Phillis Wheatley's Construction of Otherness and the Rhetoric of Performed Ideology

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Sometime in 1772, a young African girl walked demurely into a room in Boston to undergo an oral examination, the results of which would determine the direction of her life and work. Perhaps she was shocked upon entering the appointed room.

For there, perhaps gathered in a semicircle, sat eighteen of Boston's most notable citizens. Among them were John Erving, a prominent Boston merchant; the Reverend Charles Chauncy, pastor of he Tenth Congregational Church; and John Hancock, who would later gain fame for his signature on the Declaration of Independence. At the center of this group was His Excellency, Thomas Hutchinson, governor of Massachusetts, with Andrew Oliver, his lieutenant governor, close by his side.

Why had this august group been assembled? Why had it seen fit to summon this young African girl, scarcely eighteen years old, before it? This group of "the most respectable Characters in Boston," as it would later define itself, had assembled to question closely the African adolescent on the slender sheaf of poems that she claimed to have "written by herself." We can only speculate on the nature of the questions posed to this fledgling poet . . . . We do know, however, that the African poet's responses were more than sufficient to prompt the eighteen august gentlemen to compose, sign, and publish a two-paragraph "Attestation," an open letter "To the Publick" that prefaces Phillis Wheatley's book . . . . (Gates vii-viii)

In his forward to *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, "In Her Own Write," Henry Louis Gates, Jr., describes the scene he imagines having preceded the validation of Wheatley's authorship by eighteen prominent Bostonians, during which the poet was questioned in order to ascertain her ability to have written the works ascribed to her. While there may be no historical evidence to support his recreation, as Kirstin Wilcox asserts (10), Gates does manage to capture some of the important elements in Wheatley's life as a poet in his imaginative recreation.[1] In particular, the scenario Gates recounts indicates an awareness of Wheatley's dominant audience as well as the unique historical moment in which she wrote.

While Wheatley's was clearly a bifurcated audience, there can be little doubt that the eighteen men who signed for her represented a major constituency for her poetry, among those who read the broadsides and newspapers in which she published and who had the public ear.[2] She knew these men because they had visited the Wheatley home, because she had heard them preach, or because they had established public reputations in Boston. These were also men for whom she had actually written poems, either to celebrate personal accomplishment or to mourn the passing of a loved one. In addition, they were men whose experience would not have included a Phillis Wheatley, and who might well have wondered whether the young author was a "serious" poet or a front for abolitionists. For, as previous critics have pointed out, Wheatley's poetry is not devoid of racial awareness, as had

long been suggested. Antonio T. Bly asserts that Wheatley used her poems not simply to "denounce the hypocrisy practiced by white Christians, but also [to] express a strong sense of black pride to her fellow slaves, who were often read her poetry by slave masters who thought that her writings were harmless" (205-06). A number of the poems can be seen as direct appeals to her black counterparts to accept the Christian God as a means of salvation, if not in this world then certainly in the next. However, critics have yet to consider fully the possibility that Wheatley might have crafted her poems to work specifically upon the white audience that would have constituted her main readership, aside from overt pleas to accept the possibility of black Christians.

A close examination of two poems in particular, "To the University of Cambridge, in New-England" and "On Being Brought from Africa to America," suggests that they were designed to manipulate this audience in very specific ways.[3] In effect, Wheatley's strategy casts the audience into the unfolding drama of the poem: She sets the stage, introduces the hypocritical stance that allows so-called Christians to accept and even promote slavery, and then lays the groundwork for a spiritual dilemma—either join with Wheatley, the black, female *Christian* in her critique of the existing power structure or accept the very position of "other" that she and all black Americans were expected to occupy. Read this way, these two poems, both included in Wheatley's only book of poetry, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, turn out to be not so much about Wheatley herself or her created persona, as has been argued, as they are about her perceived audience.[4] It was an audience familiar with particular language and rhetorical devices—the jeremiad, the plea to the rising generation, the rhetoric of Revolution, to name a few—and one being increasingly exposed to the idea of black equality and liberation. It was also an audience used to active participation in rhetorical acts, especially in their forms of worship, and this awareness was crucial to whatever influence Wheatley might have hoped to exert. Irony, doubling, internal stress patterns, and puns, all of which have been identified as elements of the poet's technique, now emerge as among the devices she enlisted. Her strategy takes the audience from a position of initial confidence and agreement, to confusion and uncertainty, to a new ideological position at the conclusion of each poem.

This method of structuring a text with an eye toward the audience as participants in the ideological drama being enacted, what Steven Mailloux has referred to as "the rhetoric of performed ideology" (107), is fundamental for an understanding of these poems.[5] Wheatley casts the audience as critical of the prevailing ideology, expecting its members "to perform increasingly more challenging [rhetorical] tasks" (Mailloux 115). They must eventually accept a new form of authority, that of the black, female author, but in order to do so, they must be actively engaged in the "ideological performance" the poem enacts. It is a strategy that not only suggests the kind of response Wheatley may have been struggling to provoke in her reader but also implies a greater awareness of audience than she has been credited with to date. Her approach is calculated to make several complementary points: Christians who support, practice, or even tolerate slavery are guilty of the basest hypocrisy; it is possible for Africans to be redeemed and become Christians; and, most importantly, the inability to accept these arguments reflects an inherent moral failing in the reader.

