Ancients, Moderns, and Africans
Phillis Wheatley and the Politics of Empire and Slavery in the American Revolution

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In a letter to Mohegan minister Samson Occom published in eleven colonial newspapers during the spring of 1774, Phillis Wheatley engaged in an extended comparison of religious and political liberties, relating both to the question of African slavery.

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 cannot be insensible that the divine Light is chasing away the thick Darkness 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,

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and pants for Deliverance; and by the Leave of our Modern Egyptians I will assert, that the same Principle lives in us.¹

Occom’s initial letter does not survive, but it seems clear enough that however he started or continued this conversation, Wheatley ran far enough with Occom’s “reasons” to make her sound distinctly modern to some of her contemporaries—and to us. This letter is now often and rightly quoted as an example of Wheatley’s eloquence, her prophetic stance, and her universalism. It renders familiar, and inspirational, a poet long dismissed for her Christian piety, Augustan prosody, and her occasional relegation of Africa to the “thick darkness” of the pagan past. She not only loved freedom, she affirmed that everyone does. We don’t need what Wheatley goes on to call “the Penetration of a Philosopher,” to understand what she means, and part of her genius lies in stating that this is so.

We might linger, however, over her mocking identification of the patriots—not the British—as “our Modern Egyptians.” A passage that had begun in an identification of liberty with the times, and by implication with the patriot movement, proceeds to an indictment of those would-be moderns as slave drivers who deny Africans not only their freedom but also their human desire for salvation, “civil and religious.” Even writing to a fellow Christian on the very theme of hypocrisy, Wheatley begins with Anglo America in the enlightened present and Africa the dark past, only to turn around expected equivalencies of time and space. Who and what exactly was modern, or pagan, on the eve of the American Revolution, if the seemingly self-evident truth of the matter could shift in one paragraph, and that paragraph could be reprinted ten times?²


Such questions are not easily answered by the historiographies of slavery and the American Revolution. Historians of the early United States continue to talk around a “paradox” of slavery and liberty, even though we also know well that there was nothing at all inconsistent about the drivers of slaves yelping for liberty if the liberties in question included their control over their property. The problem is partly in the eloquent sources: contemporaries—like Wheatley—who called patriots hypocrites “whose Words and Actions are so diametrically opposite,” and patriots who called themselves inconsistent. Their way out remains our way in: describing the Revolution as a new birth of liberty while casting slavery as a pre-existing, ancient evil. That an emphasis on the ancient pedigree of slavery characterized both proslavery arguments and the more defensive patriot responses to Tory accusations of hypocrisy doesn’t seem to discredit it much as the default historical interpretation, so long as it gives the modernizing radicalism of the American Revolution due credit.

We remain stuck in a dilemma often more implicit than explicitly formulated, perhaps enabling as well as limiting, in light of our inability to think “slavery” without thinking ancient, or “the Revolution” without thinking of a transition to the modern. The tendency to antiquate slavery’s origins and modernize the Revolution’s effects has shaped the difficulty historians have had in crafting a satisfactory understanding of slavery’s place in the path “to” and “from” the Revolution, as it encourages thinking not of slavery as a factor in how reactionary colonists got to the Revolution, but instead of antislavery as part of the progressive road from the Revolution.3

Yet the overwhelming trend of recent work is to stress the innovative, modern, and capitalist dimensions of New World slavery, paradox or not. New forms of the state, and a more aggressive approach to colonization, led to slavery’s expansion as a policy, developments that can be related directly to the English Civil War, the Stuart restoration, and the Glorious Revolution. The ensuing conversations about liberties and who owned them are now understood as imperial as much as domestic events. The globalism or modernity of the late-seventeenth-century Anglo world is also that of the rise of slavery—and the beginnings of antislavery.4

part because it seemed to allow Europeans to go back in time and start all over again. Davis has also stressed that slavery was associated by Europeans with progress until the 1760s–1790s. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, NY, 1966), ix, 3–28; *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York, 1984), 81–82. It should be added that although Davis characterizes the problem of slavery and the Revolution as an “inconsistency” and a “paradox” and the reliance of “free society” upon slavery a “profound contradiction,” he also regards slavery itself as involving inherent paradoxes (i.e., turning people into things), and has more recently reasserted his sense of the underappreciated role of both slavery in the Revolution and of the politics of slavery in U.S. history. Davis, *Challenging the Boundaries of Slavery* (Cambridge, MA, 2003), 31–32; Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York, 2006), 3–4, 7, 9; Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation* (New York, 2014), 3–44. This emphasis has appeared regularly in briefs for the Revolution as truly revolutionary, from J. Franklin Jameson to Gordon S. Wood. Jameson, *The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement* (1926; repr. Boston, 1956), 21–26; Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, 1991), 7.

The initial appearance of antislavery in the late seventeenth century, and its sudden rise during the third quarter of the eighteenth century, coincided with and reflected controversies over empire. The rapid expansion of the British empire and its African slave trade in the eighteenth century begged the question of its similarities to Greek, Roman, or other progenitors (including, of course, Spanish, French, and Dutch variations on empire). Consequently, a key dimension of the Anglo–American controversy was a debate about empires—ancient and modern—and thus about slavery as well. Noticing this isn’t a matter of projecting our contemporary values or obsessions onto their eighteenth-century ones. The persistence and growth of slavery in our own time despite a series of emancipations and the ostensible contagion of human rights thinking suggests that there has been no globalization without slavery. Slavery is both ancient and modern; perhaps for that very reason, the conversation about slavery, like the one about republics and empires, revolved and still revolves around marking the ancient and the modern.5

Recent work on global slavery and on the uses of the “ancient” suggest interpretive possibilities that can help us to understand why Phillis


