Phillis Wheatley and Thomas Jefferson, Then and Now

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A Historiographical and Contextual Analysis

By

Arthur Scherr

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PREFACE

As the first African American to publish a book in America and the third American woman to publish a volume of poetry (preceded by Anne Bradstreet and Jane Turell), Phillis Wheatley has invariably attracted her share of attention. That attention has mushroomed over the past fifty years, spurred by the increasing interest in African American studies and culture in academia and, albeit to a lesser extent, in the larger community. The Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, concurrent Black Power ideologies and other trends in society, especially among politicians and political activists, professors and college and university administrators, spurred faculty in diverse humanities and social science departments to seek career advancement by emphasizing the African American community's survival and growth despite hardships and handicaps, especially slavery and white racism. Both white and Blacks sought promotion in this manner. In addition, in 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson's Executive Order implementing Affirmative Action programs empowering Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans and women to gain preferential treatment in college admissions and faculty professorships—with special emphasis on Ivy League institutions like Harvard, Columbia, and Yale— precipitated increased emphasis in academic departments and course offerings on African American history, culture, and the historic role of Black and white women. The scholarly output as a result of these trends was mixed, and not always to the advantage of the advancement of knowledge or the pursuit of scholarly integrity.[1]

The outpouring of books about African Americans inevitably increased when Barack Obama, son of a white American mother and

[1] Among numerous studies, see Jason Brennan, *Good Work if You Can Get It: How to Succeed in Academia* (Baltimore, 2020); Jason Brennan and Phillip Magness, *Cracks in the Ivory Tower: The Moral Mess of Higher Education* (New York, 2019); Benjamin Baez, *Affirmative Action, Hate Speech, and Tenure* (London, 2002), and Alan Bloom's classic, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York, 1987).

abandoned at the age of three, by his Black Kenyan father, a Harvard-educated academic, was universally hailed as the nation's "first African American president." This factor, and the later outbreak of massive hostility against White police brutality toward Blacks, most of them teenagers, in several highly publicized cases in Florida, Missouri, and New York City during Obama's presidency, also led to increased emphasis on Black cultural figures like Wheatley. Racial tensions and concomitant emphasis on Black culture and history increased exponentially during the chaotic conditions precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the Minneapolis police murder of George Floyd and other incidents that year, precipitating a worldwide outbreak of riots and demonstrations. Membership in such organizations devoted to the rights of Blacks as "Black Lives Matter" mushroomed. In addition, the sexual abuse of women came to the forefront, with the firing from employment and criminal trial of several major White media figures for sexual harassment, and, most prominently Harvey Weinstein, a leading film producer, for rape, emerged as newspaper headlines almost daily.[2]

It is likely that such phenomena increased interest in the most significant African American woman writer of the Revolutionary period, the enslaved female poet Phillis Wheatley. Essays, biographies and pseudo-biographies of her (in light of the few verifiable facts available about her during her short life, perhaps the latter was unavoidable), often based in large part on conjecture, proliferated during this period, epitomized in some respects by the publication of an entire issue of *Early American Literature*, a scholarly periodical, about her in 2022. As a result of Wheatley's renewed fame during the twenty-first century, numerous scholarly and semi-scholarly books and articles about her appeared, several of them relying primarily on speculation, and discussing obscure

[2] On COVID-19, Black activism, and the uproar against police brutality in 2020, see, e.g., Cato T. Laurence and Joanne M. Walker, "A Pandemic on a Pandemic: Racism and COVID-19 in Blacks," *Cell Systems* 11 (July 22,2020), available online; and Tyra Jean, "Black Lives Matter: Police Brutality in the Era of COVID-19," Lerner Center for Public Health Practices, Maxwell School, Syracuse University, *Issue Brief #31,* June 16, 2020 (online).

topics only remotely connected to her poetic talents or to the known facts about her life.[3]

My brief study is devoted to rectifying some of the errors and exaggerations pertaining to Wheatley that have become common in scholars' works about the reception of her poetry by prominent Americans during her lifetime, and in the bloated claims they make for her significance in promoting colonial resistance to Great Britain and advocating the abolition of Black enslavement before the American Revolution. I examine some of the recent historiography concerning her at length, especially the studies by prominent historians such as David Waldstreicher and Mark A. Peterson. Partly because of their laudatory treatments of Wheatley, often dependent on exaggeration rather than evidence, these historians have gained prestigious and lucrative positions in the University systems where they teach. Peterson is Edmund S. Morgan Professor of History at Yale University; and Waldstreicher is Distinguished Professor of History and Africana Studies at the Graduate School of the City University of New York.

I pay particular attention to the universal tendency of scholars who write about Wheatley to impute whatever devaluation her work endured during her lifetime (and no one has shown that such devaluation occurred) to the three disparaging sentences that Thomas Jefferson wrote about her in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, first published on a large scale in England by the firm of John Stockdale in 1787, three years after her

[3] "Dear Sister: Phillis Wheatley's Futures," *Early American Literature*, 57, no. 3 (2022); David Waldstreicher, "Anonymous Wheatley and the Archive in Plain Sight: A Tentative Attribution of Nine Published Poems, 1773-1775," *Early American Literature*, 57, no. 3 (2022), 873-910, argues that Wheatley wrote several poems for the newspapers that have not been ascribed to her. He observes that their style was similar to Wheatley's; but her "style" was essentially an imitation of Alexander Pope's ubiquitous iambic pentameter and heroic couplet. For an example of a scholarly article based on a few statements in Margaretta Matilda Odell's autobiography, *Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley* (Boston, 1834), see Will Harris, "Phillis Wheatley: A Muslim Connection," *African American Review* 48, nos. 1 and 2 (Spring/Summer 2015): 1-15. Odell (1801-1881) was a descendant of Wheatley's former owners. Born long after Wheatley's death, Odell spent most of her life in a mental institution, although in her youth she was reputedly an abolitionist activist. Carra Glatt, "'To Perpetuate her Name': Appropriation and Autobiography in Margaretta Matilda Odell's *Memoir of Phillis Wheatley*," *Early American Literature* 55, no. 1 (Winter, 2020): 145-176.

