



*An engraving (here subsequently and in our time tinted) of Wheatley-Peters, believed to be by fellow African-American (and Bostonian) Scipio Moorhead, and that appeared in the 1773 edition of her verse.*

**“...AND HEAVENLY FREEDOM SPREAD HER GOLDEN RAY”:  
The Revolutionary War Poetry of PHILLIS WHEATLEY PETERS.**

The girl who was to become Phillis Wheatley Peters<sup>1</sup> (1753-1784) first arrived at 7 years old on a slave ship from Africa, and was purchased at a Boston slave auction by Susannah Wheatley, wife of John Wheatley a well-to-do Boston tailor. When Mrs. Wheatley saw Phillis’ interest in writing she encouraged it, and moreover sought to furnish her with a quality religious and literary education. On Sarah’s death in 1773, Phillis, at 20 years of age, was emancipated; had by that time had become something of a local sensation for her writing ability, and in the same year, under sponsorship of the Wheatleys, published her first volume of poetry. Living where and when she did, what might have been her thoughts and feelings, one wonders, regarding events such as the Boston Massacre, the Boston Tea Party, Lexington and Concord, and Bunker Hill – which latter she was likely at the time in the vicinity of and able to view from a distance.

Phillis was not the first African-American poet of note, sharing honors as she did for that title with Jupiter Hammon (1711-1806)<sup>2</sup> and Lucy Terry (c.1730-1821)<sup>3</sup>; yet of the three she was most certainly the most well-known. Benson J. Lossing, for instance, felt it only appropriate to write a sympathetic and dignified sketch of her in his *Field Book of the Revolution* (1850, vol. I, pp. 256-267), and later mentions her as a sort of celebrity among celebrities who contributed out of their own pockets to the American War effort:

“In the summer of 1780 the distress of the American army was very great, on account of the scarcity of clothing, and the inadequate means possessed by the commissary department to afford a supply. The generous sympathies of the ladies of Philadelphia were aroused, and they formed an association for the purpose of affording relief to the poor soldiers. Never was the energy of genuine sympathy more nobly exercised than by the patriotic women who joined hands in this holy endeavor....

“Mrs. Sarah Bache, daughter of Dr. Franklin, was also a conspicuous actor in the formation of the association, and in carrying out its plans. All classes became interested, and the result was glorious. ‘All ranks of society seemed to have joined in the liberal effort, from Phillis, the colored woman, with her humble seven shillings and sixpence, to the Marchioness De La Fayette, who contributed one hundred guineas in specie, and the Countess De Luzerne, who gave six thousand dollars in Continental paper. Those who had no money to contribute gave the service of their hands in plying the needle, and in almost every

<sup>1</sup> (1753–1784) She was married to free black John Peters in 1778.

<sup>2</sup> And who penned the in retrospect poignant line: “If we should ever get to Heaven, we shall find nobody to reproach us for being black, or for being slaves.” *Hammon Address* (1786).

<sup>3</sup> Terry’s son Cesar, incidentally, from Vermont fought with alongside the patriots” in the War for Independence.

house the good work went on. It was charity in its genuine form, and from its purest source -- the voluntary outpourings from the heart. It was not stimulated by the excitements of our day -- neither fancy fairs or bazars; but the American women met, and, seeing the necessity that asked interposition, relieved it. They solicited money and other contributions directly and for a precise and avowed object. They labored with their needles, and sacrificed their trinkets and jewelry.” (1851, vol. II, p. 106.)

Living at one of the most epochal times in American history, Phillis is uniquely representative of the Anglo to American transition period, of the old and new age, that spanned her own life, and exhibits in her work both pre-war and wartime attitudes and sensibilities. Most of Phillis’ compositions tend to be rather stiff and conventional stichics framed in heroic couplets in some ways imitative of Pope and similar Augustan verse writers. Thomas Jefferson, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781-1782), Query 14, disparagingly remarked of her talent:

“Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but not poetry. Love is the peculiar oestrum of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion, indeed, has produced a Phillis Wheatley; but it could not produce a poet.”

This, on the other hand, is a rather harsh assessment, and indicates that she probably suffered ridicule from others; including some who did not believe she was actually the author of her writings. Yet despite and whatever her perceived shortcomings as a poet, there is nevertheless a rich purity to her vision. Meanwhile, she shows herself capable every now and then of a fine turn of phrase and of rendering sublime sentiments in a sincere and occasionally moving manner. And when further we take into account that she only survived to the age of 31, having often lived under circumstances sharply challenging and difficult, her achievement in retrospect is rightly be seen as something both touching and not a little short of amazing.

