

Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral
Phillis Wheatley (1773)

The woman who became known as Phillis Wheatley was born probably in the Senegambia region of western Africa. When she was about 7 years old, she was transported as a slave to Massachusetts, where she was purchased by a white family named Wheatley; they named her Phillis after the ship that brought her. Impressed by Phillis's intellectual abilities, the Wheatleys gave her an unusually advanced education. At about age 20, she became the first African American woman to publish a book, a collection of poems that made her famous on both sides of the Atlantic. The following three poems come from that collection. After her book was published, the Wheatleys set Phillis free. Her life after manumission was difficult; she died in poverty, in her early 30s.

1. 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 race with scornful eye:
"Their color is a diabolic dye."
Remember, Christians: Negroes, black as Cain,
may be refined and join the angelic train.

* * *

2. On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield, 1770^a

Behold the prophet in his towering flight!
He leaves the earth for heaven's unmeasured height,
and worlds unknown receive him from our sight.
There Whitefield wings, with rapid course, his way
and sails to Zion through vast seas of day.
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;
he longed to see America excel.
He charged its youth that every grace divine
should with full luster in their conduct shine.
That Savior which his soul did first receive,

^a *George Whitefield was a famous white revivalist from England who did several preaching tours in Britain's American colonies between the 1730s and 1770. He died while on tour in Massachusetts. Presented here is a selection from the middle of Wheatley's poetic eulogy of Whitefield.*

the greatest gift that even a God can give,
 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.
 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.
 Washed in the fountain of redeeming blood,
 you shall be sons, and kings, and priests to God.”

* * *

3. **To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth,
 His Majesty’s Principal Secretary of State for North America, etc.^b**

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 way.
 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. [...]

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 to enslave the land.

Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,
 wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung—
 whence flow these wishes for the common good,

^b This poem celebrates the appointment, in 1772, of William Legge, Earl of Dartmouth, to serve as the British cabinet minister overseeing colonial administration. A few years earlier, Dartmouth had been instrumental in repealing the Stamp Act, a tax reviled by many American colonists. Wheatley was therefore hopeful that, in his new cabinet position, Dartmouth would sympathize with colonists’ other complaints about the British government.

by feeling hearts alone best understood—
 I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
 was snatched from Afric's fancied happy seat.
 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
 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, as in thy will before,
 to soothe the griefs which thou didst once deplore.
 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 heaven's refulgent fane,
 may fiery coursers sweep the ethereal plain
 and bear thee upwards to that blessed abode
 where, like the prophet, thou shalt find thy God.

Source: Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London: A. Bell, 1773), 18, 22-24, 73-75, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/emu.010000351741>. Public domain.

Excerpts edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. Sentence breaks adjusted for readability. A grammatical inconsistency corrected (*shall* → *shalt*). Spelling, punctuation, and typography (italics and all caps) modernized or Americanized. Elided vowels spelled out. Capital letters at the beginning of lines converted to lowercase for readability. The capitalizing of *Negroes* reproduces the usage of the source publication, as does the capitalizing of *Pagan*. The words *sir* and *fame*, capitalized in the source, have been converted here to lowercase for the sake of modernization; but *Freedom* and *Tyranny* are capitalized here, as in the source, to underscore their personification.

These edited excerpts from Wheatley's poetry are intended for **teaching** purposes only. For **research** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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