Before proceeding to an analysis of the poems, it is necessary to establish the parameters of the audience for whom Wheatley conceivably wrote. This is not to suggest that there was a single, unified audience for these texts, but rather that we can identify at least one specific group they were intended

to influence, a group that included the eighteen men who corroborated Wheatley's authorship.[6] In addition to those already named, the signers included Samuel Cooper, Joseph Green, and Mather Byles, amateur poets and, in the case of Cooper and Byles, mentors for Wheatley in her literary pursuits (Shields, *Collected* 275). John Wheatley, her master, was a signer of the attestation as well. Additional supporters not listed but among Wheatley's readers and professed admirers were men like Dr. Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia, signer of the Declaration of Independence and a member of the Continental Congress, and the Marquis de Barbe-Marbois, who served as Secretary to the French Legation during the American Revolution (Robinson 24). Many of these men, William H. Robinson reminds us, either owned slaves or were engaged in the slave trade (24), putting them in a strategic position for Wheatley's rhetorical project. They were also men with power within the community and with specific connections to Wheatley herself.

A number of these individuals can be identified as specific objects of Wheatley's poetic gifts. She wrote elegies for Samuel Cooper and John Moorhead, poems upon the deaths of Andrew Oliver's wife and Thomas Hubbard's daughter, and a poetic response to a rebus by James Bowdoin.[7] All five of these men signed the attestation. Wheatley wrote poems about other prominent citizens as well, such as Rev. Joseph Sewall, Rev. George Whitefield, and Dr. Samuel Marshall, and surely it would have been reasonable for her to assume that they, as well as their friends and families, would constitute her readership. Robinson points out that Wheatley "composed verses *only* for people who meant much to her in a practical way" (Robinson 29), but that might also mean those who could help her bring about change.

Although Wheatley has long been criticized for her inattention to public matters, especially slavery and racial issues, recent scholarship has demonstrated that she was indeed a socially aware poet, writing for an audience she knew and understood. Comparing *Poems on Various Subjects* as it was eventually published in London to the original proposal for Boston publication, Kirstin Wilcox observes that the Boston proposal clearly presents Wheatley as a local and public poet, one involved in the life of her community. As Wilcox puts it, the list of poems for that volume "reads less like a table of contents than a log of recent significant events in Boston, particularly in the city's mercantile and Methodist circles . . . . Wheatley not only knows the same people and has been present at the same events but she also has a real existence that can be changed by the actions of her readers" (14-15).[8] Wheatley gradually learns to exploit this connection to a community of readers, although not necessarily, as Wilcox asserts, to affect her own condition. Instead, her objective seems to have been to alter the perceptions of her audience as a preparation for future change.

Wheatley, who started publishing in her teens with the encouragement of her mistress, Susannah Wheatley, knew from the start exactly for whom she was writing and why.[9] Working from the two premises established thus far—that the signers of the attestation represent a significant segment of her audience, one she knew very well as a result of personal association, correspondence, or having heard them preach; and that her poetry in general implies a larger audience of Boston's elite that included these men—we can begin to draw some conclusions about the way the rhetorical strategies underlying certain of Wheatley's poems may have been intended to manipulate this audience toward very specific conclusions. And while it is true, as some might argue, that *Poems* was itself first published in England, the primary audience was clearly a colonial one; the first proposal was for a Boston publica-

tion, and many of the poems were originally published there, including "To the University of Cambridge" and "On Being Brought From Africa to America."[10]

While the specified audience for "To the University of Cambridge," written in 1767, is a group of Harvard students, they are merely representatives of a larger group and Wheatley's actual audience: the fathers of these selfsame students, those who held positions ofpower and social influence.[11] Situating the speaker of the poem as a concerned member of the general citizenry, she attempts to forge a link between that speaker and the audience through the Puritan tradition of the experienced adult "preaching to the 'rising generation' " (Richards 169). Wheatley was also working from within another Puritan tradition, one that privileged the linguistic aspect of the redemption experience, "the power of words" (Kibbey 7). Ann Kibbey observes that, for the Puritans, "not only did speech generate conversion. The hearer's religious experience was itself a linguistic event." The Puritans expected the words of the preacher "to change the hearer's system of reference and thereby alter the hearer's perception" (7). This appears to have been Wheatley's strategy as well. Working at the level of the word, carefully setting up allusions and images with the ring of familiarity, the poem is structured in such a way as to alter her audience's system of reference and, as a result, its perceptions. Striving to gain sympathy and put the audience at ease, Wheatley begins with a justification of her activity as a writer: "While an intrinsic ardor prompts to write / The muses promise to assist my pen" (1-2). These lines are immediately followed by an ambiguous reference to her enslaved condition:

> '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. (3-6)

Wheatley was a socially aware poet, writing for an audience she knew and understood.

The ambiguity lies in Wheatley's use of *left*, as opposed to a more pointed word, to describe her removal from her homeland. This semantic decision signals Wheatley's determination not to apportion guilt, at least not in an overt way, since to do so would have put the audience on the defensive at the outset. But her choice of words also has the effect of undermining any assumed power others may believe they have over her and all slaves, a reading borne out by the next two lines: "Father of mercy, 'twas thy gracious hand / Brought me in safety from those dark abodes" (5-6). According to her interpretation of these events, Wheatley's removal from Africa was an act of God, as was her subsequent salvation. Simultaneously, she suggests that to deny this salvation is to question His will. Ultimately, since God himself was responsible for her redemption, she must be of the "elect," and, conversely, those who do not concede this point can only be non-elect and therefore damned or "other." As Paula Bennett astutely concludes, "Wheatley redeems her oppression by making it the source of her religious response to God and by making God . . . the power that liberates her speech" (66). The result is language that has been vouchsafed by God, as has the authority of its speaker.

