

Selected Poems by Phyllis Wheatley

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POEMS on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral
By Phyllis Wheatley
Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley, of Boston, in New England
Boston, June 12, 1773.

Preface.

THE following POEMS were written originally for the Amusement of the Author, as they were the Products of her leisure Moments. She had no Intention ever to have published them; nor would they now have made their Appearance, but at the Importunity of many of her best, and most generous Friends; to whom she considers herself, as under the greatest Obligations.

As her Attempts in Poetry are now sent into the World, it is hoped the Critic will not severely censure their Defects; and we presume they have too much Merit to be cast aside with Contempt, as worthless and trifling Effusions.

As to the Disadvantages she has laboured under, with Regard to Learning, nothing needs to be offered, as her Master's Letter in the following Page will sufficiently show the Difficulties in this Respect she had to encounter.

With all their Imperfections, the Poems are now humbly submitted to the Perusal of the Public.

To the PUBLIC.

AS it has been repeatedly suggested to the Publisher, by Persons, who have seen the Manuscript, that Numbers would be ready to suspect they were not really the Writings of PHILLIS, he has procured the following Attestation, from the most respectable Characters in Boston, that none might have the least Ground for disputing their Original.

WE whose Names are under-written, do assure the World, that the POEMS specified in the following Page, were (as we verily believe) written by Phillis, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa, and has ever since been, and now is, under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town. She has been examined by some of the best Judges, and is thought qualified to write them.

His Excellency THOMAS HUTCHINSON, Governor.

The Hon. ANDREW OLIVER, Lieutenant-Governor.

The Hon. Thomas Hubbard, | The Rev. Charles Chauncey, D. D.

The Hon. John Erving, | The Rev. Mather Byles, D. D.

The Hon. James Pitts, | The Rev. Ed. Pemberton, D. D.
 The Hon. Harrison Gray, | The Rev. Andrew Elliot, D. D.
 The Hon. James Bowdoin, | The Rev. Samuel Cooper, D. D.
 John Hancock, Esq; | The Rev. Mr. Saumel Mather,
 Joseph Green, Esq; | The Rev. Mr. John Moorhead,
 Richard Carey, Esq; | Mr. John Wheat ey, her Master.

N. B. The original Attestation, signed by the above Gentlemen, may be seen by applying to Archibald Bell, Bookseller, No. 8, Aldgate-Street.

On Virtue

Thou bright jewel in my aim I strive
 To comprehend thee. Thine own words declare
 Wisdom is higher than a fool can reach.
 I cease to wonder, and no more attempt
 Thine height t' explore, or fathom thy profound.
 But, O my soul, sink not into despair,
 Virtue is near thee, and with gentle hand
 Would now embrace thee, hovers o'er thine head.
 Fain would the heav'n-born soul with her converse,
 Then seek, then court her for her promis'd bliss.
 Auspicious queen, thine heav'nly pinions spread,
 And lead celestial Chastity along;
 Lo! now her sacred retinue descends,
 Array'd in glory from the orbs above.
 Attend me, Virtue, thro' my youthful years!
 O leave me not to the false joys of time!
 But guide my steps to endless life and bliss.
 Greatness, or Goodness, say what I shall call thee,
 To give me an higher appellation still,
 Teach me a better strain, a nobler lay,
 O thou, enthron'd with Cherubs in the realms of day.

On being brought from Africa to America.

'T WAS 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 fought now knew,
 Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
 "Their colour is a diabolic die."
 Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,
 May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

To Captain H——D, of the 65th Regiment.

SAY, muse divine, can hostile scenes delight
The warrior's bosom in the fields of fight?
Lo! here the christian and the hero join
With mutual grace to form the man divine.
In H——D see with pleasure and surprise,
Where valour kindles, and where virtue lies:
Go, hero brave, still grace the post of fame,
And add new glories to thine honour'd name,
Still to the field, and still to virtue true:
Britannia glories in no son like you.

To S. M. a young African Painter, on seeing his Works.

TO show the lab'ring 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,
A new creation rushing on my sight?
Still, wond'rous youth! each noble path pursue,
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!
And may the charms of each seraphic 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
That splendid city, crown'd with endless day,
Whose twice six gates on radiant hinges ring:
Celestial Salem blooms in endless spring.
Calm and serene thy moments glide along,
And may the muse inspire each future song!
Still, with the sweets of contemplation bless'd,
May peace with balmy wings your soul invest!
But when these shades of time are chas'd away,
And darkness ends in everlasting day,
On what seraphic pinions shall we move,
And view the landscapes in the realms above?

There shall thy tongue in heav'nly murmurs flow,
 And there my muse with heav'nly transport glow:
 No more to tell of Damon's tender sighs,
 Or rising radiance of Aurora's eyes,
 For nobler themes demand a nobler strain, And purer language on th' ethereal plain.
 Cease, gentle muse! the solemn gloom of night
 Now seals the fair creation from my sight.

