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The Bondage of Freedom: Phillis Wheatley's Struggle in Slavery and Emancipation

The 21st century has witnessed a generous shift in the critical conversation surrounding Phillis Wheatley, the first African woman to publish a book and the second woman to do so in America. 20th century criticism often claimed that Wheatley rejected her race and purposely failed to critique her bondage as a kidnapped woman who was sold into slavery at the age of seven. Her poetry, time and again, so goes the critical line of assessment neglects to protest her race's oppression and the prejudices her people suffered at the hands of their masters in the American colonies. However, a deeper search into Wheatley's life and poetry reveal her writings to be crafted specifically based on a political decision to focus on publication rather than protest. Perhaps, Wheatley saw the potential of publication permitted to her through circumstances, which involved being a beloved house slave whom was respected and treated as family, as the most valuable and achievable goal of her time. This idea that Wheatley wrote for the purpose of publication radicalizes her identity as a poet and revolutionizes the way we understand the demise of her career after she was granted freedom. A close reading of Wheatley's poetry, both before and after her emancipation, as well as a deeper look into her branded, yet privileged life as a slave, should reveal the immense benefit slavery had on her shackled career, a tight restraint of approved content allowed in her poems, and the negative effects freedom had on her chances of publication without the links to her white masters.

To properly assess the successful, yet controversial career, of Phillis Wheatley, it is first necessary to obtain a general understanding of her background. Wheatley, although commonly known as an intelligent female slave, did not spend her entire life in bondage. In fact, the first

seven years of her life were spent in Senegal, West Africa, along side her mother in freedom. However, her life of freedom was cut short when slave traders captured her with the intentions of selling her in the American colonies. Unlike millions of kidnapped Africans, Wheatley survived the dangerous journey from Africa to America, commonly known as the Middle Passage of the triangular Atlantic Slave Trade. Although this forced relocation from her homeland would later facilitate her career as a slave poet, rarely did she write about or mention her upbringing in Africa and the mother from which she was stolen. Perhaps Wheatley was too young to remember vivid details of her birthplace or, maybe the trauma she witnessed on the disease infested slave ship forced her to block out memories of Africa. Whatever the true cause, 20th century scholars often reprimand Wheatley's failure to write in depth about her homeland, particularly since she only mentions Africa in one brief eight line poem, "On Being Brought From Africa to America." Instead, Wheatley's new home of America served as the base of influence upon which she built her career and about which her poems are largely written.

After Wheatley completed the trip across the Atlantic Ocean in July 1761, she arrived in Boston where she was auctioned as a slave for purchase. Although Wheatley survived disease and death on her journey, she was not an ideal purchase for a slave. Typically, slaves were older, stronger, and expected to complete strenuous work in the various fields. This factor potentially deterred buyers for Wheatley, as she was young, frail, and incapable of hard labor. However, her appearance, although a turn off to most, attracted John Wheatley who happened to attend this specific auction with the intention of purchasing a female child to tend to his wife, Susanna Wheatley.

Following the purchase of the young girl by her new family, she was taken to her new 'home' and given the new name Phillis, derived from the name of the ship that brought her from

Africa to America. She was also allowed to adopt her family's surname, which completed her new American name, Phillis Wheatley. Although it was common for masters to rename their slaves, Phillis's entire life and career would be eternally linked back to the transatlantic slave ship that. Essentially, her given name perpetually bound her not only to the Wheatley's, but also to her original captors and the slave ship that transported her. Furthermore, each time Phillis published a poem, she was unintentionally crediting the ship she was named after. Nevertheless, Phillis new family, like most other families in Boston, already had multiple slaves working for them. John, a wealthy and respected merchant, and Susanna, a devoted Christian, along with their eighteen-year-old twins Mary and Nathaniel, felt they needed one more slave to work in the house and remain close to the family. This allowed for Phillis to fulfill a dual purpose, one that required her to serve as a slave and the other unintentional role she played by filling a void left from the death of their young daughter who happened to be close to Wheatley's age. Some speculate that the reason Wheatley was purchased was because she matched the age and stature of the daughter the family lost. Because of this similarity, Phillis quickly became a rare exception to the slave norm for the colonies and the Wheatley family, as she was treated comparatively like a member of the family.