What follows are some of Phillis’ Revolutionary war pieces.

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To His Excellency  
George Washington

Sir,

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

Your Excellency’s most obedient humble servant,  
Phillis Wheatley  
1776

TO HIS EXCELLENCY, GENERAL WASHINGTON (1776)

Celestial choir! enthron’d in realms of light,  
Columbia’s scenes of glorious toils I write.  
While freedom’s cause her anxious breast alarms,  
She flashes dreadful in refulgent arms.  
See mother earth her offspring’s fate bemoan,  
And nations gaze at scenes before unknown!  
See the bright beams of heaven’s revolving light  
Involved in sorrows and veil of night!

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

Muse! bow propitious while my pen relates  
How pour her armies through a thousand gates,  
As when Eolus heaven's fair face deforms,  
Enwrapp'd in tempest and a night of storms;  
Astonish'd ocean feels the wild uproar,  
The refluents beat the sounding shore;  
Or thick as leaves in Autumn's golden reign,  
Such, and so many, moves the warrior's train.  
In bright array they seek the work of war,  
Where high unfurl'd the ensign waves in air.  
Shall I to Washington their praise recite?  
Enough thou know'st them in the fields of fight.  
Thee, first in peace and honours, -- we demand  
The grace and glory of thy martial band.  
Fam'd for thy valour, for thy virtues more,  
Hear every tongue thy guardian aid implore!

One century scarce perform'd its destined round,  
When Gallic powers Columbia's fury found;  
And so may you, whoever dares disgrace  
The land of freedom's heaven-defended race!  
Fix'd are the eyes of nations on the scales,  
For in their hopes Columbia's arm prevails.  
Anon Britannia droops the pensive head,  
While round increase the rising hills of dead.  
Ah! cruel blindness to Columbia's state!  
Lament thy thirst of boundless power too late.

Proceed, great chief, with virtue on thy side,  
Thy ev'ry action let the goddess guide.  
A crown, a mansion, and a throne that shine,  
With gold unfading, WASHINGTON! be thine.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Washington wrote in reply:*  
"Cambridge, February 28, 1776.  
Mrs. Phillis,

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

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

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

I am, with great Respect, etc."

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John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington*, 1745-1799, vol. IV, pp. 360-361.

ON THE CAPTURE OF GENERAL LEE<sup>5</sup> (1776)

The deed perfidious, and the Hero's fate,  
In tender strains, celestial Muse! relate.  
The latent foe to friendship makes pretence  
The name assumes without the sacred sense!  
He, with a rapture well dissembl'd, press'd  
The hero's hand, and fraudulent, thus address'd.  
"O friend belov'd! may heaven its aid afford,  
"And spread yon troops beneath thy conquering sword!  
"Grant to America's united prayer  
"A glorious conquest on the field of war.  
"But thou indulgent to my warm request  
"Vouchsafe thy presence as my honour'd guest:  
"From martial cares a space unbend thy soul  
"In social banquet, and the sprightly bowl."  
Thus spoke the foe; and warlike Lee reply'd,  
"Ill fits it me, who such an army guide;  
"To whom his conduct each brave soldier owes  
"To waste an hour in banquets or repose:  
"This day important, with loud voice demands  
"Our wisest Counsels, and our bravest hands."  
Thus having said he heav'd a boding sigh.  
The hour approach'd that damps Columbia's Joy.  
Inform'd, conducted, by the treach'rous friend  
With winged speed the adverse train attend  
Ascend the Dome, and seize with frantic air  
The self surrender'd glorious prize of war!  
On sixty coursers, swifter than the wind  
They fly, and reach the British camp assign'd.  
Arriv'd, what transport touch'd their leader's breast!  
Who thus deriding, the brave Chief address'd.  
"Say, art thou he, beneath whose vengeful hands  
"Our best of heroes grasp'd in death the sands?  
"One fierce regard of thine indignant eye  
"Turn'd Brittain pale, and made her armies fly;  
"But Oh! how chang'd! a prisoner in our arms  
"Till martial honour, dreadful in her charms,  
"Shall grace Britannia at her sons' return,  
"And widow'd thousands in our triumphs mourn."  
While thus he spoke, the hero of renown  
Survey'd the boaster with a gloomy frown  
And stern reply'd. "Oh 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?  
"In vain allies may swarm from distant lands

