

**Cutting Off the Circulation:
The Destruction of Phillis Wheatley's Transatlantic World, 1761-1784**

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Phillis Wheatley was unique. So it comes as no surprise that most of the scholarship devoted to interpreting her poetry focuses on her singular qualities. Unlike other published poets of her day, Wheatley was young, female, born in Africa, sold into slavery, transported to America, purchased by a Boston merchant, and kept as a slave in his household. The attention scholars pay to these attributes, unusual for a poet, is both natural and fully justified, in part because Wheatley herself emphasized these singular qualities in some of her most famous poems, and in part because her more conventional traits as an eighteenth-century Anglo-American author are often associated with the duller, more conventional aspects of her poetry. After all, if every eighteenth-century English author was influenced by Alexander Pope, then why should we bother to dwell on Pope's impact on Wheatley?¹

This essay, however, temporarily sets aside the rich and sophisticated scholarship that explores Wheatley's distinctive qualities, most especially her race and the problem of slavery. Instead, it begins by focusing on those aspects of her life and work that she shared with a large and broadly dispersed network of others, her connections throughout the British Atlantic world, among whom she found her way to prominence at a moment in the early 1770s, when the prospects for Wheatley and her associates were both heightened and precarious. We know Wheatley herself better than we know her world,

the context in which she gained her fame. By attempting to understand the shape and strength of her Atlantic connections, and the benevolent hopes and ambitions the members of this community sustained, we can better see the tragic and destructive aspects of the violent rift that began in Boston, tore Britain's empire apart, and created the American imperial republic. The creation of this republic meant, both literally and figuratively, the death of Phillis Wheatley, for with the destruction of her world, she ceased to be a coherent person and instead became an incoherent symbol, a rebus that could no longer be solved within the American national narrative that supplanted Britain's imperial story.

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If one were to read a selective sampling of Wheatley's poetry without knowing anything about her identity, background, and circumstances, she would appear to be a rather typical example of a sort of writer quite common in the eighteenth century – a committed and devout member of Britain's commercial and Protestant empire, akin to poets such as Isaac Watts, the famous composer of hymns, James Thomson, whose Rule Britannia became the unofficial anthem of the far-flung seaborne empire, and countless other imitators in both the British Isles and Britain's colonies. Nearer examples might be a poet like Elizabeth Singer Rowe, a pious and popular writer in eighteenth-century England, or Wheatley's Boston neighbor, the clergyman Mather Byles, a published poet who corresponded with both Alexander Pope and Isaac Watts.² Wheatley's work, like theirs, embraces the British imperial ideology since described by Linda Colley, David Armitage, and other historians, the common belief that Britain stood for liberty, property,

and commerce, sustained by ocean-going trade and representative government, and stabilized by an ancient and venerable hierarchy.³

But in 1761, at the moment of her first appearance in the historical record, Wheatley occupied the lowest imaginable position in this hierarchy. A small child, sickly, barely clothed (at the time of her purchase, she was reportedly wrapped in a dirty bit of old carpet), female, African, and enslaved, she lacked even a name. Her place of origin is thought to have been somewhere in the region between Gambia and Ghana, possibly along the Senegambia coast, which might have made her a native Wolof speaker. This is about as precise as saying that a native American of unknown origin came from somewhere within the boundaries of the continental United States, and spoke an Algonkian language. In other words, she was nobody, from nowhere, as lowly as it was possible for a person to be.⁴

The moment of her arrival in Boston was a time of triumph for the empire, and for New England's place within it. Wheatley's early and unknown African years coincided almost exactly with the North American experience of the Seven Years' War. Judging by the fact that she was missing her front baby teeth, she was thought to be about seven years old in 1761, which would place her birth near 1754, the year the war began in America. In 1761, Bostonians still basked in the reflected glow of General James Wolfe's triumph at the Plains of Abraham in 1759, and of the 1760 campaigns led by Jeffrey Amherst that captured Montreal and finally swept the French enemy from the North American continent. Among the several works of celebration and thanksgiving for the victory over France published in Boston that year, one author, Joseph Fisk, turned to verse to express the sentiments of the moment:

To CANADA they march again;
 In order that King GEORGE might reign
 Over the *French* and *Papist* powr;
 And now we see the day is ours.

Three valiant Armies there do meet,
 In Arms and Courage all compleat.
 That MONTREAL it was the Place
 Our General Receiv'd a Grace, --

When He'd a Parley with the Foe,
 That they might hear what he would do.

To capitulate they do begin;
 For they have Fears and Frights within.

And now their Fighting they do cease;
 The Indians too do sue for Peace:
 For they do bow unto our King,
 Which is the most delightful Thing⁵

Fisk's doggerel, sad to say, is altogether representative of the patriotic effusion that poured forth from Boston pulpits and pens in the wake of the Anglo-American triumph over the Gallic foe.

Although the enslaved girl who became Phillis Wheatley entered this self-congratulatory imperial world at the very bottom rung, within a decade she would be vaulted to a place of recognition, if not exactly acceptance, among the very highest.