death. (Jefferson published a small run of his book, in English, in France in 1785, on which the 1787 British edition was based.) Ironically, Jefferson's negative remarks have sometimes garnered more attention than Wheatley's poems, especially by the recent legion of anti-Jefferson scholars. They heap his negative comments on the African American poetess atop his alleged prurient sexual relationship with the enslaved beauty, Sally Hemings, as proof of his evil, "racist" prejudices, and justification for damning to perdition his brilliant accomplishments, impressive acquirements in most fields of knowledge, and polymath abilities. Along with the renowned Harvard University English professor, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Waldstreicher and Peterson are probably the most prominent writers who emphasize Jefferson's transgressions on this score, claiming that he showed great disrespect for Wheatley's abilities solely because of her race, when (they insist) all the other White notables who commented on her work were unstinting in their praise. My close analysis of Wheatley's reputation in her own time reveals the shortcomings of their analysis, evidence, and conclusions on this matter, as on other topics relating to Wheatley's life and times. Perhaps in their quest for fame, fortune, and prestige among their colleagues in the Academic Establishment and the general public, Waldstreicher and Peterson have sacrificed scholarly authenticity and reliance on facts and evidence.[4]

Indeed, most academics have ignored or exaggerated the facts about Wheatley, Jefferson, and their times. Unlike present-day historians,

[4] Waldstreicher's recent work, *The Odyssey of Phillis Wheatley* (New York, 2023), appeared after I had finished this book. Since it has probably incorporated the several articles on Wheatley he has written over the past decade, which I discuss herein, it most likely contains little new that is of significance. Waldstreicher's *Odyssey* has garnered extreme kudos in blurbs from such an eminent "scholar" as the pompous, racially-biased billionaire, media mogul, and hypocritical Limousine Liberal Oprah Winfrey, who recently inveighed against "White Privilege." When "Oprah," the epitome of intellectual mediocrity, whose activities entrance the upper-class White intellectual *canaille*, sponsors a project, it casts doubt upon the endeavor's historical veracity: a sobering truth in Waldstreicher's case. (On the other hand, Waldstreicher, a doctoral student of iconic, late Professor David Brion Davis at Yale University, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and expert on slavery, has for over a decade been one of the heads of the Academic Establishment, and would automatically gain their praise whatever he wrote. It was obviously an effort to play to the mass market that led him to obtain Oprah's endorsement.)

Jefferson's contemporaries generally overlooked his disparagement of Wheatley.[5] Her reputation peaked like a meteor in the days after her poems were published. Sadly, by the time of her death in 1784, several years after the demise of all the members of the Wheatley family who had promoted her work, and who were indispensable to its success in England (especially among the Evangelical Anglicans who followed George Whitefield) and New England, she was penniless, alone with her dying infants, and deserted by her husband. Of course, Jefferson, whose *Notes* had not yet seen the light of day (i.e., publication) had nothing to do with her fate.

Despite her small corpus of works, Wheatley has long been recognized as a force in African American literature. She has invariably appeared in most if not all encyclopedias of Black authors and "great African Americans" series. I have made a brief, somewhat random examination of reference books on African Americans and have found that she often gains a distinguished place in them. As is the case with lengthy biographies about her, these entries are often marred by conjecture, self-contradiction, and peremptory statements not backed up by facts, and disputed or rejected by later scholars. In 1982, after African American Studies had become an established part of academic curricula, an impressive reference work, long surpassed by more recent efforts, appeared: *The Dictionary of American Negro Biography*, edited by Rayford W. Logan, an African American scholar whose study, *Diplomatic Relations of the United States with Haiti, 1776-1891* (Chapel Hill, 1941), remains the best work on the topic. The *Dictionary*'s contributors were mainly prominent Black academics. The entry on Wheatley was written by J. Saunders Redding, the first Black to be appointed professor of English at an Ivy League institution, Brown University. A reputed Black militant during his lifetime, before the rise of the Black Muslim and Black Panther

[5] The most recent biography of Jefferson, Professor Thomas S. Kidd's brief *Thomas Jefferson: A Biography of Spirit and Flesh* (New Haven, 2022), 119, runs true to form in denouncing Jefferson's minuscule critique of Wheatley in *Notes*. However, Kidd, a historian of American religion and a devout Baptist who teaches at the Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and Baptist-oriented Baylor University, more insightfully argues that the anticlerical Jefferson, who, like Voltaire, found religious enthusiasm and revivalism insufferable, was repulsed by Wheatley's religion-inspired poetry as much as by her blackness.

movements, Redding's article contradicts recent scholars' assumptions about Wheatley, although they generally have in common that they generalize about her views with insufficient evidence.[6]

