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An Investigation of the Life and Works of Phillis Wheatley

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AN INVESTIGATION OF THE LIFE AND WORKS OF PHILLIS WHEATLEY

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AN INVESTIGATION OF THE LIFE AND WORKS OF

PHILLIS WHEATLEY

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CHAPTER I

PHILLIS WHEATLEY AND AFRO-AMERICAN CULTURE

I. BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Phillis Wheatley, who was brought from Africa at an early age and was purchased by the Wheatley family of Boston, became the first Negro to achieve distinction in literature in America. She began writing poetry at the age of thirteen. Her work was an interesting beginning of the contributions which Africans have made to American culture.[1] In the course of her education and training she absorbed American culture to such an extent that it is virtually impossible to find traces of her African ancestry in her writings.[2]

To speak of Negro poetry is to use a misnomer in the sense that it is not distinct from American poetry in the same manner that Russian, French or Chinese poetry is separate. Negro writers use the same language as other American writers; and, since their works emanate from

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[1]Benjamin Brawley, A Short History of the American Negro (New York: Macmillan Company, 1927), p. 233.

[2]Richard Wright, White Man, Listen (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1957), p. 114.

the same country, there are few aberrations from the literary tendencies of their times. It is true, though, that Negro poets and writers do contribute individual facets which add to the main stream of American literature.[3]

The history of Afro-American literature has never been told except in accounts of isolated or individual incidents. A better way to look at the Negro's relationship to American culture is to look at it as a part of the whole, not as a minority concern. In this way it is possible not only to understand and evaluate Afro-American literature, but to understand and evaluate a complete American literature.[4] As one Negro said:

> Whether I like it or not, or whether you like it or not, we are bound together forever. We are part of each other. What is happening to every Negro in the country at any time is also happening to you.[5]

The exclusion of the Negro from American anthologies and the lack of knowledge of the Negro in the historical area has been attributed to the historians and social

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[3]Countee Cullen (ed.), Caroling Dusk (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1927), p. xi.

[4]Margaret Just Butcher, The Negro in American Culture (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p. 3.

[5]Theodore S. Boone, The Philosophy of Booker T. Washington (U. S. A.: Theodore S. Boone, 1939), p. 114.

scholars.[6] There has been a decided effort to ignore the possibility of any significant Negro contribution to American poetry, perhaps because "literature is a social institution."[7] In this paper it was assumed at the outset that there is but one main stream of American literature, but the various ethnic groups flow into this stream like tributaries flowing into a river; together they contribute to the collection of American belles lettres. From this amalgam come our national literature and culture.[8]

Americans are now beginning to realize that contemporary problems are directly related to the past. To understand these problems it is necessary to examine previous events and people. Then, one must include in the American tradition the writings--good or bad--of Negro authors, as well as the contributions of other persons and groups. It is the fusion of the diversified people of America which has given her the distinctive flavor of a democratic society with its own literature and culture.

Both early American literature and Afro-American literature are more interesting as history and as a study

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[6]J. Saunders Redding, On Being Negro in America (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1951), p. 124.

[7]David Daiches as quoted by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, The Poetry of the Negro (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1949), p. 21.

[8]Carl Milton Hughes, The Negro Novelist (New York: The Citadel Press, 1953), p. 17.

of the relationships between peoples and their cultures than as pure literature. Most scholars, however, confine their appraisal of Colonial literature to its intrinsic value; whereas, it needs to be studied in the context of the customs and traditions of the people by and about whom it was written.[9] This paper is an attempt to examine Miss Wheatley's poetry against the background in which it was written. An effort is made to project a relationship between the two, noting that the history of Colonial letters is important to a comprehension of the roots of the American tradition.[10]

An acknowledgement is made of the relative absence of Afro-American literature from the body of American literature compiled by scholars, historians and anthologists. A Negro historian has put the matter: "One part of the American people, though living in or near proximity and together, are quite unacquainted with the other."[11] As with individuals, so with classes, one cannot appreciate

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[9]Thomas Goddard Wright, Literary Culture in Early New England (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1920), p. 11.

[10]Mumford Jones, Ideas in America (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1944), p. 27.

[11]Martin R. Delany, The Condition, Elevation, Emmigration and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States Politically Considered, quoted in Herbert Aptheker, A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States (New York: The Citadel Press, 1951), p. 327.

the worth of another until he knows that class or that individual.

The Negro soon lost most traces of his African culture upon his transplantation to the soil of America. It is interesting to note that slavery, the same institution which did the transplanting and robbed him of his own culture, provided intimate group contacts. These forced the rapid assimilation of the American ways, making him culturally an American. On the other hand, slavery confined him to his own people and forced the growth of Negro characteristics which are not inherent but are created by environment. It is because of this isolation that American Negro idiosyncrasies developed and influenced such major areas of the American arts as music, folklore and dance.[12]

Another major contribution of the Negro to American literature and life comes from his self-conscious effort to be an American. The Negro is an American who is not recognized as such. Consequently, he has forced the concept of democracy upon America in his constant fight for freedom. He is the "catalyst of American democracy."[13] This is the vital principle of our great national liter-

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[12]Butcher, op. cit., p. 6.

[13]J. Saunders Redding, as quoted in Butcher, op. cit., p. 6.

ature--democracy.[14] To ignore the Negro on the group and historical level is to take from him his share in the heritage of this country. A Negro barber who had been given a trip by his white customers in Texas chose Plymouth Rock as his destination. Upon arrival he mailed a card back to those who had sent him, saying, "This is where our ancestors landed."[15]

The contributions of the Negroes to the field of letters make a rich addition to the native stock of the American tradition of literature. Their writings are as indigenous to this country as the Indian, the cowboy, or the goldminer.[16] The last two decades have shown a revival of interest in the work and appraisal of Negro writers. For this reason the study of Miss Wheatley's work is particularly important at this time.

The study of the contribution of Phillis Wheatley is not expected to unearth a great amount of outstanding literature. It is expected only to indicate the presence of a neglected source of Americana. Miss Wheatley was

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[14]Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Jacksonian Democracy and Literature," The Transcendentalist Revolt Against Materialism edited by George F. Whicher, Problems in American Civilization Series (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1949), p. 2.

[15]Jones, op. cit., p. 27.

[16]V. F. Calverton, Anthology of American Negro Literature (New York: The Modern Library, 1929), p. 438.

III. PROCEDURES USED

A study has been made of Miss Wheatley's life, her poetry and letters. In addition, books on Negro culture, history and literature have been examined in order to provide a background and to suggest trends in the relationship between Negro culture and white culture.

Letters have been written to the Library of Congress, the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Phillis Wheatley Association, the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, John Hope Franklin (Negro historian) and various libraries as follows: the Cleveland Public Library, Fisk University Library, the University of Alabama Library, Harding College Library, Tuskegee Institute Library, Southern Baptist College Library, the College of the Ozarks Library, and the Arkansas Library Commission. The answers to all of these letters have been received and have provided a generous amount of material by and about Phillis Wheatley. In addition, all of the available material of the Riley Library of Ouachita Baptist College has been utilized.

IV. DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The available, extant poetry of Miss Wheatley has been studied. Her works have been compared with those of Alexander Pope, whom she imitated; with those of Mrs. Anne Bradstreet, another woman poet of the Colonial period; and with those of Urian Oakes. The comments, favorable and otherwise, of her contemporaries have been reviewed. An attempt has been made to judge her poetry in the context of the literary works of her day.

V. ASSUMPTIONS

The assumptions have been made that a study of this kind will result in a greater appreciation of the contribution of the Negro to American life and literature, and in a better understanding of the life and works of Miss Wheatley as seen in the context of the whole of Colonial literature.

> We would not learn less of George Washington, "First in war, first in peace,[19] first in the hearts of his countrymen," but we would learn something also of the 3000 Negro soldiers of the American Revolution who helped to make this "Father of our country" possible. We would not neglect to appreciate the unusual contribution of Thomas Jefferson to freedom and democracy; but we would invite attention also

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[19]Miss Wheatley is given credit for originating the phrase, "first in peace," by at least three authors: James Weldon Johnson, Charlotte Wright and Vernon Loggins.

to two of his outstanding contemporaries, Phillis Wheatley, the writer of interesting verse, and Benjamin Banneker. . .[20]

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[20]Carter Godwin Woodson, The Negro in Our History, (Washington, D. C.: The Associated Publishers, Inc., 1947), p. 155.

CHAPTER II

PHILLIS WHEATLEY: BACKGROUND AND EDUCATION

Phillis Wheatley, a little African girl of very dark complexion, was purchased at a slave auction in Boston in June of 1761 by a prosperous family of that city. Conflicting birthdates have been given, with estimates of her age at time of purchase varying from five to nine years. Redding states that she probably was born in 1753, from the "circumstances of the shedding of her front teeth."[1] Other evidence based on this assumption and supporting the 1753 date may be found in the formal notice of her death in 1784, which notice said that she was thirty-one years of age. Another proof was indicated in her poem about Whitefield which was published in 1770 and gave the author's age as seventeen years.[2]

She may have been purchased by John Wheatley and taken home as a servant for his wife in her declining years.[3] Another account relates that she was bought

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[1] J. Saunders Redding, To Make a Poet Black (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1939), p. 1.

[2] Benjamin Brawley, Early Negro American Writers (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1935), p. 34.