*[Wheatley often re-tells stories, particularly from the Old Testament. This verse is an afterword, of sorts, of Wheatley's re-telling of the Greek story about the slayings of the children of Niobe—who insulted the sun-god Apollo. In shock, she watches helplessly as her last child is killed and goes into shock. She re-tells the story from Ovid's Metamorphoses, Book VI.]**

*** This Verse to the End is the Work of another Hand.**

"The blood forsook her face: amidst the flood
 "Pour'd from her cheeks, quite fix'd her eye-balls
 "stood.
 "Her tongue, her palate both obdurate grew,
 "Her curdled veins no longer motion knew;
 "The use of neck, and arms, and feet was gone,
 "And ev'n her bowels hard'ned into stone:
 "A marble statue now the queen appears,
 "But from the marble steal the silent tears."

[POEMS on Death. Wheatley wrote a number of poem concerning the death of public people or of friends. This type of poetry remained popular in American poetry through World War I. Compare to Anne Bradstreet's treatment.]

On the Death of a young Lady of Five Years of Age.

FROM dark abodes to fair ethereal light
 Th' enraptur'd innocent has wing'd her flight;
 On the kind bosom of eternal love
 She finds unknown beatitude above.
 This known, ye parents, nor her loss deplore,
 She feels the iron hand of pain no more;
 The dispensations of unerring grace,
 Should turn your sorrows into grateful praise;
 Let then no tears for her henceforward flow,
 No more distress'd in our dark vale below,
 Her morning sun, which rose divinely bright,
 Was quickly mantled with the gloom of night;

But hear in heav'n's blest bow'rs your Nancy fair,
And learn to imitate her language there.

"Thou, Lord, whom I behold with glory crown'd,

"By what sweet name, and in what tuneful sound

"Wilt thou be prais'd? Seraphic pow'rs are faint

"Infinite love and majesty to paint.

"To thee let all their graceful voices raise,

"And saints and angels join their songs of praise."

Perfect in bliss she from her heav'nly home
Looks down, and smiling beckons you to come;
Why then, fond parents, why these fruitless groans?
Restrain your tears, and cease your plaintive moans.
Freed from a world of sin, and snares, and pain,
Why would you wish your daughter back again?
No—bow resign'd. Let hope your grief control,
And check the rising tumult of the soul.
Calm in the prosperous, and adverse day,
Adore the God who gives and takes away;
Eye him in all, his holy name revere,
Upright your actions, and your hearts sincere,
Till having sail'd through life's tempestuous sea,
And from its rocks, and boist'rous billows free,
Yourselves, safe landed on the blissful shore,
Shall join your happy babe to part no more.

[Letter to George Washington from Phyllis Wheatley

To His Excellency George Washington

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

1776

Cambridge, February 28, 1776.]

To His Excellency, General Washington

By Phillis Wheatley

Celestial choir! enthron'd in realms of light,
Columbia's 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,
And nations gaze at scenes before unknown!
See the bright beams of heaven's revolving light
Involved in sorrows and veil of night!

The goddess comes, she moves divinely fair,
Olive and laurel bind her golden hair:
Wherever shines this native of the skies,
Unnumber'd charms and recent graces rise.

Muse! bow propitious while my pen relates
How pour her armies through a thousand gates,
As when Eolus heaven's fair face deforms,
Enwrapp'd in tempest and a night of storms;
Astonish'd 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.
In bright array they seek the work of war,
Where high unfurl'd the ensign waves in air.
Shall I to Washington their praise recite?
Enough thou know'st them in the fields of fight.
Thee, first in peace and honours,—we demand
The grace and glory of thy martial band.
Fam'd for thy valour, for thy virtues more,
Hear every tongue thy guardian aid implore!

One century scarce perform'd its destined round,
When Gallic powers Columbia's fury found;
And so may you, whoever dares disgrace
The land of freedom's heaven-defended race!
Fix'd are the eyes of nations on the scales,
For in their hopes Columbia's arm prevails.
Anon Britannia droops the pensive head,
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 ev'ry action let the goddess guide.
A crown, a mansion, and a throne that shine,
With gold unfading, WASHINGTON! be thine.

[*Letter from George Washington to Phyllis Wheatley*]

Mrs. Phillis [sic],

Your favour of the 26th of October did not reach my hands 'till the middle of December. Time enough, you will say, to have given an answer ere this. Granted. But a variety of important occurrences, continually interposing to distract the mind and withdraw the attention, I hope will apologize for the delay, and plead my excuse for the seeming, but not real neglect.

I thank you most sincerely for your polite notice of me, in the elegant Lines you enclosed; and however undeserving I may be of such encomium and panegyrick, the style and manner exhibit a striking proof of your great poetical Talents. In honour of which, and as a tribute justly due to you, I would have published the Poem, had I not been apprehensive, that, while I only meant to give the World this new instance of your genius, I might have incurred the imputation of Vanity. This and nothing else, determined me not to give it place in the public Prints.

If you should ever come to Cambridge, or near Head Quarters, I shall be happy to see a person so favoured by the Muses, and to whom Nature has been so liberal and beneficent in her dispensations.

I am, with great Respect, etc.
General George Washington]

Source:

Poem of the Day, 2 March 2010, N.p. Web, 4 June 2013.