Although Wheatley was considered a slave by societal standards, her adoption into the family proved she was seen more as a daughter than a slave. It was common knowledge that the majority of slaves in the early colonies were "demoralized and tormented" (Davis 129) by their masters. However, on rare occasions a house slave, such as Wheatley, was excluded from labor-intensive work and was "raised primarily close to their master's children" (Davis 129). Nevertheless, the notion of treating a slave as "an equal was not widely accepted as some people 'were shocked when they discovered that [some] American family's were too familiar with their

slaves” (Davis 129). This prejudice, although potentially damaging to the reputation of a white household, did not stop John or Susanna Wheatley from considering Phillis as a valuable member of the family. Wheatley was raised entirely differently from the other slaves of her home and most other slaves in Boston. She was not required to partake in any hard labor and instead did “lighter work, such as dusting a room or polishing a table” (Brawley, *Lit. and Art*, 19). Perhaps it was Wheatley’s tender age that gave her this advantage in bondage or, maybe it was her curiosity and intellectual traits that the Wheatley family discovered not long after bringing her home. Regardless of the reason for the special treatment she received, Wheatley gradually “came to be regarded as a daughter and companion rather than as a slave” (Brawley, *Lit. and Art*, 19). This acceptance allowed for the family to be attentive and intentional with Wheatley, which would later craft her entire career and ultimately lead to her temporary success. But first, the Wheatley family gave Phillis something not even all white colonists received at the time, an education.

Early on, Wheatley showed remarkable talent and aptness when it came to learning English, reading, and writing. It helped that Mary acted as Wheatley’s personal tutor teaching her “a little astronomy, some ancient and modern geography, a little ancient history, and an appreciative acquaintance with the most important Latin classics” (Brawley, *Early Negro*, 31). Wheatley also quickly became “acquainted with the Bible and with works of Horace, Vergil, Ovid, Terence, and various contemporary English poets, especially Pope, and probably Milton” (Mason, *The Poems*, 4). For a child who did not know English or the culture of America, she adapted in record timing and learned to “read fluently the most difficult parts of the Bible” (Brawley, *Lit. and Art*, 17) within sixteen months of her arrival. Wheatley’s intelligence was not lost on her family as they encouraged her to hone in on her intellect. This resulted in her desire to

write verses specifically inspired and modeled after the styles of Alexander Pope. Due to her curiosity in poetry and her proved intellect for reading and writing, the Wheatley family aided in the pursuit of her poetic voice and gave her a “heat and a light [in her room], because her constitution was delicate, and in order that she might write down her thoughts as they came to her rather than trust them to memory” (Brawley, *Early Negro*, 32). The efforts and care of the Wheatley family soon paid off as Phillis would become a published poet by the ripe age of twelve, a mere five years after her kidnapping from Africa.

The Unforeseen Benefits of Slavery on Wheatley’s Career

Much, if not all of Phillis’s success, is due to the persistence and diligence of John and Susanna Wheatley. For Phillis, talent was not sufficient enough for others to overlook her race and bondage status. While John and Susanna arguably saw no color when it came to their daughter-like slave, they understood that publication for Wheatley’s work would take much convincing because of society’s “racist reasons” (Andrews 770). Regardless, once Phillis built up a large enough collection fit for publication, John actively sought supporters to back Wheatley’s book. However, he realized that “publishing Phillis’s book represented an act of potentially disturbing intervention into an established literary and cultural tradition” (Gates 165). Although discrimination held Wheatley back in the colonies, her links to John allowed for her to secure publication through a London publisher. Wheatley’s successful attempts of publication still posed one significant issue, verification of authorship.

