Intertexual [sic] Cadences, "When Wants and Woes Might Be Our Righteous Lot": Excavating Phillis Wheatley's Transcending Voice of Accent

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"WHEN WANTS AND WOES MIGHT BE OUR RIGHTEOUS LOT": EXCAVATING PHILLIS WHEATLEY'S TRANSCENDING VOICE OF ACCENT

A Thesis

Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of American Studies
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Antonio T. Bly
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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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Approved, May 1999

Richard Lowry
Grey Gundaker
William Carroll
Norfolk State University
DEDICATION

For Antonio
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I. THE WHIPPING OF PRINCE, A PROLOGUE</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II. INTERPRETATIONS AND READINGS, READINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS: PHILLIS WHEATLEY, A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE OR SOMETHING LIKE AN INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III. CHRIST AND THE CHOSEN: REVISITING PHILLIS WHEATLEY’S SUBTLE WAR OF BIBLICAL METaphORS</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER IV. UN DÉNOUEMENT</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Often when We, as readers, Read a book, an article or even a Master’s Thesis for that matter, we tend to associate that particular work with either one or several authors, leaving in the shadows of the text a number of people who are equally responsible for the development of that particular work in question. Although much is lost between the lines, perhaps even more is surrendered under the umbrella-like veil of the Author. With that said, the credit for this particular work is not mine only. There were a number of people whose support and encouragement has made this work possible.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis compares the writings of Phillis Wheatley, eighteenth-century slave-poet laureate to the nineteenth-century slave spirituals. Drawing on my theory of accentuated signification, this thesis explores the possible meanings embedded in the poet’s usage of italicization, and how these meanings—which are clearly informed by the Bible—are similar to a host of biblically-inspired themes that appear in the spirituals.

Ever since the publication of her Poems On Various Subjects, Religious and Moral, Phillis Wheatley (ca. 1754-1784) has been the subject of much debate. For more than two hundred years, scholars and critics have struggled to assess the African-born poetess’ artistic, social and historic significance. Not surprisingly, "Race," as a sociological construct, lies at the center of the Wheatley debate.

In the first half of the thesis, I will examine both the contemporary and the modern responses to Phillis Wheatley’s poetry. More importantly, I will explore how "Race" not only informs the critical discussion of the poet, but also operates as symbolic rupture that isolates the poet outside critically of the slave tradition. Here, by slave tradition, I mean a discourse in which the Bible serves as a resource for African Americans to imagine freedom and criticize slavery.

In the second half of the thesis, I will analyze the poet’s italicization of certain terms, and more importantly, the biblical meta-text they signify. Furthermore, I will compare Wheatley’s poems to the Negro-spirituals. Overall, this comparative analysis suggests that both Wheatley’s and the slave singers’ appropriation of the Bible are thematically analogous.
INTERTEXUAL CADENCES. \"WHEN WANTS AND WOES
MIGHT BE OUR RIGHTEOUS LOT\": EXCAVATING PHILLIS
WHEATLEY\'S TRANSCENDING VOICE OF ACCENT
"How dare he insult my Phillis like that!"

I got a Song, you got a Song,
All o' God's Chillun Got a Song
I got a Song, you got a Song,
All o' God's Chillun Got a Song

It was late in the afternoon. The sun was burning orange and red; the sky was purple, blue, and a blackish-gray. On the promenade, Susanna Wheatley stood. Light blue dress. Something hand-woven, something foreshadowing Victorian. "That saucy varlet, and my Phillis!" Her eyes burned like flames. She nodded. Prince cried.

"That saucy varlet," she exclaimed again. Again, she nodded.

"How is he to know he wasn’t supposed to set on the same seat with her... She a slave!... She is a slave, madam"

Elizabeth’s cried, somewhat hysterically. Shaken, Susanna turned, faintly making out the dark, plump caricature of her beloved house-servant. "Elizabeth?" she mumbled. "Elizabeth." In the distance, however, she could hear Prince. Sobbing. Elizabeth, quickly, faded into a flash of red light. Again, she nodded. Again, Prince cried, "Pray, master... Pray, master!"

5.

It was late in the afternoon. A small crowd of slaves gathered
together near the tree which most of them knew personally as the whipping-post. From it swung Prince, a snapped vine barely clinging to it. His legs were soaked. The air was dry and hot. And the blend of the heat, and the smell of flesh and urine made the once light breeze almost unbearable. As each blow from the leather cowhide whip touched Prince’s minced back the cry, "Pray, master. . . Pray, master!" came from his trembling lips.