Wheatley became the most famous slave of her day and how this African
neo-classicist could shape the creation of the American republic. Joseph
C. Miller insists that slaving is a strategy employed by relatively marginal
folk; e.g., colonists. It has itself been a way of making history. It was, in
that sense, a counterculture in the early modern European much as in
initial ancient and African contexts, only to be embraced and enlarged
to buttress state-making, monarchy and mercantilism, and empires—not
so unlike what happened in the ancient Mediterranean, and in Africa in
the wake of European trade. Miller specifies why slavery recurs and why
its new features, the way it “became institutionalized in unprecedented
ways in the late eighteenth century Americas,” led to a new kind of
antislavery that got mixed up in the struggle over monarchy and empire.
This helps explain why Atlantic slavery could make the settlers seem
weird, even inferior, and yet also made the empire work and the colonists
more British and free—leading precisely to the crisis of colonial identity.6

Meanwhile, students of the seventeenth and eighteenth century across
disciplines are having a neoclassical revival of their own, finding not
just enthusiasm for the ancients but also complicated politics and subtle
selectivity. The term “ambivalence” comes up repeatedly, especially for
the eighteenth century, but the ambivalence was about both the present
and the ancient past, making the ancients good to think with about
empire, conquest, and slavery as much as about republicanism and vir-
tue. In colonial Peru, for example, Sabine McCormack finds that Roman
literature “provided a springboard” for colonization and for under-
standing the Inca empire; yet Rome also “perennially elud[ed] the grasp” of
those who would use the ancient as simply a tool of power. The “poly-
valent” classical legacies “at times, became instruments of Andean auton-
omy.” For Eric Nelson, Greece and ancient Israel could even be a literal
source of ideas about democracy and the redistribution of wealth, against
modern innovations possibly read as Roman.7

6. Joseph C. Miller, The Problem of Slavery as History (New Haven, CT,
7. Sabine McCormack, On the Wings of Time: Rome, the Incas, Spain and
Peru (Princeton, NJ, 2007), xviii, 14, 21; Eric Nelson, The Greek Tradition in
Republican Thought (Cambridge, MA, 2004); Nelson, The Hebrew Republic
(Cambridge, UK, 2010); Howard D. Weinbrot, Britannia’s Issue: The Rise of Brit-
ish Literature from Dryden to Ossian (New York, 1993), 21–22; Weinbrot, “Pope
and the Classics,” in The Cambridge Companion to Alexander Pope, ed. Pat Rogers
(New York, 2007), 76–88; Joseph M. Levine, The Battle of the Books: History and
In this sense scholarship seems to be returning, through the side door of empire and the Atlantic world, to J. G. A. Pocock’s *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975), which described not merely an early modern republican revival and its inherent fragility in time but also a more paradoxical—and imperial—pattern. The Machiavellian moment occurs when, in the context of realizing the possibility of a republic of equal citizens, it is also realized, at “possibly but not necessarily the same” time, that “a republic is perceived as precarious, threatened by internal contradictions or by contingent historical circumstances,” and one (if not the most important) of those contradictions and circumstances is empire.8

For Pocock in 1975, the notion of imperial corruption animated the revolt against the British empire and shaped the political creativity of the period between 1776 and 1787. With the United States as the endgame, Pocock could actually help Americanists forget about empire, or at least identify against it, much as their early republic subjects did. The imperial dimension barely registered in most American versions of the so-called republican synthesis. But not for Pocock himself. His more recent work may support an updated and more rigorous version of his notion of a conceptual crisis in political history spurred by empire and its slaving accompaniments. *Barbarism and Religion*, his six-volume excavation of...
Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, pivots precisely on the threat of not just “corruption” or “conspiracy” but *empire* to republican virtue. But what kind of empire? Not one that Americanists can write off as merely old world. Rome as an “empire of conquest and enslavement, rather than of commerce and industry” emerges in Gibbon’s intellectual world not by direct contrast—London as Rome—but by subtle, selective appropriation, “the inexhaustible ambiguities of sentiment” toward ancient history. The result—Gibbon’s achievement—was a part of a challenge to empire that emerged in the third quarter of the eighteenth century and that both emboldened and endangered the colonists. Empire created opportunity and liberty, but it also grew government, greed, and slavery. It had to be managed, and thinking about ancient history and ancient texts was more than just a scholarly way to do that.9

For the American patriots in particular, what Miller would call the slaving part of the equation had to be managed, especially if they were going to spin neoclassicism in a favorable direction. For if slavery’s growth in the colonies was a sign of imperial overexpansion and decadence, where did that leave patriot denunciations of ministerial corruption? James Otis demonstrated in 1764 that the issues of slavery and

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colonial liberties could be linked in an antiracist as well as antislavery key, and he didn’t invent it out of whole cloth. By 1772, slavery had been thoroughly implicated in the seemingly separate issues of economy and sovereignty—issues of empire. In *Somerset v. Steuart* (1772), a case about a Virginia–Boston fugitive who ran away in London, the pre-eminent jurist Lord Mansfield ruled that colonial slave laws did not trump English liberties—in this case the right of a person not to be seized and transported. Consequently, Anglo Americans faced the fact that the colonies were different than England not only because they had more liberty or more land or less aristocracy but also because they had slavery; that they had slavery because they were colonies; and that the same justifications for slavery or any distinctly colonial state of affairs might also justify limits on colonists’ power, their liberties, or their equality as British citizens.10

When the British mainstream and officialdom depicted African slavery as an example of “beyond the line” barbarism that must be contained in the colonies, and the American revolutionaries responded by blaming slavery on antiquated imperial governance, a space opened in which Africans could make a political difference even in the absence of rebellion or marronage (which also occurred, in Jamaica in 1760 and St. Vincent in 1769–73). Mansfield’s moment was also, or even first, James Somerset’s moment: If the fugitive had not made his way to Granville Sharp’s doorstep, there would have been no Mansfield decision. Closer attention to Somerset’s contemporary Phillis Wheatley suggests a Somerset/Wheatleyan moment in 1772–73: a landmark in the struggle against slavery and a moment of crisis for the American patriots. Wheatley, as much as Somerset or Mansfield or Thomas Jefferson for that matter, exacerbated and made manifest the double meaning, and risks, of the classical

and republican revival in the context of slavery. She did this, in part, by re-creating herself through the Greek and Roman classics—as a neoclassical poet—and by making the relationship of the patriots’ dilemma to the ancient and modern politics of slavery a key theme of her very public project. She accomplished something politically that perhaps no man could.

