THE POETRY OF PHILLIS WHEATLEY:
A NEW INTERPRETATION

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To God be the glory, for the
great things He hath done.

To my wife, Cynthia, who
loved me all the while.

To Hortense, who settled for
nothing less than the best.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ........................................... ii
INTRODUCTION ................................................... 1

Chapter

I. THE MAKING OF A GENIUS: THE LIFE OF
   PHILLIS WHEATLEY ........................................... 3

II. A VIEW OF GREATNESS: THE LITERARY
    REPUTATION OF PHILLIS WHEATLEY ....................... 18

III. THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL: PHILLIS
    WHEATLEY AS SEEN THROUGH HER POETRY .............. 36

CONCLUSION ..................................................... 70
APPENDIX ........................................................ 71
BIBLIOGRAPHY ................................................... 77
INTRODUCTION

Phillis Wheatley as a serious literary artist has been treated unfairly by white and black scholars alike. White literary scholars have historically ignored the achievements of Phillis Wheatley and since 1922 black literary scholars have heaped insult upon injury by claiming that Phillis Wheatley totally disregarded the plight of her brothers and sisters. However, a close and perceptive reading of her poetry and an awareness of the historical implications expressed therein have revealed that Phillis Wheatley was a significant and influential poet; in America's early history she astounded two continents with her genius, patriotism, and ability to reject the insanities of slavery imposed on her mind. In fact, Martin Day, in a very brave statement, claims that Phillis Wheatley "was superior to all other American poets of the day." I agree with Martin Day and have sought to support his claim with concrete evidence from the life, reputation, and works of Phillis Wheatley.

In Chapter I, "The Making of a Genius: The Life of Phillis Wheatley," attention has been given to those factors which contributed to the development of her genius. Chapter II, "A View of Greatness: The Literary Reputation of
Phillis Wheatley," evolves as a survey and discussion of the many remarks made about her since her lifetime. Chapter III, "The Struggle for Survival: Phillis Wheatley as Seen Through Her Poetry," represents a textual analysis never before attempted by any Wheatley scholar, an analysis which centers on Phillis' use of neo-classical conventions, her concept of God, and her racial and political views.
CHAPTER I

THE MAKING OF A GENIUS: THE LIFE OF

PHILLIS WHEATLEY

Most available sources relating biographical information on Phillis Wheatley state that she was brought to America as a slave in 1761. The generally accepted basis for this event is the "master's letter" included in Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral, Wheatley's only published book, in which John Wheatley of Boston wrote: "Phillis was brought from Africa to America in the year 1761, between seven and eight years of age." From her arrival in 1761 to 1767 no public accounts are available on Wheatley, and therefore the remainder of the "master's letter" and Margaretta Matilda Odell's biography seem to provide a plausible indication of Wheatley's life during these six "hidden years." The remainder of the "master's letter" reads:

Without any assistance from school education, and by only what she was taught in the family, she, in sixteen months time from her arrival, attained the English language, to which she was an utter stranger before, to such degree, as to read any, the most difficult parts of the Sacred Writings, to the great astonishment of all who heard her.

As to her writing, her own curiosity led her to it; and this she learnt in so short a
time, that in the year 1765, she wrote a letter to the Rev. Mr. Occom, the Indian minister, while in England.

She has a great inclination to learn the Latin tongue, and has made some progress in it. This relation is given by her master who bought her, and with whom she now lives.  

Wheatley's eagerness to write is strongly supported by Odell, a descendant of Mrs. Susannah Wheatley. Odell informs us that Wheatley was so zealous to write that she often wrote letters on the walls with charcoal or chalk. Though knowledge of Phillis is limited during these years, such is not the case with the Wheatleys.

John Wheatley was a prosperous tailor in Boston's fashionable King Street, now known as State Street. His wife was a middle-aged woman reaching the time of life "when one looks with an appreciative eye toward peace and quiet." She, therefore, purchased for herself "a young Negress to be brought up under her own eye in order that she might secure herself a faithful domestic in her old age." That Mrs. Wheatley treated Phillis very well is seen in a letter Phillis wrote to her friend, Obour Tanner, on March 21, 1774: "I was a poor little outcast, and a stranger when she took me in: not only into her house, but I presently became a sharer in her most tender affections. I was treated by her more like her child than her servant; no opportunity was left unimproved of giving me the best of advice; but in terms how tender! how engaging! This I hope
ever to keep in remembrance." However, Martha Bacon, who considers Wheatley to be a very minor early American poet, assures us that Mrs. Wheatley was quite a cold, practical and calculating colonial woman:

Mrs. Wheatley assumes the shape of a woman who could not forego a commitment to a certain child and kept it until her death. Mrs. Wheatley expressed no opinions on public matters, nor did she give rein to creative imagination nor sell all her goods to feed the poor. She and her husband were satisfied members of the mercantile class, gentled by education and delicate living. She had no moral objection to slavery and visited the Feather Wharf to traffic in human flesh as coolly as a farmer buying cattle at a fair. Her affection for Phillis was completely partial and personal and the remaining black members of the household had it neither better nor worst than the majority of their kind.

Mrs. Wheatley's partiality toward Wheatley is humorously highlighted by an event recorded by Odell. One day while Wheatley was visiting friends of the family, it began to rain. Mrs. Wheatley sent Prince, the family coachman, to fetch Phillis so that her delicate health might not receive a fatal blow from the weather. When "that saucy varlet" returned, he had "my Phillis" sitting on the box beside him rather than in the coach out of the rain. Prince received a severe reprimand and narrowly missed a flogging for "forgetting the dignity thus kindly, though perhaps to him unaccountably, attached to the able person of 'my Phillis.'"
Wheatley not only became "my Phillis" to Mrs. Wheatley but also achieved an excellent reputation in and around Boston. She was given books "by many of the literati of the day," and "visited by clergymen and others who were high standing in society." Though Wheatley was clearly not the average "house nigger," she never let her unusual status affect "the modest demeanor" which she possessed on the slave block at Feather Wharf. Henri Gregoire, one of her first biographers, states that she was of "amiable manners, exquisite sensibilities and premature talents." Odell notes that "whenever Phillis was invited to the houses of individuals of wealth and distinction, she always declined the seat offered her at their board, and requesting that a side-table might be laid for her, dined modestly apart from the rest of her company." Perhaps Wheatley requested the side-table because she did not want to alienate any of the host's guests by placing her sable self near their persons. Maybe she genuinely distrusted their overt expressions of acceptance, but whatever the reason(s) Odell assures us that "this conduct was both dignified and judicious."

During these six "hidden years" (1761 to 1767), Wheatley probably mastered the various backgrounds everywhere evident in her poetry. Odell provides the following observation: "We gather from her writings, that she was
acquainted with astronomy, ancient and modern geography, and ancient history; and that she was well-versed in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. She discovered a decided taste for the stories of heathen mythology, and Pope's Homer seems to have been a great favorite with her. "Wheatley, according to Odell, also mastered belles-lettres and in spite of all her learning remained her usual unassuming self: "Phillis was gentle-tempered at all times and altogether free from the despicable foible--literary vanity."

Wheatley apparently had a poor memory. She is alleged to have done knitting or needle point in the evening and in the morning she did not remember where she had laid her work or even that she had done it. Mrs. Wheatley was particularly understanding of Wheatley's seemingly poor memory, so she provided her with a light, a fire (in cold seasons), and writing material so that "without rising or taking cold, she could secure the swift-winged fancy, ere it fled." Odell is totally unable to explain Wheatley's mental makeup; however, today psychologists might well classify Phillis as the archetypal example of one possessing a high discriminate and well developed mental process, which retains only those things the will considers significant. Wheatley's extant poetry abundantly demonstrates that she remembered what she wanted to remember, even a dead language. Her translation of Ovid's Metamorphoses, Book VI,
sufficiently proves that she was in full control of her mental faculties and able to employ what was useful to her and to discard the rest.

In 1767 Wheatley published her first poem and embarked on a literary career that was unparalleled at that time by any black American and few white Americans. This initial publication was entitled "On Messrs. Hussey and Coffin," and was printed in the New Port Mercury for December 21, 1767.10 This relatively short piece was occasioned by God's deliverance of the two subjects from a terrible sea storm.

The next eventful year in Wheatley's life was 1771 when she is reported to have recited twenty minutes of her poetry for guests at the Wheatley home.11 Many of this group later served as subscribers and supporters of Wheatley's book, Poems on Various Subjects. Also in 1771 Mary Wheatley, the only living daughter of the Wheatley family, married Rev. Lathrop.12 Certainly this event must have affected Wheatley strongly, for she was losing not the master's daughter, but a sister. It was Mary who taught Wheatley how to read and encouraged her greatly with her writing. However, during this time, the most important event for Wheatley occurred on August 18, 1771, when she was baptized into the Old South Meeting Church.13 Her baptism is noteworthy because blacks as a rule were not baptized into white congregations.
Two years later, in the spring of 1773, Wheatley made her celebrated voyage to England. The Wheatleys were most concerned about her failing health and thought that a voyage to England might be beneficial. On May 17, 1773 or thereabouts, Wheatley and the Wheatley's son, Nathaniel, sailed on the Dolly Ann for England.\textsuperscript{14} While Nathaniel attended to various business affairs, the high society of London attended to Wheatley. From the moment her feet touched English soil, she was surrounded by friends, members of the nobility, well-wishers and sight-seekers. Her second published poem, "On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield, 1770," was dedicated to the Countess of Huntingdon, a faithful member of Whitefield's congregation. This poem established her reputation in England and endeared her in the heart of the Countess. Wheatley's ability as an exceptional conversationalist and the considerable influence of the Countess enabled her to matriculate in circles in which even the Wheatleys could not normally operate. Lord Dartmouth gave a garden party in Wheatley's honor. The Lord Mayor of London presented her with a copy of the Glasgow folio edition of \textit{Paradise Lost}, and she also received a copy of Smollett's 1770 translation of \textit{Don Quixote}.\textsuperscript{15}

Wheatley was to have met George III, but news from Boston telling of Mrs. Wheatley's declining health prompted her to cut her visit short. However, before she and Nathaniel made
their hasty return to America, Wheatley finalized arrangements for the publication of *Poems on Varicous Subjects* which appeared in London, September 1, 1773.

