

The public consciousness of phillis wheatley



“ I was a kind of bastard of the West... I might search in them in vain for any reflection of myself... At the time I saw that I had no other heritage which I could possibly hope to use... I would have to appropriate those white centuries, I would have to make them mine... I would have to accept my special attitude, my special place in this scheme – otherwise I would have no place in any scheme... The American Negro has always had to hide from himself as the price of his public progress: I hated and feared white people. This did not mean that I loved black people; on the contrary, I despised them.” James Baldwin, from *Autobiographical Notes*

Though her legacy remains an open question, both Phillis Wheatley’s supporters and detractors agree that her moment of notoriety was achieved under a highly unique set of circumstances. Wheatley’s acceptance into public discourse validated her status as a “ person of interest” – an honorary title usually conferred upon landowning white men. Her new status stood in direct opposition to the legal and popular classification of enslaved persons as property, and her undeniable intelligence and mastery of high poetic forms (as well as the public’s appreciation of it) made it difficult to defend the idea that people from Africa were subhuman and incapable of emotion or rationality. The criticism of Phillis Wheatley’s work by her contemporaries is almost universally racist, and therefore does not merit a great deal of discussion. Thomas Jefferson’s critique, however, was so vitriolic that it deserves some mention: “ Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. Among blacks is misery enough God knows, but no poetry. Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whatley’s [sic] but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism.” However, Jefferson follows this statement with his own critique: “ The heroes

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of the *Dunciad* are to her, as Hercules to the author of that poem” (Robinson, 42-3, Gates 5-6, Nott 27). This suggestion of religious influence is no doubt an insult, as Jefferson was a staunch rationalist, and the “published under her name” comment suggests that even the approval of a hearing and eighteen of his peers was not enough to allow Jefferson to acknowledge Wheatley’s obvious talent. It is worth noting, however, that Jefferson’s critique was published many years after Wheatley’s death. That she was still able to arouse such a passionate response is evidence of her work’s enormous political and popular influence. It was only in the mid-to-late twentieth century that scholars began to seriously examine Wheatley’s body of work, though as Mary McAleer Balkun has noted, most criticism focuses not on what she actually accomplished, but what she could have accomplished under different circumstances (121). Wheatley occupies an uncomfortable space in the history of Black America. While she is unquestionably acknowledged as a pioneer as the first well-known poet of color in American history, her reputation is stymied by the lack of concern that many critics display towards not only Wheatley herself, but other Africans who suffered the bonds of slavery. Wheatley’s usage of the heroic couplet – the highly cultured style used by great English poets such as John Milton and Alexander Pope – has been criticized by critics such as Leroi Jones, who labeled her poems as “ludicrous departures from the huge black voices that splintered southern nights” (105-06). James Weldon Johnson goes so far as to accuse Wheatley of being “smug” and unconcerned. “One looks in vain for some vague outburst or even complaint against the bondage of her people, for some agonizing cry about her native land” (Robinson, 113). It is completely understandable that many contemporary readers can find little

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to identify with in Wheatley's heavily-constructed poetics, particularly upon the first reading of a poem such as "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. Some view our sable race with scornful eye, " Their colour is a diabolic die." Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain, May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train." Wheatley's apparent ambivalence about " call[ing] a new black nation into being" with an authentic " African song" can feel alienating even to modern white readers who consider themselves " socially conscious" (Robinson, 8). Her use of heroic couplets has been criticized as being too derivative of European neoclassical poetry, and her language, with passages such as " 'Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land," seem as though the speaker is almost thankful for being kidnapped and sold into slavery. And yet there is little hostility found in the critical literature towards Wheatley herself; rather, she is commonly seen as an unfortunate product of her environment. While Terrence Collins dismisses her unprecedented popularity as " almost always an exception, a guest, a showpiece novelty," he nevertheless feels that Wheatley's attitude was a product of the slave mentality, and that her embrace of European literary form is, as it was for Baldwin, a form of self-hatred induced by a lifetime of being treated as a disposable piece of property. Some critics are less empathetic, however, noting that Wheatley's status as a house slave purchased to be a companion to Mrs. Wheatley and her daughter Mary gave her the privilege of education and the leisure time necessary to compose poetry. While these facts are indisputable, the question remains whether this privilege caused Wheatley to abandon her