Although John and Susanna successfully secured a publisher for Wheatley through their contacts and financial connections, Phillis’s African roots led to a significant cause of suspicion on whether or not she was the true author of the poetry presented. Therefore, the success and circulation of her book of poetry relied on the verification of her white masters as well as other

prominent white citizens. Wheatley's book of poetry totaled "124 pages [with] 39 poems. . . . Fourteen of the poems are elegiac, and at least six others are occasional. Two are paraphrases from the bible. . . . with sixteen poems to represent the best that Phillis Wheatley" (Brawely, *Lit. and Art*, 33). The first step in authenticating Wheatley's individual poems was for John to write numerous letters of validation to be placed before the majority of the poems throughout her book. One example of such an introductory letter reads:

Phillis was brought from *Africa to America*, in the Year 1761, between Seven and Eight Years of Age. Without any assistance from School Education, and by only what she was taught in the Family, she. . . attained the English Language, to which she was an utter Stranger before. . . . As to her Writing, her own Curiosity led her to it; and this she learnt in so short Time. . . . This Relation is given by her Master who bought her, and with whom she now lives. John Wheatley. Boston, Nov. 14, 1772 (Mason 47)

Henry Louis Gates explains that "[r]eaders discovering the virtually unprecedented example of a black woman slave poet would not be satisfied merely to read and ponder her verse. They would have to be convinced that it was truly hers" (Gates 165). Consequently, John lent his voice as a form of witness to the then unexplainable talent behind Wheatley's book of poetry and "[t]hus *Poems on Various Subjects* offers its reader several introductory documents designed to authenticate Phillis Wheatley and her poetry and to legitimate her literary motives" (Gates 165). As this was most likely the first time a white audience was presented with such astounding work from a slave poet, John crafted his letters to carefully explain and convince readers that Phillis' not only "attained" fluent English and only had the talent to write, but she also had aspiration and ambition, which he refers to as "her own curiosity". He uses his letter to separate Wheatley from her common title of 'slave' and instead instills the new title of 'author'. Additionally, John

suggests that Wheatley is indeed a human whom is capable of emotions and intellect that readers assumed were reserved only for white people. This separation allows for readers to marvel at Wheatley's natural intelligence and witness the uncommon trait for an African to write based on her own desire.

In addition to John's introductory letters, it was also required of Wheatley to acquire further support and proof of authentication from high standing citizens before the finalization of her book's publication. Therefore, with the added assistance of the family's son, Nathaniel Wheatley, and the finances the family allowed to Phillis, Wheatley was transported from Boston to London in order to secure signatures from "the governor of Massachusetts, along with John Wheatley and John Hancock, [who] were among the eighteen prominent citizens [who] testify[ed]" (Baym 824). Their written testimony appears at the beginning of Wheatley's book and reads as such:

As it has been repeatedly suggested to the Publisher, by Persons, who have seen the Manuscript, that Numbers would be ready to suspect they were not really the Writings of PHILLIS, he has procured the following Attestation. . . that none might have the least Ground for disputing the Original. WE whose Names are under-written, do assure the World, that the POEMS specified in the following Page, were (as we verily believe) written by PHILLIS, a young negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from *Africa*, and has ever since been, and now is, under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town. She has been examined by some of the best Judges, and is thought qualified to write them (Mason 48).

Although necessary, this letter partially undoes what John Wheatley attempted to do in his letter. While John focused on emphasizing Phillis' intelligence and motivation, the citizen's letter

emphasizes Wheatley's slave status and her 'barbarian' roots. The addition of their statement, "as we verily believe" further establishes room for doubt surrounding the aporia of her poetry and whether she was the true author of the poetry. Regardless, the white public was pleased with the letters from John and the citizens and, therefore, accepted Wheatley as the author of her poetry. This act of approval permanently chained Wheatley to a reliance on the white supporters in her life and consequently dictated the course of her career and the amount of success society allowed her to achieve in her lifetime.

While Wheatley represented the brains behind the words in her book of poetry, all her success is entirely and eternally linked directly to her white masters. Although Phillis was granted privileges many slaves would not even dare to dream of, she was unable to free herself from the brand of slavery which was intentionally forced upon her by the Wheatley family when they choose to purchase her. While education and intelligence allowed Phillis to rise above the standards placed on Africans in the eighteenth century, she still wholly relied on her family to represent her voice when she had no power to speak for herself. This mandatory bond between masters and intelligent slaves was not exclusive to Wheatley. In fact, work authentication letters from white slaves owners "helped establish a convention, a kind of interracial literary etiquette, that white readers soon came to expect when encountering an African American author" (Gates 165), which originated under the circumstances of Phillis Wheatley's publication. This meant that the entirety of Wheatley's career would bind her to her masters or other white, high-ranking citizens in order to authenticate her work and speak truth on behalf of her poetry. While this idea of white folks aiding in the publication of African slaves is obliging, it fails to release slaves, such as Wheatley, from the grasps of their masters. For Wheatley, it is proved that education, while valuable, is not nearly enough to speak on its own merits. If it were not for John, Susanna,

and the citizen's intervention into the "literary etiquette" of their time, Phillis Wheatley's poetry would have remained in the family desk, unread by the world.