[3] Dumas Malone (ed.), Dictionary of American Biography (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), pp. 36-37.

out of compassion by Mrs. Wheatley, who saw her on the auction block.[4] The child had no formal schooling, but was tutored by the Wheatley twins, Mary and Nathaniel, who were ten years her senior. It was they who named her Phillis, and she came to be known as Phillis Wheatley. Within sixteen to eighteen months Phillis was speaking and writing English fluently, and at twelve she was reading Latin. At the age of thirteen she was writing verse, and in three more years she was reading the classic Roman poets, Virgil and Horace.[5]

Mrs. Wheatley, who was a religious and benevolent woman, seems to have recognized the unusual talent of her slave. She gave Phillis every opportunity to develop. The child was permitted to have heat and a light in her room because of the delicacy of her health and to enable her to study and to write whenever she wished.[6]

There can be little doubt that environment was most effective in shaping the poet's personality and her eventual destiny. She came to be looked upon as a daughter, or much-loved companion, by Mrs. Wheatley, who

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[4]Shirley Graham, The Story of Phillis Wheatley (New York: Julian Messner, Inc., 1949), pp. 13-24.

[5]Herman Dreer, American Literature by Negro Authors (New York: Macmillan Company, 1950), p. 22.

[6]Brawley, Early Negro American Writers, p. 32.

kept Phillis constantly with her and her children.[7] Mrs. Wheatley gave her religious instruction. Phillis was baptized, becoming the first slave to be admitted into membership of the congregation at Boston's Old South Meeting House, which she joined at the age of sixteen.[8]

Miss Wheatley was treated as a member of the family and was proudly presented to the guests at a New Year's Eve party, where she astounded the audience by reciting her own poetry for more than twenty minutes. It may be noted that she was but seventeen or eighteen at the time. The following lines from a religious poem which she recited on that occasion show her ability at a relatively young age:

> 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. . . .
>
> Infinite Love, where'er we turn our eyes
> To Him, whose works arrayed with mercy shine
> What songs should rise, how constant, how divine![9]

There is an account in the Story of Phillis Wheatley of the custom which developed in Boston of having Miss

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[7]Brawley, Short History of the American Negro, p. 233.

[8]Glenn S. Weight, "Anniversary of Phillis Wheatley Remains an Inspiration to All." Negro History Bulletin (Washington, D. C.: Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, Inc., January, 1962), Vol. XXV, No. 4, p. 91.

[9]Ibid.

Wheatley read poetry at afternoon teas. The ladies had little opportunity for social gatherings, and the reading of Miss Wheatley's poetry soon became a popular diversion.[10]

During a summer visit to Newport with the two Wheatley ladies, mother and daughter, Phillis went for a walk one afternoon and met a young black woman seated in a town park. This young woman's name was Obour Tanner, sometimes spelled Abour Tanner. According to Graham, Miss Tanner recognized Miss Wheatley as one who had come over on the same slave ship with her. Miss Wheatley was too young at the time to remember this. However, the two became fast friends, and seven of Miss Wheatley's letters to Obour Tanner are preserved in the archives of the Massachusetts Historical Society where they are available for today's scholars.[11]

Miss Wheatley seems to have been a sensation among the Boston intellectuals--". . .a kind of poet laureate in the domestic circles of Boston."[12] She was easily the most gifted Negro in the literary field; two others of note were Jupiter Hammon and Gustavus Vassa. The three had social advantages which the mass of colored people in the new

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[10]Graham, op. cit., pp. 91-106. [11]Ibid., p. 85.

[12]Benjamin Brawley, Negro Builders and Heroes, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1937), p. 18.

nation lacked. All of them began life as slaves but had sympathetic aid and understanding from their owners. They all achieved their fame in the North, and all of them were devout and pious Christians. In addition, they were of pure African inception, which indicates the capacity for the highest culture on the part of the Negro race.[13]

As Miss Wheatley's education progressed, it consisted of geography, ancient history, astronomy, a fair knowledge of the Bible and a thorough acquaintance with the most important of the Latin classics. She read extensively in Greek mythology, Greek and Roman history, and in contemporary English authors of whom Pope was her particular delight. This is more remarkable when the young student is considered against her Colonial background and within the bounds of the institution of slavery. Few Boston young ladies could boast half as many intellectual attainments. Then, if one reviews her background, especially before her eighth year, her accomplishments seem to be of a high order indeed.[14]

Perhaps as a result of the conditions of her early childhood, Miss Wheatley had delicate health during her

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[13]Richard Bardolph, The Negro Vanguard (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1959), p. 18.

[14]Brawley, A Short History of the American Negro, p. 234.

whole life. In 1792 she wrote to Obour Tanner, "I have been in a very poor state of health all the past winter and spring, and now reside in the country for the benefit of its more wholesome air."[15] It was probably about this time that the family physician ordered "sea air" and the Wheatleys arranged for her to accompany Nathaniel, who had previously planned a business trip to England.[16]

Miss Wheatley was to be the guest and under the special patronage of the Countess of Huntingdon. The acquaintance with the Countess came about because of a poem Miss Wheatley had written earlier. The first of her poems to be published, it was written in 1770 when she was seventeen years of age. It was entitled, "On the Death of the Reverend George Whitefield." The dedication was addressed to the Countess of Huntingdon. The Reverend Whitefield had served as chaplain to the Countess some years previously in England. When Whitefield disagreed with John Wesley over a church matter, the Countess took Whitefield's part. During Whitefield's stay in America, he had established several orphanages in Georgia, and at his death the Countess became trustee of these institutions.

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[15]Vernon Loggins, The Negro Author (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), p. 20.

[16]Bardolph, op. cit., p. 34.

The Countess was impressed with Miss Wheatley's talent and personality and urged the Wheatley family to allow the visit to England.[17]

According to several accounts, Miss Wheatley was given formal manumission before she went to London, because Mrs. Wheatley wished to have no barriers to the enjoyment of the trip. One author, however, reports that the manumission may not have been recorded properly, and it was the fear of being enslaved again in payment for her master's debts which caused her to contract a later, unhappy marriage.[18]

Miss Wheatley's dark skin was no handicap to social acceptance in Eighteenth Century England. She was showered with presents and became the toast of London. According to Redding, she was the best known of the contemporary American poets.[19] Lord Dartmouth gave a great party in her honor; Brook Watson, the Lord Mayor of London, presented her with a magnificent folio edition of Paradise Lost. This book is now in the Harvard University Library. On one of the pages, in Miss Wheatley's handwriting, are the words, "Mr. Brook Watson to Phillis Wheatley, London, July, 1773."

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[17]Brawley, Negro Builders and Heros, p. 20.

[18]Brawley, Short History of the American Negro, p. 234.

[19]Redding, To Make a Poet Black, p. 8.

Also, on the bottom of the page, in the handwriting of another--probably that of Dudley L. Pickman, the donor--are the words:

> This book was given by Brook Watson, formerly Lord Mayor of London, to Miss Phillis Wheatley, and after her death was sold in payment of her husband's debts. It is now presented to the Library of Harvard University at Cambridge by Dudley L. Pickman of Salem, March, 1824.[20]

Miss Wheatley's first book of poetry was published in England in 1773. It was actually printed after she left hurriedly to visit Mrs. Wheatley, but the arrangements had been made before the departure. The publisher, a Mr. Bell, evidently feared that people would not believe that the author was a Negro slave, for he had an affadavit prepared which stated,

> We, whose names are under written, do assure the world that the poems in the following pages were, as we verily believe, written by Phyllis [sic], a young Negro girl who was, but a few years since, brought, an uncultivated Barbarian, from Africa, and has ever since been under the disadvantage of serving as a slave in a Family in This Town.[21]

It was then signed by many of the notables of Boston and Massachusetts, comprising a list of some eighteen names including that of John Wheatley. The book was later

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[20]Brawley, Early Negro American Writers, p. 35.

[21]Weight, op. cit., p. 91.

reprinted in Boston, running through several editions.[22]

Miss Wheatley was lionized during her stay in London and was to be presented at the court of George III. However, she had not arrived at a fashionable time, so the presentation was postponed until the official social season would be under way.[23] The strangeness of her story and the ability of her pen seem insufficient to account for the interest and international reputation which she had acquired.[24] Her personality was gentle and unassuming, but her wit and conversational ability won many more friends.

The news of the illness of Mrs. Wheatley reached her in London before she was presented at court. With what seems to be characteristic faithfulness and thoughtfulness, Miss Wheatley decided to depart immediately for the Colonies to be of service and to comfort the one whom she loved. Nathaniel elected to remain in England, a decision which he was later to regret. The journey took about fifty-one days, and then Miss Wheatley was at the bedside of her dying Maecenas.

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[22]Brawley, Early Negro American Writers, p. 33.

[23]Weight, op. cit., p. 91.

[24]Benjamin Quarles, The Negro in the American Revolution (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1961), p. 45.