"This ain’t right, I tell you. ...This just ain’t right."
Daniel spoke out among the crowd. "Ole lord why?"


"Why Prince being whipped like this, just for sitting beside another nigger," Daniel say. "I’ve seen ole Julius get whipped less for stealing."

Mary joined the discreet conversation. "Fool, you already know the answer to that one. . . Phillis is the prized one. You know. . . Mrs. Wheatley calls her--her protegee, whatever that suppose to means."

Mimicking Mary, Daniel whispers back. "I don’t care what she calls her. This ain’t right. . . She a slave just like the rest of us. So why should one slave be beaten for just sitting beside another? We all niggers."

"Fool, you still ain’t hearing, she’s Mrs. Wheatley’s pride. She’s special. . . She can read. She writes. She. . . ."

"She no different from the rest of us. Just because she know how to read and write . . . makes her different? I can read, and I taught myself how to, too! But, they don’t know."
"Yeah! They might treat her a little better, but she still a slave, and she still a nigger. They say it to her in little ways though. She’s worse off than a slave. She’s the Missus’s Phillis. She ain’t even her own to own. I bet you, she knows too. . . If she’s half as smart as they say she is, she knows. . . has to. She don’t eat with us, and she don’t really eat with them. She don’t talk around us, and she don’t talk really around them. Remember what Prince say happened that time at Missus Fitch’s house. What kinda life is that? Dangling in the middle like that."

"We all have our crosses Abednego. You have yours, Daniel has his’s, I got mine. Prince, here, he has his’s too, and I expect that poor little Phillis has hers." Abednego paused. His mind wondered off. Daniel nodded at Mary in agreement. After a short while, they continued to talk quietly, Prince’s cry masking their conversation: "Pray, master. . . Pray, master!"

7.
It was late in the afternoon. The sun was burning orange and red; the sky was purple, blue, and a blackish-gray. In a dimly-lit room, Phillis sat in a sturdy chair near a small desk. A Bible and a copy of Homer lay on the one side; an inkwell, a long, spotted turkey feather and an oil lamp on the other. A blank sheet of paper lay in the middle of the desk. A light breeze occasionally cooled the room. In the distance, Prince’s shrilling cry could be heard: "Pray, master. . . Pray, master!" It echoed
throughout the small room. Phillis sat there motionlessly, her eyes as glassy as the window which cradled the sad mirror of her face. Her face bore tracks: tracks of consoling tears, tracks of unimaginable, sleepless nights.

Sitting there, she wondered to herself. "[No-one knows] the lash for horrid crimes I felt." There, in the mist of Prince's melancholia, Phillis' hand began gently to brush the paper in front of her.
Notes for Chapter One

CHAPTER TWO

"The Whipping of Prince" is based on Margaretta Matilda Oddell’s 1834 Memoir of Phillis Wheatley. In it, she briefly alludes to an incident where Prince, the Wheatley’s African coachman is "severely reprimand[ed]" for sitting on the same seat with Phillis.1 Written by the great grandniece of Phillis Wheatley’s mistress, Oddell’s memory of the first significant African-American author is perhaps the single most authoritative document on the poet’s life. Though "The Whipping of Prince" fictionalizes the historical space of the coachman’s punishment, it also addresses a profound silence in Oddell’s sketchy text, one that suggests that Prince’s physical chastisement, despite its unknown severe physicality,2 psychologically castigated Phillis. In putting Prince in his place for sitting beside her "Phillis," Susanna Wheatley, in many respects, reminds her prized protegee of hers.

More than this, "The Whipping of Prince," also contemplates the complex irony of Phillis Wheatley: by irony I mean the ambiguity of being a both a poet and a slave during a time when to have been both would characterize something of a cultural paradox. Indeed, in the colonial hierarchy of the early Republic, Wheatley’s place was perhaps the most cruel and difficult. For, hers was a place where she could neither freely fraternize with
other black slaves as equals (in particular the other servants of
the Wheatley’s household), nor openly encounter whites on equal
terms. Hers was a place islandized, suspended between the vast
peripheral space of black Otherness and the hegemony of white
society. There, she inhabited a strange cultural purgatory in
which white society designated her as something that was neither
black nor white, as someone who was neither wholly a slave nor
wholly a freed person.