Yet Wheatley's recollection of this early event is not devoid of criticism: The final line of the first stanza can also be read as a reference to the dangers of the Middle Passage and the fact that

she did not perish along the way. The overall rhetorical effect for which she strives is one of gracious acceptance of God's will, at least as concerns her immediate condition. In the spirit of "errare humanum est," Wheatley aligns herself with the Divine by forgiving those who enslaved her, with the ironic consequence of then aligning them *against* the Divine for their own involvement, whether active or passive, in the slave trade.

This is a theme she develops more explicitly in the second stanza when she cites the great compassion of Christ toward sinners: "He hears revilers, nor resents their scorn: / What matchless mercy in the Son of God!" (15-16). The implication is that, while she bears no grudge toward her revilers, surely Christ will not look kindly upon those who fail to emulate Him in this way. Such a statement also begs the question: Should one then prefer to be the reviler or the reviled, especially if one must eventually answer to the Son of God for one's choice? The refusal to publicly criticize her masters or those involved in the slave trade reinforces Wheatley's authority as a spokesperson for Christianity. It is the reader, who might be tempted to reject the speaker on any of three grounds—as black, as woman, as slave—who is in danger of being situated in the position of "reviler." Should this not be enough to encourage the development of a more Christian attitude toward others, however, Wheatley continues with a statement that can leave no doubt about the true relation between black and white Christians. She observes that "the whole human race by sin has fall'n," and Jesus died "that they might rise again" (17, 18), meaning, of course, *all* humankind, not just whites. The shift in her use of pronouns, from "How *Jesus'* blood for *your* redemption flows" to "He deigned to die that *they* might rise again" (12, 18; my emphasis on the pronouns), broadens the application of her argument, as does the fact that it is "the *whole* human race" which "by sin has fall'n" (17; my emphasis). Wheatley's unwillingness to cast herself overtly as one of the saved—her use of *they* rather than *we*—underscores the subtlety of the mind at work in these lines and its awareness of the audience to which it is appealing. It also underscores her personal lesson of Christian humility and generosity.[12]

The treatment of Africa deserves careful attention in any discussion of Wheatley's rhetorical strategies. In this case, her homeland is designated as "the land of errors," thereby emphasizing a lack of knowledge on the part of the inhabitants rather than innate sinfulness. She could well have expected her intended audience to make certain inferences and connections based on the description of Africa as the land of "*Egyptian* gloom," among them the association of black slaves with God's chosen people, who were delivered from slavery in Egypt and led into Canaan. This is an association that also recalls the Puritan settlers, who cast themselves as the "New Israelites" and their destination as the "New Canaan." Thus, while Wheatley's image resonates with one of the classic archetypes of American ideology, the Puritans as God's Chosen People, it also establishes a clear connection to this group, whose members saw themselves as maligned and persecuted, virtually enslaved, for their religious convictions. It was also a group that had already become central to the very notion of what it meant to be American.

In the second stanza, Wheatley adopts the narrative stance that informs the rest of the poem, that of the preacher exhorting her flock. It was during the eighteenth century that the jeremiad became a popular form in America, one that Larzer Ziff describes as striving "for a strong psychological reaction at the very time of the sermon's being preached," certainly a reaction Wheatley might have hoped for in the reader of her poems (35). In fact, this is strikingly similar to the effect the poems' rhetorical performance was calibrated to produce.

While several critics have already noted the parallels between Wheatley's poem and the jeremiad, none has previously considered the ways this might have helped the poem work upon its audience. Instead, Wheatley's use of this genre is usually discussed in terms of her attempt to authorize herself as writer. This is certainly one effect, but it is also clear that Wheatley used the jeremiad to exploit the associations it would have produced in readers such as those described above.

As Sacvan Bercovitch has pointed out, the jeremiad as practiced in America "was a ritual designed to join social criticism to spiritual renewal, public to private identity, the shifting 'signs of the times' to certain traditional metaphors, themes and symbols" (xi). It was also a much more optimistic form as practiced in colonial America, one that stressed conversion as opposed to simple obedience and relied upon the same sense of errand and divine destiny that the early Puritans had espoused. To use a specific example, in "Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God," one of the best-known Puritan jeremiads, Jonathan Edwards uses a strategy very similar to Wheatley's. He addresses a group of auditors who see themselves as "elect" and therefore "saved" and gradually leads them into an awareness of themselves as "requiring salvation." Edwards' audience is advised that death can come at any moment, that the person each is sitting next to may be doomed to hell (and, of course, everyone is sitting next to someone), and that they must actively pursue redemption. Both Edwards' sermon and Wheatley's poem are marked by a measured and solemn tone, and both have conversion as their ultimate goal. However, Wheatley's goal is the conversion of her audience to an awareness of the evils being done on earth, slavery in particular, and her own authority as a Christian to speak to these matters.