In contrast to twenty-first century scholars, Redding perceives little concern with abolition of slavery or the plight of the Black slave in Wheatley's life or poetry. He also denies that she was a fervent supporter of the American Revolution. Rather, he assumes that she adopted the lifestyle and beliefs of her middle-class merchant owners to as great a degree as possible. Despite the lack of adequate information on the Wheatley family's stance toward the American Revolution, he asserts, "The Wheatleys were monarchists, and so was Phillis. They were patricians but not patriots." Moreover, Redding made extreme assumptions about New Englanders' racism without providing evidence, saying that "they characterized Negroes as members of a subhuman species." He mistakenly wrote that the Wheatleys sent Phillis to England to improve her frail health, when they were actually more interested in getting Susannah Wheatley's friend, Countess Selina Hastings to publish her poems; and he claimed that Phillis' friend, Obour Tanner of Newport, Rhode Island, was "a young free Negro" when she was more likely a slave. At the same time, he perceptively noted that Tanner was one of her few Black acquaintances, as well as an individual unconnected with the white Wheatley family. (Indeed, little is known about the relationship between Obour and Phillis, how they knew each other, and indeed whether they ever physically met). Redding mistakenly wrote that the Wheatleys manumitted Phillis *before* she left for England with Nathaniel Wheatley in May 1773. However, Phillis herself said that they emancipated her after her return, due to pressure from her "English friends." Redding mentioned that the merchant Brook Watson, mayor of London, presented her with a copy of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, but he was not yet mayor at the time.[7] Redding's observation that, after reading Wheatley's poem extolling him in late 1775, General George Washington received her with "marked courtesy" at his Cambridge headquarters in April 1776, though there is no proof that the

[6] Saunders Redding, "Wheatley, Phillis," in Rayford W. Logan and Michael R. Winston, eds., *Dictionary of African American Biography* (New York: Norton, 1982), 640-642.
[7] Ibid., 641.

meeting occurred, has been echoed by later scholars; and even the leading Wheatley expert, Vincent Carretta is undecided on the matter.[8]

Redding's brief account of Wheatley apparently influenced later authors, for good and ill. His often-conjectural statements have seemingly taken on the aura of facts in later, more substantial studies. Aware that most members of the Wheatley family died by 1778, Redding assumes that she lived with them until that year, and was the unofficial manager of John Wheatley's household after his wife's death in 1774. Although most scholars agree that John Wheatley did not leave Phillis any money in his will, Redding claims that a small legacy he provided her enabled her to survive for several years. His hostile view of her husband, John Peters as a ne'er de well, though still a contentious question among scholars, has garnered a substantial amount of support in recent years, although Carretta's biography is more charitable. Redding goes so far as to state that Peters was a conman and a fraud who tricked her into marrying him by claiming to be a doctor, a lawyer and a merchant. Further, Redding charges that, because her unhappy life with Peters caused the ebb of her literary abilities, she produced few poems during her marriage. Contrastingly, Carretta later argued that, in the days before professional organizations of physicians and attorneys like the American Medical Association and the American Bar Association were instituted, it was common for men to become jacks-of-all trades and profess diverse occupations. [9]

Redding ended his entry on Wheatley somberly. Although historians are uncertain about exactly how Wheatley supported herself during her last few years and where John Peters was during that time, Redding seems certain that he had abandoned her, and that her three babies had all died, the last one along with her on December 5, 1784 (in what most writers assume was a dirty shack on the outskirts of Boston). Or, as Redding puts it, "With her inheritance totally dissipated, Phillis supported herself and her infant child by working in a boarding house in a poor section of Boston." It is generally agreed, however, that her three

[8] Ibid., 157.
[9] For Carretta's discussion of John Peters, see Vincent Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (Athens, Ga., 2011), 175-192.

infants died before she did, and that she probably died after giving birth to the third.[10]

Redding lamented that Wheatley's reputation faded into obscurity not long after her death. He was gratified by the renewal of "the respect she deserved" with the publication in 1935 of a lengthy encyclopedia article and literary criticism on Wheatley by Benjamin Brawley, an entry that included the text of many of her poems. He was also pleased that Julian D. Mason had completed an edition of Phillis Wheatley's Poems in 1966.[11] Since the 1980s, when Redding's article in Logan's *Encyclopedia* appeared, the trickle of books and articles about Wheatley and her poetry has grown into a flood. A brief survey and summary of some of the most important brief studies and collections of her works available for perusal by the public follows.

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Although the upsurge in Wheatley studies has taken place mainly since 2003, when Henry Louis Gates' little book appeared shortly after his 2002 article in *The New Yorker*, Wheatley was hardly an invisible literary presence before that time. The most significant Wheatley scholars are John C. Shields and Vincent Carretta. Shields took the most important first step in the "Wheatley Revival," so to speak, when he edited a one-volume edition of her *Collected Works* for Oxford University Press in 1988. Over a decade later, he published significant, eulogistic studies of her poetry. He filled in gaps in factual knowledge about young Phillis with conjectures, beginning a trend that continues to the present.[12]

Shields considered it important to believe that Phillis was a member of the African Fulani tribe, and brought up as a Muslim in Senegambia, in the present country of Senegal. He insisted that as a child

[10] Redding, "Wheatley," 642. It is possible that Peters did not abandon her; he may have been in prison for debt at the time of her death.
[11] Benjamin Brawley, *Early American Negro Writers* (Chapel Hill, 1935), 35-59; Julian D. Mason, ed., *Poems of Phillis Wheatley* (Chapel Hill, 1966).
[12] John C. Shields, ed., *Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley* (New York, 1988); Shields, *Phillis Wheatley and the Romantics* (Knoxville, 2010); Shields, *Phillis Wheatley's Poetics of Liberation* (Knoxville, 2008); Shields and Eric D. Lamore, eds., *New Essays on Phillis Wheatley* (Knoxville, 2011).