What brought her from the bottom to within sight of the top, what made an African nobody into Phillis Wheatley, were the very same things that made anyone in the British Empire – connections. Connections always began with family, and then radiated outward in concentric circles, so to understand who Phillis Wheatley became and the shape of the world that made her, we need to trace these lines of connection.⁶

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The name “Phillis” came from the ship which brought her to Boston from Africa, marking her with an indelible connection to transatlantic commerce.⁷ “Wheatley” was given to her by the man who bought her for a slave, John Wheatley, a merchant tailor of Boston, whose home on King Street, in the heart of the city near the Long Wharf, placed Phillis geographically in the midst of the flowing traffic that connected Boston to points around the Atlantic world.⁸ But it was primarily Wheatley’s wife, Susannah, and their daughter, Mary, who recognized the remarkable talents of their young slave and began to treat her as something closer to an adoptive daughter than a typical servant. In doing so, Susannah and Mary Wheatley played a role which, as scholars from Linda Kerber to Linda Colley remind us, was common to women within the empire, as agents of ideology. Though excluded from official positions of power and authority, women could sustain, convey, and embody the tenets of the faith, both civic and religious.⁹ Susannah Wheatley was a devout evangelical Christian, a member of Boston’s New South Church, and her daughter Mary, also a New South Church member, would marry the Reverend John Lathrop, minister of Boston’s Second or Old North Church, the church of Increase and Cotton Mather in earlier generations.¹⁰ Their efforts to educate Wheatley focused, quite naturally, on the Bible and the doctrines of the Westminster Confession,

supplemented by the classical poets and more recent works of modern history and polite letters, from Milton to Pope.

Gradually, as Phillis became literate and polished, she became a Christian as well, and in this way her circle of connections began to extend beyond the immediate family. She became a favorite project of the Boston clergy, who oversaw the development of Wheatley's religious education. Among those who made a strong impact on her, and who lived and preached within a few blocks of the Wheatleys' King Street home, were Samuel Cooper, minister of the Brattle Street Church, who baptized her in 1771, John Moorhead, minister of the Long Lane Presbyterian Church, Joseph Sewall, of the Old South Church, Mather Byles, grandson of Increase and nephew of Cotton Mather, and himself a poet who strongly influenced Wheatley's work, and Samson Occam, the Mohegan Indian minister who journeyed to England to raise money for missionary work and Indian education in America, and to whom Wheatley wrote her first known composition – Occam was an occasional houseguest of the Wheatleys when he preached as substitute for John Moorhead. The Rev. Moorhead was himself the owner of a slave, Scipio, who became a talented painter, and about whom Wheatley wrote an important poem. Joseph Sewall was the son of Samuel Sewall, the Puritan merchant, diarist and judge, who wrote The Selling of Joseph (1700), the first anti-slavery pamphlet published in British America. In August, 1771, Phillis would join Sewall's Old South Church in full membership.¹¹

Through these clergymen, who ministered to Boston's elite as well as to the lowly in their capacious meetinghouses, and through the lively social circle that the Wheatleys entertained on King Street, where she waited on table, Phillis encountered literary,

political, and mercantile leaders of the town as well. On some occasions, as her reputation grew, other servants waited on Phillis as she made a round of visits, slaves serving tea to a fellow slave as she entertained hosts curious about her growing reputation as a poet.¹² This circle included Thomas Hutchinson, the royal governor of Massachusetts, and his Lieutenant Governor and brother-in-law, Andrew Oliver. When Oliver's wife died in 1773, Wheatley wrote a moving elegy "To His Honour, the Lieutenant Governor." Her acquaintances certainly numbered other amateur poets and literary benefactors, such as the merchants Joseph Green and Richard Carey, and merchant politicians such as John Erving, Harrison Gray, and James Bowdoin.¹³ Bowdoin is thought to be the author of a poetical rebus which Phillis solved in verse of her own, and placed as the conclusion of her published volume of poetry. The rebus itself and Phillis's clever answers display just how deeply committed she and her circle were to their vision of Boston's place in a triumphal British empire. Bowdoin's clues combined Biblical and classical allusions with pride in the colony's accomplishments, and Wheatley readily picked them up –

Bowdoin: "A town of gaiety and sport/
Where beaux and beauteous nymphs
Resort/
And gallantry doth reign?"

Wheatley: "Boston's a town, polite and debonair/
To which the beaux and
beauteous nymphs repair."

The first initials of the six words that are the answers to Bowdoin's clues spelled out the hidden word -- QUEBEC (the "B" was for Boston) – and so Wheatley concludes in her answering poem: "*Quebec* now vanquished must obey, She too must annual tribute pay, To *Britain* of immortal fame, And add new glory to her name."¹⁴

What this circle of worthies surrounding Wheatley shared, in addition to their positions of prominence in Boston society, was a faith in the liberating and ennobling power of Britain's transatlantic empire, a belief that, if the world were not yet perfected, then the conditions offered by the empire – liberty, property, prosperity, the Protestant religion, and the free commerce of diverse peoples from around the globe – offered the prospects for future perfectability. Did this common faith include opposition to slavery, and make these men proto-abolitionists? Well, yes, and no. All were opposed to the kind of “slavery” that, at least since the Stamp Act Crisis, had been a watchword in Boston against Parliamentary encroachment on their political liberties, and threatened to make them the kind of slaves that, in the famous words of Thomson's Rule Britannia, Britons never will be. But so long as Parliament restrained itself, and the king's benevolence continued to favor them, then the Royal Navy's rule over the waves would guarantee their commercial freedom and make them masters of their own property.