The sorrow caused by the death of Mrs. Wheatley in 1774 is expressed in this letter written to Obour Tanner:

> Imagine the loss of a parent, sisters, and brother. The tenderness of all these were united in her. I was a poor outcast and a stranger when she took me in; not only into her house, but I became a sharer in her most tender affections.[25]

Following the death of Mrs. Wheatley, Phillis' misfortunes seem to have continued in a steady series until the end of her life. The Wheatley daughter, Mary, had married. Nathaniel had become a resident of England; he planned to return in 1783 and wrote to Phillis, indicating his intention of calling on her, but his death intervened. Within four years following the death of Mrs. Wheatley, both Mr. Wheatley and Mary Wheatley Lathrop were dead. The financial dependence of a slave upon her mistress was immediately apparent. Although Miss Wheatley had been presumedly manumitted, the legal record was not clear. This was the era leading up to and including the Revolutionary War. Because of the uncertainty of the times, Mr. Wheatley left several debts, and his property was sold to repay them. There was the threat of selling Phillis to satisfy some of the debts.[26]

Whether because of loneliness, the threat of slavery, or the reality of romance, Miss Wheatley married John Peters

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[25]Weight, op. cit., p. 91. [26]Ibid., p. 21.

in April of 1778. The marriage license lists her as a "free Negro."[27] John Peters is variously described as a proud, restless ne'er-do-well, who not only condemned Phillis to a life of poverty, but, by his actions, estranged the friends who might have been able to assist in her need.[28] The family evidently led a gypsy life for several years, picking berries, following the harvests, and living in an old wooden cart. By 1783 they were living in a tenement quarter in Boston. The following year John Peters was thrown into prison for debts (a not-unusual occurrence during this period), and Phillis was forced to work as a drudge in a cheap boarding house.[29]

She continued to write some poetry during this time, but most of it was lost or destroyed by her husband. An advertisement in the Evening Post and the General Advertiser of Boston proposed to bring out a second volume of poetry by Phillis Wheatley, to be dedicated to Benjamin Franklin. The titles of thirty-three poems are given in the advertisement. The war was being fought, however, and interest in cultural persuits had to take second place. Since enough subscriptions did not materialize to carry

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[27]Loggins, The Negro Author, p. 19.

[28]Ibid.

[29]Weight, op. cit., p. 91.

out the proposal, the plan was never completed. Only two of the listed poems have been preserved for posterity, the other thirty-one having been lost or destroyed.[30] The War for Independence left little time for prose and poetry, and there was little money to spare when many were hungry for bread. At another time, perhaps, her friends and fellow church members might have supported the effort.[31]

During the last years of Miss Wheatley's life three of her poems were published: "To Mr. and Mrs. _____ on the Death of Their Infant Son," which appeared in the Boston Magazine, September, 1784; "An Elegy Sacred to the Memory of That Great Divine, the Reverend and Learned Dr. Samuel Cooper;" and an ode on the termination of the Revolution, "Liberty and Peace," both of the latter being issued as pamphlets.[32]

Phillis Wheatley Peters had three children, two of whom died in infancy. The third child was buried with its mother. The announcement of her death appeared in the Independent Chronicle:

> Last Lord's Day, died Mrs. Phillis Peters (formerly Phillis Wheatley), aged 31, known to the literary world by her celebrated miscellaneous poems. Her funeral is to be this afternoon, at four o'clock from the house

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[30]Brawley, Early Negro American Writers, p. 35.

[31]Loggins, The Negro Author, p. 20.

[32]Ibid.

> lately improved by Mr. Todd, nearly opposite Dr. Bulfinch's at West Boston, where her friends and acquaintances are desired to attend.[33]

Her life was brief and, in many respects, tragic; but she triumphed over adverse circumstances and, by her grace and culture, satisfied the "conventionalities of Boston and of London."[34] Charles Fred Heartman calls her one of the greatest artistic talents the Negroes have ever produced and states that America had the task of giving her talent the possibility of development even though she was African born.[35]

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[33]Charlotte Ruth Wright, op. cit., p. vi.

[34]Brawley, Short History of the American Negro, p. 235.

[35]Charles Fred Heartman, Phillis Wheatley, A Critical Attempt and a Bibliography of Her Writings (New York: Charles Heartman, 1919), p. 9.

CHAPTER III

PHILLIS WHEATLEY: POETRY AND LETTERS

The first poem which Miss Wheatley wrote was directed "To The University of Cambridge in New England." She was thirteen years of age at that time and had been in America for about six years. The occasion which brought about the writing of the poem involved young Nathaniel Wheatley. He had announced to his family that he was not going to be graduated from Harvard College and he was not going to be a clergyman.[1] After he and his friends returned to school they received in the mail the following lines:

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;
Father of Mercy, 'twas Thy gracious hand
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, ye receive
The blissful news by messengers from heaven
How Jesus' blood for your redemption flows
With matchless mercy in the Son of God.
Improve your privileges while they stay,
Ye pupils, and each hour redeem, that bears
Of 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;
Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg.
Ye blooming plants of human race divine,
An Ethiop tells you 'tis your greatest foe;

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[1]Graham, op. cit., pp. 68-69.

Its transient sweetness turns to endless pain,
And in immense perdition sinks the soul.[2]

Miss Wheatley did not intend to be humorous. Her concern for Nathaniel and his friends was sincere. With her talent for learning as real as it was, the young men's lack of concern for education must have been painful to her. The incongruity of a thirteen-year-old girl's advising young men ten years her senior, however, cannot help but provoke a smile. The poem continues for another nineteen-line stanza in the same tone of maternal chiding and advice.

"To The King's Most Excellent Majesty" was probably the next poem written by Miss Wheatley while she was still thirteen. The occasion of this writing was the repeal of the Stamp Act in 1768. It is not a particularly noteworthy poem; it sought to reflect the reaction of the American colonists:

But how shall we the British King reward?
Rule thou in peace, our father, and our lord!
Midst the remembrance of thy favors past,
The meanest peasants most admire the last. . . .

Then it closes with the expressive line:

A monarch's smile can set his subjects free![3]

Her recognition of a political event seems to have been entirely of her own volition. Her endeavor to express the gratitude of the subjects to their king was in keeping with

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[2]Charlotte Ruth Wright, op. cit., pp. 18-19.

[3]Ibid., pp. 19-20.

the prevailing attitudes in the days preceding the Revolution before separation became the cry of the land and its people.

The Reverend Samuel Sewell, whom she elegized in a poem written in 1769, was the pastor who had christened her and received her into the congregation of his church, Old South Church, in Boston. This poem was written, as were the others, in the leisure moments of the author, with no intentions of having them published. They were published later at the insistence, and with the assistance, of friends. "On the Death of the Rev. Dr. Sewell" was the first of her elegies.[4] It is interesting to note that out of the original first thirty-nine of her poems, fourteen were elegies. In the forty-six of her poems which have survived until today, eighteen are elegies. This custom of writing was in keeping with the practice of the times and, particularly, with the Puritan tradition of practicality. Puritan poetry was written for moral and theological purposes. Miss Wheatley referred to her elegies as "messages of hope."[5] Her Puritan background and training are

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[4]George W. Light, Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley (Boston: George W. Light, 1834), pp. 44-46.

[5]Graham, op. cit., p. 93.

clearly in evidence when one examines the occasions for her poetry.[6]

This poem contains what is perhaps the most personal utterance in her poetry. The lack of personal feelings and thoughts is the most frequently stated criticism of her work.[7] The following lines are in the first person and spoke directly from the heart of the young poet:

> . . .'Sewell is dead.' Swift-pinioned Fame thus cried.
> 'Is Sewell dead?' my trembling tongue replied. . . .
> How oft for us the holy prophet prayed!
> How oft to us the word of life conveyed!
> By duty urged by mournful verse to close,
> I for his tomb this epitaphy compose. . . .
>
> "Listen, ye happy, from your seats above.
> "I speak sincerely, while I speak and love. . . .
> "I, too, have cause, this mighty loss to mourn,
> "For he, my monitor, will not return, . . .[8]

It is not known exactly how Sewell advised and counseled Miss Wheatley, but her cry of grief seems very real and very personal. In addition to her neoclassical training, she had a puritanical guard on her emotions and wrote of others' griefs more often than her own. For instance, neither the loss of any of the Wheatleys nor of her own children is commemorated by an elegy. Mrs. Wheatley had

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[6]Loggins, The Negro Author, p. 22.

[7]Arthur P. Davis, "Personal Elements in the Poetry of Phillis Wheatley," Phylon, Vol. XIV, 1953, p. 191.

[8]Light, op. cit., p. 45.

asked that Phillis write no elegies for them, but she composed some eighteen at the request of friends or acquaintances.[9]

The poem "To Maecenas" was probably written in recognition of what she owed to the Wheatley family. The name Maecenas was taken from that of a friend of Horace and Virgil, a Roman statesman and a patron of literature. The word has come to mean any wealthy patron, expecially of literature and art.[10] One critic suggests that she was thinking also of the Countess of Huntingdon. In either instance she unwittingly suggested a truth of that day, namely, that each member of her race who rose to a position of distinction in this period had a patron. It was not until the beginning of the nineteenth century that the Negro could look to his own race for support.[11]

"To Maecenas" also expressed her deep concern for her own handicaps. With the quick and facile mind which was evidenced by her rapid progression in reading and writing, she must have been keenly aware of her lack of excellence as a poet. She refers to herself as having a

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[9]Ibid., p. 19.

[10]Webster's New World Dictionary (Cleveland: New World Publishing Company, 1962), p. 880.

[11]Loggins, The Negro Author, pp. 4-5.