race and assimilate completely into white society. Wheatley's implied isolation from the experience of "authentic slavery" is understandable, considering the conditions under which she lived. Kidnapped from Senegal at the age of eight, she arrived on American soil aboard the slave ship Phillis. According to Wheatley biographer Margaretta Matilda Odell, when the young girl was sold to the Wheatley family, she was so frail and sickened from her experience aboard the "coffin ship" that she was not fit for any labor save the simplest housework. As her position in the Wheatley home was to serve as a companion, she was given a standard education alongside Mary Wheatley, with the intent that she become "refined" and "cultivated." This "cultivation" required young Phillis to be isolated entirely from the other slaves in the Wheatley household (Robinson, 148). Under these circumstances, it is easy to understand how Wheatley's poetic interests would be so far separated from the "southern nights" Johnson mentioned. An anonymous review of Wheatley's book in 1834 ventured that "it must, of course, be remembered under what circumstances she commenced her career, how little encouragement she had from the example of those of her own color in those days, how incomplete at the best were the tardy sources of info and discipline which were furnished her...after all, [she was] a mere child...a slave!" (Robinson, 67) Archibald Bell, the publisher of Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, praised her output as "one of the greatest instances of pure, unassisted genius that the world ever produced" (Robinson, 28). Henry Louis Gates, Jr. even goes so far as to suggest that the public trial Wheatley endured to prove the authorship of her poems is echoed in the criticisms she continues to endure from twentieth-century literary critics. In addition to overcoming hurdles imposed by her

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race and her status as a piece of property without human dignity, Wheatley was also forced to confront the limitations imposed by her sex. Past critics such as William J. Sterling praised Wheatley for excelling not only in light of her status as a captured African, but also as a female, claiming that her work had a sophistication “ known to few females of that day, and not common even now” (Robinson, 65). While the oppressions employed against women and people of color “ in general” are not comparable, and no oppression deserves to be “ ranked”, it is not hard to imagine that contemporary critics might find it easier to dismiss Phillis Wheatley as a “ weak” adolescent girl in the face of Anglo-American hegemony. Wheatley’s critics, however, often fail to take into account the complicated layering of her poetry. One must consider, for example, the letter Phillis Wheatley wrote to Reverend Samson Occom in the spring of 1774: “[F]or in every human Breast God has implanted a Principle, which we call the love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance...God grant Deliverance in his own Way and Time, and get him honour upon all those whose Avarice impels them to countenance and help forward the Calamities of their fellow Creatures. This I do not desire for their Hurt, but to convince them of the strange Absurdity of their Conduct whose Words and Actions are so diametrically opposite...I humbly think it does not require the Penetration of a Philosopher to determine” (Gates, 72-73). The letter was first published in the Connecticut Gazette, and was later reprinted in several New England papers. The letter was thus highly circulated among the same public which would have been the most avid readers of Wheatley’s poems. However, this correspondence appears to have been either largely unavailable – or perhaps unimportant – to reviewers of Wheatley’s work until recently (Robinson, 228).

This is highly unfortunate, since reading Wheatley's poetry with this letter in mind (and especially the sarcastic comment, " I humbly think it does not require the Penetration of a Philosopher") calls into question the common assumption of ambivalence in her verses on Africa and Africans. Wheatley's comments here, in fact, perfectly outline the three basic arguments that she employs in her poems: first, that Christians who accept slavery are hypocrites, second, that African people can become Christians and thus are no less human or enlightened than whites, and finally, that a reader who is unable or unwilling to acknowledge the truth of these statements is both intellectually and morally flawed. It is essential to understand her rhetorical devices as exactly that: carefully constructed, and intended to produce a powerful response in the reader without the reader realizing that manipulation is taking place. Though she has been criticized for not including enough of " herself" in her work, Wheatley was a truly public poet; her verses were not constructed for the author, but rather for the audience. Michael Warner emphasizes the importance of belonging (or at least the appearance of belonging) in the creation of a public: "[a] space of circulation [that is] taken to be a social entity, but that in order for this to happen all discourse or performance addressed to a public must characterize the world in which it attempts to circulate, and it must attempt to realize that world through address. There is no speech or performance addressed to a public that does not try to specify in advance, in countless highly condensed ways, the lifeworld of its circulation...through the pragmatics of its speech genres, idioms, stylistic markers, address, temporality, mise en scene, citation field, interlocutory protocols, lexicon, and so on...Then it goes out in search of confirmation such a public exists...It cannot work by frankly declaring its

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subjunctive-creative project. Its success depends on the recognition of participants and their further circulatory activity, and people do not commonly recognize themselves as virtual projections" (422, emphasis mine). That Wheatley wrote "of whites and for whites," then, can be considered a highly deliberate move, and not simply an attempt to confirm her validity as an author through the mastery of complex verse (though it is that, too). The influence of her Calvinist indoctrination on her worldview cannot be denied, and her religious experience had influenced her poetic methods, as well. Her manner of addressing the reader, in which the reader must actively participate in the psychological underpinnings of a poem, is most likely influenced by her own experience of sermons and preaching, which were typical of the day: the hearer's experience of a sermon was both a linguistic and a spiritual event. By "active participation," it is implied that Wheatley constructed her verses in an effort to provoke a specific set of responses in the reader. A second examination of "On Being Brought From Africa to America" reveals how deliberately Wheatley guides the reader from an initial position of confidence to a confrontation of his or her own moral hypocrisy. At the conclusion of the poem, the reader must accept the authority of the black female author. When Wheatley writes, "'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land," she is not - as a casual reader might initially assume - expressing gratitude for the "mercy" of the traders who kidnapped her and sold her into bondage. Rather, by attributing her removal from Africa to "mercy," by which she means the will of God, she removes the agency of the slave traders and their institution, identifying herself as having been directly chosen by God. By aligning herself with God, she implicitly casts those who refuse to accept the authority of her address

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against him (Balkun, 124). This sentiment also appears in "To the University of Cambridge, in New-England," but is even more explicit: "Father of mercy, 'twas thy gracious hand/Brought me in safety from those dark abodes."