she had a strong relationship with her mother and believed devoutly in Islam, although there is no evidence for any of this. According to Shields, she also was infatuated with the sun (one is reminded of the young Albert Camus in Algeria), and worshipped it as a natural wonder rather than as a polytheistic deity; this accounted for the "solar imagery" in her poetry. His only source for these ideas is a phrase in Margaretta (sometimes spelled Margarita) Mathilda Odell's eccentric memoir, written in 1835, where she recorded third-hand a statement that the child Phillis supposedly made to a member of her enslaving "family," the Wheatleys, that her mother "poured out water before the sun at his rising." Odell also reported that Phillis, who died long before she was born, learned Arabic as a child, a "fact" that Shields embraces.[13]

In his major literary studies of Wheatley, published after 2000, and his brief biographical entry in the *Encyclopedia of Black Women* (1997), essentially duplicated in his article in *American National Biography* (1999), Shields lards his accounts with a plethora of qualifications, such as she "may have," "may well have been," "suggested," etc. Unfortunately, as is the case with most Wheatley studies, surmises and conjectures outnumber facts.[14]

In an effort to convert the teenage Phillis, who had no education other than that provided by the fraternal twins Mary and Nathaniel Wheatley, neither one of them college graduates, into a sophisticated classical scholar of his twentieth-century ilk, Shields bombastically writes: "Wheatley's later blending in her poems of solar imagery, Judeo-Christian thought and figures, and images from ancient classicism bespeaks complex multicultural commitments, not least of which is to her African heritage."[15] In addition to his substantive monographs on Wheatley,

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[13] John C. Shields, "Wheatley, Phillis (ca. 1753-1784)," in Darlene Clark Hine, ed., *Facts on File Encyclopedia of Black Women in America: The Early Years, 1617-1899* (New York, 1997), 189-194. On Albert Camus' panegyrics to the sun, see, for example, Stephen Ohayon, "Camus' *The Stranger*: The Sun-Metaphor and Patricidal Conflict," *American Imago* 40.2 (Summer 1983): 189-205.

[14] See also John C. Shields, "Wheatley, Phillis," in John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes, eds., *American National Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 23: 121-122.

[15] Shields, "Wheatley," in Hine, ed., *Facts on File*, 189 (quotation).

Shields composed several influential brief biographical articles about her for numerous reference works. They are not without flaws, however.

Shields makes illogical comments about Wheatley even within his brief article about her for *Facts on File*. Assuming without evidence that she supported the colonial resistance to Britain during the early 1770s, he stresses that Benjamin Franklin visited her when she arrived in England along with her master's son Nathaniel, ostensibly for her health, but also to advertise her book of poems and secure a publisher. Shields observes that Nathaniel, who supposedly had Tory sympathies, sent her to meet him, but, as Franklin wrote, Nathaniel "did not come into the room himself, and I thought [he] was not pleased with the Visit." Although Franklin obviously meant that Nathaniel was irked that Franklin, a Whig patriot, was visiting her (indeed, Franklin said that Nathaniel, seeking to help Wheatley's literary fortunes, actually sent Phillis to meet *him*), Shields turns the event upside down, writing, "The poet's political stance must have been uncomfortable to maintain in view of the divisive attitudes within the family."[16] There is not much reason to believe that Wheatley chose to see Franklin because she shared his Whig principles. Some scholars imply that Nathaniel Wheatley was upset because he feared that, in light of the recent *Somerset* Decision in the British supreme court, which some interpreted as automatically freeing any slave landing in Great Britain, Phillis intended to persuade Franklin into helping her escape from bondage and remain free in London.[17] But none of those involved left any evidence that this was the case (and one would expect the supremely articulate Franklin to mention it somewhere). The assumption is based solely on conjecture.

In attempting to discern why Wheatley did not publish her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in Boston, Shields, in some ways like Henry Louis Gates, erroneously claims that most Bostonians were Tories. Both scholars imputed her failure to publish there to widespread racism—which was probably not the case, in light of the testimonials from the wealthy and powerful of Boston and the book's popularity after it was published there by Cox and Berry. In any case, her

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[16] Ibid., 191.

[17] For instance, see Leonard W. Labaree, ed., *Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (N*ew* H*aven*, 1959--), 20: 291-92n.

1773 poems were *not* Whiggish or threatening to those who favored remaining in the Empire. The long-term economic depression in the town from the 1740s to the 1770s most likely accounted for the lack of interest in her small book, as well as her being an unknown, enslaved, young Black woman, characteristics not generally associated with talented poets or writers in general in those benighted times.[18]

Shields delivered his most impressive, well-balanced assessment of Wheatley in a reference work in Henry Louis Gates' seminal *African American Lives* (2004), the "go-too" encyclopedia of African American biography, later adapted to Home Video format and a PBS documentary series. More than other authors, Shields discussed her later life and mentioned her marriage to John Peters without impugning his reputation. He mentioned her never-published *Poems and Letters on Various Subjects* (1784), the text of which has disappeared, for which she issued advertisements ("Proposals") in 1779 and 1784 in unsuccessful attempts to attract subscribers.[19]

Like other twenty-first-century scholars, most notably historians David Waldstreicher and Mark A. Peterson, Shields emphasized Wheatley's ardent opposition to Black enslavement, but produced little proof of her antislavery commitments. He cites only two sources that might be construed as antislavery: her personal letter to Samson Occom, dated February 11, 1774, which, probably at Occom's request, initially appeared in a Connecticut (not Boston) newspaper; and another private document, her elegy on the death of Major General David Wooster, July 1778, addressed to her patroness, the General's wife. Hailing the letter to Occom, an opaque document that seems more addressed to the ancient Hebrews' struggle against slavery in Egypt under Moses' leadership than to her decade's concerns, Shields obliquely asserts, "Certainly [eighteenth-century] whites never questioned her attitude toward slavery."[20]

