

This deals not curses on mankind,  
 Or dooms them to perpetual grief, 20  
 If from its aid no joys they find,  
 It damns them not for unbelief;  
 Upon a more exalted plan  
 Creatress nature dealt with man—

Joy to the day, when all agree 25  
 On such grand systems to proceed,  
 From fraud, design, and error free,  
 And which to truth and goodness lead:  
 Then persecution will retreat  
 And man's religion be complete. 30

1815

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## PHILLIS WHEATLEY

c. 1753–1784

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Phillis Wheatley was either nineteen or twenty years old in September 1773, when her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* was published in London. At the time of the volume's publication, she was the object of considerable public attention because, in addition to being a child prodigy, Wheatley was an enslaved person. Her books included a testimonial from eighteen prominent citizens—including the governor of Massachusetts and the merchant and statesman John Hancock—who bore witness that “under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town,” Wheatley “had been examined and thought qualified to write them.” While the circumstances and nature of the examination remain unclear, the need for such a testimonial indicates the obstacles that Wheatley faced in pursuing her literary art.

Born in Africa (probably in present-day Senegal or Gambia), she was captured by slavers and brought to Boston in 1761. A wealthy tailor, John Wheatley, purchased her as a companion for his wife, Susanna, and she was named after the vessel that carried her to America. Wheatley was fortunate in her surroundings, for Susanna Wheatley was sympathetic toward this frail and remarkably intelligent child. At a time when even few white women were given an education, Wheatley was taught to read and write, and before long she began to read Latin writers. She came to know the Bible well, and three English poets—John Milton, Alexander Pope, and Thomas Gray—strongly influenced her verse. The Wheatleys moved in a circle of enlightened Boston Christians, and Phillis was introduced to a community that was coming to view the keeping of slaves as incompatible with Christian life.

Wheatley became internationally famous after the publication of her poetic eulogy celebrating George Whitefield, the great English evangelist who made several visits



**Phillis Wheatley.** This engraving—by Scipio Moorhead (see “To S. M.,” on p. 795)—was the frontispiece to Wheatley’s book.

to America, frequently toured New England, and died in Newburyport, Massachusetts, in 1770. In June 1773 she traveled to London in the company of the Wheatleys’ son Nathaniel, partly for reasons of health and partly to seek support for her first book of poems. Benjamin Franklin and the lord mayor of London were among those who paid their respects. To her admirers, her literary gifts, intelligence, and piety exemplified the triumph of the human spirit over circumstance.

Just before her book could be published, Wheatley was called back to Boston by the news that Susanna Wheatley was dying. Early in the fall of 1773 she was granted manumission. Susanna Wheatley died in 1774. In the year that John Wheatley died, 1778, Wheatley married John Peters, a freedman, about whom almost nothing is known other than that the Wheatleys did not like him, that he petitioned for

a license to sell liquor in 1784, and that he may have been in debtor’s prison when Phillis Wheatley died, having endured poverty and the loss of two children in her last years. On her deathbed her third child lay ill beside her and succumbed shortly after Wheatley herself. They were buried together in an unmarked grave. Five years earlier, Wheatley had run advertisements for her second volume of poetry, to include thirteen letters and thirty-three poems. Her hoped-for subscribers did not respond, however, so she never published that volume. Most of the poems and letters are lost.

Wheatley’s poetry was rediscovered in the 1830s by the New England abolitionists, but she has never been better understood than at the present. Her recent critics have not only corrected a number of biographical errors but, more important, have provided a context in which her work can be more fully interpreted. This reconsideration shows Wheatley to be a bold and canny spokesperson for her faith and her politics. She early joined the cause of American independence and supported the abolition of slavery, anticipating her friend the Reverend Samuel Hopkins’s complaint that when African Americans first heard the “sons of liberty” cry out for freedom they were shocked by the indifference to their own “abject slavery and utter wretchedness.” In a public letter to the Presbyterian minister and Mohegan leader Samson Occom, Wheatley stressed that the exercise of slavery cannot be reconciled with a “principle” that God has implanted in every human breast, “Love of Freedom”; and in her poem addressed to the conservative Earl of Dartmouth, she wrote that there could be no justice anywhere if people in authority were deaf to the cries of human sorrow. She promoted the cause of American independence in her poem celebrating George Washington as well, perhaps with the idea that he might encourage greater support for the rights of African Americans.