The trip to England did not substantially help Wheatley's health, as we learn from a letter to Arbour Tanner dated October 30, 1773: "I can't say my voyage to England has condued the recovery (in a great measure) of my health."\(^{16}\) While Wheatley continued to be "disposed by cold and asthma," Mrs. Susannah Wheatley died on March 3, 1774. Of this most painful experience Wheatley could only say: "I have lately met with a great trial in the death of my mistress; let us imagine the loss of a parent, sister, or brother, the tenderness of all these united in her."\(^{17}\)

The death of Mrs. Wheatley may be considered the beginning of the end for Wheatley. Mary was married and could effectively run only her household. Mr. Wheatley and Nathaniel became increasingly involved in their business and the controversial political conditions prior to the American Revolution. The constant attention and consideration generally given to Wheatley suddenly disappeared and Mason argues that she no longer lived regularly at the Wheatley home.\(^{18}\)

In 1775 the American Revolution was in full swing. The Battle of Bunker Hill of July 7, commonly known as the invasion of Boston, sent many Bostonians fleeing to smaller
suburban communities. Wheatley fled to Wilmington, a hamlet twenty miles north of Boston. However, before she left Boston, she deposited her manuscripts with a niece of Mrs. Wheatley for safe keeping. To the best of my knowledge these manuscripts remained with this niece until John Peters, after Wheatley's death, demanded them as property of his deceased wife.

If 1774, the year of Mrs. Wheatley's death, was the beginning of the end for Wheatley, then 1778 was the "Time of Jacob's Trouble." On March 12, 1778 John Wheatley died and on December 12, 1778 Mary Wheatley Lathrop also died. Nathaniel was in England and for the first time Wheatley was without any members of her adopted family. During this year it is generally accepted that Phillis Wheatley married. Vernon Loggings, in The Negro Author in America, cites a passage from A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston, Containing Boston Marriages from 1772 to 1809 (1903, p. 441) which supports this year as the date she received her freedom: "April 1, 1778. Phillis Wheatley, a free negro obtained a license to marry John Peters, a man of her own race." However, the most depressing event in Wheatley's life was not the deaths but probably her marriage to John Peters who proved to be an undependable provider and an unstable husband.
It appears that the first mention of John Peters is couched in a letter from Wheatley to Obour Tanner dated October 30, 1773: "The young man by whom this [letter] is handed to you seems to me to be a very clever man, knows you very well, and is very complaisant and agreeable." Nearly all biographers agree that Peters was something of a man around town: "He kept a grocery store in Court Street, and was a man of very handsome person and manners; wore a wig, carried a cane, and quite acted out the gentleman. He was a man of talents and information; and he wrote with fluency and propriety, and at one period studied law." Yet in spite of his many positive attributes he served to alienate Wheatley from relatives of the Wheatleys, friends that she desperately needed: "It is admitted, however, that he was disagreeable in his manners, and that on account of his improper conduct, Wheatley became entirely estranged from the immediate family of her mistress." This impasse was of such a nature that the surviving family of the mistress only accidentally learned of Wheatley's death. Had it not been for the accidental presence of one of Mrs. Wheatley's grandnieces in Court Street on the day of Wheatley's funeral, Odell and her relatives might have never known of Wheatley's interment. The last we know of Peters is that he took Wheatley's manuscripts and went South.
Why Wheatley married in the first place remains something of a mystery. Perhaps in a time when the war was causing difficulties on all sides, she married for security. Glenn S. Weight argues that she married Peters because she could not find her manumission papers and that marriage to a free Negro would guarantee her freedom.22 Or perhaps she married Peters because he was somewhat of a literary artist himself and she hoped that they might inspire each other. G. Herbert Renfro concurs in this latter notion: "Peters was well-versed and highly intelligent and from all accounts was most likely to encourage Phillis."23 But whatever the reason(s), the marriage resulted in misery for Wheatley. Apparently, Peters and Wheatley were simply not suited for marriage. Wheatley was crippled by the over-protection of the Wheatleys and Peters crippled himself by entertaining fanciful imaginings. Gregoire supports this as a possible reason for the failure of the marriage: "The sentimental Phillis, who according to the trivial expression was brought up as a spoiled child, knew nothing of domestic affairs, and her husband proposed that she should learn the household art. He began with reproaches, which were followed by a harshness, the continuance of which afflicted her so much that she died of a broken heart."24

There is no doubt that Wheatley was unhappy with the marriage, in spite of the fact that her final poems do not
indicate any unhappiness. In a letter dated May 29, 1778 to Obour Tanner, she pleads with Obour for frequent letters, saying: "You will do me a great favor if you will write me by every opportunity."²⁵ Then she signs the letter "Phillis Wheatley" instead of "Mrs. Phillis Peters." One year later on May 10, 1779 Wheatley wrote: "I have not been unmindful of you, but a variety of hindrances was the cause of my not writing to you. But in time to come I hope our correspondence will revive--and revive in better times--pray write me soon, for I long to hear from you."²⁶ "Better times" ostensibly refers to the times when the Revolutionary War will be over, but it seems more likely that Wheatley is referring to the time when, hopefully, her marriage will be a happier one.

During her marriage to John Peters, Wheatley gave birth to three children, who died in infancy. Despite her marital problems, she published a proposal for her second book, which appeared in the Evening Post and General Advertiser for October 30, 1779.²⁷ During the last year of her life, she published "Liberty and Peace," a poem anticipating America's imminent freedom from England.

Phillis Wheatley Peters died on December 5, 1784 in abject poverty. In the Independent Chronicle for December 9, 1784 one finds the following account: "Last Lord's day, died Mrs. Phillis Wheatley Peters (formerly Phillis
Wheatley), aged 31, known to the literary world by her celebrated miscellaneous poems. Her funeral is to be this afternoon at four o'clock, from the house lately improved by Mr. Todd nearly opposite Dr. Bullfinch's at West Boston, where friends and acquaintances are desired to attend."
Notes


2Poems on Various Subjects, p. xi.

3Margaretta Matilda Odell, Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley, A Native African and a Slave, Dedicated to the Friends of the Africans (Boston: George W. Light, 1834). Unless otherwise noted, the facts in this biographical sketch are taken from this volume, since it claims to be the most reliable: "The facts stated are derived from grand-nieces of Susannah Wheatley, a grand-daughter and from the author of this memoir, who is a collateral descendent of Susannah Wheatley. All persons have distinct, vivid, and familiar remembrances of Mrs. Wheatley and her 'admired protegee,' Phillis Wheatley Peters."

4Poems on Various Subjects, p. xi.

5Martha Bacon, Puritan Promenade (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1964), p. 8. Many of Ms. Bacon's remarks are questionable, but her description of Mrs. Wheatley seems accurate, especially in conjunction with remarks by Odell.

6Bacon, p. 8.

7Julian Mason, ed., The Poems of Phillis Wheatley (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1966), p. 107. Much material has been discovered since 1966 which sheds significant new light on Wheatley's scholarship. Therefore, in some cases this new evidence refutes some of Mason's observations.

8Bacon, pp. 10-11.


12 Benjamin Brawley, *The Negro Genius* (1937; rpt. New York: Biblo and Tanner, 1972), p. 20. Brawley claims that the Wheatleys had five children. Mary and her twin brother, Nathaniel, were the only two to survive to adulthood.

13 Albert Matthew, "Phillis Wheatley and Her Poems," *Notes and Queries*, 10S, 11 (1909), 214. Mr. Matthew located this date in H. A. Hill's *History of the Old South Church*, ii, 102. Odell says it was 1769.

14 Brawley, p. 20.

15 Mason, p. xv.

16 Mason, p. 106. "Arbour" and "Obour" refer to the same person.

17 Mason, p. 107.

18 Mason, p. xv.

19 Odell states that Wheatley fled with her husband and children. She is incorrect. Phillis did not get married until 1778. (See p. 11 of this chapter.)


21 Mason, pp. 105-106.

22 Weight, p. 92.


24 Gregoire, p. 236.

25 Mason, p. 108.

26 Mason, p. 109.

27 Mason, pp. 111-113.

28 Mason, p. xvi.
CHAPTER II

A VIEW OF GREATNESS: THE LITERARY REPUTATION OF PHILLIS WHEATLEY

In 1773 Phillis Wheatley published her book of thirty-eight pieces, Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral. This slim volume was printed in London in September of 1773 and very shortly after it was published, several reviews appeared in some of the prominent periodicals of the day. In the London Magazine or Gentleman's Monthly Intelligencer (XLII, September, 1773, 456), the following discussion of her poems is found:

These poems display no astonishing power of genius; but when we consider them as the production of a young untutored African, who wrote them after six months casual study of the English language and of writing, we cannot suppress our admiration of talents so vigorous and lively. We are the more surprised too, as we find her verses interspersed with poetical names of the ancients, which she has in every instance used with strict propriety. As our readers may be curious enough to wish for a specimen of the Afric Muse's poetry, we subjoin "Hymn to the Morning."

And in the Monthly Review (XLIX, 457-59) for December 1773 appeared a review "less concerned with the poems than with the fact their author was a Negro slave": 2

If we believed, with the ancient mythologists, that genius is the offspring of the sun,
we should rather wonder that the sable race have not been more distinguished by it, than express our surprise at a single instance. The poems written by this young negro bear no endemical marks of solar fire or spirit. They are merely imitative; and, indeed, most of those people have a turn for imitation, though they have little or none for invention ... She has written many good lines, and now and then one of superior character has dropped from her pen.

We are much concerned to find that this young woman is yet a slave. The people of Boston boast themselves of liberty. One such act as the purchase of her freedom, would, in our opinion, have done more to honor than a thousand trees with ribbons and emblems. One is undoubtedly aware of the massive racial prejudice expressed in this review and the contradictions that totally defeat its objectivity. Nonetheless, Walter Graham, in *English Literary Periodicals* (New York, 1930), p. 209, labels this one and one-half page review as "the earliest review of importance in English literature." There is no way of knowing Graham's basis for the statement, so we must accept it as a comment based on his extensive research.