In addition, they were all believers in “liberty,” but a complex definition of Protestant Christian liberty. This liberty was not license to do what one lists, but a freedom to know what is right and to do good, a freedom rooted in submission to an omnipotent God's authority, and acceptance of Christ's love demonstrated in his substitutionary atonement for mankind's sins, which transformed repenting believers from slaves to sin into free servants of God's divine purpose. The connection among these ideas was ably made by Sarah Osborn, an evangelical Christian from Newport, Rhode Island, with whom Phillis made contact by way of the Wheatley family, and through whom Phillis became acquainted with the antislavery clergyman Samuel Hopkins. In the wake of Parliament's repeal of the Stamp Act, Sarah Osborn had written,

“O that Liberty, precious Liberty were used for the Glory of God Let us not be entangled with the yoke of Bondage, Lord; free us yet more from the bondage of sin.”¹⁵

The best government was one, like Britain’s, that freely spread the Protestant Gospel as widely across the globe as possible, and which could, as in the Stamp Act crisis, correct itself when it went astray. Finally, as chief beneficiaries of the commercial prosperity that Bostonians (and their counterparts in Newport) wrung from Atlantic trade, they shared the luxury to treat the slaves they possessed as privileged servants – like Phillis Wheatley or Scipio Moorhead – rather than as field hands, the laboring backbone of an agricultural staple economy.¹⁶

In this context, the institution and practice of African chattel slavery was a serious but murky problem. Positions on it ranged from that laid out in 1700 by Samuel Sewall, that the slave trade was inherently wrong, legalized manstealing, no more justified than the selling of Joseph by his brothers, and therefore best avoided, to a more pragmatic, if hypocritical, view, that slavery was justifiable because it was wrong to leave an entire continent in darkness, unmoved by Christianity, or to neglect the souls of those unfortunates already captured into slavery and deposited on America’s shores through no fault of their own. Some, then, like Harrison Gray, Joseph Sewall, and Andrew Eliot, minister of the New North Church, were actively opposed to slavery, refused to own slaves themselves, and spoke out against the institution.¹⁷ Others, however, saw no contradiction between owning slaves and treating them humanely as Christians – John Wheatley and John Moorhead, of course, were among them. Regardless of their positions along this spectrum, Wheatley was surrounded by an influential group who generally believed that the best principles of the British empire would certainly, if

gradually, move toward an amelioration of the conditions of slaves, the bestowal of Christian truth upon Africans, and the eventual elimination of an institution inconsistent with and ultimately unnecessary within its benevolent domains. And these positions were closely linked with similar beliefs that Christian missionary efforts toward the native populations of the Americas, Africa, and Asia would spread the light of civilization and the truth of the gospel throughout the world – the support of these Boston worthies, the Wheatleys prominent among them, for Samson Occom was intimately connected to their championing of Phillis Wheatley and their hopes to ameliorate the problem of slavery.¹⁸

Through her connections to this circle within Boston, Phillis Wheatley went on to become acquainted with, and then celebrated by, a greater range of contacts around and across the Atlantic, with larger and more immediate ambitions for addressing the problem of slavery. It began with George Whitefield, the incomparably famous itinerant preacher, whom Wheatley encountered in her own Old South Church, when he preached there four times in August, 1770, and who very probably lodged with the Wheatley family in Boston, shortly before his death in Newburyport.¹⁹ Moved by his preaching and by his sudden demise, Wheatley wrote a funeral elegy on Whitefield, noting of course Whitefield's prominence in bringing Christian instruction to African American slaves.²⁰ The elegy was addressed to Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon, whose chaplain Whitefield had been. Susannah Wheatley was a correspondent of the Countess, and Phillis was brought to the Countess's attention when the Whitefield elegy was published to wide acclaim in both London and Boston in 1771. This was the beginning of Phillis Wheatley's international fame.²¹

The Countess of Huntingdon played a curious and remarkable role within British religious and public life. Although married to a titled peer of the realm, her early conversion by Whitefield to his brand of Calvinist Methodism allied her with the sorts of people among whom the nobility did not ordinarily mix – tradesmen, the laboring poor, even the urban destitute. Her mission in life became to heal the ills Britain and its empire suffered, beginning with religion. She founded a series of missionary and educational institutions she called “the Connexion,” designed to bring Christian education to the poor and unlearned, and to heal the rift between dissenters and Anglicans in English religious culture.²² In the course of these pursuits, she became interested in the problem of slavery and the religion of Africans as well, thanks in no small part to Wheatley’s remarkable qualities. The Countess, like some of Wheatley’s Boston circle, did not see it as necessary that slaves be immediately freed – she inherited a number of slaves in Georgia and never manumitted them – but she was committed to bringing Christianity to Africans, to treating slaves humanely, and missionaries trained in the Countess’s “Connexion” eventually became leading figures in the British colony of repatriated former slaves in Sierra Leone.²³

The Countess of Huntingdon became Phillis Wheatley’s patron, sponsoring her visit to London in 1773, assisting in getting Wheatley’s volume of poetry published in London (Phillis dedicated the book to her, and began it with an ode to “Maecenas,” the Roman nobleman renowned for his patronage of artists, including Terrence, the African). And through the Countess, she was introduced to the wider circle of antislavery activists in Britain. Among these were John Thornton and Granville Sharp -- Sharp met Phillis and took her on a tour of London, including the Tower and its zoological collections.²⁴

Most significant of all, however, was William Legge, the 2d Earl of Dartmouth.

