

“Hang A Thousand Ribbons: The Legacy and Poetry of Phillis Wheatley”

February 5, 2023

Beacon UU Congregation

Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker and Nancy Paxton

Part 1: Who was Phillis Wheatley

Rev. Robin

In many ways, the story of Phillis Wheatley is a familiar one. And, then again, it is extraordinary enough for her poetry to be included in prominent anthologies, and for her likeness to hang in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington. Common enough for her to have gain freedom only to die in poverty; extraordinary enough that she corresponded with George Washington. As we embark on Black History Month, the legacy and poetry of Phillis Wheatley offers many pathways to the story of an enslaved girl who was a gifted poet and the tragedies that both preceded and followed her triumph.

Debates over how Wheatley story has been told (explicitly whether it was whitewashed in a memoir by Margaretta Odell, an alleged Wheatley descendent) also offers in important window into the question of who tells and will tell the stories of folks like Phillis Wheatley, especially in this divisive and Orwellian climate of spreading censorship of the histories, viewpoints and experiences of Black Americans.

Phillis Wheatley never recorded her own account of her life. It has been pieced together by historians and surviving records, as Wheatley had an unusually public life for an enslaved person in the 1700's. This slender and frail girl arrived in Boston on July 11, 1761, on board the Phillis, a slave ship that was returning from Senegal, Sierra Leone, and the Isle de Los, off the coast of Guinea. Most likely a native Wolof speaker from the Sene-Gambian coast, she arrived naked except for a kilt made from a quantity of dirty carpet. She had lost a front tooth so was thought to be around 7 or 8. Susanna Wheatley, the wife of a prosperous tailor and merchant, John Wheatley, acquired her as a house servant and named her after her slave ship.

The Wheatleys had teenaged twins, Mary and Nathaniel, and with their mother's encouragement, Mary began teaching Phillis to read, tutoring her in English, the Bible, and Latin. A reminder that slaves were typically forbidden to learn to read and write and could be lynched or whipped for disobeying.

By 1765, the girl had written her first poem in the formal style of the day, “religious piety wrapped in heroic couplets” in the words of the noted African American scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Nancy Paxton, now a retired English professor, and our Worship Associate today, will be exploring Wheatley's poetry in more detail after this introduction.

Susanna Wheatley submitted it for publication on her behalf and this began an unlikely journey in publishing for the young enslaved poetess. Of course, there were doubts about

whether this person of color could have written her verses. 18th century philosophers such as David Hume believed that blacks were a different and inferior species.

John Wheatley himself assembled a group of interrogators to authenticate Phillis' capacity as a poet...and this assemblage included such luminaries as John Hancock, Charles Chauncy, and Mather Byles, the grandson of famous Puritan minister Increase Mather. Nearly all of the men present were Harvard graduates and slave holders. On Gates notes, "the group she faced was not exactly an association of the advancement of colored people."

No transcript exists of Wheatley's trial, but she prevailed, and earned her a letter of support. Even so, no American publisher would touch her work and a London publisher was found. Ben Franklin became a friend during her London sojourn. Within a month of the book's publication and Phillis' return to America, she was manumitted. Yet, her freedom meant she became fully responsible for her literary career and her finances...and this led to her eventual demise.

Wheatley's freedom had enslaved her to a life of hardship. In 1778 she married a black man named John Peters, but her later abandoned her soon after she gave birth to their third child. The first two had died in infancy. In December of 1784 she died penniless and alone. Her third child died with her. Peters is thought to have sold the only copy of her second manuscript. Ironically, back in 2000, one her of her poems surfaced at Christies and sold for nearly \$70,000.

Wheatley has been both cited as proof of Africans innate intellectual equality and as an abolitionist icon. Then, in the 1960's criticism of her rose to a fever pitch. On founder of the Black Arts movement wrote in 1962 that Wheatley's "pleasant imitations of 18th century English poetry are far, and finally, ludicrous departures from the huge black voices that splintered Southern nights with their hollers and chants." They claimed she was a race traitor who fit the Uncle Tom syndrome, "pious, grateful, and civil."

For Wheatley's critics, her origin story as a stolen child, her sacrifices, her courage, her humiliations, her trials, could never be enough. Gates concludes his essay about Wheatley by defending her, stating that "if she stood for anything, it was the creed that culture did, or could, belong equally to everyone." The only way to truly know Phillis Wheatley, is to let her witness to her own experience and take the stand.

Part 2: Wheatley's Poetry – Nancy Paxton

I. Phillis Wheatley was born probably in Senegal, around 1753, and she died in 1784 when she was just 31 years old. English was not her native language; she began to learn it after she was stolen from her family, taken on a slave ship to Boston, and purchased by a wealthy tailor, John Wheatley. She mastered English in less than a year and soon began to study Latin as well. It's helpful to have a literary fame of reference to understand her poetry so remember that Phillis Wheatley lived and died a generation before Jane Austen (1775-1817); she grew to maturity in

colonial/ revolutionary Massachusetts. If you were a fan of the Austen-based “Sandition,” remember the decorousness of British culture at the time, but think of “Poldark” for a more historically accurate frame of reference.