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<sup>5</sup> Maj. General Charles Lee. His capture was ostensibly less glorious and heroic than the poem implies; though it would seem more than probable that Phillis herself was unacquainted with the details. Nonetheless, the tribute is particularly of value in helping to now bring alive the high enthusiasm and regard some at one time held for him. Although, as is well known, following the battle of Monmouth he came under a cloud and was forced to leave the army, possibly Lee's most positive contribution to the American cause was his reassuring confidence that helped instill in the colonial soldiers the notion that the British could both be fought and beaten; including among such fighting men William Moultrie; who, in his memoirs, cites Lee's encouragement of morale as instrumental in aiding the famous victory of the Revolutionaries at Charleston harbor in June 1776. As far as Monmouth goes, Lee cannot really be faulted militarily for falling back as he did; indeed, it can be convincingly argued that he rescued his detachment from almost certain destruction by his withdrawal. His actual blame (of significance) then -- if any -- lay in his undiplomatic squabbling with fellow officers about the matter afterward.

"And demons aid in formidable bands.  
 "Great as thou art, thou shun'st the field of fame  
 "Disgrace to Brittain, and the British name!  
 "When offer'd combat by the noble foe,  
 "(Foe to mis-rule,) why did thy sword forgo  
 "The easy conquest of the rebel-land?  
 "Perhaps too easy for thy martial hand.  
 "What various causes to the field invite!  
 "For plunder you, and we for freedom fight:  
 "Her cause divine with generous ardor fires,  
 "And every bosom glows as she inspires!  
 "Already, thousands of your troops are fled  
 "To the drear mansions of the silent dead:  
 "Columbia too, beholds with streaming eyes  
 "Her heroes fall -- 'tis freedom's sacrifice!  
 "So wills the Power who with convulsive storms  
 "Shakes impious realms, and nature's face deforms.  
 "Yet those brave troops innum'rous as the sands  
 "One soul inspires, one General Chief commands  
 "Find in your train of boasted heroes, one  
 "To match the praise of Godlike Washington.  
 "Thrice happy Chief! in whom the virtues join,  
 "And heaven-taught prudence speaks the man divine!"  
 He ceas'd. Amazement struck the warrior-train,  
 And doubt of conquest, on the hostile plain.

BOSTON. Dec.r 30, 1776

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ON THE DEATH OF GENERAL WOOSTER<sup>6</sup> (1778)

From this the muse rich consolation draws  
 He nobly perish'd in his Country's cause  
 His Country's Cause that ever fir'd his mind  
 Where martial flames, and Christian virtues join'd.  
 How shall my pen his warlike deeds proclaim  
 Or paint them fairer on the list of Fame --  
 Enough great Chief -- now wrapt in shades around  
 Thy grateful Country shall thy praise resound  
 Tho' not with mortals' empty praise elate  
 That vainest vapour to th' immortal State  
 Inly serene the expiring hero lies  
 And thus (while heav'ward roll his swimming eyes)  
 Permit, great power while yet my fleeting breath  
 And Spirits wander to the verge of Death --  
 Permit me yet to paint fair freedom's charms  
 For her the Continent shines bright in arms  
 By thy high will, celestial prize she came --  
 For her we combat on the field of fame

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<sup>6</sup> Brig. Gen. David Wooster (1711-1777), a distinguished French and Indian War veteran from New Haven Conn., succeeded to command of the American forces collecting for and besieging Quebec following the death of General Montgomery. He himself was mortally wounded at the battle of Ridgefield (27 April 1777) as part of an effort to thwart a British raid on Danbury, Conn. Evidently, Phillis, as an acquaintance, had met or otherwise had known Wooster, an anti-black slavery supporter, personally.

Without her presence vice maintains full sway  
 And social love and virtue wing their way  
 O still propitious be thy guardian care  
 And lead Columbia thro' the toils of war.  
 With thine own hand conduct them and defend  
 And bring the dreadful contest to an end --  
 For ever grateful let them live to thee  
 And keep them ever virtuous, brave, and free --  
 But how, presumptuous shall we hope to find  
 Divine acceptance with th' Almighty mind --  
 While yet (O deed ungenerous!) they disgrace  
 And hold in bondage Afric's blameless race?  
 Let virtue reign—And thou accord our prayers  
 Be victory our's, and generous freedom theirs.