In her prosody Wheatley employed the dominant neoclassical verse form of the heroic couplet, while the themes of her poetry—including spiritual and political liberty, the sublime wonders of nature, and the qualities of vision and imagination—are more in keeping with the emerging Romantic tradition. A number of scholars have suggested that Wheatley’s poetry includes allusions to her African childhood,

some overt, others more subtle. Her work is enriched by the tension between traditional form and transformational ideas.

The following texts are from *The Poems of Phillis Wheatley* (1966, rev. 1989), edited by Julian D. Mason. Wheatley's spelling and punctuation have been retained.

### 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 Savior too:  
 Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.  
 Some view our sable<sup>1</sup> race with scornful eye,  
 "Their color is a diabolic dye."  
 Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,<sup>2</sup>  
 May be refined, and join the angelic train.

1773

### To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth,<sup>1</sup> His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for North America, &c.

Hail, happy day, when, smiling like the morn,  
 Fair Freedom rose New England to adorn:  
 The northern clime beneath her genial ray,  
 Dartmouth, congratulates thy blissful sway:  
 Elate with hope her race no longer mourns,  
 Each soul expands, each grateful bosom burns,  
 While in thine hand with pleasure we behold  
 The silken reins, and Freedom's charms unfold.  
 Long lost to realms beneath the northern skies  
 She shines supreme, while hated faction dies:  
 Soon as appeared the Goddess<sup>2</sup> long desired,  
 Sick at the view, she<sup>3</sup> languished and expired;  
 Thus from the splendors of the morning light  
 The owl in sadness seeks the caves of night.

No more, America, in mournful strain  
 Of wrongs, and grievance unredressed complain,  
 No longer shalt thou dread the iron chain,  
 Which wanton Tyranny with lawless hand  
 Had made, and with it meant t' enslave the land.

1. Black.

2. Cain slew his brother Abel and was "marked" by God for doing so. This mark has sometimes been taken to be the origin of dark-skinned peoples (Genesis 4.1–15).

1. William Legge, second Earl of Dartmouth

(1731–1801), was appointed secretary in charge of the American colonies in August 1772. He was sympathetic to the Methodist movement in England but not to the American Revolution.

2. Freedom.

3. Faction.

Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song, 20  
 Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung,  
 Whence flow these wishes for the common good,  
 By feeling hearts alone best understood,  
 I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate  
 Was snatch'd from Afric's fancied happy seat: 25  
 What pangs excruciating must molest,  
 What sorrows labor in my parent's breast?  
 Steeled was that soul and by no misery moved  
 That from a father seized his babe beloved:  
 Such, such my case. And can I then but pray 30  
 Others may never feel tyrannic sway?

For favors past, great Sir, our thanks are due,  
 And thee we ask thy favors to renew,  
 Since in thy power,<sup>4</sup> as in thy will before,  
 To sooth the griefs, which thou did'st once deplore. 35  
 May heavenly grace the sacred sanction give  
 To all thy works, and thou forever live  
 Not only on the wings of fleeting Fame,  
 Though praise immortal crowns the patriot's name,  
 But to conduct to heavens refulgent fane,<sup>5</sup> 40  
 May fiery coursers sweep th' ethereal plain,<sup>6</sup>  
 And bear thee upwards to that blest abode,  
 Where, like the prophet,<sup>7</sup> thou shalt find thy God.

1773

### To the University of Cambridge,<sup>1</sup> in New England

While an intrinsic ardor prompts to write,  
 The muses promise to assist my pen;  
 'Twas not long since I left my native shore  
 The land of errors, and Egyptian gloom:<sup>2</sup>  
 Father of mercy, 'twas Thy gracious hand 5  
 Brought me in safety from those dark abodes.

Students, to you 'tis given to scan the heights  
 Above, to traverse the ethereal space,  
 And mark the systems of revolving worlds.  
 Still more, ye sons of science<sup>3</sup> ye receive 10  
 The blissful news by messengers from Heaven,  
 How Jesus' blood for your redemption flows.

4. I.e., since it is in thy power.

5. Heaven's shining temple.

6. The heavens. "Coursers": spirited horses.

7. In 2 Kings 11, a chariot of fire with fiery horses appears, and the prophet Elijah is taken up to heaven by a whirlwind.

