garnered through rhetorical humility—she appears humble, grateful, and to have his best interest in mind.

> 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.
> May heav'nly grace the sacred sanction give
> To all thy works, and thou for ever live
> Not only on the wings of fleeting *Fame*,
> Though praise immortal crowns the patriot's name,
> But to conduct to heav'ns refulgent fane,
> May fiery coursers sweep th' ethereal plain,
> And bear thee upwards to that blest abode,
> Where, like the prophet, thou shalt find thy God. (40)

However, Wheatley, masterfully subtle, is spoon-feeding her argument to the Earl in a bite that he can actually swallow. She gives the impression that she is merely trying to assist him on his journey to discover God's glory, to live forever "on the wings of fleeting *Fame*," and "sweep th' ethereal plain." However, Wheatley's not-so-underlying argument is that the Earl's support becomes a mutually beneficial situation. He can help move the needle towards liberation while also finding salvation for himself. This coincides with the transatlantic Great Awakening in which spiritual rebirth and acceptance of Christ as one's personal savior were prioritized (Carretta, 25). Wheatley's appeal to a societal shift towards evangelical Christianity and Methodism would have resonated deeply with the Earl.

This stanza uses light imagery as well, pointing towards a positive resolution. While there is noticeably less actual language describing light and dark, the build up to one of the most vivid scenes in the poem helps contribute to its significance. The use of other words such as "great," "heav'nly grace," "sacred," "immortal," "crowns," all lead to height of the ending, "But to

conduct to heav'ns refulgent fane, / May fiery coursers sweep th' ethereal plain," ultimately resolving in the Earl finding God. The grandeur in which Wheatley suggests the Earl will be greeted, or exist in heaven with "fiery cursers" sweeping the ethereal plane provides a gratifying end to an already impactful address. She controls the light here in the same way she does throughout the poem, using it to her advantage, as a sign of God, a figure of freedom, and the ultimate liberation. Thus, she is connected to the Revolution and the flame that brings it.

Wheatley illustrates her intellect, faith, and rhetoric in creating nuance while challenging the injustices of her world. Through her masterful use of the light and dark motif, she was able to articulate an argument for equality, liberation, and spiritual redemption in a profound way. Her ability to weave intricate layers of meaning into her work not only humanized her and other Africans in the eyes of white colonizers, it also refused to go unheard. Wheatley's sanctioned subversive voice, though constrained by her status as an enslaved person, transcended the boundaries of race, class, and enfranchisement to claim an enduring place in revolutionary, literary, and historical discourse.

AFRICS OF BETHLEHEM, *AMERICUS* OF GATH

Parallels between oppressed Americans and Africans, and English and American oppressors

Wheatley's opinions of enslavement and freedom are often overshadowed by her elegies and Biblical focus. As I explore the nuances of her writing, which is heavily intertwined with Christian ideals, I continue to develop my argument based on the notion that Wheatley used the appeal of her faith to advocate for freedom from enslavement on the grounds of God's word and Biblical stories. She transformed radical ideas into palatable verses that her white audiences could digest, and even agree with, but undoubtedly missed the true meaning of. In other words, she obliged them to confront their own willful ignorance when it came to messages of the Bible; no longer could they pick and choose which values to uphold inconsequentially.

Though not published in her first volume, Wheatley's "America," written in 1768, builds on her symbolic analysis of the impending American Revolution most notably the concepts of *freedom* and *tyranny* I explored in "To the Right Honourable WILLIAM, Earl of DARTMOUTH." In "America," Wheatley illustrates a personified interaction between Brittania and her son, who takes on several names throughout the poem including "americus," "Prostrate," "the rebel," "America," and "New England." The progression from "americus" to "New England" symbolizes Wheatley's journey of exploration to realizing that the once naive, powerless America, son of Brittania, "the rebel" who started to push back against Tyranny, is nothing more than a new England. This allegorical framing aligns with what Shields identifies as Wheatley's use of "subversive pastoral," a literary mode that allows writers to "insinuate and glance at greater matters" under the guise of seemingly simple or conventional forms, thereby masking political critique within acceptable poetic structures (632).