Although lamenting that Wheatley died "a pitiful" impoverished death, Shields, as in previous essays, emphasized that she was in the

[18] Ibid., 190-191.
[19] John C. Shields, "Wheatley, Phillis," in Henry L. Gates and Evelyn B. Higginbotham, eds., *African American Lives* (New York: Oxford UP, 2004), 872-874.
[20] Ibid.

vanguard of a proto-feminist community of women, wealthy whites (her mistress Susanna Wheatley, Selina Hastings, countess of Huntingdon, and others) and poor Blacks (her friend Obour Tanner) that fostered her talents. On a wider scale, Shields perceives her as the mother of African American letters, the first Black published author in the Thirteen Colonies' history, and "the first American woman who tried to earn a living by her writing."[21]

Specialists in the American Revolution may be disturbed by Shields' assumption, in his encyclopedia entries and his book, *Phillis Wheatley's Poetics of Liberation*, that Wheatley met personally with General George Washington, commander of the Continental Armies, at his headquarters in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for thirty to forty-five minutes during the siege of Boston in February or March 1776. Although he invited her to come to his headquarters in his belated reply on February 28, 1776 to a letter and fulsome poem she sent to him on October 26, 1775, the British Army's continued occupation of Boston until April 1776 and a smallpox epidemic in the neighborhood, which extended to Cambridge, made his offer less than tempting, unless he provided her with a military escort and vaccination. Wheatley's most careful biographer, Vincent Carretta, denies that she ever met him, although he notes that Phillis was in Providence, Rhode Island, in February 1776, two months before Washington visited Providence for two days in April 1776; hardly proof that they met. And Shields provides no convincing evidence that they saw each other.[22]

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[21] Ibid., 874.

[22] John C. Shields, *Phillis Wheatley's Poetics of Liberation* (Knoxville, 2008), 49-50. Shields' only source for this statement is Benson J Lossing's undocumented, popularized *Pictorial Field Book of the Revolution* (2 vols.; New York, 1855), 1: 556n. Shields also claims, without proof, that Washington owned Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects*. *Wheatley's Poetics of Liberation,* 1. The online catalog of Washington's Library available at the Mt. Vernon website does not list Wheatley's *Poems,* although it does reveal that Washington owned a copy of Jefferson's notorious *Notes on Virginia*. For Carretta's doubts that Wheatley and Washington ever met, see Vincent Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (Athens, Ga., 2011), 156-157. Shields exaggerates when he says that Wheatley's "visit" may "have contributed to Washington's anguish bout the slavery question in later years." Shields, *Facts on File*, 193. Indeed. the idea that Washington opposed slavery is a myth. He continued to buy and sell slaves

Although I have criticized much of the biographical *oeuvre* about Wheatley as being based on conjecture rather than evidence, there is a positive side to this scholarly venturesomeness when it comes to Wheatley studies. At least, it has encouraged the upsurge in interest in and writing about Wheatley. One need only read the brief one-page biography of Wheatley in the original, monumental *Dictionary of American* Biography, published during the 1930s, to perceive academics' lamentable failure to appreciate her significance until recent years. Adding insult to injury, to all appearances, the small biography of her was not even signed by its author.[23]

The rise of the Civil Rights movement and African American political power during the 1960s, their alliance with radical Left student movements and the mass protests against the Vietnam War, rapidly made themselves felt in the colleges and universities. Extending into the present, such phenomena, a crude barometer of which is the plethora of encyclopedias of African American biography, several of them devoted exclusively to women, are at least indirectly responsible for Wheatley's increasing prominence.[24]

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throughout his lifetime, did not free any, and ruthlessly pursued Oney Judge, a runaway female slave, during his last year as president. His will stated that the slaves he owned would be freed after his wife's death, but he did not emancipate any slaves during his lifetime, nor did he attempt to manumit his wife's "dower" slaves from a prenuptial agreement, which constituted the majority of his slave holdings. Washington's Last Will and Testament, July 1799, available online. See, among numerous works, Fritz Hirschfeld, *George Washington and Slavery: A Documentary Portrayal* (Columbia, Mo., 1997), and Bruce Ragsdale, *Washington at the Plow* (Cambridge, Mass., 2021).

[23] Dumas Malone, ed., *Dictionary of American Biography* Vol. 20 (New York, 1936), 36-37.

[24] For instance, along with the biographical entries by Shields and others discussed at length above, see R. C. Prospo's perceptive entry, "Wheatley, Phillis," in Michael W. Williams, ed., *African American Encyclopedia* (New York: Marshall Cavendish, 1993), 6: 1686-1688.

INTRODUCTION

In *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley* (2003), celebrated literary critic and television personality Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. succinctly contributed to the literature about renowned African American poet Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784). Regretting that Black Power movement intellectuals of the 1960s (mis)read her as a sellout to her generation's WASP Establishment, he praised the poet's fame in her lifetime, encapsulated by her affinity for the white British upper class (many of them Tories) on her visit to England in 1773.[1] These affluent individuals were friends of the brilliant young slave's Massachusetts mistress and patroness, Susannah Wheatley.[2] Exhilarated by her enthusiastic reception in London, Phillis wrote to her friend Obour Tanner after returning to Boston in October 1773:

> My voyage to England has conduced to the recovery (in a great measure) of my Health. The Friends I found there among the Nobility and Gentry, Their Benevolent conduct towards me, the unexpected, and unmerited civility and Complaisance with which I was treated by all, fills me with Astonishment. I can scarcely Realize it.[3]

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[1] Henry Louis Gates, *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley* (New York, 2003) was essentially an extended, unfootnoted version of his 2002 Jefferson Lecture published in the *New Yorker* (although the book includes a bibliography).