Dartmouth, like Huntington, was born into the titled nobility. His father died at an early age, and his widowed mother married Francis, Lord North, father of the future Prime Minister. Dartmouth and his step-brother were educated together, and both took their expected places at the center of power within the realm. Yet Dartmouth, like the Countess of Huntingdon, was peculiar in his religious preferences. Huntington introduced him to Whitefield's preaching, and Dartmouth became a devout evangelical, ready and willing to mix with fellow believers of all ranks. When attending the Methodist meeting at his home estates, he insisted on being called "Brother Earl," for which he received a good deal of ridicule and scorn from his peers in the House of Lords. But Dartmouth, like Huntington, took it in stride, believing that through faith and service, the rifts that separated human beings, in matters of religion, of class, of race (he was a principal benefactor of Eleazor Wheelock's Indian College, which was named for him) or in conflicts like the late controversies between the colonies and home country, could be overcome.²⁵

In 1772, Dartmouth was appointed Secretary of State for the Colonies, and in the wake of the disasters of the Stamp Act and Townshend Duties, it was hoped, especially by American evangelicals, that his appointment represented a new regime and the restoration of friendly relations between the crown and its colonial servants. New Englanders in particular looked forward to "the full enjoyment of civil and religious liberty" with Dartmouth as Secretary.²⁶ With this hope as an inspiration, Wheatley wrote one of her best poems, "To the Right Honourable WILLIAM, Earl of DARTMOUTH," which compares the slavery feared by the American colonies (especially New England)

to her own experience of enslavement, and plucks Dartmouth's sentimental heartstrings by offering her own parents' grief at the loss of their child as an example of what Dartmouth must have felt to see devout New Englanders robbed of their liberties by an unfeeling Parliament.²⁷

The key to understanding the faith that colonists, like Wheatley, placed in Dartmouth, the key to Dartmouth's and Huntingdon's hopes for improving the religious, moral, and political tenor of Britain and its empire, and indeed, the key to the faith in the British empire as an agent of benevolent improvement held by Wheatley and her Boston circle, lay in a seldom noticed but remarkably prevalent theme of Wheatley's poems – a belief in the power of *circulation* to right wrongs, restore order, recover lost health, bring light where darkness reigned, and salvation to sinners. Many of Wheatley's most powerful poems, including those that explore her own condition as an enslaved African, rely on circulation, both metaphorically and literally, as a basis and an explanation for her optimism about the empire's future.

In the poems, "circulation" appears in many guises. The basic story of human sin and redemption, often repeated throughout her work, is cast as exile from the innocence of the garden, followed by restoration and salvation, described as a physical translation to a heavenly abode, as in her "Hymn to Humanity," or in the many elegies in which the subject, like Joseph Sewall, is seen as a "saint ascending to his native skies."²⁸ Or this:

Behold, the prophet in his tow'ring flight!

He leaves the earth for heavn's unmeasured 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.²⁹

Even Dartmouth, though years away from giving up the ghost in 1772, gets the same imagined treatment:

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.³⁰

The next two poems, following the “Ode to Dartmouth,” translate this metaphor into more literal and earthly terms, by focusing on travel or circulation through different points within the British empire as a source of restoration for lost health, and by implication, a form of saving grace as well. The voyage of her mistress, Susannah Wheatley, from Boston to England in 1772, was intended in part as an effort to restore Susannah's failing health. Phillis composed an “Ode to Neptune, On Mrs. W—'s Voyage to England,” in which the raging ocean god is calmed by prayers to ensure Susannah's safe voyage:

The Pow'r propitious hears the lay,
 The blue-ey'd daughters of the sea
 With sweeter cadence glide along,

And *Thames* responsive joins the song.

The restorative powers of Britain's climate for her mistress's health are duly praised as well:

To court thee to *Britannia's* arms

Serene the climes and mild the sky,

Her region boasts unnumber'd charms,

Thy welcome smiles in ev'ry eye.³¹

A similar theme is set forth in the next poem, entitled, "To a LADY on her coming to North America with her Son, for the Recovery of her Health." Here the voyager is leaving Jamaica's "fervid" and "malignant" shore to cross "Neptune's wat'ry realm" and find her health in "The Northern milder climes."³² The theme is given still fuller treatment in yet another ode, "To a GENTLEMAN on his Voyage to Great-Britain for the Recovery of his Health," where the power of circulation itself, of travel across the ocean, is celebrated directly:

O thou stupendous, earth-enclosing main

Exert thy wonders to the world again!

If ere thy pow'r prolong'd the fleeting breath,

Turn'd back the shafts, and mock'd the gates of death,

If ere thine air dispens'd an healing pow'r,

Or snatch'd the victim from the fatal hour,

This equal case demands thine equal care,

And equal wonders may this patient share.³³

The power and depth of this concept, the importance of circulation within Wheatley's world view, is best revealed in the poems where Wheatley addresses her own condition. For instance, in "A Farewel to America," written on her departure for England, Phillis emphasizes that she is leaving New England's springtime charms for England in order to restore her health:

In vain for me the flow'rets rise,
 And boast their gaudy pride,
 While here beneath the northern skies
 I mourn for *health* deny'd. . . .

While for *Britannia's* distant shore
 We sweep the liquid plain,
 And with astonish'd eyes explore
 The wide-extended main.
 Lo! *Health* appears! Celestial dame!
 Complacent and serene,
 With Hebe's mantle o'er her Frame,
 With soul-delighting mein.³⁴

A more profound, if more troubling, variation on this theme appears in the poem for which Wheatley is probably most famous, "On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA." This poem has been the source and the subject of a tremendous amount of heavily fraught criticism, brought on by the fact that in it, Wheatley seems to be accepting, even celebrating, her own kidnapping and enslavement.