Reviews and comments on Wheatley appeared in other popular periodicals such as the *London Chronicle* for September 16-19, 1773; the *Universal Magazine* for September 1773; and the *Gentleman's Magazine* for May 1773. In the latter of the three periodicals, which incidentally was printed before *Poems*, one finds an article entitled "Some Account of Phillis, A Learned Negro Girl," and subjoined therewith the "Letter Sent by the Author's Master to the Publishers."
I have not been able to personally examine this specific issue of the Gentleman's Magazine, but judging from the tone and context of its inclusion in Matthew's article, it is certain that Wheatley had earned an admirable literary reputation in England before the publication of Poems in 1773.

The notion of Wheatley's literary reputation predating her Poems is further collaborated by remarks ascribed to Benjamin Rush in "An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements in America, Upon Slave-Keeping" (Boston, 1773), p. 2, which contains the following lines: "There is now in the town of Boston a Free Negro Girl about 18 years of age, who has been but 9 years in the country, whose singular genius, and accomplishments are such as not only do honor to her sex, but to human nature. Several of her poems have been printed and read with pleasure by the public." The "several poems" refer to the many poems Wheatley published singly before 1773. These poems may be found in Part Two of Julian Mason's edition of Poems.

In 1774 appeared perhaps the most famous statement by a Frenchman on the question of slavery and the intelligence of Negroes. In a letter to Baron Constant de Rebecq, Voltaire said: "Fonntenelle avait tort de dire qu'il n'y aurait jamais de poete chez les Negres: il ya actuellement une Negresse qui fait de tres-bons vers anglais." In
reacting to Voltaire's statement, Edward Seeber humorously suggests that Voltaire was just as curious as Phillis Wheatley: "Curiously enough, Voltaire, whose opinion of the Negro was at times not very high, was one of the first eminent writers to praise Phillis Wheatley."  

Between 1774 and 1778 Wheatley published many singular poems, the most popular one being dedicated to General George Washington. This poem appeared with her letter to Washington and a covering letter to the editor in the Virginia Gazette for March 30, 1776.  

A poetic commentary on Phillis Wheatley appeared in Hartford on August 4, 1778. It was written by America's first published Negro poet, Jupiter Hammon, who entitled his poem, "An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatley, Ethiopian Poetess, in Boston, Who Came from Africa at Eight Years of Age, and Soon Became Acquainted with the Gospel of Jesus Christ." Hammon admonishes her to strive for higher things by the grace and help of God:

Come you Phillis, now aspire.  
And seek the Living God,  
So step by step thou mayst go higher,  
Till perfect in the world.  

In the Evening Post and General Advertiser for October 30, 1779 the following mention of Phillis Wheatley in connection with the proposal for her second book appeared:

The Learned and ingenious, as well as those who are pleased with novelty, are invited to encourage the publication, by a generous subscription
--the former that they may fan the sacred fire which is self-kindled in the breast of the young African; the ingenious, that they may, by reading this collection have a large play for their imaginations, and be excited to please and benefit mankind by some brilliant production of their own pens--those who are always in search of some new thing that they may obtain a sight of this 'rara avis in terra'--and everyone that the ingenious author may be encouraged to improve her own mind, benefit and please mankind.12

Thomas Jefferson, universally recognized as a racial bigot, could not resist commenting on Phillis Wheatley. In Notes on the State of Virginia (1785) Jefferson derides her thus:

Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches of poetry. Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. Love is the peculiar oestrum of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion, indeed, has produced a Phillis Whately [sic]; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism. The heroes of the Dunciad are to her, as Hercules to the author of that poem.13

Thomas Jefferson apparently knew little about Phillis Wheatley and even less about the relationship between poetry and religion. If he had taken one moment to reflect on poetry and religion, he would have realized that the Bible is full of excellent poetry. But we must not conclude at once that Jefferson was anti-Negro, though the following statements seem strongly to suggest that he was a racial bigot: "I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time
and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in endowments both of body and mind." And, "Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason and imagination, it appears to me that in memory they are equal to whites; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous." James Weldon Johnson advisedly informs us that: "It is quite likely that Jefferson's criticism was directed more against religion than against Phillis Wheatley's poetry." Johnson may have a valid point because Jefferson was a practicing deist and, therefore, categorically abhorred Christianity.

Wheatley never learned of Jefferson's remarks (she died one year before Notes), but had she been alive in 1785, we doubt seriously that she would have bothered to defend herself. Nonetheless, others who were familiar with her writings came to her rescue. Thomas Clarkson's famous first prize winning dissertation (University of Cambridge, 1785) used Phillis Wheatley as an example to demonstrate the capabilities of the Negro. This essay appeared the same year as Notes and scholarly defeated all of Jefferson's contentions. Moreover, in the process of refuting Jefferson's claims, Clarkson made a statement that surely must have caused very mixed reactions: "If the authoress was
designed for slavery, then the great part of the inhabitants of Britain must lose their claim to Freedom" (p. 112). The title of his study is *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African.* It was published in book form in Philadelphia in 1786.

In 1792, Gilbert Imlay brilliantly defended Wheatley's poetry against Jefferson's charges, saying:

I will transcribe part of her Poem on Imagination, and leave you to judge whether it is poetical or not. It will afford you an opportunity, if you have never met with it, of estimating her genius and Mr. Jefferson's judgment; and I think, without disparagement to him, that by comparison, Phillis appears much the superior. Indeed, I should be glad to be informed what white upon this continent has written more beautiful lines.17

Henri Gregoire was highly disappointed with Jefferson and could only say:

Jefferson, who appears unwilling to acknowledge the talents of Negroes, even those of Phillis Wheatley, pretends that the heroes of the Dun- ciad are divinities when compared with this African Muse. If we were disposed to cavil, we might appeal to the judgment of the public, which is manifested by the collection made of the poetry of Phillis Wheatley; but a more direct refutation may be made, by selecting portions of her works, which will give us an idea of her talents.18

In 1810 Dr. Samuel Stanhope Smith published a statement that finally answered Jefferson's remarks fully. The statement says:

The poems of Phillis Wheatley, a poor African slave, taught to read by the indulgent piety of her master, are spoken of with infinite
contempt. But I demand of Mr. Jefferson, or any other man who is acquainted with American planters, how many of those masters could have written poems as equal to those of Phillis Wheatley.19

From 1810 until 1922 the comments about Phillis Wheatley were usually favorable, at least on the part of black scholars. But in 1922 James Weldon Johnson suddenly thrust Wheatley into contempt by saying: "Only seldom does Phillis Wheatley sound a native note. Four times in single lines she refers to herself as 'Afric's Muse.' But one looks in vain for some outburst or even complaint against the bondage of her people, for some agonizing cry for her native land."20 To the best of my knowledge Johnson was the earliest black critic to level such a charge against Wheatley. However, within a few years (1939) we find J. Saunders Redding noting the same apparent lack of blackness in Wheatley's verse by saying: "Not once, however, did she express in either words or action a thought on the enslavement of her race, not once did she utter a straight-forward word for the freedom of the Negro. Phillis seems artificial, especially to the members of her own race. She is chilly and can not seem altogether real."21

Lerone Bennett does not bother to classify her as a Negro artist when he states: "Phillis Wheatley did not write as a Negro; she wrote as an eighteenth-century Bostonian, a proper eighteenth-century Bostonian."22 And John
Hope Franklin confidently states that: "She was not concerned with the problems of the Negro or of the country."\textsuperscript{23}

Though the above black scholars are reputable, their evaluations of Wheatley are questionable, for a scrutinious reading of her poetry and other related evidence suggest that she was not as anti-black and detached from the contemporary scene as they claim. These scholars generally agree on the fact that Wheatley was not treated as most slaves, but they fail to comprehend the awfully high price she paid for her special treatment. In one important way, her form of slavery was more dangerous than the slavery imposed on other blacks. In the Wheatley household Wheatley suffered incalculable harm which the form of slavery imposed on her imagination and talents. Odell tells us that: "No matter how favorable the conditions and circumstances of servitude . . . it was utterly impossible that her talents could be fully developed, or that she could enjoy more than a small share of the advantages common to the freer and lighter-hued daughters of the land."\textsuperscript{24} This small, usually unnoticed, fact undoubtedly accounts for the predominance of elegies in Wheatley's canon. She was asked (kindly ordered) to write elegies, irrespective of her wishes and will. Certainly her education was a marvelous thing, but when she could only use it in certain ways, or
for certain purposes, one wonders whether it was truly for her benefit.

Darwin T. Turner also believes that the peculiar nature of Wheatley's servitude determined the scope of her compositions. Turner argues that, "Undoubtedly the conciliatory tone of Hammon's and the non-racial attitude of Phillis Wheatley's works reflect the poets' awareness that their opportunity to learn and to publish depended upon the good will of their masters."25 Chances are that if Wheatley had lashed out at the injustices of slavery, she would have wound up in a far worse state of both physical and mental slavery.

In addition to these possible reasons why Wheatley's poetry is unattractive to many modern scholars, it must be clearly understood that during the period in which Wheatley lived attitudes toward Negroes and even the Negroes' attitudes about themselves were not as hostile as they were during the industrial revolution and thereafter. Lerone Bennett points to the fact that: "When coming into contact with Christians prior to the industrial revolution the Negro did not feel that antagonistic spirit, but rather the spirit of humility and gratitude, for them Christianity offered earthly and spiritual welfare."26 Richard Wright confirms Bennett's observation in White Man, Listen when he says that: "Slavery had not yet cast its blackness com-
pletely over the American scene, and the minds of white people were not so warped at that time as they are now regarding the capacities of the Negro."

In light of these possible reasons why Wheatley's poetry does not include as much awareness and protest of the black experience as many would wish, it is a great injustice to expect of Wheatley what neither she nor her culture were able to supply. We can only guess what Wheatley would have written if she had not lived in the Wheatley household or in eighteenth-century New England.