In this role as preacher of temporal duty, Wheatley enjoins the students to turn their attention back to earth, where it belongs, a goal that is mirrored in the imagery she uses. She describes the students first as those who "scan the heights" and "traverse the ethereal space" (7-8), then as "sons of science" (10), and finally as "blooming plants," the last suggesting flowers turned to the sun but with their roots yet in the earth. However, it should be noted that they are "blooming plants of human race *divine*" (27; my emphasis), raising the question of whether the race is divine or whether she is flattering this particular group of representatives. This strategy reverses the usual conversion experience, where the unregenerate obey the call to turn *away* from worldly concerns and toward heaven and God. Wheatley understands the desire of these "sons of science" to study the heavens and "mark the systems of revolving worlds" (10, 9), but it is vital that, as future leaders of the colonies, they be concerned with the things of this earth if anything is to change. It is her mission to make sure they understand this duty. To this end, she threatens them with the possible loss of what they now possess, warning them to "Improve your privileges while they stay" (21). Her implication is that they will not be among the privileged forever, whether on earth or in heaven. Wheatley plays on her audience's fears of eternal damnation and suffering, as well as their awareness of the transience of all earthly things. Her vague use of the word *sin*, which includes the sin of the reviler in the previous stanza, allows the audience to participate in the poem by filling in that gap with specific sins. That she follows this with another reference to her position as an African, "An *Ethiop* tells you 'tis your greatest foe" (28), cannot help but suggest the exact form of sin to which she is alluding.[13]

Slavery frames the poem in a way that is unavoidable. But while the speaker begins the poem as a slave, grateful to have survived her ordeal and/or to have been saved at all, by the final lines she has metamorphosed

into an "Ethiop," one with experience and knowledge beyond that of her audience. Wheatley's manipulation of tone, imagery, and literary form has resulted in her speaker's gradual "rise." No longer a victim of Egyptian gloom, she now has the confidence and authority to give advice to the sons of the elect because she has already been redeemed. This reference also conveys a vision of the "self" that extends beyond the label of "slave." It is a reference that elevates her in stature and announces that, if she is to be "other," it will be an "other" of her own choosing.

The general audience for this poem would certainly have had concerns similar to Wheatley's about the future of the colonies and the need for young men to be reminded of their duty in this regard. While these readers might initially have rejected any opinion offered by a black slave calling herself a Christian, the rhetorical strategy of the poem leaves them but one alternative: to *disagree* with the speaker's contention that the students have a responsibility to use their time at school wisely and well and be ever vigilant against sin. To reject Wheatley's position is to reject not only common sense but Christian doctrine as well, since she builds her case upon doctrinal evidence: the sinful nature of man, the generous and loving nature of Christ, and the transience of this world. Christ is invoked throughout the poem as the measure of truly Christian behavior, a measure the reader must acknowledge as well as the student. The same fate awaits all who are "saved" just as a certain fate awaits those who are not; black or white, they will not know "Life with death, and glory without end" (20). The alternative is only too well-known to her audience, and Wheatley capitalizes on this fear of eternal damnation.

By the final line the audience has become an active participant in the ideological drama of the poem through a variety of rhetorical ploys, not least of which are the rather general references to "students" (7) and "pupils" (22) that Wheatley plays upon. While appropriate to the audience within the poem, such terms also suggest the position of congregation to preacher or Christian to God. In this capacity as student/pupil in relation to wiser leader, the audience has been reminded, however gently, of the responsibilities that come with unearned good fortune, of the tenuous nature of existence, and of the mercy of Christ through whom all are redeemed. Wheatley invokes two of the three "parts" of God to make her case: the Father of the Old Testament, who punishes and scorns, and the Son of the New Testament, who redeemed all through his own suffering and death. These are related to the dual positions of the speaker. On the one hand, she conjures up images of "endless pain" and "immense perdition" (29, 30) in the traditional jeremiad style, positing a group of willing sinners far different from those living in the "land of errors" from which she originated. On the other hand, she is a disciple, concerned not with races but with the "human race" and the salvation of all God's children. To take one's place in the ranks of the saved, members of the audience must accept Wheatley in these dual roles, and this can only happen by an understanding of and active engagement in the rhetoric of the poem.

A number of cultural and social developments made the later eighteenth century an opportune time for the brand of literary activism Wheatley exhibits in "To the University of Cambridge." The most important was the gradual rise of a climate in New England in which anti-slavery sentiments were becoming more acceptable. In *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812,* Winthrop Jordan describes a number of trends that help explain this change. He paints a picture of a society and culture in flux, one in which a variety of forces were combining to produce a moment in which a woman of Wheatley's talent and race could

emerge and be heard. For instance, it was in the 1760s and 1770s that the idea of prejudice as a reason for the treatment of blacks was popularized, especially the fact of skin color as a reason for such prejudice. There was a growing awareness that color/appearance played a major role in the subjugation of blacks, that in effect it was "the rock upon which slavery was founded" (Jordan 278-79). The very term *prejudice* as a way to describe the feeling of whites with regard to blacks and Native Americans emerged in these years (Jordan 276). In addition, the most outspoken group in the antislavery movement in the eighteenth century were ministers, so it should come as no surprise that condemnations of the institution contained an additional element: the appeal to religious sentiment, particularly claims that slavery was a sin for which all would eventually pay. Yet, as Jordan observes, "More important than this atavistic, generalized sense of slavery as a communal sin and of impending punishment was the way in which the clergy wove the sin of slaveholding into the fabric of the Revolutionary crisis" (298).[14]