"grovelling mind." Although the lines are of somewhat stilted wording, there was voiced real disappointment at her poetic failure:

> Oh! could I rival thine and Virgil's page,
> Or claim the Muses with the Mantuan sage; . . .
> Then should my song in bolder notes arise,
> And all my numbers pleasingly surprise:
> But here I sit, and mourn a grovelling mind,
> That fain would mount, and ride upon the wind.[12]

In other lines she referred to Terence, the Latin poet of the second century B. C., who had gained renown as a poet and supposedly won his freedom thereby:

> The happier Terence all the choir inspired,
> His soul replenished, and his bosom fired:
> But say, ye Muses, why this partial grace
> To one alone of Afric's sable race; . . .[13]

At this time Phillis was still a slave; she voiced her discouragement in such lines as "the faltering music dies upon my tongue."[14] Thus, she compared her status in a very personal way with one of her own race who had achieved excellence as a poet and freedom.

The first of her poems to be published was another elegy entitled, "An Elegiac Poem on the Death of George Whitefield." It was published first as a broadside and

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[12]Light, op. cit., p. 40.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Ibid.

sold in Boston by Ezekiel Russell and John Boyle. This is the poem which was dedicated to the Countess of Huntingdon. Within a few months the poem had come out in at least six different editions in the three major cities of America: Boston, Philadelphia and New York.[15] The poem was also published in two editions in London and made the name of Miss Wheatley well-known in the "Calvinistic Methodist circles in England."[16]

The shortest of her poems, "On Being Brought from Africa to America," is mainly subjective.[17] She seems to be trying to point out to her fellow Africans that through Christ alone the slave has a chance for escape from his slavery. He was redeemed in the eternal sense but was also changed and refined in order that he might become a Christian brother to his owner. She wrote:

> '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.
> 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.[18]

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[15]Loggins, The Negro Author, p. 116.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Davis, op. cit., p. 194.

[18]Light, op. cit., p. 42.

This small poem is one of only two of her poems which have a Negro theme. James Weldon Johnson accused her of being smug about her escape from Africa even though she identified it as her home.[19] He is perhaps overlooking the fact that Miss Wheatley was glorying in her Christianity rather than gloating over her absence from her homeland.[20] She was deeply and sincerely religious and expressed this in all of her poetry as well as in her other writings. Benjamin Brawley called this poem "eight childish but sincere lines."[21]

Vernon Loggins suggested that George Whitefield preached an emotional religion which the Negro could understand and which stirred him to self expression. He also gave religion, more than any other force, credit for aiding the Negro to adapt to the ways of Western civilization. He stated, "The first Negroes in America who attempted authorship owed their main inspiration for achievement to emotional religion."[22] If this were true, Miss Wheatley was right to glory in the mercy which brought her from a pagan land.

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[19]James Weldon Johnson, The Book of American Negro Poetry (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1931), p. 27.

[20]Davis, op. cit., p. 195.

[21]Brawley, Early Negro American Writers, p. 34.

[22]Loggins, The Negro Author, p. 4.

Miss Wheatley wrote one other poem which was decidedly racial in tone. This was "To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth, His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for North America." The Earl was Secretary of State to George III. Evidently all the colonists were impressed with his appointment. Miss Wheatley sang the praises of freedom; then, perhaps feeling constrained to explain how a slave knew of freedom, she penned the following words:

> 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,
> By feeling hearts alone best understood,--
> I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
> Was snatched from Afric's fancied happy seat: . . .
> Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
> Others may never feel tyrannic sway?[23]

This would seem a strong protest indeed from one who was a slave and would expect to be read or published in a slave-holding community.

One of the poems which was inspired by a public event has already been mentioned. Several others are of minor importance. Three of the remainder were not published in the 1773 edition, but were added later. The most famous of these is the one inspired by the appointment of George Washington as Commander in Chief of the Revolutionary forces. The poem was accompanied by a letter expressing

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[23]Light, op. cit., p. 75.

hope that "your Excellency would meet with all possible success, 'in the great cause you are so generously engaged in.'"[24]

This poem, "His Excellency General Washington," is panegyric in utterance. The middle section of the poem has received much attention:

> 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![25]

James Weldon Johnson states emphatically that Miss Wheatley was the first to apply the phrase, "first in peace," to General Washington. This phrase was incorporated into the encomium, "first in war, first in peace, first in the hearts of his countrymen," which was used in the resolutions presented to Congress on the death of Washington in December, 1799.[26] Charlotte Ruth Wright credits Miss Wheatley with being the first to address Washington as "First in peace,"[28] as does Vernon Loggins, who states

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[24]Quarles, The Negro in the American Revolution, p. 46.

[25]Light, op. cit., pp. 91-92.

[26]James Weldon Johnson, op. cit., p. 25.

[27]Brawley, Early Negro American Writers, p. 35.

[28]Charlotte Ruth Wright, op. cit., p. ix.

that this is possibly the first such reference to Washington.[29]

In this poem, also, she spoke out for freedom in a restrained manner, to be sure, but in a manner rather bold for one who was still in the chains of bondage:

> . . .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.[30]

In February of 1776 Washington wrote a gracious reply apologizing for his tardiness in answering. (Her letter was dated October, 1775, and his answer, February 28, 1776.) His excuse, a valid one, was that "a variety of important occurrences, continually interposing to distract the mind and withdraw the attention, I hope will apologize for the delay. . . ."[31] Miss Wheatley was so at one with her culture--the culture in which she was educated and trained--that many events involving her country she deemed propitious enough to warrant the writing of a poem. Charlotte Ruth Wright calls this one of her most significant poems.[32]

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[29]Vernon Loggins, Visual Outline of American Literature (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1933), pp. 28-29.

[30]Heartman, op. cit., pp. 20-21.

[31]Quarles, The Negro in the American Revolution, p. 46.

[32]Charlotte Ruth Wright, op. cit., p. lx.

Washington, in the letter mentioned above, invited Miss Wheatley to visit him if the occasion ever presented itself. She did visit him for about half an hour just a few days before the British evacuated Boston. She received much gracious attention from the General and his officers. It would seem to be to the gentlemen's credit that they received a "dark child of Africa and a bond-woman" with such thoughtfulness.[33]

Washington expressed a desire to have the poem published as a "striking proof of your great poetical talents," but stated that he refrained from doing so because he might be considered vain.[34] The poem eventually appeared in print for the first time in the Pennsylvania Magazine while Thomas Paine was editor, in April of 1776.[35]

The larger part of Miss Wheatley's poetry was of the occasional class. There was, however, a large enough variety of poetry or writings to give proof of her genius and versatility.[36]

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[33]Benson J. Lossing, Pictorial Field Book of the Revolution (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1850), Vol. I, p. 556.

[34]Quarles, The Negro in the American Revolution, p. 46.

[35]Light, op. cit., p. 14.

[36]Charlotte Ruth Wright, op. cit., pp. 48-50.

There are several abstract pieces of verse. "On Recollection" is one of the most interesting of these. This should be classed also as one of her most personal poems. It begins with these lines:

> Mneme begin. Inspire, ye sacred nine,
> Your vent'rous Afric in her great design.
> Mneme, immortal pow'r, I trace thy spring;
> Assist my strains, while I thy glories sing:
> The acts of long departed years, by thee
> Recover'd, in due order rang'd we see. . . .[37]

Mneme, the Greek personification of memory, is entirely a classical allusion. She referred to herself in these lines:

> . . .Now eighteen years their destin'd course have run
> In fast succession round the central sun.[38]

Her Puritan, New England conscience is plainly visible in the words:

> How did the follies of that period pass
> Unnotic'd, but behold them writ in brass!
> In Recollection see them fresh return,
> And sure 'tis mine to be asham'd and mourn . . . .[39]

And then she ended on a Christian note of hope and optimism:

> But oh! what peace, what joys are hers to impart
> To ev'ry holy, ev'ry upright heart!
> Thrice blest the man, who, in her sacred shrine,
> Feels himself sheltered from the wrath divine![40]

Two other of her abstractions are companion pieces, "Hymn to the Morning" and "Hymn to the Evening." These are especially representative of the pseudo-classic

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[37]Light, op. cit., p. 68.

[38]Ibid., p. 69.

[39]Ibid.

[40]Ibid., p. 70.

influence. Loggins credits the splendor of Milton's "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" with inspiring Miss Wheatley to attempt imitations, as did many other eighteenth century poets.[41]

"On Imagination" is credited by several critics as being the best of her works. The opening stanza followed the classic tradition of personifying human traits:

> Thy various works, imperial queen, we see
> How bright their forms! how decked with pomp by thee!
> Thy wond'rous acts in beauteous order stand,
> And all attest how potent is thine hand.[42]

The description of imagination which follows in the third stanza is vivid in its portrayal of the qualities of this particular abstraction. It ". . .illustrates her own imaginative gift and command of language in which to clothe it so beautifully."[43]

There are several other aspects of Miss Wheatley's writings which are worth exploring, although no large volume of material is involved in any of them. These are paraphrases, translations and letters.

In keeping with the New England custom of versifying selections from the Bible, Miss Wheatley paraphrased eight

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[41]Loggins, The Negro Author, p. 24.

[42]Light, op. cit., p. 70.

[43]Robert B. Eleazer, Singers in the Dawn, (Atlanta: Conference on Education and Race Relations, 1934), p. 3.

verses from the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah and a passage in the first book of Samuel which describes David's fight with Goliath. Neither of these was very successful. Her paraphrase of Isaiah began:

> Say, heavenly Muse, what king, or mighty God,
> That moves sublime from Idumea's road?[44]

To invoke a heavenly Muse in this instance is not only incongruous, but takes all the "fire and brimstone" out of this particular passage.