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.³⁵

The presence of this seeming false consciousness within the work of a figure whom critics would like to be able to treat as a founding figure in African American literature has caused a major critical challenge.³⁶

However, I read Wheatley's whole-hearted embrace of New England's version of British imperial culture as akin to the experience of Eunice Williams, the English Puritan girl taken captive by Roman Catholic French-allied Caughnawaga Indians in the raid on Deerfield, Massachusetts in 1704. Like Williams, who was similarly captured at the age of 7 or 8, torn from her family, and taken to an alien world, Wheatley adopted her captors' language, culture, and values in part because she had no other choice and no context for resisting, but in part because her captors offered her a new name and a new identity, lavished attention and concern upon her, and treated her as one of their own.³⁷ Not surprisingly, Wheatley, like Eunice Williams, later in life refused the opportunity to "return" to her native African shores. When it was suggested that she become a religious missionary in Sierra Leone, she declined the offer, arguing that her poor health prevented it, but she also made it clear that she now considered New England her home, and that she would seem "like a Barbarian" to Africans, "being an utter stranger to the language of Anamaboe."³⁸ Only the year before, the introductory preface to her published works of poetry, written by John or (more likely) Susannah Wheatley, had described Phillis as "an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa" at the time of her arrival in Boston.³⁹ By her

original translation from Africa to New England, the purpose of transatlantic circulation had, in her case, been achieved, and she was now loathe to reverse the process.

In other words, if we set aside the traditional concern about Wheatley's problematic status at the beginning of an African American literary canon, and instead consider Wheatley within the context of British Atlantic writers and her metaphor of circulation, we will find that in this poem, and in the figurative language which it employs and shares with her other work, the "mercy" that brought her from Africa to Boston functions much like the other forms of translation, relocation, and movement throughout her work, as an agent of grace. This reading is reinforced by the fact that "Saviour," in this poem, is italicized, just as "health" is italicized in her "Farewel to America." The additional stress marks the appearance of the redeeming qualities that emerge in new places where imperial circulation brings souls that have been suffering in benighted darkness.

This reading of the power of circulation is sustained in Wheatley's ode to the Earl of Dartmouth. Here, the "Fair *Freedom*" that Dartmouth's appointment as Secretary of State for the colonies portends is cast in the figure of the rising sun, whose absence has until recently left New England in darkness: "Long lost to realms beneath the northern skies/ She shines supreme, while hated *faction* dies." With the return of Freedom's light, New England "no longer mourns,/ Each soul expands," while destructive Faction, by contrast, "Sick at the view, she languish'd and expir'd." So far, the poem is consistent with Wheatley's general table of metaphorical equivalences, aligning light, truth, freedom, health, grace and salvation, against darkness, ignorance, slavery, sickness, and death.

Then, while still claiming the power to speak in general terms for all New England (“For favours past, our thanks are due,”) Wheatley personalizes the poem’s narrative. Addressing Dartmouth directly, she explains that if Dartmouth wonders “whence my love of *Freedom* sprung,” the source of these feelings, which Dartmouth’s sympathetic heart presumably shares, derives from the fact that “I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate/ Was snatch’d from *Afric*’s fancy’d happy seat:” However, Wheatley has already informed the reader, in “On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA,” why this fate was only “seeming cruel,” – it was an act of mercy -- and why *Afric*’s seat is only “fancy’d” happy – because there she neither sought nor knew redemption. It is not her own sufferings that bring her the sympathetic capacity to long for freedom, but rather her contemplation of her parent’s feelings:

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.⁴⁰

The key text that explains Wheatley’s rhetorical position here is the story of Joseph from the book of Genesis, sold into slavery by his brothers, but raised up through his talents to become Pharaoh’s servant, Lord Protector of all Egypt. Joseph, despite his own suffering, clearly benefited in the long run from his brothers’ evil deed. But his heart was torn by the suffering of his father, Jacob, who mourned his lost son, a suffering that could only be remedied by revealing, in the end, the freedom, power, and glory to which Joseph had been elevated. From at least the time of Samuel Sewall’s The Selling of

Joseph, this story became a critical narrative for thinking about the problem of slavery in New England, and within the empire as a whole. Wheatley herself had this connection in mind when she described America's slaveholders, in a letter to Samson Occom, as "our modern Egyptians."⁴¹ Devout Protestant evangelicals could not help but think that bringing Africans to Christendom meant translating them from darkness to light, from sin to salvation – a gift of value beyond measure. But neither could those of tender conscience accept the method – manstealing – as anything but tyranny itself. For that reason, Wheatley's feelings about the meaning of freedom have to be cast in terms of her parent's suffering, rather than her own. And her hopes and wishes, in light of Dartmouth's elevation to the crown's chief minister for the colonies, is for a world in which the blessings of circulation – light, truth, knowledge, health, redemption, and salvation – can be achieved without the crime of tyranny, which can just as well "from a father seize his babe below'd" as it can "enslave the land" with an "iron chain."

* * *

Phillis Wheatley's apotheosis came at this moment of seeming high promise, when the forces she embraced so completely looked as though they might prevail, and yet within a few short months her world was torn apart by imperial conflict that could not be resolved. It was in the summer of 1772, roughly the time when eighteen of Boston's worthies tested Wheatley in order to be able to assert that she was, indeed, the author of her poems, that another Boston slave, James Somerset, had his fate decided in a British court by Lord Mansfield. Somerset had been brought to London in 1769 by his owner, a Boston-based royal customs officer, and there had escaped from his master's service. Recaptured, his owner had tried to ship Somerset in chains for Jamaica and re-

enslavement. But Mansfield decided, in Somerset's behalf, that as Parliament had passed no laws legalizing slavery in Britain itself, that it was unlawful to enslave a man there, even if custom and colonial legislation justified the institution elsewhere within the imperial realm. The colonies, in other words, could not legislate for Parliament in England.⁴²

The Somerset case marked a seeming moment of triumph, and spurred British anti-slavery activists throughout the empire to new efforts. But it had an ominous undertone, a dark side – it threatened to cut off the circulation between colonies and imperial center. The news of the Mansfield decision spread quickly throughout the Atlantic world, causing slaves to long for England, but making masters wary of bringing slaves there, for fear of losing the power to bring them back home. This created a legal rift between colonies and home country.⁴³ In 1768, in her ode to King George III, Phillis had thanked the king for repealing the Stamp Act, which had threatened to break apart the empire, and at that time, she offered this future hope for the King's gracious rule: "And may each clime with equal gladness see/ A monarch's smile can set his subjects free."⁴⁴ After the Somerset decision, it appeared that in England's clime, the monarch's smile did set his subjects free, but that colonial climes were different.⁴⁵ Wheatley gained her own freedom only upon her return to New England, late in 1773, when her owner's smile set her free.