The Mansfieldian or Somerset–Wheatleyan moment of 1772 was not merely an analogy to Pocock’s series of early modern Machiavellian moments, but rather a crucial dimension of the thing itself in its Anglo–American context. If so, the appropriate restatement of Pocock would be that the struggle for colonial liberties—between, in this case, king-in-parliament supremacy and some more republican or confederated version of empire—suggested, in addition to a renaissance or renewal of prerogatives, the disturbing possibility that the act of calling for them would end in the abrogation of colonial liberties, including power over their slaves. The colonial zone’s liberties may derive from exceptional qualities that include slavery—and thus, quite possibly, end in a decline into barbarism, the ultimate loss of liberty. In an attempt to postpone this moment some American patriots moved toward antislavery, more perhaps toward independence, and toward racism. The actions of slaves helped produce this crisis, and thus shaped both the Revolution and the distinctive future of slavery in North America.11

Phillis Wheatley’s career is a clear demonstration of this process in the life, politics, and cultural work of one person. In the Somerset–Wheatley moment, stunning imaginative leaps and a new kind of political practice occurred. Granville Sharp’s reading of the ancient constitution meshed with James Somerset’s inspired fugitivity and Lord Mansfield’s desire to enforce Parliamentary supremacy to produce a juridical dimension of this happening—a decision. A pious Boston slave girl with an astoundingly sensitive ear, an awareness of exactly what it meant to be called “an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa” (or to call Americans “our modern Egyptians”), and a hard-won talent for putting herself in others’ shoes,

initiated another highly publicized happening, at the other end of the Atlantic, in another sector of the public sphere. Wheatley’s own realization that she could address her African and enslaved experience as well as her captors’ prejudices and practices through an engagement with the Mediterranean heritage—a heritage seen by her captors as at once distant (ancient) and universal—was pivotal. Her profundity and political effectiveness derived not just from her classicism but from its studied inflection of her Africanism—and her womanhood. 12

What can we know of Wheatley’s African experience and what it meant to her in the almost complete absence of her direct testimony? Shipping records and newspapers reveal that Wheatley arrived in Boston on the *Phillis* in 1761, at about the age of seven or eight. Nevertheless, that’s a lot to know about an individual enslaved person during the Revolutionary era. It has been tempting for scholars in recent years to presume she came from direct from Senegambia, since she later mentions Gambia as an origin, and the ship owner Timothy Fitch directed his captain to that region. But she could have been taken or retaken at a number of West African or Caribbean ports. Like many slaving ships in this era, the *Phillis* was also directed by its owner to make as many stops as necessary to fill the cargo. Senegambian voyages did not stay long in port at mid-century, if only because of a high ratio of shipboard revolts there. 13

So we do not know where she was from. And yet if we apply what we do know about West Africa and slavery in the late 1750s and think of


those facts as things Wheatley knew (better than we do), a meaningful picture emerges, one that allows us to make sense of what she brought to the writing table. In general, “most people who found themselves on slave ships did so in the aftermath of war.” Historians of Senegambia and West Africa agree that the 1750s saw a ramping up of wars, violent European competition for trading posts, and pressure from African coastal merchants on their warlord suppliers to liquidate human assets. She may have traveled significantly even before arriving in a West African port, and then possibly a Caribbean port—indeed, a sizable chunk of the seven-year-old’s life may have been spent within the slave trade. It was not unusual for young female children to be caught up in the expanding market for people. They were more easily captured and pawned; their sale was in some ways where the more traditional forms of enslavement and the newer more market-oriented forms overlapped, resulting in an intensified kidnapping of women and children. A precociously bright and observant child would have learned quite a bit about trades in women, about travel, about the commonality of slavery and about its spread, and about war and change in West African inlands and Atlantic coasts.¹⁴

The recent literature on the slave trade, and on oral culture in West Africa and the British Caribbean, stresses the role of women as poets

who represented, and often glorified, male authorities. Roger D. Abrahams has described “verbal play directed at a powerful figure” as a West African tradition that made it to the Americas. Other scholars of this period underline the importance of death rituals both in West African cultures, in the changing West Africa emerging from the slave trade, and in the lamentations and narrations of African women in Atlantic slavery. The one detail that exists in Wheatley family lore about Phillis’s African memories involved her mother pouring out water to the sun in the morning, as part of what the recorders understood as a religious ritual.\textsuperscript{15}

Much of this background would have played directly into the role of the poet in eighteenth century Anglo America. Whether elegiac and personal or occasional and imperial, eighteenth-century poetry “was issue-dominated, highly rhetorical, and centered on present-day happenings.” In both Africa and America during the eighteenth century, a woman talking eloquently about war and death could become a more valued member of an intimate and political community by doing so. It might even be a way to re-establish kin ties in a real, substantive sense. Many of Wheatley’s poems, and especially the early ones, were in effect gift offerings for the bereaved, offered in a Christian idiom to be sure, but universalizing in effect. We know that her poems circulated first in manuscript, between acquaintances, and that she was asked to read or recite in parlors long before male authorities wondered who could have taught her or whether she actually wrote the poems. The female networks she found suggests that some aspects of her African knowledge of how to be

in the world, how to relate to others, how to survive and even thrive amid strangers, might, indeed, translate.\textsuperscript{16}