While the Founding Fathers of America are assembling ideas for a new style of government, conceptualizing values that would eventually show up in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution— ideas like "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness," and "All Men are created Equal," Wheatley is recognizing these ideals do not currently apply to everyone in late 18th century; they only apply to free white men. O'Neale's analysis further emphasizes that Wheatley was acutely aware of these contradictions, using biblical narratives of deliverance—particularly those associated with Israel's liberation from bondage—to imply that the promise of freedom should extend to enslaved Africans as well (155). Before the founding of the United States, while Africans were enslaved via the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and brought to the British Colonies, the idea of New England, one free from the monarchy and the practice of enslavement in Britain, brought hope to some enslaved people that the liberty the colonists sought would bring liberty to them as well. As we know, African Americans endured nearly another century of legal enslavement, until the 14th Amendment in 1863, though some southern states still illegally enslaved Black Americans well into the 20th century.

Wheatley's poetic retelling of the birth of America, including mentioning the taxes placed on the colonies by Britain, followed by Britain's ignorance of America's complaints, allows her to make staunch comparisons between the rebel Americus and the "Ethiopians," or *Africs* she frequently refers to African Americans as. The beginning of the poem:

> New England first a wilderness was found
> Till for a continent 'twas destin'd round
> From feild to feild the savage monsters run
> E'r yet Brittania had her work begun
> Thy Power, O Liberty, makes strong the weak
> And (wond'rous instinct) Ethiopians speak
> Sometimes by Simile, a victory's won. (75)

sets up comparison between the inhumane way that white settlers took over the American continent and the impact on Native Americans, presumably the "savage monsters" that Wheatley mentions, with the cruel practice of enslaving Africans, the "Ethiops." The power that white colonists are able to exhibit over populations of color, makes even a weak white man strong in the eyes of his government. However, she positions herself, a self-proclaimed Ethiop, as an omniscient voice, both metaphorically in the poem and within the context of her writing. She pushes back against the notion of a "savage monster," and creates a sense of unity among groups whose sacred land and existence has been uprooted by white exertion of power. Such repositioning reflects Wheatley's broader effort to redefine dominant racial and religious assumptions by shifting meaning away from physical markers like skin color and toward spiritual and moral frameworks that affirm Black humanity (O'Neale, 153).

As the poem continues, she develops a theory of devolution for white colonists. Initially unknowing of his power, Americus "grew up daily virtuous" though Brittania, "Fearing his Strength which she undoubted knew / She laid some taxes on her darling son... Amend your manners I'll the task remove / Was said with seeming Sympathy and Love" (75). Brittania's physical and emotional manipulation sends her son into intense distress. As Americus cries in response, Britannia, "Turn'd a senseless ear / At last awaken'd by maternal fear / Why weeps americus why weeps my Child," (75). The false sense of care exhibited by Brittania here mirrors the false concern white Colonists exhibited for Africans seeking freedom. Just as England and King George III (poorly) attempted to show compassion, or justify heartless behavior, many Christian Colonists did the same to those they enslaved. Americus replies:

> Indeed said he, you have no cause to Chide
> You see each day my fluent tears my food
> Without regard, what no more English blood?
> Has length of time drove from our English veins

The kindred he to Great Britain deigns?
Tis thus with thee O Brittain keeping down
New English force, thou fear'st his Tyranny and thou didst frown
He weeps afresh to fell this Iron chain
Turn, O Brittania claim thy child again. (75)

The abandonment and betrayal that Americus feels here resonates with Wheatley likely due to her own experiences with white Bostonians. This poem was written five years before the publication of her volume of poetry but nonetheless illustrates the intense conflict growing between the Colonies and England. Wheatley unsurprisingly finds common ground with Colonists who are seeking freedom from their economic oppression, as Wheatley is searching for freedom from her physical oppression. Her hero asserts that his mother has no reason to scrutinize his complaints or efforts since she refuses to notice his suffering. The same can be said for the African struggle for freedom. She further connects the story to enslavement with the mention of the Iron chain. The chain's symbolism both throughout Wheatley's works, and in the broader context of slavery, is unmistakable. Just as Americus is trapped by the metaphorical iron chain, Africans are trapped by the physical one. This layering of meaning exemplifies the kind of masked critique in which Wheatley uses conventional poetic forms to "[enable] her to levy sometimes severe censure, particularly of the institution of slavery, under the guise of an innocuous purveyor of the status quo" (Shields, 633).