Shortly after her manumission, the decisive event that would set in motion the severing of the empire had occurred, the destruction of the tea on the East India Company ship, Dartmouth, on December 16, 1773. Bostonians would not accept Parliament's revised Tea Act, which gave the company monopoly distribution rights, and so refused to

allow the tea to be unloaded. Governor Thomas Hutchinson insisted that the law be enforced, and would not allow the Dartmouth to leave the harbor without unloading its cargo. The “Tea Party” settled the matter, and cut off Boston’s imperial circulation once and for all. The Boston Port Bill, chief of the Coercive (or Intolerable) Acts of 1774, closed the port down entirely, and within another year all transatlantic commerce between Britain and America had ceased. If Mansfield had decided that the colonies could not legislate for Parliament in the matter of slavery, now the colonies stated in no uncertain terms that Parliament could not legislate for them without making them slaves.

The ensuing warfare, the siege of Boston begun in April 1775, and the evacuation of the British military in March, 1776, effectively destroyed the world that had created Phillis Wheatley, a world she had embraced and in which she raised herself to prominence. Her former master, John Wheatley, remained loyal to the crown, abandoned Boston, no longer a town of “gaiety and sport,” and went into exile in England, as did many other members of her circle; Thomas Hutchinson, of course, as well as some of the most outspoken antislavery voices, such as Harrison Gray. Other supporters who remained in Boston, like Mather Byles and Andrew Eliot, were effectively silenced by their Tory inclinations, or in Eliot’s case, his inability to decide which side to support. Susannah Wheatley, Phillis’s closest friend and ally, died shortly before the crisis, never recovering her ailing health that her trip to England had been meant to cure. Mary Wheatley and her only brother, Nathaniel, died during the war. In this context, manumission was a mixed blessing, cutting Phillis off from the means of support, both material and moral, that had sustained her early years in Boston, and leaving her to fend for herself in a city ravaged by war.⁴⁶

She made a valiant effort to embrace the new direction that her adopted region seemed to be taking. After George Washington arrived in Cambridge to assume command of the Continental Army, Wheatley wrote an ode in his honor, not unlike the many earlier ones she addressed to imperial dignitaries. She wrote to the “Generalissimo,” as she called him, enclosing her poem, and was rewarded by a brief audience with the great man himself in his Brattle Street headquarters.⁴⁷ But otherwise, the Revolutionary War years did not inspire a poetic outpouring. She wrote (but did not publish) only two other poems about the war years, one on the capture of Charles Lee, an American general, by British forces, which she sent to her old mentor, James Bowdoin. The other concerned another general, the Connecticut merchant, David Wooster, with whom she had formerly corresponded about selling her book of poems. Wooster was killed in battle, and Wheatley addressed her ode to his widow, enclosed in private correspondence. Though she made various proposals for book projects, none of them came to fruition, and her publication largely ceased with the onset of the Revolution.⁴⁸

When the war finally ended, Wheatley celebrated by writing a poem entitled “Liberty and Peace.” No surprise, the chief benefit of liberty and peace to America, for Wheatley, was the return of free circulation throughout the Atlantic world: “To every Realm her portals open’d wide,/ Receives from each the full commercial Tide.” Despite the bitterness, violence, and destruction of war, Wheatley’s greatest hope is that “E’en great *Britannia*” will resume its part in friendly transatlantic commerce:

Britain, whose Navies swept th’ Atlantic o’er,

And Thunder sent to every distant Shore:

E’en thou, in Manners cruel as thou art,

The Sword resign'd, resume the friendly Part!

She goes on to enumerate how “every Kingdom on Europa’s Coast” can now take part in this free world of commerce that a liberated America champions.⁴⁹

For Wheatley, despite her limited efforts to redeem the war’s destruction and restore a sense of order to her world, the damage could not be repaired. She did not live long beyond the war, dying in childbirth with her third child in December, 1784. Even before this, she had been appropriated by the makers of new American narratives in ways that transformed her from an unusual but fully coherent spokeswoman for British imperial aspirations, to a virtually illegible element in America’s newly fabricated exceptionalism. In his Notes on the State of Virginia, Thomas Jefferson used Phillis Wheatley as an example, a scrap of evidence torn unfeelingly from its context, in his argument with French philosophes⁵⁰. This argument presumed, on both sides, an American exceptionalism that all of Wheatley’s poetic efforts had been written to oppose. But in either case, the idea that free circulation of people, goods, ideas, values, and beliefs throughout an interconnected Atlantic world would even out the accidental differences among various climes, and distribute grace, health, knowledge, and virtue equally and everywhere, was rejected out of hand. Jefferson’s mockery of Wheatley’s talent, his intimations that she, and all Africans, were innately inferior, inaugurated an argument that has gone on for two centuries and more, an argument that, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., recently summarized it, has shaped the history of African-American literature in ways that have made Wheatley a badly discordant figure, an embarrassing beginning, in the eyes of many critics.⁵¹

Phillis Wheatley deserves better, but so does the context in which she emerged. Creative as the new American republic was, it also destroyed many things, not all of them bad, least of all the aspirations of those anti-slavery evangelicals around the British Atlantic who championed Phillis Wheatley.