Much like the spirituals of plantation slaves, which utilized familiar Judeo-Christian stories and themes as allegories for their own enslavement, Wheatley's lines appear to be representations of shared Christian values, a theme that readers could identify to without being explicitly subversive.

Russell J. Reising describes Wheatley as "employing an intricate rhetorical negotiation that rendered her verse 'virtually unreadable for a public with certain racial, political, theological and cultural assumptions' and at the same time 'eminently readable...within the discursive practices of her culture'" (Nott, 22). Wheatley's reference to Africa's "Egyptian gloom" demonstrates the cleverness with which she utilized this tactic. Egypt is obviously located in Africa, but the "gloom" mentioned is an allusion to the Exodus, a metaphor commonly used by both slaves and colonial settlers as a representation of the journey to the "promised land." It can be said, then, that rather than considering Wheatley's poems to be ambivalent, they are by contrast almost exclusively concerned with the sociopolitical attitudes of her audience. The majority of the works in *Poems on Various Subjects* were written for specific individuals (usually elegies) or about notable events in the community. Wheatley was one of only three Americans who were able to publish anything while in bondage - the very publishing of her book was an active revolt (Nott, 23). Her first published poem was a broadside printed in 1770 titled, "An Elegiac Poem, on the Death of that Celebrated Divine, and Eminent Servant of Jesus Christ, the late Reverend, and pious George Whitefield, Chaplain to the Right Honourable the Countess of Huntingdon."

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Within months of its original distribution in the *Massachusetts Spy*, the work was republished in Newport, four times again in Boston, once in New York, and once in Philadelphia (Robinson, 225). Her work began to circulate even more widely as revolutionary fervor began to take over Boston and individual rights and freedoms became the primary topics of discussion in the public sphere. According to Terry Eagleton, the public sphere is “ a network of rational discourse whose formation and operation aimed at the acquisition of political power through the control of an emerging public opinion...[a] distinct discursive space, one of rational judgment and enlightened critique... poised between the state and civil society” (Nott, 25). The public sphere of 18th century Boston was composed primarily of an emerging middle class. Most were merchants who owned slaves or were involved in the slave trade. In order to establish a place within the public sphere, one had to be a “ person of interest”; that is, someone who owned property and was therefore interested in the social, legal and economic factors that would affect the community. Wheatley’s book gave her access to this network, and therefore made her a “ person of interest.” Her participation in spite of her status as property called into question the validity of a system that relied on human trafficking. According to Warner, a public “ knows itself by knowing where and when it is assembled in common visibility and common action...the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation” (413). The frequent printing of her work in the *Boston Gazette* speaks to Wheatley’s large constituency of patriotic and revolutionary readers (Nott, 30): the very same men who were dedicated to the reverence of “ freedom.” Wheatley was aware of the composition of her primary audience: they were men in positions of power, such as the men who had verified her book. She

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had personally composed poems for some of these men; still others she had encountered socially once she became a public figure (Balkun, 29). Benjamin Franklin wrote about a visit he paid to the young poetess in a letter from 1773: Mr. Wheatley, Franklin wrote, had clearly been displeased because Franklin had inquired after Phillis before asking about her owner (Robinson, 25). George Washington hesitated to publish the poem he received from Wheatley, “not knowing whether it might not be considered rather as a mark of my own vanity, than as a compliment to her.” In a personal letter, he thanked her for the “elegant lines” that he felt he was “undeserving” of. He closes the letter by writing, “with great respect, your obedient humble servant” (Robinson, 35-36). While a standard closing for letters at that time, the amount of cordiality with which Washington addressed Wheatley – not to mention the irony of a man who was already legendary well before his death identifying himself as the “obedient humble servant” of a black female slave – speaks volumes about the amount of influence and regard she held within the community. Wheatley was such an important symbol of African dignity that her detractors often implied that she was merely a front for the abolitionist movement. One of the most common arguments for African “inferiority” was that no African text had been produced that was as great as those that had been written by other cultures. Wheatley’s elegant and popular poetry was an undeniable refutation of this charge and proof of the African people’s mental equality. Indeed, in a response to Thomas Jefferson’s attack on Wheatley, Gilbert Imlay asked, “what white person upon this continent has written more beautiful lines?” (Robinson,

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