Content Imitations and Limitations

Although Wheatley achieved success in becoming the first African woman to publish a book on any subject, a close reading of her poetry seems to suggest that her writing was crafted specifically for her white audience and bared a heavy imitation on the neoclassical style of Alexander Pope. While Pope represented a source of reference for Wheatley's poetry, his life unintentionally mirrors a parallel bondage of restriction in his life and writing. During his childhood, Pope suffered from bone tuberculosis, which left him severely hunchbacked and dependent on body straps in order to write his poetry. Similarly, Wheatley dealt with the limitations of slavery and a tight restraint of what was and was not acceptable for a black, female slave to write. Additionally, if Pope did not make use of the straps that held his body in an upright position, he would not have been able to write poetry just as Wheatley would not have had the opportunity to write if it were not for her chains of slavery.

While Wheatley was not allowed free reign of speech in her poetry, an explication of two of her most commonly anthologized poems, "To the University of Cambridge, in New England" and "On Being Brought from AFRICA to AMERICA" suggests that the works are "designed to manipulate this audience in a specific way" (Balkum 122). Although "On Being Brought from AFRICA", at eight lines and one stanza, is significantly shorter than "To the University of Cambridge", with its thirty lines and three stanzas, both poems are structured in the same manor where they "introduce the hypocritical stance that allows so-called Christians to accept and even promote slavery and then lays the groundwork for dilemma" (Balkum 122). The dilemma displayed in both poems presents the idea that black slaves who have been 'reformed' and

‘rescued’ from their non-Christian homeland of Africa, deserve the same opportunity of spiritual renewal and baptism as their masters. Since Wheatley’s audience was largely Puritan and already familiar with “particular language and rhetorical devices” (Balkum 122), Wheatley was able to influence her readers without taking a straightforward approach that would ultimately risk her chances of publication.

In her poem, “To the University of Cambridge, in New English” written in 1767 and published in 1773, Wheatley writes not only to the students of the university, but to their fathers who held positions of “power and social influence” (Balkum 124). The poem also bares strong Puritan elements that many citizens of her time would be familiar with and were devote believers of the movement, to which Wheatley ultimately used to her advantage while expressing her cause in the later portion of her poem. The early lines of the work establish her background, not of a slave, but as a once free child living in Africa:

‘Twas not long since I left my native shore
 The land of errors, and *Egyptian* gloom:
 Father of mercy, ‘twas thy gracious hand
 Brought me in safety from those dark abodes. (3-6)

Since we know that Wheatley was kidnapped from Africa, her choice to use the word *left* softens the reality of her forced reestablishment, which keeps an open communication between her and her white audience. The additional use of the words *error*, *gloom*, and *dark*, each describe her homeland of Africa in a more forgiving manor than the idea of Africa as a land of ‘barbarians’ as was previously suggested in the letter from the prominent citizens. Wheatley then balances the use of the three negative adjectives with the idea that *mercy*, either the mercy of God or the

mercy of her white kidnappers, was kind enough to rescue her. *Mercy* also directly opposes the idea of *errors* as an error is a mistake that can be correct, especially if *mercy* is at hand.

Like “To the University of Cambridge”, the opening lines of the poem “On Being Brought From AFRICA to AMERICA”, written in 1768 and published in 1773, echo’s a similar theme condensed into a single sentence, “‘Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land” (1). The use of *mercy* again refers either to the mercy of God or the mercy of her white kidnappers, which a Puritan audience could argue that Wheatley’s kidnappers were sent by God. Wheatley then ends the line with the capitalized word *Pagan*, which is a negative and offensive term referring to the ignorance of not knowing or acknowledging the God of the bible. The use of *Pagan* also carries a similar meaning to ‘Cambridge’s’ line, “The land of errors” (4). Wheatley continues the poems with three additional lines accusing her, and subsequently all black slaves, of negativity and negligence, which ultimately led to conversion:

Taught my benighted soul to understand

That there’s a God, that there’s a *Savior* too:

Once I redemption neither sought nor knew. (2-4)

These three lines, which takes the reader to the poem’s midpoint, continues the theme of disapproval toward her previous life, followed by the interference of God in order for a chance at realization and redemption. Wheatley describes herself as being benighted, which not only means an ignorant soul, but also a soul that is dark in reference to her skin tone. She also admits that her origins are not based in Christianity, but that of a Muslim whom does not carry the same beliefs of accepting a Savior. However, the final line in the second couplet, “Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.” (4), sneaks in a subtle reminder that Wheatley was not seeking mercy, understanding, or redemption when she was stolen from her homeland. Regardless of what she

did or did not want for her life, she now contains knowledge of a Savior and uses her poem to carefully express her desires of temporarily setting aside race for the sake of her soul and the souls of her fellow slaves in order to completely convert to Christianity.

With the establishment of the theme of ignorance and redemption in the opening lines of the poems, “To the University of Cambridge” and “On Being Brought from AFRICA to AMERICA”, Wheatley dedicates the middle portions of both works as a plea for acceptance and reformation of the Negro soul. While Wheatley cannot outright condone her situation due to the content limitations regarding her poetry, her “Cambridge” poem does remind her white readers that they were born with the privilege to, “scan the heights / Above, to traverse the ethereal space” (7-8) and that “*Jesus*’ blood for your redemption flows” (12). Wheatley structures the poem so she can first acknowledge that her primary audience has full access to Heaven and God’s redemption as long as they choose to accept it. However, the argument behind her poem is not for the colonist who were born into the privileged life of spiritual freedom, but for the African race that was not always granted the opportunity of baptism and religious conversion. Wheatley, having to tread carefully with her words, reminds the reader that:

When the whole human race by sin had fall’n

He deign’d to die that they might rise again (17-18).

Wheatley uses these two lines as a focal point to her argument by insinuating that the human race is not made up only of the white Christians, but black Christians as well. The word ‘they’ would then refer to all of humankind, which means that Christ indeed died for black slaves and therefore African’s have a rightful claim to redemption.

Wheatley’s concern for the souls of black slaves is also evident in the second half of her poem, “On Being Brought from AFRICA to AMERICA”. In her attempts to still play toward the

approval of her white audience, Wheatley shifts her thoughts to reflect the terminology commonly used when speaking about Negros. In addition to this shift, she also ceases to talk about her experience as an individual and chooses to speak on behalf of her entire race:

Some view our sable race with scornful eye,

“Their colour is a diabolic die.”

Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*, (5-7)

Similar to the word ‘benighted’, Wheatley uses the word sable as an unorthodox term describing Africans. Additionally, the word ‘some’ at the beginning of line five prepares the reader for the quote in line six, which mimics the direct thoughts of the very people who are reading her poem. It is imperative for Wheatley to establish this inner monologue of the outer thoughts of her audience in order to remind them that Christians can also be “black as Cain” (7). The significance behind the use of Cain not only stems from Cain committing the first ever murder, but from the basis that his sin resulted in a mark from God supposedly turning him black and thus creating the African race. Wheatley’s argument is then concluded by stating that anyone who claims Christianity, even someone like Cain, “May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train” (8). Even though Wheatley was not born into white privilege, she subtly argues that her redemption and restoration from her previous land of Africa should qualify her and others the right to baptism and complete spiritual renewal in Jesus.

The conclusion of the poem “To the University of Cambridge” also argues for Wheatley’s same message regarding Christianity. Before accusing her readers of their sin by not allowing slaves the opportunity of revival, she first compliments them by saying they are the “blooming plants of human race devine” (27). Her last three lines of the poem then turn into a warning of what possibilities may occur if they choose to continue in their ways:

An *Ethiop* tells you 'tis your greatest foe;
 Its transient sweetness turns to endless pain
 And in immense perfition sinks the soul. (28-30).

The word 'foe' in line twenty-seven refers to the sin her audience is committing by refusing black Christians the opportunity of baptism. The effect this ending had on her Puritan readers would have been efficient and frightening for the potential demise of their souls. Additionally, Wheatley refers to herself as an *Ethiop*, which brings the reader back to the idea that she is currently a slave who was previously 'rescued' from her ungodly lands.