Nonetheless, Wheatley's poetry does signify her awareness of the slavery question and even her involvement in the struggle for freedom. Gregoire was able to see her racial commitment and has written: "Phillis in the piece "Ode to Maecenas" reminds us that Terence[28] was her com-patriot. On seeing his works ('To S.M., A Young African Painter, On Seeing His Works') she vents her grief on the sorrows of her countrymen."[29] Dorothy Porter, an eminent scholar of Black American literature, realizes that Phillis Wheatley did, in fact, know of her people's condition and sympathized with it:

Among the earliest outpourings of song and story, one finds the writings of Phillis Wheatley and Jupiter Hammon, the first of the black poets. Their products were striking enough for their day and were seldom matched by occasional expression of hymns, spiritual songs, or didactic verse, however impassioned,
on the subjects of freedom, slavery or other-worldly bliss. The remarkable thing is that these early black expressions were genuine, sometimes moving and often pleasing specimens of narrative writing or poetry describing the condition, the aspirations or the sufferings of black genius. And, of course, they voiced the hopes of the race.30

A reference to Wheatley's active though limited participation in the cause of racial freedom may be found in Renfro's edition of Poems. Renfro remarks that: "She was not insensible to prejudices, for she makes gentle references to them in several of her poems, never with bitterness of spirit, but with true purity of heart and Christian feeling."31 Margaretta M. Odell in her 1834 edition of Poems sees a significant racial theme thus: "Her poetry will be found to be a beautiful expression of her religious sentiments and a noble vindication of the claims of her race."32 William Wells Brown supports Odell's evaluation by making the following statement: "Fortunately rescued from the fate that awaits the victims of slave trade, this injured daughter of Africa had an opportunity to develop the genius God had given her, and of showing the world the great wrong done to her race."33 Darwin T. Turner as late as 1969 makes the following statement based on his understanding of "On Being Brought from Africa to America," "To the University of Cambridge," and "Goliath of Gath": "It is significant that she urges greater respect for the potential of the Africans."34 And finally, Margaret Just Butcher in The Negro in
American Culture provides the appropriate words for a
defense of Wheatley's poetry: "Her constructive contribu-
tion was to give evidence of the intellectual and artistic
capabilities of the Negro in a time and environment of
doubt; this, with a few other talents, she gave."

The preceding statements attest to Wheatley's
involvement in the racial struggle of her time, and to the
fact that being black was no handicap to intellectual excel-
rence. In her life, every day was a witness to her desire
to visibly show what the peculiar and delicate conditions
of her slavery prevented her from openly writing about.
Wheatley acted out the greatness of being black rather than
becoming involved in the rhetoric associated with any dra-
astic change. Moreover, her example provided the anti-slavery
cause with evidence of the black man's true worth that no
racial bigot could contest. Of her influence upon the
abolition movement, George W. Williams says:

Her influence upon the rapidly growing anti-
slave sentiment of Massachusetts was consider-
able. From a state of nudity in a slave-market,
a stranger to the English language, this young
African girl won her way over the rough paths
of learning, had conquered the spirit of caste
in the best society of conservative Boston; had
brought two continents to her feet in admira-
tion and amazement at the rare poetical
accomplishments of a child of Africa.

Further incontestable evidence of Wheatley's influence upon
the slavery question may be readily found in almost every
issue of Garrison's Liberator. From the 1830's to the
1840's, Wheatley's poetry was reproduced therein, time and time again.

Since the days of abolition two significant articles have been written dealing with the question of Wheatley's race consciousness. Arthur P. Davis in "Personal Elements in the Poetry of Phillis Wheatley" convincingly shows that a definite outline of Wheatley's personality, character, and views may be found in her verse. In a significant way this one article has done more to redeem Phillis Wheatley than any other single effort. However, it is extremely curious that most Wheatley scholars who have written about her since Davis' article (1953) fail to take note of his findings and consequently mislabel her as being non-committed.

The other significant article to treat the question of Wheatley's blackness appeared just last fall. R. Lynn Matson appropriately entitled the discussion "Phillis Wheatley--Soul Sister?" Matson argues that Wheatley identified with her people through the language and motifs of death which characterize a great deal of her extant verse. The constant references to death constitute what Matson believes to be her attempt to escape from her existence of nominal slavery just as other slaves sought freedom from the evils of full-fledged bondage. Matson executes this thesis well and, though much of the material
previously appeared in Davis' article, the interpretation is refreshing. Also, the notion of Wheatley's having tendencies toward escapism has been generally known long before 1972. John Hope Franklin noted as early as 1945 that: "Phillis' writings are, perhaps a good example of the search for independence through the method of escape, which was to become a favorite device of the Negro of the nineteenth-century." However, it seems that no one until Matson actually documented the motif of escapism in Wheatley's verse with appropriate passages. This type of supportive research and analysis is sorely needed in Wheatley scholarship.
Notes

1 Julian Mason, The Poems of Phillis Wheatley (Chapel Hill: The Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1966), p. xxxvi. The second chapter of the introduction has been invaluable in developing this chapter.

2 Mason, p. xxxvii.

3 Ibid., p. xxvii.

4 Ibid.


7 Mason, pp. xlii-xlili.


9 Ibid.


12 Renfro, Life and Works of Phillis Wheatley, p. 23.


14 Ibid., p. 150.

15 Ibid., p. 146.

17 Gilbert Imlay, Topographical Description of Western Territory of North America (London: J. DeBrett, 1792), pp. 185-86.


19 An Essay on the Cause of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species (New Brunswick and New York, 1810), p. 269. Quoted in Mason, p. xliiv.


26 For a full discussion of changing Negro attitudes, see Ch. Five of Bennett's Before the Mayflower.


28 Terence was an African playwright and poet. Wheatley identifies with him and begs for a portion of the blessing Maecenas gave him.


31 Renfro, Life and Works of Phillis Wheatley, p. 15.

32 Odell, Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley, p. 15.

34 Turner, Black American Literature: Poetry, p. 9.


37 "Personal Elements in the Poetry of Phillis Wheatley," Phylon, 14 (June 1953), 191-98.

38 "Phillis Wheatley--Soul Sister?" Phylon, 33 (Fall 1972), 222-30.

39 Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom, p. 156.
CHAPTER III

THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL: PHILLIS WHEATLEY
AS SEEN THROUGH HER POETRY

The extant poetry of Phillis Wheatley may be properly classified as neo-classical verse, and may be divided into four broad classes: poems on abstractions ("On Virtue," and "On Recollection"); poems dedicated to living persons ("To the King's Most Excellent Majesty," and "To S. M., A Young African Painter, On Seeing His Works"); poems that reveal her political and racial views ("Liberty and Peace," and "On Being Brought from Africa to America"); and poems that deal with death ("On the Death of J. C., and Infant" and "On the Death of Dr. Samuel Marshall"). The largest class contains the poems that deal with death and the second largest class includes poems dedicated to living people. An analysis of her poetry for her use of neo-classical conventions and for the personal elements contained therein reveals the degree to which she was a successful poet.\(^2\)

One of the most common neo-classical conventions that Wheatley adheres to is that of the epic setting. The epic setting may be readily defined as being vast in scope,
covering great nations, the world, or the universe. For Wheatley the epic setting was primarily universal, because in her many elegies souls are always seen as they wing their way to Heaven:

Come, let us all behold with wishful eyes
The saint ascending to his native skies;
From hence the prophet wing'd his rapt'rous way
To the blest mansions in eternal day.
("Death of Rev. Dr. Sewall")

Perfect in bliss she from her heav'nly home
Looks down and smiling beckons you to come;
("On the Death of a Young Lady")

To heav'n's high mandate cheerfully resign'd
She mounts, and leaves the rolling globe behind,
("To the Honorable T. H. Esq.")

Concerning Wheatley's use of the universal epic setting, R. Lynn Matson notes that the metaphor of death as a flight or a voyage in the poetry of Phillis Wheatley later became popular in Negro spirituals. Such spirituals as "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," "This Train is Bound for Glory," and "'Tis the Old Ship of Zion" illustrate Wheatley's influence upon the black man's concept of Heaven and how he gets there.

Phillis Wheatley was quite fond of the heroic couplet and there are three examples which are pleasing to me, perhaps only because they show how lofty and sustained she can be:

Soon as the sun forsook the eastern main
The pealing thunder shook the heav'nly plain:
("Hymn to the Evening")
In the smoothest numbers pour the notes along,
For bright Aurora now demands my song.
("Hymn to the Morning")

Whose silken fetters all the sense bind,
And soft captivity involves the mind,
("On Imagination")

However, Wheatley deviated from using the heroic couplet in five instances as identified by Mason:

"On Virtue," which is written in free verse;
"To the University of Cambridge, in New England," which is primarily blank verse; "A Farewell to America," which is in ballad stanza;
"Ode to Neptune," which has three sections of six lines each, with each section having four lines of iambic tetrameter couplets, followed by one heroic couplet; "An Hymn to Humanity," which has six sections of six lines each, with each section having first an iambic trimeter line followed by an iambic trimeter line which rhymes with the third line of the section.4

The sixth poem, "America," discovered since Mason's 1966 analysis of Wheatley's poems, contains a heptameter, the single longest line in Wheatley canon: "New English force, thou fear'st his Tyranny and thou didst frown." But this heptameter is not nearly as unusual as the ability of this mere child to accurately and consistently reproduce the rhythmic idiosyncrasies of the heroic couplet. She did not have formal training in writing poetry and yet she wrote iambic pentameter perceptively and with apparently little difficulty. Of her remarkable talent, Vernon Loggins has said: "She lived during the age when the poetical fashion in America was to imitate Pope; and while John Trumbull,
Timothy Dwight, Joel Barlow, the Phillip Freneau of the political satires, and numerous others among her contemporaries caught more of his general spirit, she perhaps excelled them all in reproducing his rhythm. It is generally noised about in anthropological circles that Africans categorically have a better sense of rhythm than any other race. Phillis Wheatley, in a sense, lends validity to this assumption.