Wheatley concludes the poem with a prophecy, one that is frighteningly accurate. She writes from the perspective of Brittania:

Arise my sons with one consent arise
Lest distant continents with vult'ring eyes
Should charge America with Negligence
They praise Industry but no pride commence
To raise their own Profusion, O Brittain See
By this, New England will increase like thee. (76)

Wheatley astutely argues that despite America's criticism of England, they are destined to follow in the same vein. While they may be on the path to disavowing a monarchy, the future of the new nation, based on its own actions, its focus on the wrong kind economic freedom that favors "Industry" and wealth rather than physical and spiritual freedoms, will make America no different than the England they are trying to break away from. Since the United States has a mixed-market economy, which was built on the free labor of enslaved populations, Wheatley's warning is all the more impressive. In this way, her poetry participates in what O'Neale describes as a broader effort to expose the moral contradictions of a Christian society that professes liberty while sustaining bondage, using familiar religious language to turn that ideology back on itself (146).

Just as Wheatley's prophecy foretold, Britannia's suffering son follows suit to become the oppressor. Wheatley's longest published poem, "GOLIATH of GATH *1 Sam. Chap. xvii.*," adapted from the Old Testament story of David and Goliath, transcribes the story into verse with a nearly identical plot. However, Wheatley makes a few, very small, but very important, changes to the story that greatly impact the reader's understanding of her message. For her, Goliath is the white *Americus* and David is oppressed *Afric* nobly defeating his peoples' oppressor.

Wheatley's first change is to the consequences the losing army will face. Goliath, of the Philistines, proposes a one-on-one fight to settle the war with the Israelites, but until David's emergence, the Israel army had continued to retreat. When Goliath speaks the rules and consequences in the Biblical story, he suggests the defeated army will become *servants* to the victors (Byerman, 4). However, Wheatley enacts a minor linguistic change that completely transforms her meaning: "For he who wins, in triumph may demand / Perpetual service from the vanquish'd land," (Wheatley, 20). As Byerman points out, the change from merely servants, with

no timeline, or any other details provided, to Wheatley's "perpetual service," forces an eternal commitment on the "vanquish'd land." While Wheatley's use of the word "vanquished" clearly indicates the army defeated at the time, considering her nuanced interpretation of the world and conflict around her, she likely also means perpetual vanquishment alongside perpetual service; in her metaphorical Goliath/*Americus* versus David/*Africs*, Goliath is confident in his own victory to the point where he is proposing eternal enslavement of the Israelites by the Philistines, and Wheatley's further implication is that the service will perpetually vanquish the Israelites/*Africs*. She transformed a simple and vague consequence into a direct commentary on her own situation, while masking her criticism in a revered Christian story.

Wheatley then changes the terms of the reward to more clearly illustrate her comparison to Africans' struggle for freedom. In I Samuel, the rewards are "the man who killeth him, the king will enrich him with great riches, and will give him his daughter, and make his father's house free in Israel" (I Samuel, 17:25). Wheatley keeps the monetary prize, and even the arranged marriage, however, she adapts the third. While exact interpretations of "make his father's house free in Israel" can vary between economic and governmental, suggesting tax exemption from Israel rule, and freedom from service for the family, Wheatley's version changes the phrasing enough to mask her message with enough ambiguity so as to not immediately tip off her white audiences while forcefully making her argument: "Freedom in Israel for his house shall gain" (Wheatley, 20). Not only does Wheatley remove the paternal factor, she simplifies the statement to reflect the Americus versus Africs conflict for freedom. Wheatley changes the narrative. The house of David, as the eventual victor, is to be free in Israel; the Africs are to be free in the land of Americus.

In her final change, Wheatley further invokes the strength of David in her comparison to Africs. Changing the rules and rewards of the battle was only the beginning. While they were small changes, they were the foundation for Wheatley's overarching argument. Her final change is woven through the reveal of David's lineage (I Samuel, 17:58-18:3). Her final stanza houses her greatest addition: "'Small is my tribe, but valiant in the fight; / Small is my city, but thy royal right'" (Wheatley, 25). By aligning Africs with David, the additional emphasis on his beginning and community, Wheatley arguably exhibits one of her rare allusions to her own upbringing before she was forcefully brought aboard the *Phillis*. While virtually all of the details of her life before enslavement are unknown, she had made references to her life in Africa before, including her most well-known, and likely most debated, poem, "On Being Brought from Africa to America." Even if she is not referring directly to her own childhood, the connection between African Americans and David is unmistakable.