A number of studies have considered Wheatley's relationship to the clergy. James A. Levernier points out that Wheatley "maintained an extensive network of connections with several prominent members of the New England clerical establishment" (23), men such as George Whitefield, Joseph Sewall (son of Samuel Sewall), John Lathrop (son-in-law of the Wheatleys), Timothy Pitkin (a guest in the Wheatley home), Eleazer Wheelock and Nathaniel Whitaker (founders of Dartmouth), and Samuel Hopkins (the abolitionist), in addition to the previously mentioned Samuel Cooper. In addition to Hopkins, many of these men were either "sympathetic with or outright involved in the Whig crusade for the abolition of slavery in New England" (Levernier 24). Levernier makes a strong case for an environment in which "Wheatley would have been surrounded by discussions of personal freedom and human rights, and, predictably, these subjects constituted much of the period's pulpit oratory" (25). She would have seen these ideas given respectful attention by audiences who were used to getting their lessons in sermon form. With such examples before her, it would have been an easy task for Wheatley—who learned to read and write English in sixteen months—to absorb what she needed in order to influence an audience of her own. Besides sermonic techniques, she would have learned what was and was not acceptable as material for her prospective audience and how her strategies might be used to greatest effect. In essence, Wheatley co-opted elements of several rhetorical trends—the language of equality and revolution in particular—combined them with the rhetoric of the pulpit, and gradually developed her rhetorical project.

Wheatley's central concern in this project may have been to expose and counteract the hypocritical ideological position held by many members of her perceived audience; however, as others have pointed out, her situation within that culture precluded her from an open attack on slavery.[15] Betsy Erkkila observes in "Phillis Wheatley and the Black American Revolution" that, when Wheatley's book was published, "there was widespread fear of slave revolt; Abigail Adams's September 1774 letter to John on the conspiracy of Boston Negroes is only one of a number of signs that fear of slave insurrection was spreading from the South to New England" (231).[16] To engage in a critique of slavery, Wheatley needed to find a strategy that made allies of her readers rather than critics. To this end, she used the genres and forms familiar to them—the sermon, the verse epistle, and the Bible—to establish a common ground from which to launch her attack. This is not to suggest that Wheatley expected the members of her intended audience suddenly to change their positions on slavery. But it does

suggest that she was a keen observer of her culture, an evaluation that has been a long time coming.

Wheatley's cultural awareness is even more evident in the poem "On Being Brought From Africa to America," written the year after the Harvard poem in 1768. The later poem exhibits an even greater level of complexity and authorial control, with Wheatley manipulating her audience by even more covert means. Rather than a direct appeal to a specific group, one with which the audience is asked to identify, this short poem is a meditation on being black and Christian in colonial America. As did "To the University of Cambridge," this poem begins with the sentiment that the speaker's removal from Africa was an act of "mercy," but in this context it becomes Wheatley's version of the "fortunate fall"; the speaker's removal to the colonies, despite the circumstances, is perceived as a blessing. She does not, however, stipulate exactly whose act of mercy it was that saved her, God's or man's. One result is that, from the outset, Wheatley allows the audience to be positioned in the role of benefactor as opposed to oppressor, creating an avenue for the ideological reversal the poem enacts. Hers is a seemingly conservative statement that becomes highly ambiguous upon analysis, transgressive rather than compliant.[17]

While the use of italics for "*Pagan*" and "*Savior*" may have been a printer's decision rather than Wheatley's, the words are also connected through their position in their respective lines and through metric emphasis. (Thus, anyone hearing the poem read aloud would also have been aware of the implied connection.) In lieu of an open declaration connecting the Savior of all men and the African American population, one which might cause an adverse reaction in the yet-to-be-persuaded, Wheatley relies on indirection and the principle of association. This strategy is also evident in her use of the word *benighted* to describe the state of her soul (2). While it suggests the darkness of her African skin, it also resonates with the state of all those living in sin, including her audience. To be "benighted" is to be in moral or spiritual darkness as a result of ignorance or lack of enlightenment, certainly a description with which many of Wheatley's audience would have agreed. But, in addition, the word sets up the ideological enlightenment that Wheatley hopes will occur in the second stanza, when the speaker turns the tables on the audience. The idea that the speaker was brought to America by some force beyond her power to fight it (a sentiment reiterated from "To the University of Cambridge") once more puts her in an authoritative position. She is both in America and actively seeking redemption because God himself has willed it. Chosen by Him, the speaker is again thrust into the role of preacher, one with a mission to save others. Like them (the line seems to suggest), "Once *I* redemption neither sought nor knew" (4; my emphasis). However, in the speaker's case, the reason for this failure was a simple lack of awareness. In the case of her readers, such failure is more likely the result of the erroneous belief that they have been saved already. On this note, the speaker segues into the second stanza, having laid out her ("Christian") position and established the source of her rhetorical authority.

She now offers readers an opportunity to participate in their own salvation:

> Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
> "Their colour is a diabolic die."
> Remember, *Christians, Negroes,* black as *Cain,*
> May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train. (5-8)

The speaker, carefully aligning herself with those readers who will understand the subtlety of her allusions and references, creates a space wherein she

and they are joined against a common antagonist: the "some" who "view our sable race with scornful eye" (5). The members of this group are not only guilty of the sin of reviling others (which Wheatley addressed in the Harvard poem) but also guilty for failing to acknowledge God's work in saving "Negroes." The result is that those who would cast black Christians as other have now been placed in a like position. The audience must therefore make a decision: Be part of the group that acknowledges the Christianity of blacks, including the speaker of the poem, or be part of the anonymous "some" who refuse to acknowledge a portion of God's creation. The word *Some* also introduces a more critical tone on the part of the speaker, as does the word *Remember*, which becomes an admonition to those who call themselves "Christians" but do not act as such. Adding insult to injury, Wheatley co-opts the rhetoric of this group—those who say of blacks that " 'Their colour is a diabolic die' " (6)—using their own words against them. Betsy Erkkila describes this strategy as "a form of *mimesis* that mimics and mocks in the act of repeating" ("Revolutionary" 206). The effect is to place the "some" in a degraded position, one they have created for themselves through their un-Christian hypocrisy.

