Born in Africa (probably in Senegal or Gambia), Phillis Wheatley was enslaved at the age of seven or eight, when she was bought by John Wheatley (1703–1778) of Boston to serve as his wife Susannah’s companion. Susannah fostered Wheatley’s intellectual avidity by having her daughter Mary oversee Wheatley’s education. Wheatley became well-read in the Bible; classical literature, including some of the classics in their original Latin; and English literature, responding especially to the works of Alexander Pope (1688–1744), master of the heroic couplet, and John Milton. She also converted to Christianity, becoming a member of the Old South Congregational Church.

Touted as a prodigy, Wheatley traveled to London for the publication of her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773). There she became a minor celebrity, meeting the lord mayor of London, Benjamin Franklin, and William Legge, the 2nd Earl of Dartmouth (1731–1801). The same year that her Poems were published, Wheatley was freed from slavery.

In the past, her poetry was deemed unoriginal, as giving little sense of Africa, her race, or her life as a slave. This reading attests to Wheatley’s strategic success in opposing prevalent views of women, blacks, and slaves during her era. Her poems are now recognized for their strong assertion of equality among all humankind and their strong-minded expression of self to contemporary readers who denied that selfhood.

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#gender #diversity #history #classics

Phyllis Wheatley

“On Being Brought from Africa to America”

(1773)

‘Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there’s a God, that there’s a Saviour too:
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.

“To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth”
(1773)

HAIL, happy day, when, smiling like the morn,
Fair Freedom rose New-England to adorn:
The northern clime beneath her genial ray,
Dartmouth, congratulates thy blissful sway:
Elate with hope her race no longer mourns,
Each soul expands, each grateful bosom burns,
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:
Soon as 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.

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.

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,
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?

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'n's 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.

"On the Death of Rev. Mr. George Whitefield. 1770."
(1771, 1773)

HAIL, happy saint, on thine immortal throne,
Possest of glory, life, and bliss unknown;
We hear no more the music of thy tongue,
Thy wonted auditories cease to throng.
Thy sermons in unequall’d accents flow’d,
And ev’ry bosom with devotion glow’d;
Thou didst in strains of eloquence refin’d
Inflame the heart, and captivate the mind.
Unhappy we the setting sun deplore,
So glorious once, but ah! it shines no more.

Behold the prophet in his tow’ring flight!
He leaves the earth for heav’n’s unmeasur’d height,
And worlds unknown receive him from our sight.
There Whitefield wings with rapid course his way,
And sails to Zion through vast seas of day.
Thy pray’rs, great saint, and thine incessant cries
Have pierc’d the bosom of thy native skies.
Thou moon hast seen, and all the stars of light,
How he has wrestled with his God by night.
He pray’d that grace in ev’ry heart might dwell,
He long’d to see America excell;
He charg’d its youth that ev’ry grace divine
Should with full lustre in their conduct shine;
That Saviour, which his soul did first receive,
The greatest gift that ev’n a God can give,
He freely offer’d to the num’rous throng,
That on his lips with list’ning pleasure hung.

"Take him, ye wretched, for your only good,
"Take him ye starving sinners, for your food;
"Ye thirsty, come to this life-giving stream,
"Ye preachers, take him for your joyful theme;
"Take him my dear Americans, he said,
"Be your complaints on his kind bosom laid:
“Take him, ye Africans, he longs for you,
“Impartial Saviour is his title due:
“Wash’d in the fountain of redeeming blood,
“You shall be sons, and kings, and priests to God.”

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

But, though arrested by the hand of death,
Whitefield no more exerts his lab’ring breath,
Yet let us view him in th’ eternal skies,
Let ev’ry heart to this bright vision rise;
While the tomb safe retains its sacred trust,
Till life divine re-animates his dust.

*The Countess of Huntingdon, to whom Mr. Whitefield was Chaplain.

“To S. M., a Young African Painter, on Seeing his Works”
(1773)

To show the lab’ring bosom’s deep intent,
And thought in living characters to paint,
When first thy pencil did those beauties give,
And breathing figures learnt from thee to live,
How did those prospects give my soul delight,
A new creation rushing on my sight?
Still, wond’rous youth! each noble path pursue;
On deathless glories fix thine ardent view:
Still may the painter’s and the poet’s fire,
To aid thy pencil and thy verse conspire!
And may the charms of each seraphic theme
Conduct thy footsteps to immortal fame!
High to the blissful wonders of the skies
Elate thy soul, and raise thy wishful eyes.
Thrice happy, when exalted to survey
That splendid city, crown'd with endless day,
Whose twice six gates on radiant hinges ring:
Celestial Salem blooms in endless spring.

Calm and serene thy moments glide along,
And may the muse inspire each future song!
Still, with the sweets of contemplation bless'd,
May peace with balmy wings your soul invest!
But when these shades of time are chas'd away,
And darkness ends in everlasting day,
On what seraphic pinions shall we move,
And view the landscapes in the realms above?
There shall thy tongue in heav'nly murmurs flow,
And there my muse with heav'nly transport glow;
No more to tell of Damon's tender sighs,
Or rising radiance of Aurora's eyes;
For nobler themes demand a nobler strain,
And purer language on th' ethereal plain.
Cease, gentle Muse! the solemn gloom of night
Now seals the fair creation from my sight.
“Letter to Rev. Samson Occom”

(1773)

The Connecticut Gazette, March 11, 1774

Rev’d and honor’d Sir,

I have this Day received your obliging kind Epistle, and am greatly satisfied with your Reasons respecting the Negroes, and think highly reasonable what you offer in Vindication of their natural Rights: Those that invade them cannot be insensible that the divine Light is chasing away the thick Darkness which broods over the Land of Africa; and the Chaos which has reign’d so long, is converting into beautiful Order, and [r]eveals more and more clearly, the glorious Dispensation of civil and religious Liberty, which are so inseparably Limited, that there is little or no Enjoyment of one Without the other: Otherwise, perhaps, the Israelites had been less solicitous for their Freedom from Egyptian slavery; I do not say they would have been contented without it, by no means, for in every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance; and by the Leave of our modern Egyptians I will assert, that the same Principle lives in us. God grant Deliverance in his own Way and Time, and get him honour upon all those whose Avarice impels them to countenance and help forward tile Calamities of their fellow Creatures. This I desire not for their Hurt, but to convince them of the strange Absurdity of their Conduct whose Words and Actions are so diametrically, opposite. How well the Cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the exercise of oppressive Power over others agree,—I humbly think it does not require the Penetration of a Philosopher to determine.—

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