[2] Gates, *Trials of Phillis Wheatley*; James A. Rawley, "The World of Phillis Wheatley," *New England Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (Dec. 1977): 666-677. Despite its age and brevity, one of the most illuminating articles on Wheatley remains Charles W. Akers, '"Our Modern Egyptians': Phillis Wheatley and the Whig Campaign Against Slavery in Revolutionary Boston," *Journal of Negro History* 60, no. 3 (1975): 397-410.

[3] Phillis Wheatley to Obour Tanner, Oct. 30, 1773, quoted in Vincent Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (Athens, Ga., 2011), 144. Spelling and punctuation in the original. Unfortunately, Wheatley suffered an asthma attack after her return to Boston. The best biography of Phillis Wheatley is Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*, an excellent study. See also John C. Shields, *Phillis Wheatley and the Romantics* (Knoxville, 2010)

The following brief study is an effort to examine Phillis Wheatley's reputation in her own time, and (among scholars) in our era. It investigates the extent to which her contemporaries recognized her greatness as a poet. It follows with a discussion of the current historiography on Wheatley, especially those historians, particularly David Waldstreicher and Mark A. Peterson, who have most recently devoted attention to her and offered exotic new perspectives on her work and her symbolic meaning in her time and ours. The book also discusses the role that Thomas Jefferson's (in)famous three-sentence critique of Wheatley's poetry in his book, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (London, 1787) has played in forming the attitude of other critics and scholars, past and present, toward both Jefferson and Wheatley. It then elaborates on how Jefferson's terse mockery of Wheatley's talents has adversely affected his current reputation among scholars, and enhanced Wheatley's.

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and Shields, *Phillis Wheatley's Poetics of Liberation: Backgrounds and Contexts* (Knoxville, 2008). There is a competent, brief, eulogistic biography of Wheatley by John C. Shields in *American National Biography*.

PART ONE.

THE CONTROVERSIAL PHILLIS WHEATLEY: THOMAS JEFFERSON AND MODERN SCHOLARLY CRITICS

CHAPTER 1

WHITE ENTHUSIASM FOR A BLACK "POETESS" (1773)

Phillis arrived in Boston from Africa against her will in 1761, as a slave, virtually naked, wrapped up in a rug, at the age of seven or eight. Within a few years, she revealed poetic genius, notably in composing poems praising the Anglican Church, of which her mistress Susanna Wheatley, a friend of the renowned English, Anglican revivalist minister George Whitefield, was a devout member.[1]

Assisted by her influential Boston merchant owners, the Wheatleys, neutrals during the American Revolution (although Nathaniel moved to England in 1778 to be with his wife), Phillis, whom Gates calls "the Toni Morrison of her time," relied on British aristocrats to purchase her expensive short book of poems after its London publication in 1773. Encouraged by her mistress Susanna(h), she sought the patronage of Selina Hastings, countess of Huntingdon, Susanna's friend and co-religionist in the New Light/ evangelical faith. Inadvertently mocking the poverty and widespread unemployment that plagued Boston from the 1740s to the 1770s, Gates argues that only white racism prevented Wheatley from obtaining the 300 subscriptions required to publish her book in her home colony. Regarding subscriptions to Wheatley's book of poems, Gates writes: "The necessary number of subscribers could not be found because not enough Bostonians could believe that an African slave possessed the requisite degree of reason and art to write a poem by herself." In light of the testimonials signed by eighteen major political and social figures in Boston that she had sufficient ability to write such poems, famously prefaced to the first edition of the book when it was published in England, including Patriot leader John Hancock and Loyalist icon Governor Thomas Hutchinson, the literate population of Boston must have

[1] Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 33-34, 72-77, 91-92.

been sufficiently cognizant of her talents. A more relevant consideration may have been the lack of surplus merchant capital in Boston and her failure to compose paeans to the Whig Patriot cause. As her biographer Vincent Carretta writes, "Prior to the British occupation of Boston, Wheatley had quite carefully balanced her public expressions of revolutionary and loyalist sentiments." Since Phillis Wheatley initially expressed moderately Loyalist sympathies, and the majority of Bostonians were fervent Whigs, they might not have been inclined to purchase her poems for that reason.[2]

When Wheatley did finally get her poems published in Boston, it is likely, judging from the proliferation of advertisements for her book extending from January 1774 until the end of the year, that it sold more copies in the Thirteen Colonies than in England. Her only published book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* was dedicated to the Countess of Huntingdon and contained thirty-eight poems, together with a Preface that included the "attestation" of eighteen of the most prominent political, social and religious notables of Massachusetts that guaranteed that she (despite being an impoverished, assumedly ignorant, young Black