What makes Wheatley's two poems successful and appropriate is her genius in manipulating her audiences so that they not only read her poetry, but so they hear the appeal's of a slave. Her argument to allow black Christian's the same spiritual opportunities as white Christian's is only possible through her continuous compliments to her readers and a sense of agreement on the implied ignorant state of black slaves. While it would have been easier for Wheatley to protest her stance with a straightforward approach condemning white colonist, significant limitations on what she was allowed to say forced her to cleverly approach her poems in this structured manner. Wheatley's overall goal in writing these two poems was to remove the exclusivity of Christianity by admitting that African's were hopeless and slavery gave them the opportunity to learn the truth. This unique approach to protest is the reason 20th Century critics dislike Wheatley's poetry due to its supposed appropriation of slavery and pride in her bondage. However, "critics have yet to consider fully the possibility that Wheatley might have crafted her poems to work specifically upon the white audience that would have constituted her main readership" (Balkum 122). Additionally, Wheatley did not live in a time where poetry was a direct extension of ones personal and emotional tropes. In fact, her choice to heavily imitate

Pope's writing style provided an approach to art that was considered the "hallmark of good taste" (Rigsby 402) which was commonly read and enjoyed by those Wheatley was writing to. Overall, the explication and comparison of the poems "To the University of Cambridge, in New England" and "On Bring Brought from AFRICA to AMERICA" prove that Wheatley did in fact cater to her white audience through forms of "tone, imagery, and literary" (Balkum 127) manipulation for the purpose of gaining readership and camouflaging her argument.

The Eternal Bondage of Freedom

With the publication and success of Wheatley's book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, Phillis quickly became famous in Boston and London. This marked a monumental time for Wheatley as she not only achieved the impossible, but her master "Mrs. Wheatley saw to it that. . . [she] was formally manumitted" (Brawley, *Early Negro*, 32). Her freedom, although an honor and privilege not awarded to most slaves, ultimately lead to Wheatley's stagnant success. After her return from London, and with the finalization of her freedom, Wheatley married a free black man. It's widely thought that Wheatley's husband, John Peters, is partially to blame for her financial misfortunes later in life. Peters was a habitual liar who owed debts to multiple persons and spent his life in and out of prison. In addition to Wheatley's disappointing marriage, the Revolutionary War made her home of Boston a dangerous place to reside. Furthermore, although Wheatley was legally free, her freedom did not give her the "moral status in the sight of [her] white fellow citizens to make the freedom of the Negro an acceptable and workable relationship for them" (Tannenbaum 111). All these factors directly impacted the demise of Wheatley's career and severely slowed her poetry publication.

Since the majority of Phillis' success came from the dedicated efforts of her former masters, Wheatley's voice was greatly dampened without their backing. In fact, "only one year

after her marriage, a proposal appeared for a second volume of poetry to include thirteen letters and thirty-three poems. The volume was never published” (Baym 824). Additionally, “[d]uring the first five years of the marriage, Phillis Wheatley Peters published nothing” (Gates 166). Eventually, Wheatley began publishing in pamphlets and newspapers around Boston, however, “her fame offered little material support through the lean years of war and the depression that followed” (Carretta, *Historical Journal*, 78). The struggles she faced resulted in a shift in her writing that allowed her to focus more on the issues at hand, such as the Revolution. Wheatley realized that if she wanted the opportunity of publication, she needed to create content that appealed to her audience and supported the cause. This change in her writing led to the publication of “three elegies and *Liberty and Peace*, a tribute to the triumphant American Revolution” (Gates 166). Wheatley also penned a poem, “To His Excellency, General Washington” which was dedicated to George Washington. This poem eventually led to an invitation to meet personally with General Washington, which Wheatley’s gladly accepted.

The two poems, “To His Excellency, General Washington” published in 1776, and “Liberty and Peace” published in 1784, are great examples of how Wheatley’s poetry evolved during her freedom. Both poems deviate from her known writing style as she “undertook patriotic poetry as a way to affirm her allegiance to the cause of liberty” (Gates 166). Each poem also overtly expresses Wheatley’s support and praise for her ‘home’ of Columbia and for the war efforts.