Recent studies of Atlantic cultures stress syncretism despite—and sometimes because of—uneven power relationships: Even exploitative relations are, after all, relationships. People did not simply choose assimilation or cultural autochthony any more than they do today. What would the various middle grounds have looked like to a young slave in Boston? It surely varied depending on who was listening. Jeffrey Brace, who was captured in the Niger Valley, spent a few months in Barbados, and arrived in Boston just the summer before Wheatley did, remembered that Africans there “asked me many questions about my native country.” At the same time, as Anne Bailey suggests, the slave trade had an effect on individuals of the sort we associate with modern wars: Veterans often do not like to talk about it directly, and certainly not to people who not only did not share the experience but also do not admit their complicity in the horror of it all.\textsuperscript{17}


\textsuperscript{17} Jeffrey Brace, \textit{The Blind African Slave: Memoirs of Boyereau Brinch, Nicknamed Jeffrey Brace}, ed. Kari J. Winter (Madison, WI, 2005), 152; Anne Bailey,
Waldstreicher, ANCIENTS, MODERNS, AND AFRICANS • 715

Wheatley used to be a poster child for uplift, assimilation, and literacy; subsequently she became a target for Afrocentrists who readily presumed, based on the existing scholarship, that her choice of literary models made her at best victim of deracination, at worst an oreo who rejected Africa. Yet it seems more likely that she chose poetic roles and forms for their very continuities with her West African and Atlantic experiences. The issue here is not whether Wheatley had African or slave trade memories, kept them alive, or knew how and when to share them; it is how they related to the idioms she did choose in her writing, which made her a public figure at an astonishingly young age.

Until very recently most scholars have also neglected, or continued to condescend to, what to most of us is most foreign and inaccessible about Wheatley: her classicism. We’ve been so shaped by our generations’ lack of a classical education, and perhaps by the idea that, as Bernard Bailyn argued, the American founders were not real classical scholars and that their appropriations of classics thus had only derivative and symbolic rather than substantive meaning, that even specialists in the period have tended to view neoclassicism as mere window dressing, or the playful and pragmatic use of pseudonyms: a kind of heady yet superficial identity politics, the equivalent of a toga at a frat party.\(^{18}\)

But what does the naïve reader of Homer, Terence, Virgil, and Ovid—the four poets Wheatley invoked directly as muses in her first volume, each central to mid-eighteenth-century education both in the original and in translation—discover? Tricksters and Gods who intervene in human lives. Gods that behave like humans; humans who are godlike. Direct speech with the dead. An overwhelming importance given to eloquent acts of speech, and to “professional rhapsodists” who represent “the defeated and the dead” while singing of gods, of battles, and of heroes who might even be present at the feast. Libations poured out for the gods, ritually, regularly. A world of war (The Iliad). A world of consequential, tragic, and yet sometimes redemptive travels (The Odyssey, The Aeneid, Metamorphoses). Women as prizes—booty of war—and as slaves: Most of the slaves in The Odyssey are women. Individual women who are on the bottom but seem to have the power to determine the doings of men, and not merely as catalysts. Women mourning, and being mourned. A “dread of enslavement” as a central trope, as slaves are made free, and men and women made slaves. 19


Slaves who are smarter than their masters, who manipulate situations to their own ends in Terence’s comedies, or who may be the loyal keys to the reclaiming of the kingdom, like Eumaeus in *The Odyssey*. Eumaeus is a boy prince who was sold away, then captured: Now an old man, he indicates a world in which anyone might be enslaved, but still might come to love his captors, and he in some sense a member of the family. Indeed, in Homer’s ancient world, there is a discernible relation between travel, encounter, war, and enslavement, one that would have meant all the more because of the several mentions of Egypt and Ethiopia in the text. In the later Greek and Roman literature the importance of slaves in everyday life, as “vibrant violators and exploiters of the intimacies of family life,” only intensifies. So does the ubiquity of war as a cruel leveler. Africa appears with even greater clarity and frequency as a place on the map. The very first of Virgil’s *Eclogues*, often used as a teaching text for children, is a dialogue in which one interlocutor speaks of his escape from slavery while the other forecasts exile to, among other places, Africa, in the wake of the forcible transfer of land to soldiers. And Horace—so clearly a favorite of Wheatley as he was of one of her English favorites, Alexander Pope—repeatedly makes a theme of how patronage and his talents made it possible for him to live a better life despite his father’s low status as a former slave.  

Students of slavery have rightly made much of the travesty committed by masters who gave names like Caesar and Pompey to their household bondsmen. Wheatley carried the name of the slave ship she was bought from, the *Phillis*. But was it refreshing to learn that the name referred to a beautiful woman in Virgil’s third *Eclogue*? A tragic, eloquent figure in Ovid’s *Heroides*? Or that, in one of Horace’s Odes, Phillis is a slave so

virtuous “she must have come down from kings!” If the late colonial and revolutionary era master class fulfilled their imperial fantasies by imagining their slaving as akin to Greek and Roman varieties, that required, or at least allowed, them to do more than merely condescend to their slaves as primitive and pagan. Like the Christian and republican traditions, these Mediterranean idioms had universalizing, as well as egalitarian, potential.  

By the time Wheatley opens her 1773 Poems by citing the Roman slave poet Terence, “African by birth,” as a precedent, in a poem titled “To Maecenas,” the patron of Horace, she had connected a certain set of dots. The classical world, her Africa, and her America exist in the same universe. Poets are actors in this world. They make sense of war, of cross-cultural encounters, enslavement, the supernatural. Women can be central to a cultural and political drama: The traffic in women is a kind of original sin that makes and unmakes the world—the real origins of slavery in fact—and it is the job of the poet to knit the world back together, and maybe free herself in the process. Classical examples and models do not consist of unattainable brilliance or primitive exoticism to be appreciated, if at all, for its very difference from a modern Christian world. Rather, the classics are classic because they apply to her worlds. They are pagan, but they are witty, playful, worldly. Squaring what’s good, what’s not so good, what’s the same, and what’s different about the ancient and the modern is like any other act of comparing times, places, and mores.