Suddenly, the audience is given an opportunity to view racism from a new perspective, and to either accept or reject this new ideological position. Further, because the membership of the "some" is not specified (aside from their common attitude), the audience is not automatically classified as belonging with them. Nor does Wheatley construct this group as specifically white, so that once again she resists antagonizing her white readers. Her refusal to assign blame, while it has often led critics to describe her as uncritical of slavery, is an important element in Wheatley's rhetorical strategy and certainly one of the reasons her poetry was published in the first place. Hers is an inclusionary rhetoric, reinforcing the similarities between the audience and the speaker of the poem, indeed all "Christians," in an effort to expand the parameters of that word in the minds of her readers. Rather than creating distinctions, the speaker actually collapses those which the "some" have worked so hard to create and maintain, the source of their dwindling authority (at least within the precincts of the poem).

Wheatley's shift from first to third person in the first and second stanzas is part of this approach. Although her intended audience is not black, she still refers to "our sable race." Her choice of pronoun might be a subtle allusion to ownership of black slaves by whites, but it also implies "ownership" in a more communal and spiritual sense. This phrase can be read as Wheatley's effort to have her privileged white audience understand for just a moment what it is like to be singled out as "diabolic." When the un-Christian speak of " 'their color,' " they might just as easily be pointing to the white members of the audience who have accepted the invitation into Wheatley's circle. Her rhetoric has the effect of merging the female with the male, the white with the black, the Christian with the Pagan. The very distinctions that the "some" have created now work against them. They have become, within the parameters of the poem at least, what they once abhorred—benighted, ignorant, lost in moral darkness, unenlightened—because they are unable to accept the redemption of Africans. It is the racist posing as a Christian who has become diabolical.

The reversal of inside and outside, black and white has further significance because the unredeemed have also become the enslaved, although they are slaves to sin rather than to an earthly master. Wheatley continues her stratagem by reminding the audience of more universal truths than those uttered by the "some." For example, while the word *die* is clearly meant to

refer to skin pigmentation, it also suggests the ultimate fate that awaits all people, regardless of color or race.[18] It is no accident that what follows in the final lines is a warning about the rewards for the redeemed after death when they "join th' angelic train" (8). In addition, Wheatley's language consistently emphasizes the worth of black Christians. For instance, the use of the word *sable* to describe the skin color of her race imparts a suggestion of rarity and richness that also makes affiliation with the group of which she is a part something to be desired and even sought after. The multiple meanings of the line "Remember, *Christians, Negroes* black as *Cain*" (7), with its ambiguous punctuation and double entendres, have become a critical commonplace in analyses of the poem. It has been variously read as a direct address to Christians, Wheatley's declaration that both the supposed Christians in her audience and the Negroes are as "black as Cain," and her way of indicating that the terms *Christians* and *Negroes* are synonymous. In fact, all three readings operate simultaneously to support Wheatley's argument. Following her previous rhetorical clues, the only ones who can accept the title of "Christian" are those who have made the decision not to be part of the "some" and to admit that "*Negroes* . . . / May be refin'd and join th' angelic train" (7-8). They must also accede to the equality of black Christians and their own sinful nature.

Once again, Wheatley co-opts the rhetoric of the other. In this instance, however, she uses the very argument that has been used to justify the existence of black slavery to argue against it: the connection between Africans and Cain, the murderer of Abel. The line in which the reference appears also conflates Christians and Negroes, making the mark of Cain a reference to any who are unredeemed.[19] Thus, in order to participate fully in the meaning of the poem, the audience must reject the false authority of the "some," an authority now associated with racism and hypocrisy, and accept instead the authority that the speaker represents, an authority based on the tenets of Christianity. The speaker's declared salvation and the righteous anger that seems barely contained in her "reprimand" in the penultimate line are reminiscent of the rhetoric of revivalist preachers.

In the event that what is at stake has not been made evident enough, Wheatley becomes most explicit in the concluding lines. While ostensibly about the fate of those black Christians who see the light and are saved, the final line in "On Being Brought From Africa to America" is also a reminder to the members of her audience about their own fate should they choose unwisely. It is not only "*Negroes*" who "may" get to join "th' angelic train" (7-8), but also those who truly deserve the label *Christian* as demonstrated by their behavior toward all of God's creatures. "*May* be refined" can be read either as synonymous for 'can' or as a warning: No one, neither Christians nor Negroes, should take salvation for granted. To the extent that the audience responds affirmatively to the statements and situations Wheatley has set forth in the poem, that is the extent to which they are authorized to use the classification "Christian." Ironically, this authorization occurs through the agency of a black female slave.

Starting deliberately from the position of the "other," Wheatley manages to alter the very terms of otherness, creating a new space for herself as both poet and African American Christian. The final and highly ironic demonstration of otherness, of course, would be one's failure to understand the very poem that enacts this strategy. Through her rhetoric of performed ideology, Wheatley revises the implied meaning of the word *Christian* to include African Americans. Her strategy relies on images, references, and a narrative position that would have been strikingly familiar to her audience. The "authentic" Christian is the one who "gets" the puns and double

entendres and ironies, the one who is able to participate fully in Wheatley's rhetorical performance. In effect, both poems serve as litmus tests for true Christianity while purporting to affirm her redemption. For the unenlightened reader, the poems may well seem to be hackneyed and pedestrian pleas for acceptance; for the true Christian, they become a validation of one's status as a member of the elect, regardless of race.