ENDNOTES

¹ Important titles on Wheatley's life and work include: Henry Louis Gates, Jr., The Trials of Phillis Wheatley (NY: Basic Books, 2003); William H. Robinson, ed., Critical Essays on Phillis Wheatley (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982); Merle A. Richmond, Bid the Vassal Soar (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974); David Grimsted, "Anglo-American Racism and Phillis Wheatley's 'Sable Veil,' 'Length'ned Chain,' and 'Knitted Heart,'" in Women in the American Revolution, ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter Albert (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1989), 338-444; Vincent Carretta and Philip Gould, eds., Genius in Bondage: Literature of the Early Black Atlantic (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 2001). In addition, the major editions of Phillis Wheatley's writings all contain significant biographical and critical commentaries: see Vincent Carretta, ed., Phillis Wheatley: Complete Writings (NY: Penguin Books, 2001); Julian D. Mason, Jr., ed., The Poems of Phillis Wheatley, rev. and enlarged ed. (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1989); William H. Robinson, Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings (NY: Garland Press, 1984); John C. Shields, ed., The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley (NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988). For Pope's influence on Wheatley, see Albertha Sistrunk, "The Influence of Alexander Pope on the Writing Style of Phillis Wheatley," in Robinson, ed., Critical Essays, 175-88.

² See Henry F. Stecher, Elizabeth Singer Rowe, the Poetess of Frome: A Study in Eighteenth-Century English Pietism (Bern, Switzerland: Herbert Lang, 1973); Arthur W. H. Eaton, The Famous Mather Byles (Boston: W. A. Butterfield, 1914).

³ Linda Colley, Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1992), 11-54; David Armitage, The Ideological Origins of the British Empire (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), 170-198; these chapters in Colley and Armitage both begin with the famous lines from Thompson's Rule Britannia as an epigraph. See also Kathleen Wilson, The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century (London: Routledge, 2003), 1-53, and for a closer examination of the colonial American side of this subject, see David S. Shields, Oracles of Empire: Poetry, Politics, and Commerce in British America, 1690-1750 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

⁴ For a necessarily somewhat speculative but nonetheless plausible account of Wheatley's early life in Africa and arrival in Boston, see Robinson, Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings, 3-10.

⁵ Joseph Fisk, A Few Lines on the Happy Reduction of Canada, . . . (Boston, 1761), 3.

⁶ Among the more complete accounts of Wheatley's circle of connections are James A. Rawley, "The World of Phillis Wheatley," New England Quarterly 50 (1977): 266-77; and Grimsted, "Anglo-American Racism and Phillis Wheatley's . . .," 370-94.

⁷ For the advertisements in the Boston newspapers announcing the arrival of the Phillis and the sale of its "parcel of likely Negroes, imported from Africa," a group which John Avery, the Boston agent, referred to privately as "the meanest Cargo I Ever had Come," see Robinson, Wheatley and Her Writings, 3-5.

⁸ The Wheatleys' large and handsome house stood at the northeast corner of King Street (the main thoroughfare from the Long Wharf into the heart of town, along which John Wheatley also owned a wholesale store), and Mackerel Lane (later Kilby Street), just a few blocks from the Colony House, the center of government; see Robinson, Wheatley and Her Writings, 12-15.

⁹ Kerber, Women of the Republic, and "'History Can Do It No Justice': Women and the Reinterpretation of the American Revolution," in Women in the Age of the American Revolution, ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter Albert (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 3-42; Colley, Britons, also, Captives; for a nuanced discussion of the relationship of women to the British imperial state, especially through the experience of warfare, see Kathleen Wilson, The Island Race, 92-128. On the particular role of evangelical women, on both sides of the Atlantic, in creating Wheatley's circle of support, see Grimsted, 370-94.

¹⁰ On Lathrop, see Clifford K. Shipton, Sibley's Harvard Graduates, vol. 15, 1761-1763 (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1970), 428-36.

¹¹ On Samuel Cooper, see Charles Akers, "'Our Modern Egyptians': Phillis Wheatley and the Whig Campaign Against Slavery in Revolutionary Boston," Journal of Negro History, 60, no. 3 (July, 1975): 397-140; Eaton on Mather Byles. For Wheatley's correspondence with Occom, see Carretta, ed., Complete Writings, 152-53 On the Sewall connection and Samuel Sewall's Selling of Joseph, see Mark A. Peterson, The Selling of Joseph: Bostonians, Antislavery, and the Protestant International, 1689-1733 Massachusetts Historical Review 4 (2002): 1-22.

¹² Robinson, Wheatley and Her Writings, 19.

¹³ Robinson, Wheatley and Her Writings, 23-24.

¹⁴ See “A REBUS, by I. B.” and “An ANSWER to the *Rebus*, by the Author of these POEMS,” in Carretta, ed., Phillis Wheatley, Complete Writings, 64-65.

¹⁵ Sarah Osborn, Diary, Mar. 18, 1767, cited in Grimsted, 380.

¹⁶ For a nuanced discussion of the “humanitarian” form of Anglo-American “anti-slavery without abolitionism” in the eighteenth century, see Christopher Leslie Brown, Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 33-101.

¹⁷ On Harrison Gray, see Samuel Eliot Morison, Harrison Gray Otis: The Urbane Federalist (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969); on Andrew Eliot, see Bernard Bailyn, “Religion and Revolution: Three Biographical Sketches,” in Faces of Revolution (NY: Vintage Books, 1990), 106-124.