1. Harvard.

2. "And Moses stretched forth his hand toward heaven; and there was a thick darkness in all the land of Egypt three days" (Exodus 10.22). "Errors": i.e., theological errors, because Africa was unconverted.

3. I.e., knowledge.

See Him with hands out-stretched upon the cross;  
 Immense compassion in his bosom glows;  
 He hears revilers, nor resents their scorn: 15  
 What matchless mercy in the Son of God!  
 When the whole human race by sin had fallen,  
 He deigned to die that they might rise again,  
 And share with Him in the sublimest skies,  
 Life without death, and glory without end. 20

Improve<sup>4</sup> your privileges while they stay,  
 Ye pupils, and each hour redeem, that bears  
 Or good or bad report of you to Heaven.  
 Let sin, that baneful evil to the soul,  
 By you be shunned, nor once remit your guard; 25  
 Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg.  
 Ye blooming plants of human race divine,  
 An Ethiop<sup>5</sup> tells you 'tis your greatest foe;  
 Its transient sweetness turns to endless pain,  
 And in immense perdition sinks the soul. 30

1767

1773

### On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield, 1770<sup>1</sup>

Hail, happy saint, on thine immortal throne,  
 Possessed of glory, life, and bliss unknown;  
 We hear no more the music of thy tongue,  
 Thy wonted auditories<sup>2</sup> cease to throng. 5  
 Thy sermons in unequalled accents flow'd,  
 And every bosom with devotion glowed;  
 Thou didst in strains of eloquence refined  
 In flame the heart, and captivate the mind.  
 Unhappy we the setting sun deplore,  
 So glorious once, but ah! it shines no more. 10

Behold the prophet in his towering flight!  
 He leaves the earth for heav'n's unmeasured height,  
 And worlds unknown receive him from our sight.  
 There Whitefield wings with rapid course his way,  
 And sails to Zion<sup>3</sup> through vast seas of day. 15  
 Thy prayers, great saint, and thine incessant cries  
 Have pierced the bosom of thy native skies.  
 Thou moon hast seen, and all the stars of light,  
 How he has wrestled with his God by night.  
 He prayed that grace in every heart might dwell, 20  
 He longed to see America excel;

4. Take advantage of.

5. Ethiopian. In Wheatley's time, "Ethiopian" was a conventional name for the black peoples of Africa.

1. Whitefield, born in 1714, was the best-known revivalist in the eighteenth century.

2. I.e., thy customary listeners.

3. Here, the heavenly city of God.

He charged<sup>4</sup> its youth that every grace divine  
 Should with full luster in their conduct shine;  
 That Savior, which his soul did first receive,  
 The greatest gift that even a God can give, 25  
 He freely offered to the numerous throng,  
 That on his lips with listening pleasure hung.

“Take Him, ye wretched, for your only good,  
 Take Him ye starving sinners, for your food;  
 Ye thirsty, come to this life-giving stream, 30  
 Ye preachers, take Him for your joyful theme;  
 Take Him my dear Americans, he said,  
 Be your complaints on His kind bosom laid:  
 Take Him, ye Africans, He longs for you,  
 Impartial Savior is His title due: 35  
 Washed in the fountain of redeeming blood,  
 You shall be sons, and kings, and priests to God.”

Great *Countess*,<sup>5</sup> we Americans revere  
 Thy name, and mingle in thy grief sincere;  
 New England deeply feels, the orphans mourn, 40  
 Their more than father will no more return.

But, though arrested by the hand of death,  
 Whitefield no more exerts his laboring breath,  
 Yet let us view him in the eternal skies,  
 Let every heart to this bright vision rise; 45  
 While the tomb safe retains its sacred trust,  
 Till life divine re-animates his dust.

1770

1770, 1773

### Thoughts on the Works of Providence

Arise, my soul, on wings enraptured, rise  
 To praise the monarch of the earth and skies,  
 Whose goodness and beneficence appear  
 As round its center moves the rolling year, 5  
 Or when the morning glows with rosy charms,  
 Or the sun slumbers in the ocean's arms:  
 Of light divine be a rich portion lent  
 To guide my soul, and favor my intend.  
 Celestial muse, my arduous flight sustain  
 And raise my mind to a seraphic<sup>1</sup> strain! 10

4. Exhorted.

5. Selina Shirley Hastings (c. 1707–1791), Countess of Huntingdon, head of a small society of evangelical churches, was a strong supporter of

George Whitefield. Wheatley visited her in England in 1773.