"Goliath of Gath" is a seven-page dramatic poem which describes the fight between David and the Philistine giant. The neoclassical influence may be seen in such phrases as the "fleecy care" for sheep; "flow'ry meads" for fields; "ensanguined plain" for battlefield. This paraphrase is by far the most dramatic of her longer works. The flowing lines are reminiscent of Pope's version of the Iliad,[45] as illustrated in the first stanza:

> Ye martial powers, and all ye tuneful Nine,
> Inspire my song, and aid my high design.
> The dreadful scenes and toils of war I write,
> The ardent warriors and the fields of fight:
> You best remember, and you best can sing
> The acts of heroes to the vocal string:
> Resume the lays with which your sacred lyre,
> Did then the poet and the sage inspire. . . .[46]

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[44]Light, op. cit., p. 67.

[45]Loggins, The Negro Author, p. 23.

[46]Light, op. cit., p. 51.

Her descriptions and choices of words were striking, as these examples show:

> Now front to front the armies were displayed,
> Here Israel ranged, and there the foes arrayed;
> The hosts on two opposing mountains stood,
> Thick as the foliage of the waving wood: . . .
> . . . . . .
> "Goliath, well thou know'st thou hast defy'd
> "Yon Hebrew armies, and their God deny'd.
> "Rebellious wretch! audacious worm! forbear,
> "Nor tempt the vengeance of their God too far:"
> . . . . . .
> Now David comes: the fatal stones demand
> His left, the staff engaged his better hand.
> . . . . . .
> He humbly thus: "The son of Jesse, I;
> "I came the glories of the field to try.
> "Small is my tribe, but valiant in the fight;
> "Small is my city, but thy Saul's royal right."[47]

Vernon Loggins calls an adaptation of a portion of the sixth book of Ovid's Metamorphoses one of her better achievements.[48] This eight-page work is a classical paraphrase; it so impressed some of Miss Wheatley's friends that they had the translation published.[49] She had been inspired to write the poem after viewing a painting by Richard Wilson. The painting showed a scene from the story which Miss Wheatley named "Niobe in Distress for Her Children Slain by Apollo." She began with her usual invocation

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[47]Light, op. cit., pp. 51-59.

[48]Loggins, The Negro Author, p. 24.

[49]American Authors, 1600-1900: A Biographical Dictionary of American Literature (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1938), pp. 798-799.

to the Muse:

> . . .Thou who didst first the ideal pencil give,
> And taught the painter in his works to live,
> Inspire with glowing energy of thought
> What Wilson painted, and what Ovid wrote.
> Muse! lend thine aid, nor let me sue in vain,
> Though last and meanest of the rhyming train!
> Oh! guide my pen in lofty strains to show
> The Phrygian queen all beautiful in woe. . . .[50]

This selection is representative of the Latin classic influence in her writings and of her versatility and facility in handling the Latin language.

There is evidence to show that a little book entitled "Letters of Phillis Wheatley, the Negro-Slave Poet of Boston" and edited by Charles Deane was privately printed in Boston just before the Civil War. This was a time when any testimony of the intelligence of the Negro was much in demand by the Abolitionists.[51] According to Moses Coit Tyler, Miss Wheatley's efforts to write prose have "no more value in that direction than have her efforts in verse." He goes on to describe them as infantile platitudes expressed in extremely stilted English.[52]

On the other hand, in November of 1863 Charles Deane presented a paper on Phillis Wheatley at the Massachusetts

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[50]Light, op. cit., p. 90.

[51]Moses Coit Tyler, The Literary History of the American Revolution (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1957), p. 187, footnote.

[52]Ibid.

Historical Society and expressed regret that so few of her letters were extant.[53] Thirteen of her letters had been promised along with thirty-three poems in a proposed edition of her works. The planned volume of poetry and letters was to have run to about three hundred pages.[54] This would have been a tremendous addition to Miss Wheatley's extant writings had it been published.

One of the letters was addressed to the Countess of Huntingdon and one to Doctor Benjamin Rush. These were evidently lost or destroyed along with some of her poems. What is possibly a manuscript copy of one of the letters, "To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth, Secretary of North America," is in the library of the Massachusetts Historical Society and is dated October 10, 1772.[55] Another which had been preserved was sent to John Greenleaf Whittier by a friend, Joshua Coffin, with the following note:

> Dear Whittier. . .I was gratified with the perusal of a letter in the hand-writing of the celebrated Phillis Wheatley. It is beautifully written, and with the consent of the good Doctor, I herewith send you a copy, verbatim et liberatim, from the original.

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[53]Benjamin Quarles, "A Phillis Wheatley Letter," Journal of Negro History (Washington, D. C.: The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, Inc., October, 1949) Vol. XXXIV, pp. 462-464.

[54]Loggins, The Negro Author, p. 19.

[55]Phillis Wheatley, "Letter to the Earl of Dartmouth," October 10, 1772 (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, May, 1885).

> It is addressed to the Rev. Mr. Samuel Hopkins, of New Port, R. I. . . .[56]

Seven of her letters to Obour Tanner were preserved in a neat packet and, some years after Miss Wheatley's death, were presented to the Massachusetts Historical Society. The letters, published by the Society in 1864, provide an insight into the character of the young writer. This one was written following her return from England:

> I can't say but my voyage to England has conduced to the recovery (in a great measure) of my health. The friends I found there among the nobility and gentry, their benevolent conduct towards me, the unexpected civility and complaisance with which I was treated by all, fills me with astonishment. I can scarcely realize it. This I humbly hope has the happy effect of lessening me in my own estimation.[57]

When she died on December 5, 1784, she had already written her own epitaph:

> But when these shades of time are chased away,
> And darkness ends in everlasting day,
> On what seraphic pinions shall we move,
> And view the landscapes in the realms above?
> There shall my 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 plan. [sic]
> Cease, gentle muse! the solemn gloom of night
> Now seals the fair creation from my sight.[58]

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[56]Quarles, "A Phillis Wheatley Letter," pp. 462-463.

[57]Phillis Wheatley, "Letter to Obour Tanner," October 30, 1773 Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings, 1863-64), Vol. VII, pp. 267-279.

[58]Graham, op. cit., p. 168.

CHAPTER IV

INFLUENCES ON THE WRITINGS OF PHILLIS WHEATLEY

There were three books in the Wheatley family library of which Phillis Whatley was particularly fond: the Bible, a collection of tales from mythology, and Alexander Pope's translation of Homer's Iliad and Odyssey. She was also familiar with Thomas Gray and possessed a copy of John Milton's Paradise Lost and a collection of other English poetry. There was every indication that she read all the literature that was available. However, Pope's translation of Homer seems to have had a more profound influence than any other.[1]

The neoclassical age had achieved its greatest triumph in England in the period from 1700 (the death of John Dryden) to 1744 (the death of Alexander Pope).[2] The intervening years would have allowed time for that influence to cross the Atlantic Ocean and to be in vogue in New England at the time that Phillis Wheatley was beginning her writing. This period had also been called the "Age of Reason" because of its supposedly rational approach to the social problems and literary aspects of the times.

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[1]Loggins, The Negro Author, p. 26.

[2]Bernard D. Grebanier, et al., English Literature and Its Backgrounds (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1949), pp. 770-776.

The imitation of English literature by Americans was but a natural outgrowth of the colonization of the New World. It is difficult to evaluate this transition from English letters to American letters. The whole Colonial Period is one of imitative writings. For example, as Louis Untermeyer points out, Edward Taylor copied Richard Crashaw, Henry Vaughn and George Herbert.[3] America was still a part of Europe and European civilization, and it "was a sign of good taste to choose the best literature available on which to model their own."[4] The way of Europe was the way of America throughout the early period. The words of the great English writers--for example, John Milton, Alexander Pope, Joseph Addison and Richard Steele--all had their echoes in the American press of the times.[5]

It has been suggested by numerous critics and literary scholars that Alexander Pope was the chief pattern of inspiration for Phillis Wheatley's writings. It is of interest to notice some similarities between the two poets. Both of them were physically incapacitated in some way.

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[3]Louis Untermeyer, An Anthology of the New England Poets (New York: Random House, Inc., 1948), p. 34.

[4]Louis B. Wright, "The Study of the American Cultural Heritage," William and Mary Quarterly, Vol. I, No. 3, Third Series, July, 1944, p. 201.

[5]Ibid.

Alexander Pope had emerged from an illness at the age of twelve as an invalid. He was only four and one half feet tall; he was humpbacked and suffered from frequent ailments. Phillis Wheatley, though not deformed, was a victim of constant delicate health and frequent illness.

Alexander Pope was a Catholic in a country that was, at that time, predominately Protestant. The public schools, the universities and public offices were closed to anyone of the Catholic faith. His education was acquired by an unsystematic succession of private tutors and irregular attendance at Catholic schools. Phillis Wheatley suffered from a similar lack of formal education and discrimination on the basis of race or color. She was educated in a more or less haphazard manner by the Wheatley children and Mrs. Wheatley. They were not always in agreement as to when, how and what she should study.[6] As a slave, Phillis must have been barred from opportunities which may have been opened to a white woman writer even though the Colonial Period was not conducive to the development of women in any area outside of the home.