¹⁸ Joanna Brooks, American Lazarus: Religion and the Rise of African American and Native American Literatures (NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003); William DeLoss Love, Samson Occom and the Christian Indians of New England (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse Univ. Press, 2000).

¹⁹ On Whitefield’s connection with the Wheatley family, see Grimsted, 384.

²⁰ Wheatley, “On the Death of the Rev. Mr. GEORGE WHITEFIELD. 1770,” in Carretta, ed., Complete Writings, 15-16. All subsequent references to Wheatley’s poetry will be from this edition.

²¹ David Grimsted argues that Susannah Wheatley was, in fact, the Countess of Huntingdon’s chief correspondent and collaborator in the North American colonies, playing a role similar to that played by Wilhelmina, Lady Glenorchy, in Scotland. In the

early 1770s, Susannah Wheatley was hostess to a series of evangelical missionaries sent to America by the Countess, and exchanged ideas with the Countess on future missionary activities; see Grimsted, 384; and Sara Dunlap Jackson, “Letters of Phillis Wheatley and Susanna Wheatley,” Journal of Negro History 57 (1972): 212-215.

²² Boyd Stanley Schlenther, Queen of the Methodists: The Countess of Huntingdon and the Eighteenth-Century Crisis of Faith and Society (Durham, U.K.: Durham Academic Press, 1997); Edwin Welch, Spiritual Pilgrim: A Reassessment of the Life of the Countess of Huntingdon (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995); Alan Harding, The Countess of Huntingdon’s Connexion: A Sect in Action in Eighteenth-Century England (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003), 1-172.

²³ Welch, 131-147; Schlenther, 83-92, Harding, 371. Note further that earlier, she had taken the same sort of interest in missions to India, America, as had the Halle circle discussed in Ch. 3 – Harding, Connexion, Peterson, “Boston’s Dutch Moment”.

²⁴ Phillis Wheatley described her own encounter with Grenville Sharp in a letter to Colonel David Worcester of New Haven, Connecticut, an acquaintance from her travels with the Wheatley family in New England; see Phillis Wheatley to David Worcester, Oct. 18, 1773, in Carretta, ed., Complete Writings, 146-47.

²⁵ B. D. Barger, Lord Dartmouth and the American Revolution (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1965), 1-23. Dartmouth became the patron of John Newton, the former African slave trader who converted to Christianity, became an Anglican minister (eventually the Bishop of Chester), and gradually adopted abolitionist beliefs as well; see Adam Hochschild, Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire’s Slaves (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 130-131.

²⁶ Letter from Thomas Woolridge, 24 November 1772, Dartmouth Manuscripts, cited in Barger, 58.

²⁷ Complete Writings, 39-40.

²⁸ For examples, see Complete Writings, 13-15, which describes Joseph Sewall as “the saint ascending to his native skies,” and 50-51.

²⁹ Complete Writings, 15.

³⁰ Complete Writings, 40.

³¹ Complete Writings, 41.

³² Complete Writings, 41-42.

³³ Complete Writings, 47-48.

³⁴ Complete Writings, 62-64. Hebe was the Greek goddess of eternal youth, whose powers were often symbolized as a freeing of men from their bondage and chains; Michael Stewart, "Hebe," *Greek Mythology: From the Iliad to the Fall of the Last Tyrant*. <http://messenger.com/myths/bios/hebe.html> (November 14, 2005)

³⁵ Complete Writings, 13.

³⁶ Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s The Trials of Phillis Wheatley is essentially an extended essay on the evolution of Wheatley criticism and her place in the canon of African American literature – as such, it is perhaps the most nuanced discussion of this subject.

³⁷ See John Demos, The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America (NY: Knopf, 1994), 140-66.

³⁸ Phillis Wheatley to John Thornton, 30 October 1770 [1774], in Complete Writings, 158-160.

³⁹ Complete Writings, 8.

⁴⁰ Complete Writings, 39-40.

⁴¹ Complete Writings, 152-53. See also Akers, "Our Modern Egyptians: Phillis Wheatley and the Whig Campaign Against Slavery in Revolutionary Boston."

⁴² For a recent study of the Somerset case, see Steven M. Wise, Though the Heavens May Fall (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 2005).

⁴³ Brown, Moral Capital, 96-101; Daniel J. Hulsebosch, "Nothing But Liberty: *Somerset's Case* and the British Empire," Law and History Review 24, no. 3, (Fall 2006): 647-657.

⁴⁴ Complete Writings, 13.

⁴⁵ Eliga H. Gould, "Zones of Law, Zones of Violence: The Legal Geography of the British Atlantic, circa 1772," William and Mary Quarterly, 3d ser., 60, no. 3 (July 2003): 471-510.

⁴⁶ The scholar who comes closest to seeing the damage that personal manumission and revolution did to Wheatley is Frank Shuffleton, "On Her Own Footing: Phillis Wheatley in Freedom," in Carretta and Gould, eds., Genius in Bondage, 175-189.

⁴⁷ See Henry Wiencek, An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 205-14, for a discussion of this episode, and Complete Writings, 88-90, for her ode to Washington.

⁴⁸ Complete Writings, 90-94, Shuffleton, "On Her Own Footing," 187-88.

⁴⁹ Complete Writings, 101-02.

⁵⁰ Jefferson's infamous claim, that "Religion, indeed, has produced a Phillis Whately; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism," can be found in Notes on the State of Virginia, ed. David

Waldstreicher (Boston: Bedford Books, 2002), 178. The comment on Wheatley was prompted by the inquiries of the Marquis de Barbe-Marbois, who had been fascinated by Wheatley's accomplishments.

⁵¹ Gates, Trials of Phillis Wheatley, 40-56.