Though Wheatley was highly successful with the heroic couplet, she is not without her irregular two-line rhymes:

"Lo, here a man, redeem'd by Jesus' blood
A sinner once, but now a saint with God:
("On the Death of Sewell")

He leaves his carriage to another's care,
And runs to greet his brethren of the war
("Goliath of Gath")

They chill the tides of Fancy's flowing sea,
Cease then, my song, cease the unequal lay.
("On Imagination")

It seems, too, that whenever she pleased, she constructed three-line rhymes, a somewhat more difficult task:

From Tithon's bed now might Aurora rise,
Her cheeks all glowing with celestial dies,
While a pure stream of light o'erflows the skies.
("On Imagination")

From thee, O man, what gratitude should rise!
And, when from balmy sleep thou op'st thine eyes,
Let thy first thoughts be praise to the skies.
("Thoughts on the Works of Providence")
To yon bright regions let your faith ascend,
Prepare to join your dearest infant friend
In pleasure without measure, without end.
("On the Death of C. B., an Infant")

Each of these triple rhymes is encased in a bracket, which clearly suggests that Wheatley knew what she was doing and that she wanted the lines to remain thus.

No neo-classical poet could consider himself a real poet if he were not able to portray common people in heroic terms. Miss Wheatley was apparently fond of several men, most of them being ministers or soldiers, and in her poems they are forever remembered as "prophets." There may not be anything particularly heroic about a prophet, but in the strongly Christian environment of Puritan New England, the individual closest to God was the "prophet." If an individual could prove that he had heard God's voice, he immediately received honor, respect, and prestige in the community. Moreover, the Bible, the first book Phillis Wheatley learned to read, is in a sense the recounting of many prophets' experiences with God. In view of the historical importance and the contemporary respectability of "prophets," it is small wonder that Wheatley chose to label her heroes "prophets":

O what a blessing in his flight gen'd!
How oft for us the holy prophet pray'd!
How oft for us the Word of Life convey'd
("On the Death of Rev. Sewell")

Behold the prophet in his tow'ring flight!
("On the Death of Whitefield")
And bear thee upward to that blest abode,
Where, like the prophet, thou shalt find God.
("To the Earl of Dartmouth")

However, when Wheatley comes face to face with the greatness of General George Washington, she drops the "prophet" distinction and calls him "godlike": "Find in your train of boasted heroes, one / To match the praise of Godlike Washington" ("On the Capture of General Lee"). This one distinction is found only once in her poems, which leads me to think that to Phillis Wheatley, George Washington was the greatest person alive in the colonies. This notion is amply supported by her poem and letter dedicated to him while he was yet a soldier (see Mason, pp. 87-90). It is worthwhile also to mention here that the individual who led the Jewish slaves out of Egypt was also a "prophet." The slavery of the Hebrews and the slavery of blacks in America contain parallels on many levels and perhaps in her usual unassuming way Wheatley is saying that the greatest men are those who work for spiritual, national, and racial freedom. If this is, indeed, Wheatley's criterion for selecting these men, then we may conjecture that she employs her description of heroic characters to signify her awareness of and involvement with all the above freedoms.

Another neo-classical convention that Wheatley was unusually fond of was the invocation. In her first poem of Poems on Various Subjects, she invokes Maecenas, the special
friend and patron of Horace and Vergil to inspire her as he had inspired them:

Maecenas, you beneath the myrtle shade,
Read o'er what poets sung, and shepards play'd,
What felt those poets but you feel the same?
Does not your soul possess the sacred flame?
Their noble strains your equal genius shares
In softer language, and diviner airs
Then grant Maecenas, thy paternal rays,
Hear me propitious, and defend my lays.

In a great number of her other poems she often beseeches the aid of the "tuneful nine":

While an intrinsic ardor prompts me to write,
The muses promise to assist my pen:
("To the University of Cambridge")

Mneme begin, Inspire, ye sacred nine,
Your vent'rous Afric in her great design.
("On Recollection")

Indulgent Muse! my grov'ling mind inspire
And fill my bosom with celestial fire.
("To A Lady Coming to North America")

Ostensibly the invocations are common, but a close examination of her remarks to the muses reveals how Wheatley feels about herself and her talent, which at first appears quite negative:

But I sit, and mourn a grov'ling mind,
That fain would mount, and ride upon the wind.
But I less happy cannot raise the song
The faultering Music dies upon my tongue.
("To Maecenas")

Muse! lend thy aid, nor let me sue in vain,
Tho' last and meanest of the rhyming train.
("Niobe in Distress")

While I each golden sentiment admire
In thee, the muse's bright celestial fire.
The generous plaudit 'tis not mine to claim
A muse untutor'd, and unknown to fame.
("Phillis' Reply")

However, just as frequent as these negative comments about her possibilities are the remarks that express self-confidence and a positive awareness of her talents:

While bright Aurora purples o'er the main,
So long, great sir, the muse thy praise shall sing
("To Maecenas")

Of light divine be a rich portion lent
To guide my soul, and favor my intent
Celestial muse, my arduous flight sustain
And raise my mind to a seraphic strain!
("Thoughts on the Works of Providence")

My song more happy speaks a greater name,
Feels higher motives and a nobler flame.
For thee, O Rotch, the muse attunes her strings,
And mounts sublime above inferior things
("To A Gentleman on His Voyage")

The constant shift in self-perspective is confusing and maybe even misleading. Perhaps Wheatley is doing nothing more than adhering to the neo-classical convention of authorial anonymity. But throughout her canon the positive comments outnumber the negative remarks two-to-one. Therefore, it is possible to argue that Wheatley did in fact know that she was highly talented and that she may have interjected negative remarks to pacify her audience. Her whole existence and state of nominal slavery was based on her ability to remain humble, slave-like and totally unaggressive. Nonetheless, there is one occasion when
Wheatley informs her audience that she will develop her talents despite the fact that she is John Wheatley's servant. When her passionate plea to Maecenas does not avail the desired results, she exclaims: "I will snatch a laurel from thine honored head, / While you indulgent smile upon the deed." Incidentally, this is one of the strongest lines in Wheatley's poems.

Whereas Anne Bradstreet is commonly recognized as the "Tenth Muse," Phillis Wheatley may well be called the "Eleventh Muse." She calls herself "muse" no less than ten times and in "Liberty and Peace," a poem published in the last year of her life, she refers to herself as the muse with prophetic powers: "LO! Freedom comes. Th' prescient Muse foretold." The "prescient Muse" can only refer to Wheatley because none of the original muses was given charge over prophecy.7 Wheatley's self-evaluation as a prophet likens her to the heroic characters of her poems, and distantly likens her to William Blake, who considered himself more of a prophet than a mystic. This latter notion of comradeship is supported when it is remembered that both Blake and Wheatley sought freedom. Blake wanted the English to be free of the "mental machines" or erroneous ways of viewing the cosmos, and Wheatley wanted America to be free of England, so that its "mental machines" would not destroy America too.8
The neo-classical school of poets was especially given to using elaborate images. Phillis Wheatley possessed a formidable imagination and from its workings we have these grand images:

Ere yet the morn its lovely blushes spread,  
See Sewell number'd with the happy dead.  
("On the Death of Sewell")

We trace the pow'r of Death from tomb to tomb,  
And his are all the ages yet to come.  
("To A Lady on the Death of Three Relations")

Be still, O tyrant of the main;  
Nor let thy brow contract'd frowns betray,  
While my Susannah skims the wat'ry way  
("Ode to Neptune")

Vernon Loggins is quite accurate in his comment: "Images of like character abound in Phillis Wheatley's poems."9 Certainly in her poetry one finds the favorite eighteenth-century cliches like, "vaulted skies," "roving fancy," "crystal shower," "balmy zephyrs," "graceful tresses," "immortal shade," "rolling globe," and "streams of sorrow," but there are many original creations which refute the claim that Wheatley was only an imitator. In her use of common images and creation of new and pleasing ones, she automatically qualifies herself as an honorary member of the "Tribe of Ben." Ben Jonson was probably as neo-classical as any of his contemporaries and immediate successors were, but his motto was: "The ancients are to be guides, not commanders."10 Wheatley acknowledged the ancients (Pope
and Milton mainly) but she definitely strove for higher grounds of artistic expression, as evidenced by her employment of images.

Most neo-classical poets wrote narratives of some sort. Phillis Wheatley made two major attempts at producing narrative poems and in each instance she is proficient. Her narrative, "Niobe in Distress for Her Children Slain by Apollo," is based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book VI, and throughout the 224 lines she maintains the reader's interest with little difficulty. Consider the unusually high narrative impact of the following passage describing Niobe's plea for the life of her last child:

One only daughter lives, and she the least; The queen close clasp'd the daughter to her breast: "Ye heav'nly pow'rs, ah spare me one," she cry'd, "Ah! spare me one," the vocal hills reply'd: In vain she begs, the Fates her suit deny, In her embrace she sees her daughter die.

"Goliath of Gath," her second narrative, is by any and all standards an excellent paraphrase of the Biblical account. An intensive reading of the Biblical version reveals that her paraphrase is worthy of being placed beside the great poetry of Psalms, Jeremiah, and Song of Solomon. Furthermore, her rendition of the account expands Goliath as a character to dimensions which apparently do not translate easily out of the Hebrew. I have found only one other Biblical scholar who agrees with Wheatley when she
portrays Goliath with a totally new emphasis: "'Your words are lost to me,' the giant cries, / While fear and wrath contended in his eyes." Never before had Goliath been seen as being fearful of the small shepherd boy or as in any way given to mixed emotions about his certain victory. Even Samuel failed to say explicitly that Goliath was anything but annoyed: "The Phillistine came towards David, with his shield-bearer marching ahead; and he looked David up and down and had nothing but contempt for him" (2 Samuel 17:14 NEB). However, the marginal references support the possibility of Goliath's instability, but we can only guess whether Wheatley used these references in her research or whether she just took liberty with her "poetic license." In either event, her paraphrase is scrupulously accurate and in this one place astonishingly brilliant.