1. Angelic.

Adored for ever be the God unseen,  
 Which round the sun revolves this vast machine,  
 Though to His eye its mass a point appears:  
 Adored the God that whirls surrounding spheres,  
 Which first ordained that mighty Sol<sup>2</sup> should reign 15  
 The peerless monarch of the ethereal train:  
 Of miles twice forty millions is His height,  
 And yet His radiance dazzles mortal sight  
 So far beneath—from Him the extended earth  
 Vigor derives, and every flowery birth: 20  
 Vast through her orb she moves with easy grace  
 Around her Phoebus<sup>3</sup> in unbounded space;  
 True to her course the impetuous storm derides,  
 Triumphant o'er the winds, and surging tides.

Almighty, in these wond'rous works of Thine, 25  
 What Power, what Wisdom, and what Goodness shine!  
 And are Thy wonders, Lord, by men explored,  
 And yet creating glory unadored!

Creation smiles in various beauty gay,  
 While day to night, and night succeeds to day: 30  
 That Wisdom, which attends Jehovah's ways,  
 Shines most conspicuous in the solar rays:  
 Without them, destitute of heat and light,  
 This world would be the reign of endless night:  
 In their excess how would our race complain, 35  
 Abhorring life! how hate its lengthened chain!  
 From air adust<sup>4</sup> what numerous ills would rise?  
 What dire contagion taint the burning skies?  
 What pestilential vapors, fraught with death,  
 Would rise, and overspread the lands beneath? 40

Hail, smiling morn, that from the orient main<sup>5</sup>  
 Ascending dost adorn the heav'nly plain!  
 So rich, so various are thy beauteous dyes,  
 That spread through all the circuit of the skies,  
 That, full of thee, my soul in rapture soars, 45  
 And thy great God, the cause of all adores.<sup>6</sup>

O'er beings infinite His love extends,  
 His Wisdom rules them, and His Pow'r defends.  
 When tasks diurnal<sup>7</sup> tire the human frame,  
 The spirits faint, and dim the vital flame, 50  
 Then too that ever active bounty shines,  
 Which not infinity of space confines.  
 The sable<sup>8</sup> veil, that Night in silence draws,

2. The sun.

3. Apollo, the Greek sun god.

4. Dried up.

5. From the eastern ocean.

6. I.e., God created everything (including the "smiling morn").

7. Daily.

8. Black.



Conceals effects, but shows the Almighty Cause,  
 Night seals in sleep the wide creation fair,<sup>9</sup> 55  
 And all is peaceful but the brow of care.  
 Again, gay Phoebus, as the day before,  
 Wakes every eye, but what shall wake no more;  
 Again the face of nature is renewed,  
 Which still appears harmonious, fair, and good. 60  
 May grateful strains salute the smiling morn,  
 Before its beams the eastern hills adorn!

Shall day to day, and night to night conspire  
 To show the goodness of the Almighty Sire?  
 This mental voice shall man regardless hear, 65  
 And never, never raise the filial prayer?  
 Today, O hearken, nor your folly mourn  
 For time mispent, that never will return.

But see the sons of vegetation rise,  
 And spread their leafy banners to the skies. 70  
 All-wise Almighty providence we trace  
 In trees, and plants, and all the flowery race;  
 As clear as in the nobler frame of man,  
 All lovely copies of the Maker's plan.  
 The power the same that forms a ray of light, 75  
 That called creation from eternal night.  
 "Let there be light," He said. From his profound<sup>1</sup>  
 Old Chaos heard, and trembled at the sound:  
 Swift as the word, inspired by power divine,  
 Behold the light around its Maker shine, 80  
 The first fair product of the omnific<sup>2</sup> God,  
 And now through all his works diffused abroad.