While freedom’s cause her anxious breast alarms,
 She flashes dreadful in refulgent arms.
 See mother earth her offspring’s fate bemoan,
 And nations gaze at scenes before unknown! (3-6).

Wheatley begins the poem, “General Washington” by personifying Columbia as a female whom is caught in a terrible fate, which represents the American Revolution. Moreover, Wheatley addresses the turmoil “her anxious breast” faces as her *freedom* is threatened during this time of suffering and war. The irony of Wheatley’s opening lines express a tremendous love and support for the white community of people who were desensitized to the idea of owning African slaves, yet, they feared for the revoke of their own freedom. It is content such as this that 20th century critics condemn as Wheatley chose to be outspoken about the white man’s freedom over the freedom of her own people.

Similar to the opening lines of “General Washington”, Wheatley addresses the issues of Freedom in the poem “Liberty and Peace”.

LO! Freedom comes. Th’prescient Muse foretold,

All eyes th’ accomplishe’d Prophecy Behold (1-2).

The difference in the use of *freedom* in the context of this poem is that the war is now over and Columbia is considered safe. While “General Washington” expresses the fear and agony surrounding the uncertain fate of Columbia and its people, “Liberty and Peace” acts as a response poem to her earlier work resolving previous fear that has turned into joy and celebration. This applause toward the triumphant resolve of the war was not only appealing to the people of her time, but it further established Wheatley’s love and admiration for the home introduced to her by her kidnappers. Once again, Wheatley neglects to represent a voice for her people in bondage and instead celebrates that the white colonist freedom was no longer in jeopardy. This tactic used by Wheatley to over emphasize her love for Columbia and its people is among the very reasons her poem was published, as it represented content her white audience could agree with and understand.

Additionally, in “General Washington”, Wheatley offers another tactic for publication, which was to not only dedicate her poem to the leader of the American Revolution, but also to offer extensive praise, support, and encouragement to the General.

Shall I to Washington tier praise recite?
 Enough thou know’st them in the fields of fight.
 Thee, first in place and honours,-We demand
 The Grace and glory of thy martial band.
 Fam’d for thy valour, for thy virtues more,
 Hear every tongue thy guardian aid implore! (23-28).

The support of George Washington is the sole reason her poem was published. After mailing Washington a letter of support along with this complimentary poem, he had the poem published on her behalf, potentially as a form of propaganda for his leadership. However, this does not represent the only time Wheatley dedicated a work of poetry to a prominent person in attempts to receive publication. In her early career, many of her elegies were written on behalf of beloved and upstanding citizens whom were well known and cherished. This device brought quick success and re-publication to many of her poems simply because the topic of her work was well recognized. Likewise, Wheatley attempted to dedicate the second volume of her book to Benjamin Franklin; however, this did not materialize and a second book of poetry never saw fruition.

In addition to praising Washington as the leader of the Revolution, Wheatley compares Columbia to a heavenly place, which was predestined to be free, stating, “And so may you, whoever dares disgrace / The land of freedom’s heaven-defended race!” (31-32). Wheatley’s use of the phrase “heaven-defended race” insinuates that not only are the people of Columbia

ordained to live freely, she approves the idea that the white colonist have been destined by heaven to live and die in freedom. Therefore, the Revolutionary War threatens not only the people of Columbia, but also the supposed proclamation from heaven that the colonists were protected under divine rule.

Wheatley continues this parallel of heaven in her poem, “Liberty and Peace”, as she draws on the idea between a heavenly relationship to the colonist and the American Revolution.

She, the bright Progency of Heaven, descends,
 And every Grace her sovereign Step attends;
 For now kind Heaven, indulgent to our Prayer,
 In smiling *Peace* resolves the Din of *War* (5-8).

Since “Liberty and Peace” is considered as a response to the successful end of the war, Wheatley insinuates that heaven heard the colonists many prayers and chose to resolve the “Din of War” while *smiling*. Wheatley crafts these four lines in particular as a form of praise to the personification not of God, but Heaven, by using words such as *Grace* and *Sovereign Step* to remind the reader that Heaven saved Columbia and her mercy was *kind, indulgent*, and done in *Peace*. Wheatley continues the heavenly metaphor by claiming, “Freedom comes array’d with Charms divine, / And in her Train Commerce and Plenty shine” (56-57). This notion that *Freedom* is divine along with Wheatley’s argument that Columbia is “The land of freedom’s heaven-defended race”, suggests that Wheatley places a high regard on the freedom of those *divine* enough to deserve it.