And most of all, if a woman and a slave seeks to hitch her desires to those of men and nations, it is wisest to work by indirect comparison. The classical revival provided her with a way of talking about her experience without talking about it directly. In that light, we might consider the moment when she first made real in practice the possibilities of a dialogue between the African, the classical, and the contemporary. Wheatley’s first published poem, which appeared in a Newport paper in 1767, is about the near-shipwreck of two Nantucket Quaker merchants. Written by a Bostonian, it nicely exemplifies a kind of archipelagic New England experience analogous to the ancient Greek world, and resolves a distinctly Homeric set of queries about the causes of a tempest into a Christian salvation.

Did Fear and Danger so perplex your Mind,
As made you fearful of the Whistling Wind?
Was it not Boreas knit his angry Brow
Against you? Or did Consideration bow?
To lend you Aid, did not his Winds combine?
To stop your passage with a churlish Line,
Did haughty Eolus with Contempt look down
With Aspect windy, and a study’d Frown?
Regard them not;—the Great Supreme, the Wise,
Intends for something hidden from our Eyes.

It isn’t hard to imagine why the survivor of a slave ship could identify with another terrifying voyage.23

But these lines are also literally evocative of The Odyssey and Virgil’s Aeneid. In Pope’s translation of The Odyssey, the ghost of Agamemnon asks the ghost of Amphideon, one of the suitors slain by Odysseus, “What cause compell’d so many, and so gay, / To tread the downward, melancholy way? . . . did the rage of stormy Neptune sweep / Your lives

at once, and whelm beneath the deep?" There are many such storm-tossed voyages in Homer, accompanied by questions about the gods’ intentions. An even more direct thematic link lies in the beginnings of Dryden’s *Aeneid*, which begins with Juno asking Eolus, who rules the winds and the waves, to bring down the ship of the Trojans, whom she calls “a race of wand’ring slaves.” He does so, with the help of Boreas, the north wind. Ultimately Neptune calms the waves. Aeneas and his Trojans land in Libya—later described as part of “Africk,” one of numerous references in the poem to North and East African peoples.24

The poem to Hussey and Coffin is also typical of Wheatley’s later work in calling attention to the inspired poet’s role as a mediator between God and the subject, simultaneously humbling herself and exalting her role. The poet, in Pope/Homer’s version of such a scene, channels the dead; in Dryden/Virgil, he channels the gods, the ultimate religious act and act of translation. In Wheatley’s version, the poet and the audience come together in response to trauma, and a Christian supersession that is beyond the ancients. Yet the entire project presumes a careful building upon the classics—classics that, for Wheatley, depict a world and a set of experiences that are not only analogous to her own voyage, but also refer directly to Africa, to slaves, and to women as central actors.25

When we pay careful attention to the contextual information we have, we see the thirteen-year-old Wheatley writing the role of her lifetime. The preface to the poem published in the newspaper described her hearing the story of Hussey and Coffin’s voyage while waiting table—precisely the kind of banquet scene, with slaves and poets in attendance, that recurs throughout *The Odyssey*. Moreover, Nathaniel Coffin, one of the merchants she addressed, was a member of what would become a

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25. For trauma, see Phillip M. Richards, “Phillis Wheatley: The Consensual Blackness of Early African American Writing,” in *New Essays on Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Shields and Lamore, 262. Wheatley could be talking about herself, imagining herself into the world of the poem—as storm-tossed hero, as voice of the dead, as vessel of the Gods. More importantly, however, is how she is in control of the ancient references, the presence of the ancient that she comes to inhabit as much as she inhabits her Africaness for the reader (the poem was published as having been written by a “Negro Girl”). *Complete Writings*, ed. Carretta, 73.
staunchly antislavery family. Coffin’s slaves Tombo and Sapho—one with an African name, the other with the name of a female Greek poet—were soon to befriend an enslaved man named James Somerset. Somerset was the human property of Coffin’s employer and fellow customs officer, Charles Steuart, who had taken Somerset with him to his posting in Norfolk, then to Boston, and would later bring him in 1769 to London, where he would run away and enter history in the great test case of *Somerset v. Steuart*.

Wheatley chose this occasion because she knew that her Quaker subjects were more than usually sympathetic to her situation, perhaps more open to the possibility of a special status for her. What’s most striking here is the boldness of the identification. Author, audience, and the subjects of the poem are placed on the same Christian and classical team. Poetry linked these worlds in a universal culture. Wheatley does insist on progress from the pagan worldview to the Christian, and in that sense is certainly a “modern,” but she manages to do so in a way that levels the playing field. She becomes an expert on the ancient, the modern, and the relationship between them.

If the ancient Mediterranean is standing in for Africa, her performance opens up another, more historicized way of viewing her self-distancing from Africa. Wheatley’s relationship to Africa in her poems has been the subject of much angst and speculation. It is usually construed in a negative fashion, most famously with reference to “On Being Brought from AFRICA to AMERICA,” a poem Henry Louis Gates, Jr. reports as “the most reviled poem in African-American literature” because of its seeming thankfulness for enslavement, refigured as conversion:

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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.
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She moves on immediately, however, to question her readers’ racism: “Some view our sable race with scornful eye, / ‘Their colour is a diabolic die.’” Recent interpreters detect a more challenging antiracist statement in the final couplet, “Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain, / May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train,” if one pays attention to the italics and considers the voice to be ironic rather than pleading. But even a more literal reading of the middle of the poem must admit that at its center is a critique of those who focus on race. The would-be Christians are the only ones in the poem not moving forward. The poem is an attempt to seize control of the meaning of Africa and America in time, and to say that race is a static, ahistorical way of thinking about slavery, Christianity, and civilization. The ambivalence about Africa parallels her contemporaries’ ambivalence about the ancient world.27

Even from 1767 Wheatley’s invocations of Africa are decidedly double-edged. They use presumptions of African pagan backwardness to challenge easy notions of progress. “Must Ethiopians be imploy’d for you / Greatly rejoice if any good I do,” she asked in “Deism,” an early unpublished poem that went through a number of extant variants and might also be seen as following a self-hating script—if it did not end in a prose encomium that sounds precisely like an adaptation of her African mother’s morning sun rite, but simultaneously classicized and Christianized: “May I O eternal salute aurora to begin thy Praise, shall mortal dust do that which immortals scarcely can comprehend.” References to

the sun as Aurora fill contemporary translations from Homer and Ovid: In *The Metamorphoses* Aurora mourns a son lost in war.28

In a similar 1767 poem, later revised, an appeal to wayward Harvard students, she refers to “the Sable land of error’s darkest night / There, sacred Nine! For you no place was found, / Parent of mercy, ’twas thy Powerfull hand / Brought me in safety from the dark abode.” Christianity saves—but it also allows her access to the “sacred” classical muses. If this is a refusal of Africa on behalf of Christianity, it is also a valorization of her authority to mediate between both ancient worlds and this modern one.