The hero pray'd -- the wond'ring Spirit fled  
 And Sought the unknown regions of the dead --  
 Tis thine fair partner of his life, to find  
 His virtuous path and follow close behind --  
 A little moment steals him from thy Sight  
 He waits thy coming to the realms of light  
 Freed from his labours in the ethereal Skies  
 Where in Succession endless pleasures rise!

Phillis Wheatley  
 Queenstreet Boston July -- 15th 1778

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#### LIBERTY AND PEACE (1784)

LO! Freedom comes. Th' prescient Muse foretold,  
 All Eyes th' accomplish'd Prophecy behold:  
 Her Port describ'd, "*She moves divinely fair,*  
*"Olive and Laurel bind her golden Hair."*  
 She, the bright Progeny of Heaven, descends,  
 And every Grace her sovereign Step attends;  
 For now kind Heaven, indulgent to our Prayer,  
 In smiling *Peace* resolves the Din of *War*.  
 Fix'd in *Columbia* her illustrious Line,  
 And bids in thee her future Councils shine.  
 To every Realm her Portals open'd wide,  
 Receives from each the full commercial Tide.  
 Each Art and Science now with rising Charms  
 Th' expanding Heart with Emulation warms.  
 E'en great *Britannia* sees with dread Surprise,  
 And from the dazzling Splendor turns her Eyes!  
*Britain*, whose Navies swept th' *Atlantic* o'er,  
 And Thunder sent to every distant Shore;  
 E'en thou, in Manners cruel as thou art,  
 The Sword resign'd, resume the friendly Part!  
 For *Galia's* Power espous'd *Columbia's* Cause,  
 And new-born *Rome* shall give *Britannia* Law,  
 Nor unremember'd in the grateful Strain,  
 Shall princely *Louis'* friendly Deeds remain;  
 The generous Prince th' impending Vengeance eye's,

Sees the fierce Wrong, and to the rescue flies.  
 Perish that Thirst of boundless Power, that drew  
 On *Albion's* Head the Curse to Tyrants due.  
 But thou appeas'd submit to Heaven's decree,  
 That bids this Realm of Freedom rival thee!  
 Now sheathe the Sword that bade the Brave atone  
 With guiltless Blood for Madness not their own.  
 Sent from th' Enjoyment of their native Shore  
 Ill-fated -- never to behold her more!  
 From every Kingdom on *Europa's* Coast  
 Throng'd various Troops, their Glory, Strength and Boast.  
 With heart-felt pity fair *Hibernia* saw  
*Columbia* menac'd by the Tyrant's Law:  
 On hostile Fields fraternal Arms engage,  
 And mutual Deaths, all dealt with mutual Rage:  
 The Muse's Ear hears mother Earth deplore  
 Her ample Surface smok'd with kindred Gore:  
 The hostile Field destroys the social Ties,  
 And every-lasting Slumber seals their Eyes.  
*Columbia* mourns, the haughty Foes deride,  
 Her Treasures plunder'd, and her Towns destroy'd:  
 Witness how *Charlestown's* curling Smoaks arise,  
 In sable Columns to the clouded Skies!  
 The ample Dome, high-wrought with curious Toil,  
 In one sad Hour the savage Troops despoil.  
 Descending *Peace* and Power of War confounds;  
 From every Tongue celestial *Peace* resounds:  
 As for the East th' illustrious King of Day,  
 With rising Radiance drives the Shades away,  
 So Freedom comes array'd with Charms divine,  
 And in her Train Commerce and Plenty shine.  
 Britannia owns her Independent Reign,  
*Hibernia, Scotia,* and the Realms of *Spain*;  
 And great *Germania's* ample Coast admires  
 The generous Spirit that *Columbia* fires.  
 Auspicious Heaven shall fill with fav'ring Gales,  
 Where e'er *Columbia* spreads her swelling Sails:  
 To every Realm shall *Peace* her Charms display,  
 And Heavenly *Freedom* spread her golden Ray.

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For more of Phillis Wheatley Peters' writings in verse, see *The Poems of Phillis Wheatley*, edited by Julian D. Mason, Jr., Univ. of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1966; and which is accessible online at:

[http://xtf.lib.virginia.edu/xtf/view?docId=chadwyck\\_ap/uvaGenText/tei/chap\\_AM9003.xml](http://xtf.lib.virginia.edu/xtf/view?docId=chadwyck_ap/uvaGenText/tei/chap_AM9003.xml)

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