Dr. Julian Mason argues that: "Phillis only occasionally uses such devices as alliteration and onomato-
poeia," which is highly questionable. Wheatley, on the contrary, was fond of alliteration, beginning with the first poem she published, "On Messrs. Hussy and Coffin": "And made you fearful of the whistling wind?" In another line of the same poem, Wheatley demonstrates internal double alliteration: "Some favorite hope their fainting hearts to cheer." Other examples of her use of alliteration are:

See, Sewell number'd with the happy dead.
Hail, Holy man, arriv'd the immortal shore,
("On the Death of Sewell")
For plunder you, and we for freedom fight.
("On the Capture of General Lee")

In the preceding discussion, attention has been given to Wheatley's use of the various devices and ornaments that externally characterize neo-classical poetry. But neo-classical poetry was more than ingenious devices and fancy constructions. It was an attempt to put in the best possible form the best ideals and aspirations of mankind. For Phillis Wheatley the best ideals are all couched in Christianity. Her expression is neo-classical, but her content is Christian. This combination is particularly interesting in light of the argument that: "Provencialities of Christendom hinder neo-classicism,"¹³ a notion which might have been true for the masses of neo-classical poets, but not for Phillis Wheatley. It seems that in her young mind the ideals of neo-classicism such as beauty, temperance, justice, prudence, and courage are the same ideals common to Christianity, and they are. The major difference between neo-classical thought and Christianity is that the former expounds "fatalism," whereas the latter supports man's right to be a "free moral agent."

Phillis Wheatley probably thought that her coming to America was the result of direct intervention by the God of the Puritans, just as Oedipus' fate was the result of Jove's machinations. Certainly both deities perform similar
functions, but there is one immense difference. The laws of Jove were set at random and his fancy was his command. The God of the Puritans set unchangeable laws, and His will was written for all to read and know. In the Bible, the transcription of His character and will, there cannot be found one word ordering white Americans and Europeans to enslave Africans, thus providing no grounds on which whites had the authority to enslave Africans. The only logical conclusion is that American slavery must have been the dubious blessing of another power. Phillis Wheatley read the Bible from cover to cover, thus she undoubtedly knew of this credibility gap, because this God of the Puritans which she so often talks about is actually as distant and removed from her as Africa was. We are not certain which god she served but from the following evidence it was not the God of the Puritans, who according to the Puritans condoned slavery.¹⁴

Critics often remark that Wheatley's poetry does not treat the subject of love, a popular theme of the eighteenth century. Certainly, it is strange enough that she does not ever say that she loves any of the Wheatleys,¹⁵ who did so much for her, but it is even stranger that she does not form an inseparable relationship with the one individual supposedly responsible for her being in America and being saved. Note carefully how she refers to the God
of the Puritans (hereafter called God) in her most personal poem, "On Being Brought from Africa to America":

'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.

Whereas there is nothing wrong with using the indefinite article "a" before God, it is clear that a sense of personal warmth is strangely missing. This absence of warmth is especially unexpected from Wheatley, who is ostensibly so holy, saved, and religious. It seems that if she really had a personal relationship with God, that she would have said something like: "That there's my God, that there's my Saviour too."

This same lack of holiness and religiosity apparently has also been noted by Jupiter Hammon in his ode to Phillis Wheatley. Upon reading the poem for the first time, one gets the impression that Hammon is actually preaching to Wheatley. He pleads with her to consider her soul's salvation as though she is still a heathen. From Hammon's point of view it seems as though she was never a Christian or that she may have back-slid. The latter of these two possibilities is interesting because in August of 1778, the time of the poem, Wheatley was married to John Peters, and from all available evidence he was definitely not concerned with living the Christian's life. Her marriage failed to
be a happy one and in such misery, it is very easy for one to forget the ideals of Christian living.

To give further credence to this argument, from Wheatley's poems, the following passage is useful: "Great God, incomprehensible unknown / By sense, we bow at thine exalted throne." Note here that Wheatley knows God only by and through her senses, which is clearly a pagan way of maintaining a spiritual relationship. To know God, one must learn of Him through spirit (intellect) and truth, a process that she does not seem to have experienced.

Still another revealing passage treating Wheatley's conception of God is the following: "The greatest gift that ev'n a God can give, / He freely offer'd to the num'rous throng" ("On the Death of George Whitefield"). These lines are taken from the 1773 version of the elegy dedicated to the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield and interestingly enough they differ quite significantly from the original version of the poem published in the Massachusetts Spy for October 11, 1770. This earlier version is photocopied in Charles F. Heartman's edition of Poems.16 It reads: "A greater gift not God himself can give: / He urg'd the need of Him to every one." At once it is clear that the earlier version of the poem has God in a more personal and restricted context. Why did she alter the latter version to make Him "a God" rather than "God" as in the first version?
In other contexts, Wheatley calls Him "the God":
"Adore the God, who gives and takes away; / Eye him all,
his holy name revere" ("On the Death of A Young Lady of 5
Years"). Again I repeat that there is nothing wrong with
"the God," but the article "the" is really quite unnecessary
when referring to the singular God of the Puritans. In a
polytheistic (neo-classical) system, "the" might be needed
to distinguish one god from another god, but in the mono-
theistic system of the Puritans there was God and no other
gods, as evidenced in the First Commandment.

The following three passages demonstrate that
Phillis Wheatley seemingly had no intentions of making God
personal in her life:

"That all the earth's inhabitants may know
"That there's a God, who governs all below:
("Goliath of Gath")

Thou that Doest, daily, feel his hand and rod,
And dar'st deny the Essence of a God.
("Atheism")

The Atheist sure no more can boast aloud;
Of chance, or nature and exclude the God
("To The Rev. Dr. Thomas Anory")

As distant and removed as God may seem in the above pas-
sages, Wheatley removes Him even farther. In many passages
like the three below, the God that brought her to America
is everybody's God but her God:

The crown upon your brows may flourish long,
And that your arm in your God be strong
("To the King's Majesty")
On harps of gold to tune immortal lays,
And to your God immortal anthems raise,
("To A Lady and Her Children")

To eye the path the saint departed trod,
And trace him to the bosom of his God.
("On the Death of A Young Gentleman")

The most interesting thing about the above citations is that
two of them picture the subjects in Heaven, the place,
according to R. Lynn Matson, that Wheatley wanted to go. 17
Yet only twice does she ever picture herself in Heaven. 18
Perhaps this lack of her presence in Heaven is linked
closely to Wheatley's humility and unassuming demeanor. In
life she always gave deference to whites 19 and maybe she
thought that the "Tree of Life" would be segregated too.

Wheatley's conception of God takes its most unortho-
dox turn when she purposely mixes pagan deities with divine
deities:

While Homer paints! circumfus'd in air,
Celestial Gods in mortal forms appear;
("To Maecenas")

Pleased with the theme, see sportive fancy
play,
In realms devoted to the God of day!
("Phillis' Reply")

Ye martial pow'rs, and all ye tuneful nine,
Inspire my song, and aid my high design
("Goliath of Gath")

Note that in the last passage she is seeking the aid of the
"tuneful nine" on a strictly Christian subject, the narra-
tive of David and Goliath. Some may argue that perhaps
what is at work is either Wheatley's confusion concerning
God and gods or maybe her irregular spelling. But she was
too intelligent to make the first error, and evidence
strongly dispels the notion that she committed the second.
Consider the spelling of "god" in the four passages taken
from "Atheism":

Thou that dost daily feel his hand and rod
If there's no god from whence did all things
spring?

They are recorded in the books of Praise
It was not written by the Hand of God

Turn now I pray thee from the dangerous road
Rise from the dust and seek the mighty God

Thy thanks, and tribute, Adoration pay,
To heathen Gods, can wise Apollo say
Tis I that saves thee from the deepest hell.

In the first passage, "god" refers to the God of the Pur-
tans and it is not capitalized. In the second and third
passages, "God" means the God of the Puritans and it is
capitalized. However, in the last passage, "God" is
capitalized but here it refers to pagan gods. About this
inconsistency Mason and others argue that Wheatley was a
careless speller.20 Certainly she was, but when she spells
the same word two different ways in the same poem, it seems
that something more than carelessness is operating.21

The final answer to Phillis Wheatley's unorthodox
conception of God might be that she never subdued the pagan
influence of her native land. The notion of her paganistic
tendencies is amply supported by the fact that the only
thing she seems to have remembered of her homeland is that her mother poured out water before the rising sun, which is undoubtedly a religious rite of some sort. The idea of Wheatley's being pagan in heart is particularly confusing, because she was a baptized member of the Old South Meeting Church and, as such, was supposed to be a converted Christian. Whether this is the answer or not, it is plain to see that something other than a wholly Puritan philosophy influenced Phillis Wheatley, and that the God she speaks of so many times is not necessarily the same God as the God of the Puritans.

While Wheatley may have been not totally captivated with the God of the Puritans, she relies heavily on the Bible for many of her allusions. "From hence the prophet wing'd his rapt'rous way" ("On the Death of Sewell") is based directly on 2 Kings 2:11: "And it came to pass, as, they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven." In "On the Death of Whitefield" we find this line: "How he wrestled with his God by night," which is taken from Genesis 32:24: "And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled with an angel until the breaking of the day." Job was one of the wisest men to live in Biblical times and from the second chapter of Job, Wheatley lifts an allusion: "Adore
the God who gives and takes away" ("On the Death of A 5 Year Old"). Job said centuries before: "Naked I came out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord hath given and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." And finally, when Wheatley speaks of Death in "To His Honour the Lieutenant-Governor": "Who'er escaped thee, the saint of old / Beyond the flood in sacred annal told," she is referring to Enoch of Genesis 5:24, the only man not to see death: "And Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him."

However, Phillis Wheatley was by no means as fond of using Biblical allusions as some other eighteenth-century poets were. In his poem to Wheatley, Jupiter Hammon bases each of the twenty-one stanzas on a Biblical text. Below are three representative passages from his ode that illustrate the point:

1
O, come, you pious youth! adore
The wisdom of thy God,
In bringing thee from distant shore,
To learn His holy word.
Eccles. xii.