Like the tribe of Judah and the children of Israel as a whole, Wheatley argues Africans living in America were disempowered, but nonetheless capable of triumph. Rather than succumb to barbaric stereotypes about Africans, Wheatley pushes back to "[align] herself with the [enslaved] creators of spirituals, sermons, and trickster tales... the methods used were consistently those of cleverness and intelligence rather than physical force," (Byerman, 5). Byerman continues, "Like David, [Africans] rejected martial armor in favor of spiritual strength. David only needed the skill to find the weak spot in his enemy's defenses; when he did so, the battle was quickly over. This was the hope of the [enslaved] as well, though they had to endure for a much longer time" (5). Without speaking to the idea directly, Byerman provides rationale for why white populations generally did not want to see educated Africans and certainly did not want to contribute to their education. "The skills" they needed, and that their white enslavers

tried to ensure they did not have, are exemplified in Wheatley. While her poetic prowess was marked by genius, her genius is not exclusive to her race. As her work was considered proof of what *could* be done by Black minds, it also reflected what was possible when populations are not held in bondage.

I believe Wheatley herself was aware of this fact. While her intentions are only left to speculation, it is hard to imagine that she would not be aware of the anomaly of her situation, and the power it held for her. Byerman's astute comparison between David and Wheatley herself confirms this argument:

> We can see a connection between the artist and her hero. Like him, she is young, small, and marginal... many doubted Wheatley's right to come into the public arena and to speak. Like him, she felt that she had the right and the preparation to enter the field of battle, in her case, with the literary, social, and political giants. Like him, she used her faith as her form of armor. Her book became her smooth stone. (5)

She was ingenious enough to know that in order to be heard, she would have to play by the rules of the white game (i.e., meeting with the men who would sign her attestation, being identified by her status as an enslaved woman, etc.), but like David, she could choose her armor, her tactics, and her words. Her intricate understanding of scripture allowed her to use the white man's word against him to argue for her own freedom, and the freedom of all enslaved Africans.

Ultimately, Wheatley's work reveals that the American Revolution was not only a political upheaval but a profoundly linguistic and ideological one—one in which the language of liberty could be both weaponized and reclaimed. Through her strategic use of Biblical narrative, allegory, and neoclassical form, Wheatley constructs a dialogue that operates within the very systems that sought to silence her, transforming them into tools of critique and resistance. Her poetry does not merely reflect the contradictions of a nation founded on freedom yet sustained by slavery, it actively exposes and destabilizes them, forcing readers to confront the dissonance

between Christian morality and colonial practice. By aligning Africs with figures like David and invoking the promise of redemption embedded in scripture, Wheatley reimagines liberation as both a spiritual and political inevitability.

CONCLUSION

Wheatley's poetry demands more than recognition—it demands a reevaluation of how we read, teach, and understand both the American Revolution and the foundations of American, and therefore African-American literature. Too often, her work has been limited to a narrative of exceptionality or reduced to classical imitation, rather than recognized and celebrated as a sophisticated intervention into the political and ideological crises of her time. To continue reading Wheatley passively is to replicate the very willful ignorance she sought to dismantle. Her poetry calls on us, as modern readers, to interrogate the systems that shaped her voice and to recognize the ways marginalized voices have always been present, though not always *listened* to, in the formation of our national identity.

If Wheatley could manipulate the dominant rhetoric of liberty, Christianity, and governance from within the constraints of enslavement, then it is our responsibility to listen more critically and expansively. This means not placing her firmly within the confines of one box—the Revolutionary canon, the Christian canon, etc.—but allowing her work to challenge that canon; to expose its exclusions, contradictions, and blind-eyes turned. It requires a shift from asking whether Wheatley was *subversive* to why her subversion has been so often overlooked. Her sanctioned subversive poetics reveal that resistance does not always appear as open rebellion; it can exist in metaphor, structure, and voice—in the quiet insistence of being understood.

To engage with Wheatley seriously is to confront the unfinished work of the Revolution. Her poetry reminds us that the promises of liberty and equality were never universally applied, and that the struggle to live up to those promises persists. Her work should not remain confined to historical curiosity but instead serve as a framework for examining how language continues to

shape power, exclusion, and resistance today. Wheatley did not simply write within the context of the Revolution; she rewrote its possibilities.

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