As reason's powers by day our God disclose,  
 So we may trace Him in the night's repose:  
 Say what is sleep? and dreams how passing strange! 85  
 When action ceases, and ideas range  
 Licentious and unbounded o'er the plains,  
 Where Fancy's<sup>3</sup> queen in giddy triumph reigns.  
 Hear in soft strains the dreaming lover sigh  
 To a kind fair,<sup>4</sup> or rave in jealousy; 90  
 On pleasure now, and now on vengeance bent,  
 The lab'ring passions struggle for a vent.  
 What power, O man! thy reason then restores,  
 So long suspended in nocturnal hours?  
 What secret hand returns the mental train, 95  
 And gives improv'd thine active powers again?  
 From thee, O man, what gratitude should rise!  
 And, when from balmy sleep thou op'st thine eyes,

9. Beautiful.

1. Depths. "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light" (Genesis 1.3).

2. Omnificent: unlimited in creative power.

3. The imagination in its image-making aspect.

4. Woman.



Let thy first thoughts be praises to the skies.  
 How merciful our God who thus imparts 100  
 O'erflowing tides of joy to human hearts,  
 When wants and woes might be our righteous lot,  
 Our God forgetting, by our God forgot!

Among the mental powers a question rose,  
 "What most the image of the Eternal shows?" 105  
 When thus to Reason (so let Fancy rove)  
 Her great companion spoke, immortal Love.

"Say, mighty power, how long shall strife prevail,  
 And with its murmurs load the whispering gale?  
 Refer the cause to Recollection's shrine, 110  
 Who loud proclaims my origin divine,  
 The cause whence heaven and earth began to be,  
 And is not man immortalized by me?  
 Reason let this most causeless strife subside."  
 Thus Love pronounced, and Reason thus replied. 115

"Thy birth, celestial queen! 'tis mine to own,  
 In thee resplendent is the Godhead shown;  
 Thy words persuade, my soul enraptured feels  
 Resistless beauty which thy smile reveals."  
 Ardent she spoke, and, kindling at her charms, 120  
 She clasped the blooming goddess in her arms.

Infinite Love where'er we turn our eyes  
 Appears: this every creature's wants supplies;  
 This most is heard in Nature's constant voice,  
 This makes the morn, and this the eve rejoice; 125  
 This bids the fostering rains and dews descend  
 To nourish all, to serve one gen'ral end,  
 The good of man: yet man ungrateful pays  
 But little homage, and but little praise.  
 To him, whose works arrayed with mercy shine, 130  
 What songs should rise, how constant, how divine!

1773

### To S. M.,<sup>1</sup> a Young African Painter, on Seeing His Works

To show the laboring bosom's deep intent,  
 And thought in living characters to paint,  
 When first thy pencil did those beauties give,  
 And breathing figures learnt from thee to live,  
 How did those prospects give my soul delight, 5  
 A new creation rushing on my sight?  
 Still, wondrous youth! each noble path pursue,

1. Scipio Moorhead, a servant to the Reverend John Moorhead of Boston.

On deathless glories fix thine ardent view:  
 Still may the painter's and the poet's fire  
 To aid thy pencil, and thy verse conspire! 10  
 And may the charms of each seraphic<sup>2</sup> theme  
 Conduct thy footsteps to immortal fame!  
 High to the blissful wonders of the skies  
 Elate thy soul, and raise thy wishful eyes.  
 Thrice happy, when exalted to survey 15  
 That splendid city, crown'd with endless day,  
 Whose twice six gates<sup>3</sup> on radiant hinges ring:  
 Celestial Salem<sup>4</sup> blooms in endless spring.

Calm and serene thy moments glide along,  
 And may the muse inspire each future song! 20  
 Still, with the sweets of contemplation blest,  
 May peace with balmy wings your soul invest!  
 But when these shades of time are chased away,  
 And darkness ends in everlasting day,  
 On what seraphic pinions shall we move, 25  
 And view the landscapes in the realms above?  
 There shall thy tongue in heavenly murmurs flow,  
 And there my muse with heavenly transport glow:  
 No more to tell of Damon's<sup>5</sup> tender sighs,  
 Or rising radiance of Aurora's<sup>6</sup> eyes, 30  
 For nobler themes demand a nobler strain,  
 And purer language on the ethereal plain.  
 Cease, gentle muse! the solemn gloom of night  
 Now seals the fair creation from my sight.