The concluding lines of the poem “General Washington” reiterate Wheatley’s support for the war and for the war’s leader, George Washington. Wheatley wraps up her thoughts by

placing one more warning to “submit to Heaven’s decree, / That bids the Realm of Freedom rival thee!” (30-31), and then closes with similar praises to the opening of her poem.

Proceed, great chief, with virtue on thy side,
 Thy ev’ry action let the goddess guide
 A crown, a mansion, and a throne that shine,
 With gold unfading, WASHINGTON! be thine. (39-42).

The poem’s conclusion thus combines the metaphor of heaven with the greatness of Washington. Should he succeed in his wartime efforts, the heavenly divine that was supposedly promised to the people of Columbia will be bestowed on Washington as well as the deserving colonist. Regardless if this was merely a tactic to receive publication, or a conscious decision to neglect her people in favor of her white audience, Wheatley showed tremendous support during this hypocritical era of the American Revolution.

Similarly, the ending of her poem, “Liberty and Peace”, also displays a blind support toward the hypocrisies of the colonist and Columbia.

Auspicious Heaven shall fill with fav’ring Gales
 Where e’er *Columbia* spreads her swelling Sails:
 To every Realm shall *Peace* her Charms display,
 And Heavenly *Freedom* spread her golden Ray. (62-65)

Wheatley ends her poem by once again establishing that Columbia is the home of ‘Heavenly *Freedom*’ where *Peace* resides. In comparison to this poem and “General Washington”, it would appear that Wheatley credits the heavenly divine as the true savior of the American Revolution rather than the efforts of Washington himself. Regardless, Wheatley clearly caters to her white audience by praising the people, praising Washington, and praising the lands that stole her life.

Although Wheatley successfully published “To His Excellency, General Washington” and “Liberty and Peace”, along with a few other works during her emancipation, her freedom ultimately proved detrimental to her career. Her proposed second book gained little traction without the financial backing and status backing of John and Susanna Wheatley. Additionally, many of her previous subscribers were too busy with the war or simply uninterested in sponsoring her for a second time. Furthermore, the “war effectively closed the British market to colonial authors in 1779” (Carretta, *Genius in Bondage*, 189) and the publisher John previously secured for her first book “failed to exploit her continuing celebrity by not referring to her premarital identity as Phillis Wheatley in advertising her proposed book” (Carretta, *Genius in Bondage*, 189). Perhaps the lack of John’s introductory documents and the absence of validation letters from prominent white citizens also damaged the possibility of publishing a second volume, consequently leaving her career stagnated.

Ultimately, Wheatley was forced to work as a maid in a boarding house for the remaining years of her life. Unlike her upbringing where she was spoiled with her own room, desk, and education, the last few years of Wheatley’s life were lived in poverty while tending to hard, manual labor. At the young age of thirty-one, Phillis Wheatley “died alone on December 5, 1784 in desperate circumstances because her husband had abandoned her” (Carretta, *Historical Journal*, 82). Though Wheatley’s work transcended the expectations of gender and status in the 18th century, her contingent freedom, in addition to her early death, stole from her the opportunity to achieve her full literary talent.

Wheatley’s potential, although realized, remained bound to her unfortunate realities of being a free black woman in a pro-slave environment without the voice of a white man to aid in her success. Yet still, Wheatley’s reputation lived on in praise and criticism. While the general

view of 20th century critics was invective toward her works, claiming, “poetry should be bullets for people at war, and Phillis Wheatley provided no arms” (Rigsby 402), a more recent approach to her work understands that, “Wheatley had first to write her way into American literature before she or any other black writer could claim a special mission and purpose of an African American literature” (Gates 167). Now, in the 21st century, Wheatley’s work should be carefully examined based on her cultural constructs with the notion that her slave status aided her career while simultaneously restricting her voice, which ultimately forced her to craft content directed toward a narrow audience in order to receive publication. Given her circumstances and the constrained life she lived, Phillis Wheatley accomplished magnificent and insurmountable feats.

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