It is no secret that Wheatley's poems drew a variety of readers, whether the Countess of Huntingdon, the plantation masters who ostensibly read the poems aloud to their slaves for the purposes of evangelization (O'Neale 145), or former slaves with access to her work, and that hers was a bifurcated audience. However, there was one specific group whose members had influence and power and were thus in a position to effect social change as well as personal change for Wheatley herself. It was for this audience that poems such as "To the University of Cambridge, in New-England" and "On Being Brought from Africa to America" were designed. In both poems, Wheatley manipulates language and genre in order to appeal to this particular audience in a way it would have found familiar, while simultaneously preserving her tenuous position as a public voice; she was writing in order to influence, enlighten, and perhaps even spur to action. It was an audience from whom she could anticipate certain reactions, and one she had good reason to believe would be responsive to the complex rhetorical performance these poems enact. A number of trends in the later-eighteenth century, including revivalism and the growing awareness of racism, had resulted in an audience more accustomed to a popularized and democratized relationship between speaker and audience than previously (Heimert 119), one on which Wheatley capitalized.

While two poems cannot be considered representative of an entire body of work, they suggest a complexity of thought and racial awareness that Wheatley exhibited more frequently and overtly over time, especially after she was given her freedom. In some ways these poems are more typical than otherwise. Poems such as "To the University of Cambridge, in New-England" and "On Being Brought from Africa to America" provide early evidence of a woman not only aware of her race but also increasingly adept at manipulating the system that enslaved her because of it. As the years passed, Wheatley became even more outspoken about the evils of slavery (Gilmore 605). For example, she added her most open condemnation of slavery, "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth," to the London edition of *Poems*. In addition, her frequently quoted letter to the Rev. Samson Occom, written and published in 1774 after her manumission, contains a strong, albeit diplomatic, denunciation of slavery.[20]

Although this discussion focuses on just two poems in Wheatley's œuvre, a number of other poems would bear analysis that focuses on this poet's rhetorical techniques and awareness of audience. The Dartmouth poem, "On Atheism," and "An Address to the Deist" are three that suggest themselves as apt texts for such a reading. As Hilene Flanzbaum and others have argued, despite the advances made to date, much still needs to be said about the language of Wheatley's poetic compositions. This type of analysis, which acknowledges her craftsmanship and complex racial consciousness, seems like the next logical step in Wheatley scholarship. The results can only be a deeper and more critical appreciation of this founding mother of African American literature.

Notes

1. Wilcox points out that there is no factual basis for the scene Gates imagines: "No one knows exactly how these signees came by their knowledge of Wheatley and her poetry. There is no evidence for the courtroom-like scene of judgement that Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Karla Holloway imagine. William H. Robinson envisions a more likely scenario: a series of drawing room performances before Susannah Wheatley's ever widening circle of influential friends, perhaps extending back before the attestation was deemed necessary. In either event, Wheatley's print persona was predicated on face-to-face encounters with prominent North American figures" (10). All references in this essay are to the edition first cited and are noted parenthetically in the text.

2. The attestation appeared in advertisements for the 1773 London edition of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, Wheatley's only published volume of poetry, and as part of the front matter in all editions after the first.

3. In " 'The Tongues of the Learned are Insufficient': Phillis Wheatley, Publishing Objectives, and Personal Liberty," Christopher D. Felker notes that Wheatley's book was originally marketed "as literature for 'extensive' reading and sold principally in the urban port cities (most notably Boston)" and "intended for a fashion-minded clientele prepared to buy the book on impulse" (159). Wheatley was clearly writing for a complex audience—her poetry was also known to fellow African Americans, such as the poet Jupiter Hammon and her lifelong friend Obour Tanner—but in this paper I am primarily interested in how the poems may have been intended to sway a segment of that audience with the power to end slavery.

4. Wheatley's poetic accomplishment has become more clearly understood and better appreciated in the last fifteen years due in large part to criticism that has focused on the structure and imagery of the poems as opposed to their biographical elements. The most promising analyses have focused either on her rhetorical strategies or the cultural work her poetry may have performed in Revolutionary America. See O'Neale, Reising, Richards, and Grimsted. Each treats the poems as complex rhetorical constructions that engage in what O'Neale refers to as Wheatley's "subtle war" against slavery.

5. While Mailloux's discussion focuses on *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a text separated from Wheatley's poems by time, gender, and geography, among other things, the basic tenets of his theory are, I believe, still applicable.

6. As Brian Richardson has observed, there are always a number of audiences represented by any given text: those being addressed, those being excluded or ignored, and those under attack (46). My argument focuses specifically on the audience being addressed by Wheatley.

7. According to John C. Shields, "Both Mason and Robinson suggest that 'I.B.' is James Bowdoin, founder of Bowdoin College, governor of Massachusetts, founder of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and a signer of the attestation authenticating Wheatley's authorship of her 1773 *Poems*" (*Collected* 296).

8. Wilcox cites the statement near the end of the Boston call for subscribers (for which she credits Susannah Wheatley) which suggests that the publication of the poems might lead to Wheatley's freedom: " 'It is hoped Encouragement will be given to this Publication, as a reward to a very uncommon Genius, *at present a slave*' " (15; my emphasis).