B. It may be difficult to understand Wheatley’s poetry, especially if you are hearing these poems for the first time. Like other British and American poets in his period, Wheatley follows the conventions of 18th. Century English poetry ; she often alludes to the poetry of John Milton, Alexander Pope, and Thomas Gray (of “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” fame), and she uses the same formal diction, rhyme schemes, and classical allusions that characterize these poets.

C. On Being Brought from Africa to America.

‘Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there’s a God, that there’s a Saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
“Their colour is a diabolic die.”

Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,
May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train.”

II. The second poem I wanted to invite you to consider is **“To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth”**; this poem was also appeared in her first book of poetry, published in 1773.

A. It contains one of the only other references to what must have been one of the most traumatic experiences of her life, when she was stolen from her parents in Africa. This poem imagines their anguish as well as her own when she was separated from them and taken to Massachusetts.

B. This poem also shows, I think, how she is careful to recognize differences between her English and American audiences. I won’t read the whole poem, but invite you to consider this passage which shows her hope that war might be avoided with Dartmouth’s appointment:

...No more, America, in mournful strain
Of wrongs, and grievance unredress'd complain,
No longer shalt thou dread the iron chain,
Which wanton Tyranny with lawless hand
Had made, and with it meant t' enslave the land.

Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,

Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung,
Whence flow these wishes for the common good,
By feeling hearts alone best understood,
I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat:
What pangs excruciating must molest,
What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?
Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd
That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd:
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?

For favours past, great Sir, our thanks are due,
And thee we ask thy favours to renew,
Since in thy pow'r, as in thy will before,
To sooth the griefs, which thou did'st once deplore.
May heav'nly grace the sacred sanction give
To all thy works, and thou for ever live
Not only on the wings of fleeting Fame,
Though praise immortal crowns the patriot's name,
But to conduct to heav'ns refulgent fane,
May fiery coursers sweep th' ethereal plain,
And bear thee upwards to that blest abode,
Where, like the prophet, thou shalt find thy God.

III. By 1775, Wheatley was so proficient that she wrote a poem addressed to George Washington and sent it to him, prefaced with a very respectful note. Like many poems in the British traditions of the time, Wheatley begins by invoking a celestial audience and refers to the United States by the classical name of Columbia:

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 the veil of night!

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

Later in the poem she describes the grim realities of the Revolutionary war in the United States:

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.

IV. My last example is Wheatley's poem "On Imagination" which was recently recovered and published. I'll just read the first 4 stanzas. You can find it on poets. Org. It begins: This poem shows Wheatley's vocabulary for talking about poetry and her appreciation of the power of the imagination:

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

From Helicon's refulgent Heights attend,
Ye sacred choir, and my attempts befriend:
To tell her glories with a faithful tongue.
Ye blooming graces, triumph in my song.
Now here, now there, the raving Fancy flies,
Till some lov'd object strikes her wand'ring eyes,
And soft captivity involves the mind.

Imagination! Who can sing thy force?
Or who describe the swiftness of thy course?

Th' empyreal palace of the thund'ring God,
We on thy pinions can surpass the wind,
And leave the rolling universe behind.
From star to star the mental optics rove,
Measure the skies, and range the realms above.
There in one view we grasp the mighty whole,
Or with new worlds amaze th' unbounded soul.

See Bynum, Tara A., et al. "Special Issue Introduction: 'Dear Sister: Phillis Wheatley's Futures'." *Early American Literature*, vol. 57, no. 3, fall 2022, pp. 663+. *Gale Literature Resource Center*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A723637898/LitRC?u=anon~ea965657&sid=bookmark-LitRC&xid=d380ccb9. Accessed 1 Feb. 2023.

Part 3: Who tells our stories?

Rev. Robin

Some modern scholars argue that Phillis Wheatley has been recovered from the white-washed version of so-called historical memoirists like Margaretta Odell, whose white-washed memoir reads like a sentimental novel. In it, Phillis was a beguiled and vulnerable orphan, not abducted or enslaved, but rather a submissive protégée redeemed by Christian kindness and her benevolent mistress and then a fallen woman seduced by an evil black man. She wrote: "The chains which bound her to her master and mistress were the golden links of love, and the silken bands of gratitude. In this telling, Phillis' enslavement is "an idyllic period, a rescue."

As Nancy and I have both explained, this is far from accurate. Like Wheatley, African Americans today struggle to witness to their own histories and experiences. Who gets to tell our stories; and explicitly, as we enter Black History Month, who gets to tell the stories of African Americans?