1773

### To His Excellency General Washington<sup>1</sup>

Sir. I have taken the freedom to address your Excellency in the enclosed poem, and entreat your acceptance, though I am not insensible of its inaccuracies. Your being appointed by the Grand Continental Congress to be Generalissimo of the armies of North America, together with the fame of your virtues, excite sensations not easy to suppress. Your generosity, therefore, I presume, will pardon the attempt. Wishing your Excellency all possible success in the great cause you are so generously engaged in. I am,

Your Excellency's most obedient humble servant,  
 Phillis Wheatley

2. Angelic.

3. Heaven, like Jerusalem in antiquity, is thought to have had twelve gates (as many gates as tribes of Israel).

4. Heavenly Jerusalem.

5. In classical mythology, Damon pledged his life for his friend Pythias.

6. The Roman goddess of the dawn.

1. This poem was first published in the *Pennsylvania Magazine* when Thomas Paine (see his headnote, earlier in this volume) was editor. After reading it, Washington invited Wheatley to meet him in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in February 1776.

Providence, Oct. 26, 1775.<sup>2</sup>  
His Excellency Gen. Washington.

Celestial choir! enthroned in realms of light,  
Columbia's<sup>3</sup> scenes of glorious toils I write.  
While freedom's cause her anxious breast alarms,  
She flashes dreadful in refulgent arms.  
See mother earth her offspring's fate bemoan, 5  
And nations gaze at scenes before unknown!  
See the bright beams of heaven's revolving light  
Involved in sorrows and the veil of night!  
The goddess comes, she moves divinely fair,  
Olive and laurel<sup>4</sup> binds her golden hair: 10  
Wherever shines this native of the skies,  
Unnumbered charms and recent graces rise.  
Muse! bow propitious while my pen relates  
How pour her armies through a thousand gates,  
As when Eolus<sup>5</sup> heaven's fair face deforms, 15  
Enwrapped in tempest and a night of storms;  
Astonished ocean feels the wild uproar,  
The refluent surges beat the sounding shore;  
Or thick as leaves in Autumn's golden reign,  
Such, and so many, moves the warrior's train. 20  
In bright array they seek the work of war,  
Where high unfurled the ensign<sup>6</sup> waves in air.  
Shall I to Washington their praise recite?  
Enough thou know'st them in the fields of fight.  
Thee, first in place and honors—we demand 25  
The grace and glory of thy martial band.  
Famed for thy valor, for thy virtues more,  
Hear every tongue thy guardian aid implore!  
One century scarce performed its destined round,  
When Gallic powers Columbia's fury found;<sup>7</sup> 30  
And so may you, whoever dares disgrace  
The land of freedom's heaven-defended race!  
Fixed are the eyes of nations on the scales,  
For in their hopes Columbia's arm prevails.  
Anon Britannia droops the pensive head, 35  
While round increase the rising hills of dead.  
Ah! cruel blindness to Columbia's state!  
Lament thy thirst of boundless power too late.  
Proceed, great chief, with virtue on thy side,  
Thy every action let the goddess guide. 40  
A crown, a mansion, and a throne that shine,  
With gold unfading, WASHINGTON! be thine.

1775–76

1776, 1834

2. When the British occupied Boston in summer 1775, Wheatley and her former master's family moved to Providence, Rhode Island, for safety.

3. This reference to America as "the land Columbus found" is believed to be the first in print.

4. Classical emblems of victory.

5. Mythological ruler of the winds.

6. Flag or banner.

7. The French and Indian War (1754–63), between France and England, ended the French colonial empire in North America.

## Letters

*To John Thornton,<sup>1</sup> London*

[THE BIBLE MY CHIEF STUDY]

[Boston, April 21, 1772]