9. A number of recent studies, in addition to those already mentioned, have examined Wheatley's "sense of an intensely public poetic vocation" (Richards 171). Phillip M. Richards refers to the work of Muhktar Ali Isani and Cynthia Smith as integral in this regard, but his own analysis also focuses on Wheatley's attempts to legitimate herself in the eyes of her readers as a "public poet," in particular an "evangelical or political poet" (174). Yet there remain those who question the intentionality of the effects she produced, Wheatley's artistry as opposed to her mere imitativeness. No previous study has considered whether Wheatley, like many writers, had a specific audience in mind as she wrote and how that might have influenced the construction of the poems. There has also been little examination of how the poems manifest this awareness of audience.

10. The very notion of a specific "reader" of a text, especially the "ideal reader" posited in the 1980s, has come under attack on a number of fronts, and for good reason. In an effort to distinguish between these terms, Stephen Railton has suggested that "we use the term 'reader' for anyone who at any time opens a book and begins processing a text. 'Audience,' on the other hand, could be reserved to designate the specific group, the contemporary reading public, to whom an author originally addresses the text. . . . Thus, the readers of *The Scarlet Letter* have all come into existence after the novel was written. The novel's audience, though, was there before Hawthorne sat down to write it" (138). Railton contends that "only the 'audience' . . . can play a role in the creation of the work itself. The reader responds to the text, but first, in the very act of literary conception, there is the response of the text to its audience; the way the text is shaped by the author's ambitions and anxieties about *performing* for a particular group" (138-39). The word *performing* is also significant in terms of my argument.

11. This poem was published by Wheatley prior to its inclusion in *Poems* in a slightly different version. However, as John C. Shields observes, she "made few major alterations" in the revision (*Collected* 281).

12. I am indebted to Angela Weisl for her observation about Wheatley's pronoun use in this instance. I am also deeply grateful for her careful readings of this manuscript in its several incarnations.

13. Sondra O'Neale discusses two possible effects of Wheatley's reference to herself as an "Ethiopian": It "might compel eighteenth-century Christians to consider that they had enslaved the heirs of biblical patriarchs," and it provided her "contemporary African-American readers [with] a sense of ethnicity related to Israel and antiquity that Europeans could not have" (153-54). Also addressing this reference, Robert Daly suggests that it is intended to evoke a line from Psalms 68:31: "Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God" (18), especially in association with the line of the poem in which the persona "urges the students of Harvard to see Christ 'with hands outstretcht upon the cross' "(5).

14. Jordan elaborates upon these connections: "By the time of the Revolution the concept of natural rights was still suffused with religious feeling and, in its most common form, with explicitly religious ideas. The right to liberty was normally spoken of as God's gratuitous gift to mankind, as an endowment of the Creator. More important, all men partook of 'natural' rights because, as Thomas Paine wrote in the preamble to Pennsylvania's abolition law of 1780, 'all are the work of the Almighty Hand' " (294). Jordan also remarks on the similarity between anti-slavery writing at this time and the earlier jeremiads. The purveyors of this reasoning tended to be "men rooted in or deriving from a specifically *Puritan* tradition. . . . Thus it was Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and to a lesser degree Quakers who spoke in this fashion, and the more explicit denunciations came from men whose intellectual backgrounds were not explicitly Calvinist, men like Samuel Hopkins and Benjamin Colman" (300). It should be noted that, of the eighteen signers of Wheatley's attestation, seven were ministers.

15. David Grimsted maintains that "Wheatley knew herself and society with such clarity that she almost automatically asserted self while causing minimal irritation in others" (352). See also Levernier, "Phillis," and Burke. Levernier describes the poet as "encoding hidden messages" in her poems, a result of realizing "early in her poetic career . . . that a seemingly subservient voice was likely to be published while a more strident political voice was likely to be suppressed, if not punished" (25), while Burke argues that the poet had to find ways to work for justice from within the culture which confined her.

16. Erkkila also argues that this fear resulted in the failure of Wheatley's book to receive enough subscriptions to be published in Boston ("Phillis" 231).

17. Levernier's observation is useful here: "Wheatley, it should be remembered, was 'Brought from Africa to America' through the triangular trade, and as she was fully aware, economic gain rather than concern for the welfare of her soul was the real reason why Yankee slave traders had abducted her, against her will, from her native Africa" ("Wheatley's 'On Being' " 26).

18. Referring to her puns on dye and sugar cane, Levernier notes that "true Christians boycotted these products. At the very time when Wheatley was writing, for example, the Quaker evangelist John Woolman refused to use dye or sugar products on the grounds that they were obtained through 'the labours of poor oppressed Negroes' " ("Wheatley's 'On Being' " 26).

19. Watson observes that, "according to European Christian tradition, Cain was sinful, but was not black. If 'Negroes' are as 'black as *Cain*,' then they are not 'black' at all, or to be more precise, they're Semitic. To be as 'black as *Cain*' is to be part of the same family as Abel, descendants of Eve and Adam" (124).

20. Wheatley's 1774 letter to the Mohegan minister Samson Occom amply demonstrates her awareness of this paradox. She writes, as she puts it, "not for their Hurt, but to convince them of the strange Absurdity of their Conduct whose Words and Actions are so diametrically opposite. How well the Cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the Exercise of oppressive Power over others agree,—I humbly think it does not require the Penetration of a Philosopher to determine" (176-77). Not only does the letter provide evidence of Wheatley's race consciousness, but it contains many of the same allusions and images evident in the poems to be discussed: the redemption of Africans as God's work, the inherent relationship between words and actions, and the connection between African slavery and Jewish slavery under the Egyptians.

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