Both of the writers began their composing at an early age; Pope was fifteen, and Miss Wheatley was thirteen. Each of them was acquainted with poverty. Pope, who had no patron, was forced to earn his way with his pen. He became

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[6]Graham, op. cit., pp. 47-63.

the first writer to be successful at supporting himself through his works; this was the first direct support of writers by the reading public.[7] Miss Wheatley had a somewhat different experience. She had a patron for a number of years, and it was not until after the deaths of the Wheatley family members that she became a victim of poverty and died of cold and starvation in a Boston slum.[8]

The imitation of English literature was carried out by other writers of the Colonial Period. Vernon Loggins states that John Trumball, Timothy Dwight, Joel Barlow and Philip Freneau copied Alexander Pope in their political satires. Numerous other contemporaries also followed the pattern of Alexander Pope. While they "caught more of his general spirit, she [Phillis Wheatley] perhaps excelled them all in reproducing his rhythms."[9] The emulation by Americans of the English authors was probably a result of the desire to create immediately an American literature which would be the equal of the English tradition of letters which had been developing over a period of hundreds of years. According to Robert Spiller, the literary "declaration of independence" from England did not develop until

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[7]Grebanier, op. cit., pp. 770-776.

[8]J. Saunders Redding, The Lonesome Road (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1958), p. 43.

[9]Loggins, The Negro Author, p. 27.

the period of the American Renaissance, about 1829.[10]

For the purposes of this study it will be convenient to point out several of the characteristics of the age of neoclassical writing in England. Since this was an age of reason, one would naturally expect an emphasis on the intellectual rather than on the emotional plane. Consequently, neoclassical writers were extremely reticent about displays of emotion. There was a constant attempt to be ornate in diction and to choose the elegant phrase in place of the simple, more easily understood one. There was an effort to be objective and never subjective in dealing with emotions or experiences. Personification was frequently used, along with hyperbole. Uses of these figures of speech were not clear and concise, but vague and general. It was considered the province of the neoclassical writer to be more concerned with society than with the individual. The personification of abstractions was possibly modeled after John Milton, but the later writers did not have his talent in this area.[11]

Alexander Pope's works had these characteristics. He also perfected the heroic or closed couplet and used it

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[10]Robert E. Spiller, et al., Literary History of the United States (New York: Macmillan Company, 1948), pp. 215-216.

[11]Grebanier, op. cit., pp. 770-776.

as a "technician in English verse" who has never been excelled.[12] Pope had a wit and developed the use of it in social or political satire. In this area Phillis Wheatley did not try to follow Pope's leading. She did, however, use the heroic couplet in all except a few minor examples of her poetry. She imitated the style of Pope in the musical quality of her writings. She has been credited by one critic with having an unusual talent and instinct for hearing and repeating the musical sounds of words.[13] She was able to catch the tones of Pope although she rarely touched upon the same type of theme that he used. For instance, while he was famous for his political satire, Miss Wheatley used political events as occasions for praise rather than for criticism. Examples of this are "To the King's Most Excellent Majesty" on the repeal of the Stamp Act, and "His Excellency General Washington" on the appointment of Washington as Commander in Chief of the American forces.

In her choice of words and phrases, Miss Wheatley used the same type of extravagant idioms as did Pope. In "The Rape of the Lock," he used such phraseology as "tim'rous ray" for sun, "ethereal plain" for heavens,

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[12] Ibid., p. 794.

[13] Loggins, The Negro Author, p. 27.

"lunar sphere" for moon, and "fatal engine" for scissors.[14] Similarly, Miss Wheatley used the following combinations in "Niobe in Distress for Her Children Slain by Apollo": "rhyming train" for poets, "crime-avenging rod" for arrow, "each blooming maid and each celestial boy" for girls and boys, and "expanded skies" for heavens.[15] She was successful in absorbing and utilizing the imagery of Pope, while writing from an entirely different background and writing on a variety of other subjects.

One of her poems, "On His Excellency Major General Lee," was written in 1776 but was not published until 1865 when it was printed in the "Proceedings" of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Vernon Loggins states that she was probably thinking of the first book of Paradise Lost in writing her poem, but even with another example in her mind she unconsciously reproduced the music of Alexander Pope:

> . . .While thus he spake, the hero of renown
> Survey'd the boaster with a gloomy frown
> And stern reply'd: "O Arrogance of tongue!
> And wild ambition, ever prone to wrong!
> Believ'st thou, chief, that armies such as thine
> Can stretch in dust that heaven-defended line?"[16]

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[14]Grebanier, op. cit., pp. 804-814.

[15]Light, op. cit., pp. 89-96.

[16]Loggins, The Negro Author, p. 27.

Herman Dreer attests to the fact that Miss Wheatley used Alexander Pope as her model and imitated him in most of her poems, producing some of her best works.[17] Another critic, Margaret Just Butcher, indicates that Miss Wheatley's works were "scrupulously" modeled after Pope.[18]

Along with the recognition of Miss Wheatley's dependence on Alexander Pope, however, must go a realization of her close acquaintanceship with the Latin classics. There is, of course, a studied similarity between the two eras of literature so that it is difficult to say where the influence of one stopped and the other began--as the neoclassical period imitated the original classical period. Miss Wheatley was a proficient Latin student. It was, perhaps, her direct acquaintance with the greater Latin authors which accounted for the ease with which she--a child of less than twenty--could model her verses so perfectly after those of Alexander Pope. The imitation of the classics in her time was in the best tradition of the new classical period. Originality and freedom in writing were not considered to be good form. Consequently, even her translations or paraphrases of the Bible and of Ovid show an adherence to a stilted rhythm and metrical scheme, especially in her use

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[17]Dreer, op. cit., p. 22.

[18]Butcher, op. cit., p. 11d.

of the heroic couplet.

Miss Wheatley made frequent use of euphuisms which was also a characteristic of the age dominated by classicism.[19] In "Liberty and Peace" smoke is spoken of as "sable columns;" "His Excellency, General Washington" has a line which describes the marching soldiers as "in bright array they seek the work of war."[20] Excerpts from the stanzas of her "Farewell to America" are as follow:

> Adieu, New England's smiling meads
> Adieu, the flow'ry plain; . . .
>
> In vain for me the flow'rets rise,
> And boast their gaudy pride, . . .
>
> Susannah [Mrs. Wheatley] mourns, nor can I bear
> To see the crystal show'r,
> Or mark the tender falling tear
> At sad departure's hour; . . .[21]

Although her imitation of Pope and of the Latin classics was one of her greatest claims to fame, in all fairness it must be pointed out that she seemed to be unaware of her powers of imitation. She borrowed images freely; but, at the same time, her words carried ideas which were very personal. She used cliches, to be sure--for example: vaulted skies, roving fancy, crystal shower, feathered warbler, smiling fields. But much of her

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[19] Heartman, op. cit., p. 26.

[20] Ibid., p. 20.

[21] Ibid., p. 14.

imagery was the result of her own imagination--for example, "Afric's sable race" from "To Maecenas," "the land of errors and Egyptian gloom" from "To the University of Cambridge," and "The iron hand of pain" from "On the Death of a Young Lady of Five Years of Age."

It may be concluded, then, that Miss Wheatley followed the best usage of her time. Her writings were in tune with the neoclassical standards. Her poetry was largely impersonal and artificial; her writings are elaborate and sumptuous in the choice of words and phrases; she continually invoked the Muses, made allusions to pagan gods and Biblical heroes; she used personification and hyperbole to excess.

There was another dominant note in her writings which was of a more native origin than either the influence of Pope or of the Latin classics. This was her intense religious faith. Since she was a New England Puritan, her religious convictions were indirectly a result of colonization by the Puritans. Every poem that she wrote, each paraphrase, translation or letter had some reference to religion. This religiosity was a result of the Puritan beliefs which made their poetry an "echo of the voice of God."[22]

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[22]Lewis Leary, "John Blair Linn, 1777-1805," William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series, Vol. IV, No. 2, April, 1947, p. 176.

Miss Wheatley's faith was deep. She was the product in this instance of several strong and related factors. Among these the most notable are New England America, a Puritan stronghold, and the Wheatley household, a devout and pious home. It would have been most unusual, then, if Miss Wheatley had been less concerned with religious faith.

Miss Wheatley was a child of her culture, the culture in which she was trained and educated. One cannot identify her poetry as the work of a Negro except in the instances of specific references to herself or to her race. This quotation from "To His Honor the Lieutenant Governor on the Death of His Lady" illustrates:

> Nor canst thou, Oliver, assent refuse
> To heav'nly tidings from the Afric Muse.[23]

She was so completely identified with her age and community that her own people criticized her for this estrangement from Negro culture. This same estrangement, however, caused Richard Wright to comment about her poem, "On Imagination," in this manner: "Whatever its qualities as poetry, the above poem records the feelings of a Negro reacting not as a Negro, but as a human being."[24]

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[23]Light, op. cit., p. 98.

[24]Richard Wright, introduction to Black Metropolis (New York: St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Clayton, 1945), p. xxxii.