16
Come, dear Phillis, be advised
To drink Samaria's flood;
There nothing shall suffice
But Christ's redeeming blood.
John iv,14-15

17
While thousands muse with earthly toys,
And range about the street,
Dear Phillis, see for heaven's joys,
Where we do hope to meet.
Matt. vi.33.
Gloriously defiant of the neo-classical convention of authorial anonymity, Phillis Wheatley throughout her canon constantly identifies herself and makes it known which side she is on politically and racially. Politically she was first pro-English, then pro-American, and finally an American royalist. Racially she was always black!

In "To the King's Most Excellent Majesty,1768," Wheatley makes it crystal clear that she is in favor of England's continued rule over the colonies: "O May your scepter num'rous nations sway, / And all with love and readiness obey." This 1773 version of the poem does not contain the last two lines of the holograph version recently discovered by Kuncio, which abundantly shows that Wheatley was pro-English: "When wars come on the proudest rebel fled / God thunder'd fury on their guilty head." One can only speculate why these last two lines did not appear in the 1773 edition of Poems, but it seems fairly safe to conclude that influential rebels had them removed.

Phillis Wheatley's next political comment is just the opposite of the first. In her celebrated poem, "To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth, His Majesty's Honorable Secretary of State for North America, and etc.," she appeals with Dartmouth to support the American cry for freedom and independence:

For favours past, great Sir, our thanks are due,
And thee we ask thy favors to renew,
Since in thy pow'r, as in thy will before,
To soothe the griefs, which thou did'st once deplore.

Unfortunately, Dartmouth did not share Wheatley's view on the question of colonial freedom, as we learn from a comment by Julian Mason: "Phillis' hopes proved to be false ones, as Dartmouth proved to be a minister not in sympathy with the events which occurred in New England in the following months."23

From this point (1772), Phillis Wheatley became more and more patriotic. In her most famous poem, "To His Excellency General Washington," she wishes him success in the campaign against the British:

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.

During the same year of the Washington ode (1776), Wheatley wrote a poem honoring Major General Lee, who was "betrayed into the hands of the Enemy by the treachery of a pretended friend." The poem is essentially a dialogue between the betrayer and General Lee, but one notable passage is:

"Say, art thou he, beneath whose vengeful hands Our best of (English) heroes grasp'd in the death the sands?
One fierce regard of thine indignant eye
Turn'd Britain pale, and made her armies fly:

In "Liberty and Peace," a poem published in the closing days of Wheatley's life, one notes that her patri-
otism reaches a high level of intensity. Also, judging from the following lines, it is safe to say that if Wheatley had lived, she would have ardently supported the "Monroe Doctrine":

The generous Prince th' impending Vengeance eye's
Sees the fierce Wrong, and to the rescue flies.
Perish that thirst of boundless Power, that drew
On Albion's head the Curse to Tyrants due.

The generous Spirit that Columbia fires.
Auspicious Heaven shall fill with fav'ring Gales,
Where e'er Columbia spreads her swellin' Sails:
To every Realm shall Peace her charms display
And Heavenly Freedom spread her golden Ray.

A final anti-English comment constitutes practically the entire poem, "America," which is a narrative between a mother (England) and her son (America). The mother has been beating (taxing) the boy without cause and the confused child responds, saying:

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

As previously stated, Phillis Wheatley was an American royalist. Support for this notion is found in her poem to Washington: "A crown, a mansion and a throne that shine /
With gold unfading, Washington! be thine." Concerning these lines, James Weldon Johnson has remarked: "Phillis was far from being a democrat not only in her social ideas, but also
in her political ideas; unless a religious meaning is given to the closing lines of her ode to Washington, she was a decided royalist" (the lines are quoted above). Phillis Wheatley envisioned General Washington becoming King George Washington rather than President Washington. It seems that the idea of monarchy was particularly captivating for Wheatley because she refers to it many times and in one instance informs her audience that in Heaven, Africans will be kings, not slaves:

"Take him, ye Africans, he longs for you,
"Impartial Saviour is his title due:
"Washed in the fountain of redeeming blood,
"You shall be sons, and kings, and priests to God."

("On the Death of Whitefield")

The controversy raging over Wheatley's racial consciousness was raised and partially answered in Chapter II. Several passages from her poetry clearly document that she was concerned with her race and that she never hesitated to identify with her black brothers and sisters. In no less than five places in her poetry, Wheatley lets the world know that she is black:

An Ethiop tells you 'tis your greatest foe
("To the University of Cambridge")

Can Afric's muse forgetful prove?
("Hymn to Humanity")

No heavenly tiding from the Afric Muse
("To His Honorable Liet.-Governor")

Your vent'rous Afric in her great design
("On Recollection")
Then fix the humble Afric seat
("Phillis' Reply")
In other poems she identifies with her people and urges them to strive for higher things:

"Take him, ye Africans, he longs for you,
"Impartial Saviour is his title due:
"Wash'd in the fountain of redeeming blood,
"Thou shall be sons, and kings, and priests
to God."
("On the Death of Whitefield")

This advice is almost identical to her aspirations for her people couched in a letter dated February 9, 1774: "My heart expands with sympathetic joy to see at a distant time the thick cloud of ignorance dispersing from the face of my benighted country. Europe and America have long been fed with the heavenly provision, and I fear they loath it, while Africa is perishing with a spiritual famine. O that they could partake of the crumbs, the precious crumbs, which fall from the table of these distinguished children of the kingdom."24 It is interesting to note that Wheatley is reflecting an idea that William Blake also displays in his works. Blake was totally convinced that Albion and his brothers had lost all connection with God and the world's spirituality depended upon the leadership of the African, who had a more sensible and pragmatic idea of God.25

But Phillis Wheatley is not always as mild and unassuming when speaking of her people as she is in the above passages. In "To the Earl of Dartmouth," Phillis
makes it crystal clear that she does not like slavery and that she does not wish any other human to experience what she is experiencing:

Should, you my lord, while you persue my song, 
Wonder from whence my love of freedom sprung, 
When flows these wishes for the common good, 
By feeling hearts alone best understood, 
I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate 
Was snatch'd from Africa's fancy'y happy seat; 
Such, such my case. And I then but pray 
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?

The underscored lines are witness to a deep well of pathos on the question of slavery.

Phillis Wheatley not only identifies with her people, she even defends them in a society that was becoming increasingly ignorant about the Negro. In "On Being Brought from Africa to America," she reminds whites that the major property of Salvation, the ability to make new men of old men, is not distributed to whites only: "Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain, / May be refined, and join the angelic train." And in "On Recollection," she reminds her readers that what Africans produce is equally important and artistically as good as that produced by any other human race:

Through the unbounded regions of the mind, 
Diffusing light celestial and refin'd. 
The heavenly phantom paints the actions done 
By ev'ry tribe beneath the rolling sun.

The last two lines are significant because inherent in their structure is the connotation of universal greatness with all
men having an equal share in it. Moreover, the word "tribe" denotes something far different from race, peoples, country, or any other such term. In short, we think of Africa when "tribe" is used.

Most critics agree that Phillis Wheatley picked up her propensity for the heroic couplet from Alexander Pope, and it seems that his influence on her verse ends there. Vernon Loggins points to the fact that: "She never mentioned Pope, and only rarely touched upon themes such as he treated." Julian Mason confirms Loggins' observation by noting that Wheatley calls Milton, not Pope, "British Homer." Moreover, one is hard pressed to find in her poetry allusions to Pope's verse, but an allusion to Milton is apparent below:

The refluient surges beat the sounding shore;
Or thick as leaves in Autumns golden reign,
("To General Washington")

In Paradise Lost one may find the following lines:

His [Satan's] legions . . .
Thick as autumnal leaves that strew the brooks . . .
(Book I, ll. 301-302)

Loggins also reports that Wheatley was influenced by Gray, Addison, and Watts.

However, more interesting and surprising than her debt to Pope and Milton is her apparent influence on William Blake. From "Thoughts on the Works of Providence" one
gets a description of a lover that characterizes Orc perfectly: "On pleasure now, and now on vengeance bent, / The lab'ring passions struggle for a vent." Of course Blake's portrayal of the same idea is far more graphic but the similarity is unmistakable:

Times rolled on o'er all the sons of Har,  
time after time Orc on Mount Atlas howld,  
chained down with the Chain of Jealousy  
("The Song of Los: Africa")

S. Foster Damon informs us that Orc is Blake's symbol for repressed love, passion, pleasure and emotions,\(^{31}\) and that his whole existence is given to becoming free from all inhibitions, thus also making him one of Blake's symbols for revolution and war in the material world; or as Wheatley said, "now on vengeance bent." Also contained in the poem are four lines which seem to have been thoroughly expanded by William Blake in "The Four Zoas," a poem describing the dialogue and controversy between the Eternals or members of the Godhead:

Among the mental pow'rs a question rose,  
"What most the image of th' Eternal shows?"  
When thus to Reason (so let Fancy rove) \(^{32}\)  
Her great companion spoke, immortal Love.

William Blake may also be indebted to Phillis Wheatley for one of the most fantastic passages in his canon. In the first passage below, Wheatley is referring to Christ, and in the latter, Blake is referring to Milton. In Blake's analytical thoughts, Christ and Milton served the
same purpose, that of the restoration of mankind (see Damon, pp. 274-80):

LO! for this dark terrestrial ball
Forsakes his azure-paved hall
A prince of heav'nly birth!
Divine Humanity behold.
What wonders rise, what charms unfold
At his descent to earth!
("Hymn to Humanity")

Blake's interpretation of the same event is:

And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England mountains green:
And was not the holy lamb of God,
On England's pleasant pastures seen!