In an article for *Culture Magazine*, Andrea Collier reflects in the role of storytelling in Black American history and in her own life. She writes: "No matter who you are or where you come from, the human spirit wants, no needs, to be validated. While story means so much in every culture and ethnicity, I know that black folk, no matter how they got here, are planted in story and shared lived experience. It's the way we witness. Storytelling was the first opportunity for black folks to represent themselves as anything other than property. As John Lewis, the civil rights champion, has remarked: "The movement without storytelling is like a bird without wings." There is no question that storytelling for black Americans is a way of saying "I am here and I matter."

Grasping this cultural truth renders the escalating censorship of authentic Black American history throughout our country all the more dire and nauseating. Writing just this past week in the *New York Times*, the African-American columnist Eugene Robinson reminds us that it's not

American history without Black history. Real black history. Not the “let’s not ruffle any white feathers” version. Point of fact, Black History Month wasn’t even established until 1986.

Robinson doesn’t pull any punches. He writes: “As this year’s observance begins, cynical Republican politicians are trying to advance their own careers by whitewashing our nation’s past. Florida’s bombastic Gov. Ron DeSantis has been in the headlines for pushing the College Board to retreat on its draft curriculum for an AP African Americans studies course because it’s too woke – it included critical race theory (as in, the un varnished truth) and references to gender and sexual orientation. He’s not alone. In his first official act, Virginia Gov Glenn Youngkin barred the state’s public schools from teaching what he deemed “inherently divisive concepts” about our history regarding race.

Fifteen states now have active educational gag orders that seek to suppress and target marginalized identities, with punishments including fines, civil suits, dismissals, and criminal penalties; for teaching the truth. From July 2021 to June 2022, PEN AMERICA’s index of school book bans listed more than 2,500 instances of more than 1,600 individual books being banned. The content of most of these banned books involves prominent characters of color, LGBTQ protagonists, or themes and subject matter related to race, Black history, and racism.

The good news is that most Americans oppose book banning and support teaching the history of race in America. However, we must also respond to the urgency of the moment. In our own backyard, HB2458 has been introduced to the Arizona legislature. It deems that:

A PUBLIC SCHOOL, SCHOOL DISTRICT OR STATE AGENCY MAY NOT PROVIDE OR ALLOW ANY PERSON TO PROVIDE INSTRUCTION TO STUDENTS OR EMPLOYEES THAT PROMOTES OR ADVOCATES FOR ANY OF THE FOLLOWING CONCEPTS: 1. JUDGING AN INDIVIDUAL ON THE BASIS OF THE INDIVIDUAL'S RACE OR ETHNICITY. 2. THAT ONE RACE OR ETHNIC GROUP IS INHERENTLY MORALLY OR INTELLECTUALLY SUPERIOR TO ANOTHER RACE OR ETHNIC GROUP. 3. THAT AN INDIVIDUAL, BY VIRTUE OF THE INDIVIDUAL'S RACE OR ETHNICITY, IS INHERENTLY RACIST OR OPPRESSIVE, WHETHER CONSCIOUSLY OR UNCONSCIOUSLY. 4. THAT AN INDIVIDUAL SHOULD BE INVIDIOUSLY DISCRIMINATED AGAINST OR RECEIVE ADVERSE TREATMENT SOLELY OR PARTLY BECAUSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL'S RACE OR ETHNICITY. 5. THAT AN INDIVIDUAL'S MORAL CHARACTER IS DETERMINED BY THE INDIVIDUAL'S RACE OR ETHNICITY. 6. THAT AN INDIVIDUAL, BY VIRTUE OF THE INDIVIDUAL'S RACE OR ETHNICITY, BEARS RESPONSIBILITY OR BLAME FOR ACTIONS COMMITTED BY OTHER MEMBERS OF THE SAME RACE OR ETHNIC GROUP.

Read one way it sounds evolved and anti-racist. But we know the hidden agenda is to curb any discomfort in learning our true history as a country. Robinson notes that “it is becoming a MAGA article of faith that the nation’s story must be told without causing White People to feel bad.” This effort (and Arizona’s own HB 2458) cannot be allowed to grow and succeed. In adopting the 8th Principle, Beacon UU made a pledge to dismantle white supremacy. So, write letters, lobby, vote, speak up.

There is much in America's history that should cause discomfort. It caused plenty to black people like Phillis Wheatley. Philosopher George Santayana's famous maxim is true: "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. We make no progress towards a more perfect union if we teach the nation's triumphs without also teaching its sins." Reducing African American history to a simple story of three chapters – slavery, the Civil War, and the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. avoids the discomfort but also erases the truth. Chattel slavery, Jim Crow and mass incarceration of people of color, redlining, voter suppression, the shootings of innocent black men like Tyre Nichols. The real history is inherently true, not inherently divisive.

Like Sofia Betancourt advises us in the poem that we heard earlier in the service – we need to gather the bones, of Phillis Wheatley, and generations of African Americans – not to bury them, but rather to honor them and their legacies (and not just for one designated month per year). May we listen to the stories being told and reckon with our own discomfort. We are all witnesses.

Blessed be. Blessed we. And Amen.

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