[2] Vincent Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (Athens, Ga., 2011), 102-104 (discussion of the signatures to the "Attestation" that she wrote the poems contained in her book), 153-154. Ibid., 154 (quotation). Gates, *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley* (New York, 2003), 22 (quotation). This is not to deny that there were racists in Boston, among them many Whigs, including such leaders as John Adams, who later became president of the United States. Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery* (Ithaca, 1998); Jared Ross Hardesty, *Unfreedom: Slavery and Dependence in Eighteenth-Century Boston* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); Patricia Bradley, *Slavery, Propaganda, and the American Revolution* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1998); and Arthur Scherr, *John Adams, Slavery, and Race* (Santa Barbara, 2018). On the poverty that plagued Boston for most of the eighteenth century, with its declining reputation as a commercial center, see Gary B. Nash, *Urban Crucible: The Seaport Cities and the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979). For the impressive list of eighteen Massachusetts notables and aristocrats who certified that Phillis Wheatley wrote *Poems on Various Subjects* and admitted their admiration for her, headed by the courageous Tory, wealthy and erudite Governor Thomas Hutchinson and Lieutenant-Governor Andrew Oliver, and including the wealthy Boston Whig merchants James Bowdoin, John Hancock, and Harrison Gray, see Vincent Carretta, ed., *Writings of Phillis Wheatley* (New York, 2019), 52. It is unlikely that Jefferson or George Washington himself could have obtained a more outstanding collection of advocates.

slave) was the author. The book's price was high. The *Boston Gazette*, in an early advertisement for the volume, on its first page, informed the public:

> THIS DAY IS PUBLISHED, [PRICE 3s 4p [three shillings four pence]. L.M. [leather Morocco] Bound, POEMS ON VARIOUS SUBJECTS—Religious and Moral. By PHILLIS WHEATLEY, A Negro Girl. Adorned with an elegant Engraving of the Author. Sold by Messr's COX & BERRY At their Store in King-Street, Boston. N.B. The Subscribers are requested to apply for their Copies.[3]

A few days later, the *Massachusetts Gazette and Weekly News-Letter*, sometimes referred to as the *Boston News-Letter*, printed an identical advertisement on page one.[4]

Wheatley's poems, especially her elegy in 1770 on the death of George Whitefield, the great Anglican evangelist, which she originally dedicated and sent to the Countess of Huntingdon, had already appeared frequently in colonial newspapers, especially in Boston. Thus, it is not surprising that when she left for England in May 1773 with Nathaniel Wheatley, her owner's son, the press mentioned it; nor was she referred to as a slave. For example, the *Boston Post-Boy* reported, "Saturday sailed the Ship *London*, Capt. Calef, for London; Mr. Nathaniel Wheatley, of this Town, Merchant, went passenger; also Phillis, Servant of Mr. Wheatley, the extraordinary Poetess."[5] The *Boston News-Letter* as well observed that "Phillis, Servant to Mr. Wheatly [an alternative spelling of Wheatley's name, and the one with which John "Wheatly" signed his name to his last will and testament] the extraordinary Negro Poet," accompanied him to London "at the Invitation of the Countess of Huntington [sic]."[6]

When she returned in September 1773, without Nathaniel, the *Post-Boy* nonetheless duly reported, "With Capt. Calef are passengers, Capt. Hillhouse and… Mr. Aleing; also PHILLIS, the extraordinary Negro Poetess, Servant of Mr. John Wheatley." The *Boston Gazette* likewise

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[3] *Boston Gazette,* January 24, 1774, p.3. See also *Boston Gazette*, January 31, 1774, p. 1, for a reprint of the advertisement on the first page.
[4] *Boston News-Letter*, Feb. 3, 1774, page one.
[5] *Boston Post-Boy*, May 3, 1773, p. 2. On the importance of Wheatley's elegy to George Whitefield in promoting her fame, see Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 72-78.
[6] *Boston News-Letter*, May 6, 1773, p. 2.

recorded, "In Capt. Calef came Passengrs, Capt. Hillhouse & Lady, Mr. Aleing, also, Phillis Wheatley, the extraordinary Poetical Genius, Negro servant of Mr. John Wheatley." [7] She was already a celebrity, although her book of poems was not published until later in the year.

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The first newspaper advertisements for Wheatley's *Poems* appeared in early January 1774, and continued intermittently for the rest of the year. The book was expensive. As late as June 1774, the New London *Connecticut Gazette* had the following square-column advertisement on the first page:

> To be sold by T. GREEN,
> POEMS ON VARIOUS SUBJECTS,
> RELIGIOUS AND MORAL,
> BY PHILLIS WHEATLEY,
> NEGRO SERVANT TO MR.
> JOHN WHEATLEY, of
> Boston, in New-England
> A few of the above are
> Likewise to be sold by SAMSON OCCOM.[8]

That the publishers expected to sell Wheatley's work at such a high price, without offering discounts for bulk purchases, suggests that Phillis was already considered something of a unique celebrity in Boston. Her book was advertised more often than any of the other contemporary local publications. On February 3, 1774, the only book other than Wheatley's *Poems* advertised in the *Boston News-Letter*, and at that on page three, has a surprisingly fascinating back-story: Reverend William Dodd's *Reflections on Death*. The author was a well-known English clergyman with a reputation for extravagance and fraud. The advertisement for that work read: "A Book which upon perusal recommends itself, and which it is only necessary to read to approve, extremely proper to be given

[7] *Boston Post-Boy*, Sept. 20, 1773. This news also appeared in the *New-Hampshire Gazette*, Sept. 24, 1773; *Boston Gazette*, Sept. 20, 1773, p. 2.
[8] [New London] *Connecticut Gazette*, June 17, 1774, p. 1.

at Funerals or any other solemn Occasion; being written expressly with that intention:

> THIS DAY WAS PUBLISHED, (Price 2 shillings of Lawful Money single and 1 pound 8 pence the dozen), By THOMAS LEVERETT; NICHOLAS BOWES, and HENRY KNOX IN Cornhill,
>
> *REFLECTIONS ON DEATH*,
>
> By WILLIAM DODD, LL.D. Prependary of Brecon and Chaplain in
>
> Ordinary to His MAJESTY…
>
> THE FIFTH EDITION.
>
> A desire of extending the very laudable Practice of giving Books at Funerals and the great propriety of the present Work for that Purpose, have induced the Editors to put this valuable Performance one Third cheaper than the London Edition, although it is by no Means Inferior in point of Elegance.[9]

Like Wheatley, Dodd was a unique figure, probably the only clergyman who preached his own funeral sermon, written for him by the renowned writer and literary critic Samuel Johnson, before his execution at London's Tyburn for forgery in 1777. He spoke in front of a large and fashionable audience, many of them his personal friends. He was nicknamed the "Macaroni Parson" because of his love of elaborate dress and his spendthrift ways, purchasing various estates and ornate homes that he could not afford. His fate was sealed largely because this popular, glad-handing prelate aroused Chief Justice William Murray, Lord Mansfield's fears of the proletarian "mob." This Murray was the same court official who decided in favor of the runaway slave James Somerset in 1772, in the case of *Somerset v. Stewart*. Mansfield ruled that an enslaved person who ran away from his master while they visited British soil was free if his master decided to punish him by selling him abroad to West Indian planters, because no "common law of slavery" existed in the British Empire.[10]

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[9] *Boston News-Letter*, Feb. 3, 1774, page three. *Reflections on Death* was 127 pages long, about the same size as Wheatley's book of poetry.

[10] Jerome Nadelhaft, "The Somersett [sic?] Case and Slavery: Myth, Reality, and Repercussions," *Journal of Negro History* 51, no. 3 (1966): 193-208. There are

Dodd was born in 1729 at Bourne, in Lincolnshire, where his father was vicar. In 1765, he tutored the diplomat Philip Dormer Stanhope, fifth Earl of Chesterfield, adoptive son of the famous erotic writer and essayist Philip Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield. In February 1777, Dodd was arrested on the charge of forging Lord Chesterfield's signature to a bond of £4,000, for which he had obtained payment. Although he repaid the money, at Lord Mansfield's insistence he was brought to trial, convicted, and executed on January 20, 1777.[11]

Reflections on Death was originally published in London in 1763. Like Wheatley, Dodd wrote poetry, but failed to earn much income from his works. His optimistic expectations led him to lease an expensive house in London on Warden Street. His only enduring legacy was to compile a popular book of Shakespeare quotations, *Beauties of Shakespeare* (1752), which long remained in print, and allegedly was Goethe's introduction to Shakespeare. Unlike Wheatley, however, the Anglican Dodd denounced the revivalist methods of John Wesley, who retaliated by lambasting him in *Lloyd's Evening Post* in 1761. From 1767-1772, Dodd campaigned for inoculation against smallpox and fought against the death penalty, aligning himself with the most liberal and enlightened positions of the time. After he was convicted for forgery and sentenced to death, Samuel Johnson tried to help him escape the death penalty. Dodd aroused a great deal of popular support for a reduced sentence, even among Britain's lower classes, because he reimbursed the money. Numerous public demonstrations were held on his behalf, arousing the conservative Chief Justice Mansfield's fear and anger. He advised the royal Privy Council to enforce the death sentence on Dodd because he was popular with the masses, who must be put in their place lest a republican revolution be encouraged. Ironically, the same figure whose "Mansfield decision" ostensibly aroused what Wheatley's biographer Vincent Carretta surmises was her demands for emancipation during her visit to London (there is no evidence that she demanded her freedom) was instrumental in Dodd's death, because of

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numerous discussions of the "Somerset decision," and they are not in agreement as to what Murray meant or the scope of the decision, including whether it threatened the slaveholdings of Southern planters in the Thirteen Colonies.

[11] Norman S. Poser, *Lord Mansfield: Justice in the Age of Reason* (Montreal, 2013), 274-275.

Mansfield's contempt for and fear of the (white) democratic impulses emerging in England.[12]

In addition, the widespread excitement and enthusiasm her little book of poems inspired among the Anglo-American political and mercantile aristocracy and intelligentsia suggests that there was less white racial prejudice against African Americans in the colonial era and the early republic than we have learned to expect from the historical and literary studies of the last fifty years. Professor Carretta speculates that Phillis was aware of the *Somerset* decision when she left for England in May 1773, with her master's son Nathaniel Wheatley, and actually intended to emancipate herself there. Conversely, he also surmises that British abolitionist Granville Sharp and others informed Phillis of the *Somerset* decision during her time in London, and that this may have inspired her to threaten to remain there unless the Wheatley family emancipated her, which they did upon their return to Boston. Unfortunately, Carretta has no proof for any of these conjectures. Phillis's emancipation may have resulted from Susannah Wheatley requesting it of her husband as a deathbed wish in 1773. Wheatley herself observed matter-of-factly, without implying that she had successfully demanded her emancipation in England, that John and/or Nathaniel Wheatley freed her because "Since my return to America, my Master, has at the request of my friends in England, given me my freedom." [13]

[12] See the biographical sketch of Dodd in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.
[13] On Wheatley's visit to England and her poetry's being published there, see Vincent Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (Athens, Ga., 2011), 128-138. For Phillis's comments, see Carretta, *Wheatley*, 118, quoting Wheatley to General David Wooster, Oct. 18, 1773. Charles W. Akers, '"Our Modern Egyptians': Phillis Wheatley and the Whig Campaign Against Slavery in Revolutionary Boston," *Journal of Negro History* 60, no. 3 (1975): 397-410, at 399, suggests that Susanna Wheatley had Phillis freed before her death.