Then first I saw him in the Zenith as a
falling star,
Descending perpendicular, swift as the
swallow . . .
And on my left foot falling on the tarsus
entered . . .
But my left foot a black cloud redounding
spread . . .
(Milton: Book the First, I,
1-5, 15, 49-52)

That Phillis Wheatley may have influenced William Blake is suggested primarily by the fact that he was unusually interested in slavery and its effects. Blake was only sixteen at the time Poems appeared in England and we cannot say for sure that he read them when they were first published. However, as he matured, he became increasingly aware of the inhumanity of slavery and everywhere in his works spoke against it. Poems went through several editions in America and in England, thus making it most probable that Blake read one of the later editions.
For decades now critics of both races have derided Phillis Wheatley's poetry as being nothing more than a curiosity of the eighteenth century. This writer rejects totally such a notion, and offers concrete examples of Wheatley's significant influence on the culture of these United States of America. It seems quite likely that the individual who gave the founding fathers the name for the tract of land between Virginia and Maryland, commonly known as the Capital, is Phillis Wheatley. In her poetry one finds for the first time the word "Columbia" being applied to the United States:

Columbia's Scenes of Glorious toils I write.  
When Gallic pow'rs of Columbia's fury found;  
Ah! cruel blindness to Columbia's state!  
("To General Washington")

The above citations offer added facts to the history of Washington, District of Columbia, in whose annals Phillis Wheatley joins Benjamin Banneker, a free-born Negro, who helped design and build the Capital. Phillis Wheatley's second cultural contribution is her description of George Washington: "Thee, first in peace and honours,—we demand." Today George Washington is remembered as: "First in war, first in peace, first in the hearts of his countrymen." One unequivocably sees that this honor posthumously given to Washington is undoubtedly based on Phillis Wheatley's estimation of him. Contributions of such magnitude must surely be laudable.
Notes

1Robert Kuncio, "Some Unpublished Poems of Phillis Wheatley," New England Quarterly (June 1970), 287-97, contains three new poems by Wheatley. The poems are reproduced in the appendix. A fourth poem, "Atheism," is also reproduced in the appendix. This poem was first published in 1945, but not in whole. Here it has been reproduced in its entirety.

2All poems unless otherwise indicated may be found in Mason's edition of Poems on Various Subjects, . . .

3"Phillis Wheatley--Soul Sister?" p. 227.

4Mason, p. xxvii, n. 8.

5Loggins, The Negro Author in America, p. 27.

6This notion is fairly popular among Wheatley scholars--Mason, Robinson, and Matson to name a few.


9Loggins, The Negro Author in America, p. 29.


12Mason, p. xxix.


14Rev. George Whitefield, one of Wheatley's "prophets," was "sympathetic with the plight of Negroes but still defended slavery on Biblical grounds" (Mason, p. 66, n. 4). The men listed in the front of Poems were slave owners too.
The letters to Obour (Arbour) Tanner, reproduced in Mason's edition of Poems, are far more loving than any poem dedicated to Mrs. S. Wheatley.


She places herself in Heaven in "On Being Brought from Africa to America," and "To S. M., A Young African Painter." Note that both poems identify strongly with her race. Wheatley apparently did not foresee meeting the Wheatleys in the Heaven that she and her brothers and sisters were going to.

See p. 6 of this thesis.

Mason, p. xxx.

In the 1773 version of "On the Death of Sewell," "Sewell" is misspelled for "Sewall" consistently throughout the poem. This consistent misspelling supports my thesis that Wheatley spelled to the best of her ability and if a word was misspelled, she continued the error throughout the poem. When two different spellings occur in the same poem, as in "Atheism," she on the basis of her usual consistency consciously affected the change.


Mason, p. 33

Ibid., p. 110.


The Negro Author in America, p. 86.

Mason, p. 86.

Ibid., p. 89, n. 18.

The Negro Author in America, p. 27.


32 For further support see A Blake Dictionary, pp. 142-52.


36 This encomium may be found in the resolutions presented to Congress on the death of Washington, December 1799. It is cited by James Weldon Johnson on p. xxiv of The Book of American Negro Poetry.
CONCLUSION

This discussion has shown that under the guise of Christianity functioned an individual trying to know herself, in an environment that discouraged self-revelation and expression. Fortunately, from time to time, the real Phillis Wheatley bursts defiantly forth and reveals that she is "now of vengeance bent." Certainly, she reflects the milieu of her times and we can only regretfully speculate what mighty passages on the suffering of mankind she would have written if she were active during what is commonly known as the Romantic period.

It is hoped that this study will contribute meaningfully to the revival of Wheatley scholarship, thus finally giving credence to Martin Day's opinion of the "Eleventh Muse": "[Phillis Wheatley] was superior to all other American poets of the day."
APPENDIX
On the Death of Mr. Snider Murder'd
by Richardson

In heavens eternal court it was decreed
Thou the first martyr for the common good
Long hid before, a vile infernal here
Prevents Achilles in his mid career
Where'er this fury darts his Poisonous breath
All are endanger'd to the shafts of death
The generous Sires beheld the fatal wound
Saw their young champion gasping on the ground
They rais'd him up but to each present ear
What martial glories did his tongue declare
The wretch appal'd no longer can despise
But from the Stricking victim turns his eyes--
When this young martial genius appear
The Tory cheif no longer could forbear.
Ripe for destruction, see the wretches doom
He waits the curses of the age to come
In vain he flies, by Justice Swiftly chaced
With unexpected infamy disgraced
Be Richardson for ever banish'd here
The grand Usurpers bravely vaunted Heir.
We bring the body from the watry bower
To lodge it where it shall remove no more
Snider behold with what Majestic Love
The Illustrious retinue begins to move
With Secret rage fair freedoms foes beneath
See in thy corse ev'n Majesty in Death
To The Honble. Commodore Hood on His Pardoning a Deserter

It was thy noble soul and high desert
That caus'd these breathings of my grateful heart
You say'd a soul from pluto's dreary shore
You say'd his body and he asks no more
This generous act Immortal wreaths shall bring
To thee for meritorious was the Spring
From whence from whence, this candid ardor flow'd
To grace thy name, and Glorify thy God
The Eatherial spirits in the realms above
Rejoice to see thee exercise thy Love
Hail Commodore may heaven delighted pour
Its blessings plenteous in a silent shower
The voice of pardon did resound on high
While heaven consented, and he must not die
On thee fair victor be the Blessing shed
And rest forever on thy matchless Head
Atheism

Where now shall I begin this Spacious Feild
To tell what curses unbeleif doth yield
Thou that dost daily feel his hand and rod
And dare deny the essence of a god
If there's no god from whence all things spring

He made the greatest and minutest thing
If there's no heaven whither wilt thou go
Make thy Elysium in the Shades below
With great astonishment any soul is struck
O rashness great hast thou thy sense forsook
Hast thou forgot the preterperfect days
They are recorded in the Book of praise
If twas not written by the hand of God
Why was it sealed with Immanuel's blood
Tho 'tis a second point thou dost deny
Unmeasur'd vengeance Scarlet sins do cry
Turn now I pray thee from the dangerous road
Rise from the dust and seek the mighty God
By whose great mercy we do move and live
Whose Loving kindness doth our sins forgive
Tis Beelzebub our adversary great
Withholds from us the kingdom and the seat
Bliss weeping waits us in her arms to fly
To the vast regions of Felicity
Perhaps thy Ignorance will ask us where
Go to the corner stone it will declare
Thy heart in unbeleif will harder grow
Altho thou hidest it for pleasure now
Thou takst unusual means, the path forbear
Unkind to Others to thyself severe
Methinks I see the consequence thou art blind
Thy unbeliev disturbance the peaceful mind
The endless Scene too far for me to tread
Too great to Accomplish from so weak a head
If men such wise inventions then should know
In the high Firmament who made the bow
That covenant was made for to ensure
Made to establish lasting to endure
Who made the heavens and earth a lasting spring
Of Admiration, to whom dost thou bring
Thy thanks, and tribute, Adoration pay,
To heathen Gods, can wise Apollo say
Tis I that saves thee from the deepest hell
Minerva teach thee all thy days to tell
Doth pluto tell thee thou shalt see the shade
Of fell perdition for thy learning made
Doth Cupid in thy breast that warmth inspire
To Love thy brother which is Gods desire
Look thou above and see who made the sky
Nothing more Lucid to an Atheist's eye
Look thou beneath, behold each purling stream
It surely cannot a Delusion Seem
Mark rising Phoebus when he spreads his ray
And his commission for to guide the day
At night keep watch, and see a Cynthia bright
And her commission for to guide the night
See how the stars when they do sing his praise
Witness his essence in celestial Lays
America

New England first a wilderness was found
Till for a continent 'twas destin'd round
From field to field the savage monsters run
E'er yet Britannia had her work begun
Thy Power, O Liberty, makes strong the weak
And (wond'rous instinct) Ethiopians speak
Some times by simile, a victory's won
A certain lady had an only son
He grew up daily virtuous as he grew
Fearing his strength which she undoubted knew
She laid some taxes on her darling son
And would have laid another act there on
Amend your manners I'll the task remove
Was said with seeming sympathy and love
By many scourges she his goodness try'd
Untill at length the best of infants cry'd
He wept, Britannia turn'd a senseless ear
At last awaken'd by maternal fear
Why weeps Americus why weeps my Child
Thus spake Britannia, thus benign and mild
My dear mama said he shall I repeat--
Then prostrate fell, at her maternal feet
What ails the rebel, great Britannia Cry'd
Indeed said he, you have no cause to chide
You see each day my fluent tears my food;
Without regard, what no more English blood?
Was length of time drove from our English veins.
The kindred he to Great Britannia deigns?
Tis thus with thee O Brittain keeping down
New English force, thou fear'st his Tyranny
And thou didst frown
He weeps afresh to feel this iron chain
Turn, O Brittain claim thy child again
Riecho love drive by thy powerful charms
Indolence slumbering in forgetful arms
See Agenoria diligent imploys
Her sons, and thus with rapture she replays
Arise my sons with one consent arise
Lest distant continents with vul'ring eyes
Should charge America with negligence
They praise industry but no pride commence
To raise their own profusion, O Brittain
See By this New England will increase like thee
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