CHAPTER V

THE RELATIONSHIP OF PHILLIS WHEATLEY TO HER CONTEMPORARIES OF THE COLONIAL PERIOD

The Poetry of Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley

Mrs. Anne Bradstreet, who preceded Phillis Wheatley by a little over one hundred and twenty years, was the first woman writer to publish verse in America. Her book, The Tenth Muse, was published in 1650. She was a cultivated, Puritan girl who had been given an education unusual for a woman in the Colonial Period. Her study at one time was under the discipline of eight tutors.[1] She was, in turn, the daughter of a governor and the wife of a governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Her first book was taken in manuscript to England where it was published in 1650. Her poems were attempts to versify her moral and religious beliefs; this was considered in good taste for a Puritan wife and mother. Her works were received well in Boston and in England. In 1687 the poems were published in a second edition in Boston. The American edition contained several new poems which have earned her reputation.[2]

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[1]Milton E. Stern and Seymour L. Gross, American Literature Survey (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1962), Vol. I, p. 137.

[2]Ibid., p. 138.

The latter poems show the influence of "Sidney, Spenser and the English metaphysical poets."[3] Her stanzas entitled "Contemplations" are considered her best work. Although it was in the best Puritan tradition to keep emotions well camouflaged, deep feelings may be sensed under the decorous words and phrases. Mrs. Bradstreet spoke disparagingly of her poetry as the "illform'd offspring of my feeble brain."[4]

It should not be necessary to point out the entirely different background, education and environment of Phillis Wheatley, who was the first American Negro to have a book of verse published. Her book was issued first in England and then in Boston. She, too, spoke in a critical manner of her own poetry. Since several scholars have chosen "On Imagination" as Miss Wheatley's best poem, it is interesting to compare this work with "Contemplations." In each instance the quotation from Mrs. Bradstreet's poem will be given first, followed by a similar passage from the poem by Miss Wheatley.

> Some time now past in the autumnal tide,
> When Phoebus wanted by one hour to bed,
> The trees all richly clad, yet void of pride,
> Were gilded o'er by his rich golden head.
> Their leaves and fruits seemed painted, but was true,
> Of green, of red, of yellow, mixed hue;
> Rapt were my senses at this delectable view. . . .[5]

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[3] Ibid., p. 138.

[4] Ibid., p. 140.

[5] Ibid., p. 144.

> . . .From Tithon's bed now might Aurora rise,
> Her cheeks all glowing with celestial dies [sic],
> While a pure stream of light o'erflows the skies.
> The monarch of the day I might behold,
> And all the mountains tipt with radiant gold, . . .[6]

Each of the authors reaches back to mythology for a sun god. They both paint vivid pictures of the dawn with descriptions of the color of the sunrise.

> Silent, alone, where none or saw or heard,
> In pathless paths I led my wand'ring feet,
> My humble eyes to lofty skies I reared,
> To sing some song my mazed Muse thought meet.
> My great Creator I would magnify,
> That nature had thus decked liberally:
> But ah, and ah, again, my imbecility! . . .[7]

> . . .But I reluctant leave the pleasing views,
> Which Fancy dresses to delight the Muse;
> Winter austere forbids me to aspire,
> And northern tempests damp the rising fire;
> They chill the tides of Fancy's flowing sea,--
> Cease then my song, cease the unequal lay.[8]

Both of the poetesses made frequent allusions to the Muse, the muses, or the "nine." Each made reference to her lack of excellence in writing.

Some of the lines from Mrs. Bradstreet's poem, "Contemplations," are similar to those of Miss Wheatley's "To the Rev. Dr. Thomas Amory," as shown in the following excerpts:

> So he that faileth in this world of pleasure,

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[6]Light, op. cit., pp. 71-72.

[7]Stern, op. cit., p. 145.

[8]Light, op. cit., p. 72.

Feeding on sweets, that never bit of th' sour,
That's full of friends, of honor, and of treasure,
Fond fool, he takes this earth ev'n for heaven's
bower.
But sad affliction comes and makes him see
Here's neither honor, wealth, nor safety;
Only above is found all with security. . . .[9]

. . .It cannot be--unerring Wisdom guides
With eye propitious, and o'er all presides.
Still prosper, Amory! still may'st thou receive
The warmest blessings which a Muse can give,
And when this transitory state is o'er,
When kingdoms fall, and fleeting Fame's no more,
May Amory triumph in immortal fame,
A nobler title and superior name![10]

The Puritan influence and deep religious feelings in the lives of both the authors are clearly discernible in the above lines, as they are in most of their poetry. Mrs. Bradstreet stated,

The world no longer let me love,
My hope and treasure lies above.[11]

Miss Wheatley wrote,

. . .Perfect in bliss, she from her heavenly home,
Looks down, and smiling, beckons you to come. . . .[12]

In spite of the differences in background, education, environment and opportunities, Miss Wheatley's poetry seems to compare favorably with that of Mrs. Bradstreet. These lines, the first from "Contemplations" and the second from "On Imagination," are of equal poetic force.[13]

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[9]Stern, op. cit., p. 146. [10]Light, op. cit., p. 84.

[11]Stern, op. cit., p. 151. [12]Light, op. cit., p. 48.

[13]James Weldon Johnson, op. cit., p. 24.

While musing thus, with Contemplation fed,
And thousand fancies buzzing in my brain, . . .[14]

Imagination! who can sing thy force?
Or who describe the swiftness of thy course?[15]

Phillis Wheatley and Urian Oakes

The opening lines of an elegy by Urian Oakes are found in many books on American Literature. Urian Oakes was at one time President of Harvard College and is, perhaps, quoted more because of his position than because of his poetic abilities. Oakes also made apology for his lack of poetic talents in the following lines:

Reader, I am no poet, but I grieve
Behold here what that passion can do,
That forced a verse without Apollo's leave,
And whether the learned sisters would or no. . . .[16]

James Weldon Johnson states, "There was no need for Urian to admit what his handicap declared.[17]

These lines of Miss Wheatley are also taken from the beginning of an elegy:

We trace the power of Death from tomb to tomb,
And his are all the ages yet to come. . . .
His fatal sceptre rules the spacious whole,
And trembling nature rocks from pole to pole. . . .[18]

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[14]Untermeyer, op. cit., p. 17.

[15]Light, op. cit., p. 71.

[16]James Weldon Johnson, op. cit., p. 23.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Light, op. cit., p. 63.

This excerpt from "To a Lady on the Death of Three Relations" compares favorably with that of Oakes.

Another of Oakes' literary efforts was the versification of the Psalms. The following is an example:

> The Lord's song sing can we? being
> in stranger's land, then let
> lose her skill my right hand if I
> Jerusalem forget.[19]

Miss Wheatley's paraphrase of Isaiah 63, verses one and eight, is perhaps of equal worth with the above quotation:

> . . ."Mine was the act," the Almighty Saviour said,
> And shook the dazzling glories of his head;
> "When all forsook, I trod the press alone,
> "And conquered by omnipotence my own; . . .[20]

Contemporary Opinions of Phillis Wheatley.

Several of the contemporaries of Miss Wheatley have been mentioned already in connection with the various poems and incidents of her life. Some of these, such as George Washington, were famous people of the Colonial Era. There are others whose opinions of her should be considered.

Thomas Jefferson was singularly unimpressed with the talents of Miss Wheatley. He summed up her work in these words: "Religion has indeed produced a Phyllis Whately sic but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published

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[19]James Weldon Johnson, op. cit., p. 23.

[20]Light, op. cit., p. 67.

under her name are below the dignity of criticism."[21] Several persons have answered this charge of Jefferson's. In his "Essay on the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species," Samuel Stanhope Smith states,

> The poems of Phillis Wheatley, a poor African slave, taught to read by the indulgent piety of her master are spoken of with infinite contempt. But I will demand of Mr. Jefferson, or any other man who is acquainted with American planters, how many of those masters could have written poems equal to those of Phillis Wheatley?[22]

In commenting on the courteous treatment accorded Miss Wheatley by George Washington and the less polite comments of Thomas Jefferson, J. C. Furnas observes that Jefferson was a man of much higher formal cultivation than Washington but that neither of these gentlemen was a literary critic.[23] Jefferson's remark may be more suitably representative of his attitude toward Negro intelligence than his appraisal of the poet's ability. The only doubting voice of criticism which has been heard among her contemporaries was that of Jefferson.

On the other hand, Benjamin Franklin, a former slaveholder, had renounced slavery before the Revolution.

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[21]Thomas Jefferson, Notes on Virginia, edited by J. William Peden (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1955), p. 140.

[22]Samuel Stanhope Smith, as quoted in Charlotte Ruth Wright, op. cit., p. viii.

[23]J. C. Furnas, Goodbye to Uncle Tom (London: Secker and Warburg, 1956), pp. 306-307.