And that combination of refusal and valorization is the real game changer. When Wheatley won a transatlantic audience with a poem on the death of George Whitefield, and soon after entered into the colonial controversy with occasional poems, she gradually began to write rather different things about Africa. In her poem addressed to Lord Dartmouth of 1772, she can mock Anglo presumptions that Africans remember their home country as a “fancy’d happy seat,” given that it is a place where fathers lose their daughters to the slave trade. This is not the first reference to paternity in the poem: In the first eight lines, celebrating Dartmouth’s ascent to the secretaryship and its possibilities for the preservation of colonial liberties, the new secretary is the “sire” as well as the “friend, [and] messenger” of peace and liberty. Wheatley improves upon patriot hopes for Dartmouth, the “psalm-singer” Lord, by celebrating New England liberties revived and then intuiting that the good Lord is wondering how and why she would care. Her African experience, she insists, is precisely what allows her to understand both liberty deprived and the generational discourse through which patriots sought to influence imperial politics. The praise song, in other words, permits her to criticize slavery, to participate in the Anglo–American conversation about liberties, and to seem very, very discerning as well as polite.29


Even given the rising importance of young women as a demographic and cultural force and as potential symbols of and participants in rebellion in late eighteenth-century North America, this is a remarkable bid to link antislavery to the patriot appeal. Her coy shaming of Anglo Americans while praising the colonial secretary depends on her feminine as well as her African and slave identity. The presentation of the poem, as recounted by Thomas Woolridge in the letter he sent enclosing the poem to Lord Dartmouth, supports a gendered interpretation of Wheatley’s actions. When Woolridge showed up in the Wheatleys’ parlor and asked Wheatley to prove her genius by composing something on the spot, Phillis told him “she was then busy and engaged for the Day,” but he could “propose a subject” and return in the morning. This is a slave woman turning the tables and acting like a lady, at once acknowledging her servitude and seducing the genteel visitor, because she has something that he wants.30

For she did not always play the daughter, the child prodigy, or the feminine mourning specialist: She could play it as a romance as well. In a 1775 verse dialogue with British officers, she accepted their feminizing pastoral reading of Africa, which makes her the bard of the continent. Like Virgil, Horace, and Alexander Pope, she retailed pastoral nostalgia in part to be able to comment on the effects of war, including enslavement. Who, indeed, was a barbarian in a world at war? Wondering not a little sarcastically, in early 1776, about “the proceedings of nations that


are fav’d with the divine revelation of the gospel,” sharing her “anxious suspense concerning the fortune of this unnatural civil Contest,” she laid the stakes on the line by invoking explicitly the specter of barbarism. Maybe the British “thirst of Dominion” was “design’d as the punishment of the national views of others,” the Americans, “tho’ it bears the appearance of greater Barbarity than that of the unciviliz’d part of mankind.”

Ultimately Wheatley followed through on an increasingly complex set of analogies regarding time, space, empires, barbarisms, and liberties that proved useful in confronting the American Revolution as well as slavery. If, as she put it in her last published poem in 1784, “new-born Rome shall give Britannia law,” what would that mean for Africa? As in the poem to Lord Dartmouth, where she did explicitly compare her enslavement to the oppression of the colonists by way of explaining why she could understand the latter, Wheatley’s great theme is one of triangulation by analogies—or in her preferred term, in the most resonant description she gave of her own craft, similes: “Sometimes by Simile, a victory’s won.” Mary Nyquist has observed that “similitude,” or argument by analogy, structured early modern debates about the relationship between tyranny and slavery, especially in the time of Milton, Wheatley’s other favorite poet. The potential of these similes about tyrants, masters, and slaves depended on something very important that contemporary scholarship on slavery has reasserted, but which American slaveholders came to deny in the wake of antislavery: the exceptional, not at all progressive or even timeless, quality of American racial slavery. The first, crucial step was the realization that, as Miller has argued, “for the ancient Mediterranean . . . more relevant analogies may come from Africa than from the modern Americas.” The relationship of Africa to Atlantic America might still be analogous to the relationship between classical world and modern, but it was not a simple one of improvement or supersession.


32. Wheatley, “Liberty and Peace,” Complete Writings, ed. Carretta, 101. Wheatley, “America,” Complete Writings, ed. Carretta, 75. It seems important in this context that in this unfinished mini-epic poem the next line—the simile—is explicitly gendered: “A certain lady had an only son,” referring to Britain and America and, allusively, to Mary and Jesus. Nyquist, Arbitrary Rule, 162–69. For Wheatley’s engagement with Milton, see Paula Loscocco, Phillis Wheatley’s Miltonic Poetics (New York, 2014); Reginald Wilburn, Preaching the Gospel of
The implications could be stunning—which is why the debate over ancients and moderns remained resonant and useful. If one said that the modern is superior, one could be shamed for defending “ancient” practices, including slavery. If one thought the ancients are a worthy model, or at least not inferior in certain regards, then comparisons between them and the present are warranted—and “the unciviliz’d part of mankind,” including Africa, might be part of the conversation. Wheatley engaged in precisely these sorts of comparisons in her letter to Occom, which was published widely only a month after its composition. To refer to “modern Egyptians,” and call them “ours,” raised the question of American slavery and its modernity. Wheatley insisted that slavery was implicated in the very meaning, and thus the future, of America.