Hon'd, Sir

I rec'd your instructive fav<sup>r</sup>2 of Feb. 29, for which, return you ten thousand thanks, I did not flatter myself with the tho'ts of your honouring me with an Answer to my letter, I thank you for recommending the Bible to be my chief Study, I find and Acknowledge it the best of Books, it contains an endless treasure of wisdom, and knowledge. O that my eyes were more open'd to see the real worth, and true excellence of the word of truth, my flinty heart Soften'd with the grateful dews of divine grace and the Stubborn will, and affections, bent on God alone their proper object, and the vitiated palate may be corrected to relish heav'nly things. It has pleas'd God to lay me on a bed of Sickness, and I knew not but my deathbed, but he has been graciously pleas'd to restore me in a great measure. I beg your prayers, that I may be made thankful for his paternal corrections, and that I may make a proper use of them to the glory of his grace. I am Still very weak & the Physicians, seem to think there is danger of a consumpsion.<sup>3</sup> And O that when my flesh and my heart fail me God would be my strength and portion for ever, that I might put my whole trust and Confidence in him, who has promis'd never to forsake those who Seek him with the whole heart. You could not, I am sure have express greater tenderness and affection for me, than by being a welwisher to my Soul, the friends of Souls bear Some resemblance to the father of Spirits and are made partakers of his divine Nature. I am affraid I have entruded on your patient, but if I had not tho't it ungrateful to omit writing in answer to your favour Should not have troubl'd you, but I can't expect you to answer this,

I am Sir with greatest respect,  
your very hum. sert.<sup>4</sup>

Phillis Wheatley

1989

*To Rev. Samson Occom,<sup>1</sup> New London, Connecticut*

[THE NATURAL RIGHTS OF NEGROES]

[February 11, 1774]

Rev'd and honor'd Sir,

I have this Day received your obliging kind Epistle, and am greatly satisfied with your Reasons respecting the Negroes, and think highly reasonable what you offer in Vindication of their natural Rights: Those that invade them

1. A London merchant (1720–1790) who was a devout Anglican and lived outside London at Clapham, where a small group of Christians were committed to helping the poor and abolishing slavery. He was a friend of John and Susanna Wheatley and sent them money to be used for work among the American Indians.

2. Favor, i.e., letter.

3. Disease of the lungs.

4. I.e., humble servant.

1. See his headnote, earlier in this volume. Wheatley first corresponded with Occom in 1765. He later suggested to Wheatley that she go to Africa as a missionary, but she rejected the idea. This extract was published in several New England newspapers.

cannot be insensible that the divine Light is chasing away the thick Darkness<sup>2</sup> which broods over the Land of Africa; and the Chaos which has reign'd so long, is converting into beautiful Order, and [r]eveals more and more clearly, the glorious Dispensation of civil and religious Liberty, which are so inseparably united, that there is little or no Enjoyment of one without the other: Otherwise, perhaps, the Israelites had been less solicitous for their Freedom from Egyptian slavery; I do not say they would have been contented without it, by no means, for in every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance; and by the Leave of our modern Egyptians I will assert, that the same Principle lives in us. God grant Deliverance in his own Way and Time, and get him honour upon all those whose Avarice impels them to countenance and help forward the Calamities of their fellow Creatures. This I desire not for their Hurt, but to convince them of the strange Absurdity of their Conduct whose Words and Actions are so diametrically opposite. How well the Cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the exercise of oppressive Power over others agree,—I humbly think it does not require the Penetration of a philosopher to determine.

1774, 1989

2. "And Moses stretched forth his hand toward heaven; and there was a thick darkness in all the land of Egypt three days" (Exodus 10.22).

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## ROYALL TYLER

1757–1826

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British North America did not produce the rich theatrical culture that thrived elsewhere in the Atlantic world. Few places had a dense enough population of English speakers to support a theater, and both Puritans and Quakers disapproved in principle of "the devil's drawing-room," as the Yankee yokel Jonathan terms it in Royall Tyler's play *The Contrast*. Nevertheless, British acting companies occasionally toured the major cities, amateur theatricals were staged in southern colonies, and college students performed dramatic readings. These activities diminished during the Revolution, when the Continental Congress banned the theater, but even then George Washington allowed a production of the English writer Joseph Addison's *Cato* (1712)—a historical tragedy that juxtaposes individual liberty and government tyranny—to be staged at Valley Forge, the Continental Army's military camp in winter 1777–78. After the Revolution, the project of nurturing a national drama would become part of the search for a cultural identity. Bans against theater were lifted, older acting companies returned, and others were formed to occupy the new playhouses, which mainly offered British plays, or translations of German and French dramas. Tyler was one of the few new playwrights to emerge. Tyler's first play, *The Contrast*, became an immediate hit when it opened at the Johns Street Theater in New York in April 1787, just weeks before the Constitutional Convention