His view was perhaps representative of the more liberal attitude toward Negroes which was predominant above the Potomac.[24] During the summer of 1773 in London, Benjamin Franklin called upon Phillis Wheatley. In a letter to Jonathan Williams he wrote, "I went to see the black poetess and offered her any services I could do for her."[25]

In 1774 Voltaire wrote to the Baron Constant de Rebecq: "Fontenelle avait tort de dire qu'il n'y aurait Jamais de poetes chez les Negres: il y a actuellement une Negresse qui fait de tres-bons vers anglais."[26]

A tribute in verse was paid to Miss Wheatley by a young practitioner of medicine, Joseph Ladd. Ladd, a New Englander, was killed in a duel in 1786 at Charleston, South Carolina. Several of his verses had been published in the local papers under the pseudonym of Arouet. He had announced the publication of his collected works, which would include his longest poem, The Prospects of America,

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[24]Quarles, The Negro in the American Revolution, p. 189.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Edward D. Seeber, "Phillis Wheatley," Journal of Negro History, Vol. XXIV, July, 1939, p. 260. The statement has been translated by Miss Lois Gardner, Associate Professor of Modern Languages, Ouachita Baptist College: "Fontenelle was wrong in saying that there would never be

a survey of the glory of his country as it is exemplified by several famous people. Phillis Wheatley's name was introduced thus:

> Here the fair volume shows the far-spread name
> Of wondrous Wheatly [sic],[27] Afric's heir to fame.
> Well is it known what glowing genius shines,
> What force of numbers, in her polished lines;
> With magic power the grand descriptions roll
> Thick on the mind, and agitate the soul.[28]

Jupiter Hammon, an American Negro of the Colonial Period, was also a writer of verse. His only two claims to fame have been that he was the first American Negro to have a poem published and that he wrote "A Poetical Address to Phillis Wheatley," published in 1778. It consisted of twenty-one four-line stanzas. It was religious in tone as these lines attest:

> Come you, Phillis, now aspire,
> And seek the living God,
> So step by step thou mayst go higher;
> Til perfect in the word.

It was published as a broadside "by the Author, and a number of his friends, who desire to join with him in their best regards to Miss Wheatley."[29]

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any poets among the Negroes: there is now a Negress who writes very good English poetry."

[27]"Phillis Wheatley, a negress, and the authoress of some ingenious poems, which seem to be entitled to a remembrance, here although not written by a native of America." (Ladd's note)

[28]Seeber, op. cit., p. 261.

[29]Jupiter Hammon, "An address to Miss Phillis Wheatly [sic]," a folio published at Hartford, Connecticut, August 4, 1778; reproduced by the Massachusetts Historical Society.

One of the indisputable proofs of the esteem in which she was held by her contemporaries may be seen in the number of editions of her poetry which were published. The first edition of her poems was issued in London in 1773. Before 1840 the book had come out in its twelfth edition.[30] This is a remarkable publishing record for a volume of verse in any period. The Library of Congress cards list seven reprintings of Poems on Various Subjects by Phillis Wheatley. The original English publication in 1773 was reprinted in various cities in the New World in 1786, 1787, 1789, 1793, 1802 and 1838. This volume was published again in 1930.[31]

In 1834, Margaretta Matilda Odell, a descendant of the Wheatley family, published Poems on Various Subjects with a memoir. The book was so popular that two more editions were necessary within the next four years.[32] George W. Light also published his Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley in 1834. Altogether the editions and reprints of her works have been produced in book or folio form fifty-three times.[33]

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[30]Weight, op. cit., p. 91.

[31]Library of Congress cards furnished through the courtesy of J. W. Fulbright.

[32]Brawley, Early Negro American Writers, p. 34.

[33]Charlotte Ruth Wright, op. cit., p. ix.

Miss Wheatley has also been acclaimed in verse by a later writer, Sylvia Blanche Robinson. Her poem, "Salute to Phyllis Wheatley," while not of the Colonial Period, gives testimony to the interest Miss Wheatley has created from her time down to this later day:

> Your presence graced a room; you strove to learn,
> But always honored duty uppermost;
> Your soul endeared you to a famous host,
> But every fleeting joy you had to earn.[34]

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[34]Sylvia Blanche Robinson, "Salute to Phyllis Wheatley," Phylon, Vol. XX, 1949, p. 172.

CHAPTER VI

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

Phillis Wheatley, who was the first of her race to achieve distinction in the field of literature in America, began a series of rich contributions to letters and culture by Negro authors. Her contributions have been largely neglected by American scholars and critics. When her works are considered, they are usually thought of as Afro-American literature rather than being valued within the context of the whole of American literature. Afro-American literature is not a separate part but belongs to the main body of American belles lettres.

Miss Wheatley's writings seldom appear in American literature anthologies. She was not a great American poet. Indeed, the age in which she lived produced no outstanding American poet. It was an age of imitation, the age of neoclassicism. Miss Wheatley was, however, significant in several respects.

Her poetry was reasonably close to the standards of the Eighteenth Century America in which she lived and wrote. Her writing compares favorably with other literary efforts of the period. The scholars of the history and literature of Colonial America point out that an investigation of the early days of Colonial history is needed.

Such an investigation is not likely to turn up any neglected genius or work of major importance; however, it will bring to light a good deal of writing of the second order--that is, writings that are clearly valuable to the tradition of American literature. Miss Wheatley's works are representative of these writings of minor importance.

Miss Wheatley, consciously or unconsciously, chose Alexander Pope and patterned the musical quality of her poetry after his style. Her verse and writings are perhaps of the second order, but they are clearly talented. She represents one of the most baffling cases of imitative precocity which is known.

Miss Wheatley made an unusual contribution to American literature which has yet to be generally recognized. To the people of her day she was a famous person. She was able to interpret public events and to send messages of hope to those in sorrow. She was an inspiration to her contemporaries in an unusual way for one with her limitations.

The life story of Phillis Wheatley is a most interesting account of the efforts of one small child to rise above the handicaps that had been placed upon her. That her rise to fame was accomplished is a tribute to her own precocity and determination as well as to the Wheatley

family who encouraged her, gave her enough freedom to allow her to study and develop, and assisted in her religious training. That they could not foresee the final result of her lack of financial independence was less a discredit to them than it was to the institution of slavery.

The works of Miss Wheatley reveal a deep religious sensitivity. They reflect her Puritan conscience and her emotional control. They anticipate a more glorious life in heaven than one has here on earth and warn the reader to beware of Satan and the power of sin. Her poetry reflects her great thankfulness that she was brought to America where she found her Savior.

In spite of the fact that she was a slave writing in a slave-holding community, she voiced several strong protests against bondage and many fervent praises in favor of liberty. She was so at one with the culture in which she was reared that Washington was her leader, the repeal of the Stamp Act was in her favor, and the end of the Revolution brought forth her thankfulness and praises.

When compared with several of the authors of the Colonial Period, Miss Wheatley makes a good impression.

Her poetry compares favorably with that of Mrs. Anne Bradstreet, a woman poet of the Colonial era. Miss Wheatley's works are superior to those of another writer of the period, Urian Oakes, whose works may be included in anthologies because of his position as President of Harvard College rather than because of his talents as a writer.

Miss Wheatley received favorable attention from a number of her contemporaries. Several of these were famous people who went out of the way to be gracious to her. Thomas Jefferson seems to be the only public figure who spoke disparagingly of her, as far as was recorded. The fact that her poetry continued to be published for a number of years after her death indicated a decidedly good response from the people of her day.

Phillis Wheatley had been referred to as the "dusky Sappho" by several commentators.[1] This was high praise indeed. She proved conclusively to her day the capacity of one Negro for the best and highest in literature and culture. "Suppose the personalities of many Phillis Wheatleys of America had been allowed to develop. . . .What a different literary utterance the American

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[1]Charlotte Ruth Writht, op. cit., p. x; Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, American Authors, 1600-1900, (New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1938), p. 798.

Negro might have given rise to."[2]

A few short weeks before his assassination the late President John F. Kennedy discussed poetry in the following words:

> When power leads men toward arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the areas of man's concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses. . . . I look forward to an America which will not be afraid of grace and beauty. . .which will steadily enlarge cultural opportunities for all of our citizens. . . which commands respect not only for its strength but for its civilization as well. And I look forward to a world which will be safe not only for democracy and diversity but also for personal distinction.[3]

Phillis Wheatley, in her own limited way, looked forward to the same things.

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[2]Richard Wright, White Man, Listen, p. 115.

[3]John Fitzgerald Kennedy as quoted in Life, LV, (November 29, 1963), 4.

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AN INVESTIGATION OF THE LIFE AND WORKS OF PHILLIS WHEATLEY

An Abstract of a Thesis

Presented to

the Graduate Faculty

Ouachita Baptist College

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Arts

by

Rozelle Goodson

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This study is an investigation into the life and poetry of Phillis Wheatley, the first Negro woman to have her writings published. Its purpose was to discover Miss Wheatley's place in American literature. The background of Miss Wheatley's life in Puritan New England has been examined. For comparison, books on Negro culture, history and literature have been studied.

Letters have been written to nine libraries, three Associations and several knowledgeable people in the area of Negro history and literature. The letters of reply and the books, periodicals, folios and microfilm loaned from the sources have furnished the basic information.

In the study of Miss Wheatley's life, an attempt was made to point out the correlation between the training, education and culture to which Miss Wheatley was exposed and the relevance of her writings to the era in which she wrote.

The study of Miss Wheatley's poetry has cited the neoclassical influences evident in her style. Her imitation

of Alexander Pope is recognized as one of the characteristics of her style. Selections of her writings have been compared with those of two of her literary contemporaries: Mrs. Anne Bradstreet and Urian Oakes. As an indication of the esteem of her reading contemporaries, a review of the editions of her works which have been republished was also made.

The study has concluded that, although Miss Wheatley's works are not of major importance, she has a contribution to make to the tradition of American literature. While her writings have little emotional appeal to present-day readers, the story of her life and the best of her works are deserving of attention in the anthologies purporting to summarize the American heritage.