These were practical and personal as well ideological questions. Phillis Wheatley in Boston was caught between slavery’s possible amelioration and its extension—that is to say, between slavery’s seemingly ancient persistence, indeed its cycles in imperial histories, and its modern American apotheosis in race. One of the things that have led historians away from Wheatley is that her experience does not look like typical plantation slavery. Wheatley’s slavery looks like some aspects of ancient slaveries. She got taught, like a member of the family; she was emancipated because of her skill. Our imaginations are so shaped by the later use of classical precedents by antebellum southerners, and by polemical battles over the character of African slavery and the role of Africans in the slave trade, that we forget the basic differences between varieties of ancient or traditional slavery, and the North American variants. In Africa and in the classical world, slavery might be brutal and ubiquitous, but slavery was not racial, and slaves, especially in the Roman world, could become, or more often became, free. Homer, indeed, seems to dwell on this process of people becoming enslaved and becoming free.33


But this is precisely this that made Wheatley a threat to the American revolutionaries, such that the Boston’s patriot newspapers and printers began to decline to publish her around, interestingly enough, 1772. It isn’t just that she proved Africans could write poetry, that they were capable, so race as a justification for slavery was a lie. It’s that she showed that modern, American slavery was worse than the ancient kind precisely insofar as it did not celebrate or even free individuals like Wheatley. She raised the distinct possibility that history was going backwards, not forwards, in America, and signaled the implications in numerous ways, even as she kept lines of communication open with both sides of the imperial controversy. A London reviewer of her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) registered the possibilities here by spending his first paragraph mocking her use of solar imagery as all too African and not really classical (“Homer and Hesiod breathed the cool and temperate air of the Meles, and the poets and heroes of Greece and Rome had no very intimate commerce with the sun”), only to conclude by stating how poorly it reflected on “the people of Boston” and their “principles of liberty” to keep even a “merely imitative” African poet in bondage. Similarly, some months later, Thomas Day, in the preface to the second edition of his popular antislavery poem “The Dying Negro” (1774), chided American “inconsistency” and called Americans worse than Spartans.34

This is why Thomas Jefferson built the “Manners” chapter of *Notes on the State of Virginia* around his famous slam: “Religion, indeed, has

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produced a Phillis Whately; but it could not produce a poet. The com-
positions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism. 
The heroes of the Dunciad are to her as Hercules to the author of that 
poem.” Jefferson had a copy of Wheatley’s Poems in his library, which 
he sold to the Library of Congress in 1815. In a Library of Congress 
copy stamped 1867, marginalia that appears to be his handwriting sug-
gests that Jefferson carefully tracked her appearances in newspapers in 
late 1773. (See Figure 1.) The misspelling of her name a dozen years 
later in the Notes (and again, differently, his 1815 catalog of his books)
may be in the manner of a Freudian slip, but it seems likely that he understood exactly what he was doing and the mocking style in which he did it: As Peter Dorsey has argued, he “clearly felt threatened.”

Wheatley only takes up a few lines at the center of this lengthy defense of the Americans, but in a real sense it is all about her, and made necessary by her transatlantic fame. She is negative proof: The quickness of the dismissal is rhetorical, and essential to the argument. Her poetry is merely religious, not classical; mock-epic, not epic. Her engagement with Alexander Pope and the very poets Pope translated—Homer, Horace—is winked away. The short-guy joke on Pope and his *Dunciad* (Wheatley is to the hacks that Pope mocked as the hunchback Pope is to Hercules) evokes Jefferson’s lengthy attack, in earlier chapters, on Comte de Buffon’s and Abbe Raynal’s widely publicized notion, in their own natural histories, that the New World had led to a natural degeneration of mammalian life—a degeneration that they had seen in the practices of the colonizers, not least their shocking revival of slavery. Buffon and Raynal’s “call for a Black Spartacus” to redress the wrongs of New World slavery certainly fed Jefferson’s sense of what it might mean for a slave poet to have an original or even derivative relationship with Roman classics.

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35. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia with Related Documents*, ed. David Waldstreicher (Boston, 2002), 178; *Thomas Jefferson’s Library: A Catalog with the Entries in His Own Order*, ed. James Gilreath and Douglas L. Wilson (Washington, DC, 1989), 117; E. Millicent Sowerby comp., *Catalogue of the Library of Thomas Jefferson* (Charlottesville, VA, 1983), 4: 491 (“Whateley”); Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London, 1773), v, Library of Congress. Peter A. Dorsey, *Common Bondage: Slavery as Metaphor in Revolutionary America* (Knoxville, TN, 2009), 174. Vincent Carretta suggested to me that Jefferson’s misspelling may reflect contemporary pronunciation of similar names like “Whately” and “Wheatley.” It is well known among scholars that Jefferson did not spell consistently. Yet no other contemporaries I have seen misspell her name in that way. There was, of course, another famous Whately: the late Thomas Whately (d. 1772), author of the Stamp Act, undersecretary of state for the colonies under Lord North, addressee of the famous Hutchinson letters, and a figure despised by American patriots. William H. Robinson maintained that Jefferson’s copy in the Library of Congress, one of the 1773 London printings, misspells Wheatley’s name; but this one does not, and as we can see from Figure 1, the owner of the LOC copy copied her name correctly from newspapers. Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley: A Bio-Bibliography* (Boston, 1981), xv.

Jefferson actually develops at considerable length a classical context for Wheatley and African slavery; but he inverts it, turning it away from her and her poems by presenting her as the antinomy of Greeks and Romans. Jefferson’s comparison of Roman slavery and of Roman slaves’ literary achievements to those of Wheatley and her contemporary Ignatius Sancho reversed the antislavery implications of the comparison of ancient and modern slavery invoked by Montesquieu, who denounced racial justifications for New World slavery. The discussion of Wheatley and other black writers as merely imitative and thus inferior has devastating implications given Jefferson’s insistence that modern African slavery is kinder and gentler than the Roman variety, and only a temporary, washable stain on Virginian and American character. The supposedly kind nature of North American mastery undergirds a downgrading of the African genius who had become a one-woman antislavery argument.

Emily Greenwood deftly observes of the larger tradition of dismissing Wheatley, “You know you have been well and truly marginalized when even your neoclassicism is held to be derivative,” but in this regard Jefferson’s refusal to even admit of the neoclassical ambitions in what he archly calls “the compositions published under her name” suggests the high stakes at play. Its most telling aspect may be his handling of the precedent of the Afro–Roman slave poet Terence—if one knows Terence as contemporaries did. Jefferson doesn’t tell us that Wheatley claims Terence: He cannot because he has already characterized Wheatley as a merely religious writer (Terence’s verse plays are downright bawdy). Instead he asserts that Terence does not prove anything about black slavery, since he was “of the race of whites,” a presumption still debated today. Jefferson also ignores the other key dimensions of Wheatley’s identification with Terence as a slave and as (in a footnote to her book’s first poem) “African by birth” like her: Terence too was suspected of getting help in writing, only to be vindicated and celebrated; and he earned his freedom by his pen. Wheatley had put herself in the tradition of classical—male—emancipated writers with something to say about political men and about the relationships between slaves and masters.

Jefferson proceeds to deny the qualifications of a few male or female African slaves to participate in the republic of letters, as well as any precedent Greek or Roman history or letters might suggest for emancipation on the grounds of African equality. Homer may indeed have Eumaeus complain about the sheer human waste of slavery, he admits (quoting Pope’s translation), but only to assert immediately that “the slaves of which Homer speaks were whites.”

Ultimately Jefferson dissolves the temporal and spatial questions of slavery and modernity into one of race—the hallmark of modern American slavery. In the aftermath of Phillis Wheatley, it seems that Jefferson had to reply on race (and in a later section, mindful of the international audience of his Notes, a promise of eventual emancipation, and an admission of slavery’s wrongs) in order to establish a virtuous Virginian–American identity. Wheatley’s non-racial, Christian, universalist, neoclassical, feminine antislavery testimony is inadmissible—because of Jefferson’s need to claim aspects of universalism, classical revival, and anti-tyranny for the Americans. In Jefferson’s emerging world, nothing but race, understood as nature, can trump the suspicion of colonial and early national inferiority—nothing, that is, but the putatively non-imperial (and proleptically post-slavery) version of American nationhood which Jefferson seeks to project. If she’s a poet, arguments for America as an improvement over European corruption, as a selective “counter-cultural” classical revival, do not stand up, at least not yet, not with slavery; if people are listening to Wheatley, the American revolutionaries have not “drove the ancients from their pedestals and occupied their places,” as Carl J. Richard summarizes the founders’ aspirations, unless it is the other ancients, the barbarians and Spartans, we are talking about. And the best way to make her something other than she was, was to get his international audience to not read her, or think about the world that had made her, but instead to read her race in the context of an exaggerated depiction of her piety as a feminine foible. When Jefferson makes

Pope and Terence and Homer his and not hers, he denies the very grounds of both her art and her politics, while reducing it to a feminized religion he has already argued, in another chapter of the Notes, ought to be separated from truly political questions. He shows just how much was at stake in seemingly literary matters, and that the segregated and gendered boundaries of American independence could not be taken for granted. They had to be inscribed anew, in part because Phillis Wheatley had rewritten them.38

The patriot movement and its call for liberties gave an extra charge to the reasonable question about whether American colonists, in the wake of world wars and a heightened slave trade, were, in fact, barbaric—that is, ancient in all the wrong ways. The very public entry of an African woman into the conversation about ancients, moderns, Africans, and Americans, in as informed a manner as Wheatley, helped precipitate a cultural and political crisis, every bit as much as the Somerset case. Little wonder that Jefferson began, around 1774, to deny the relevance of classical precedents for public matters, insisting that the uses of the classics were wholly private and domestic—much as his fellow planters would begin to describe women and slavery itself.39

Wheatley will not be fully understood or appreciated as an actor in history until we realize the striking multiplicity of reasons why she was Jefferson’s kryptonite. It was not just that she was an African and a slave writing, or writing poetry, or writing Christian poetry: It is that she was writing neoclassical poetry, and in doing so bringing, by stealth (or by simile) her African and female experience to bear on various aspects of secular as well as religious life, including the politics of the Revolution.

Wheatley’s emergence and her interventions in the politics of slavery, like those other moments when blacks became participants in the imperial struggle, were the moments when mutually serving Anglo–American myths, and with it the colonial structures they sustained, began to break down—when, in Pocock’s terms, the factors that created liberties were perceived to threaten them. That a woman played a significant role in this process may also have implications for our understanding of the American Revolution.

The problem of the empire, whether seen from Boston, from Norfolk, or from London, proved inseparable from the question of slavery. Histories of the paths to and the paths from the Revolution need to account for—not just celebrate, execrate, or excuse—the results. Empire, republicanism, and slavery implicated one another. The Mansfield decision in *Somerset v. Steuart* is one index of this; Wheatley’s emergence shortly thereafter is another. James Somerset linked the two of them personally as well as politically, and Jefferson, being Jefferson, could detect that, even if it took him a decade, the victory of the Continental Army, and perhaps also Wheatley’s death in 1784, during his revision of *Notes on the State of Virginia*, to resolve it on paper to his own satisfaction. Wheatley lived long enough to propose a rather different post-colonial identity for America than Jefferson did. Even if the story of the American Revolution must be a story of Jefferson’s real and imagined victories, it cannot be an accurate story until it shows how Phillis Wheatley and James Somerset actually chose some key battlegrounds, in verse as in the courtroom, several years before their fellow slaves chose Dunmore’s and Washington’s armies.