Understandably, Phillis Wheatley was aware of this peculiar
place. Despite her novelty, she was quite conscious of the fact
that her Otherness signified a cultural capital which positioned
her somewhere near the bottom tier of colonial life. Accordingly,
in her Memoir of the poet, Margaret Matilda Oddell observes,

Whenever she [Phillis] was invited to the houses of
individuals of wealth and distinction, (which
frequently happened,) she always declined the seat
offered her at their board, and, requesting that a
side-table might be laid for her, dined modestly apart
from the rest of the company.

We consider this conduct both dignified and
judicious. A woman of so much mind as Phillis
possessed, could not but be aware of the emptiness of
many of the artificial distinctions of life. She could
not, indeed, have felt so utterly unworthy to sit down
among the guests, with those by whom she had been
bidden to the banquet. But she must have been
painfully conscious of the feelings with which her
unfortunate race were regarded; and must have
reflected that, in a mixed company, there might be
many individuals who would, perhaps, think they
honored her too far by dining with her at the same
table. Therefore, by respecting even the prejudices of
those who courteously waived them in her favor, she
very delicately expressed her gratitude; and,
following the counsels of those Scriptures to which
she was not a stranger, and taking the lowest seat at
the feast, she placed herself where she could
certainly expect neither to give or receive offence
(12-13).

Besides Oddell’s insightful observation of the poet, Wheatley’s visit to the home of Mrs. [Eunice Plaised] Timothy Fitch, characterizes one such specific occasion in which she was reminded of her Otherness. Accordingly, during her visit there, Mrs. Fitch’s daughters, who at first were amused by the slave-poet’s stories, became noticeably uneasy at the idea of sitting at the same table with Phillis to enjoy teatime. But, after Mrs. Fitch chided her daughters, they all sat together and had tea.³ One can only imagine what Phillis thought of the incident.

Critically, "The Whipping of Prince" also alludes, perhaps passingly, to the islandized space Phillis inhabited, one suspended partially between the colonial discourse of Race and its underlying pretext of black inferiority and the eighteenth-century reality of black slavery. Perhaps the earliest example of Wheatley’s betwixt position can be read in the explanatory and/or prefatory notes that were often attached to her works. The prefatory note, for instance, attached to her first (known) published poem, "On Messrs Hussey and Coffin," seems to explain away the poet’s assertion of literacy by designating her as someone above the status of a mere slave. Accordingly, before the verse appears the following note:

*Please to insert the following Lines, composed by a Negro Girl (belonging to one Mr. Wheatley of Boston) on the following Occasion, viz. Messrs Hussey and Coffin, as undermentioned, belonging to Nantucket, being bound from thence to Boston, narrowly escaped being cast away on Cape-Cod, in one of the late Storms; upon the Arrival, being at Mr. Wheatley’s,*
and, while at Dinner, told of their narrow Escape, this Negro Girl at the same Time 'tending Table, heard the Relation, from which she composed the following Verses.'

As an authenticating document (to borrow from Robert B. Stepto's critical discourse), this explanatory note not only qualifies Wheatley's voice as a poet, but also distinguishes her from other poets, particularly her white contemporaries. Semantically, Wheatley is characterized as a juxtaposition. That is, on the one hand, she is depicted as a Negro Girl, whereas, on the other, she is characterized as a slave, the property "belonging to one Mr. [John] Wheatley of Boston." Together, these two phrases color the cultural ambiguity in which Wheatley lived. In surrounding the phrase "(belonging to one Mr. Wheatley of Boston)" in parentheses, the publisher of the Newport [Rhode Island] Mercury, perhaps unwittingly, calls attention to both the phrase and, of course, the earlier reference toward the poet as a Negro Girl which more than likely alludes to the free black population that existed in New England during the eighteenth-century. Needless to say, implicit in this explanatory note is the idea that the poet somehow resides in a cultural limbo, a space fixed between the colonial social construct of Race and the colonial institution of black slavery.

Suggestively, in 1775, Bernard Romans also observes the poet's betwixt place, saying,

Do we not see Solomon’s words fully verified in Negroes? A servant will not answer though he understand. The very perverse nature of this black race seems to require the harsh treatment they
generally receive, but like all other things, this is carried into the extreme; far be it from me to approve or recommend the vile usage to which this useful part of the creation is subjected by some of our western nabobs, but against the Phyllis of Boston (who is the Phannix [sic] of her race) i [sic] could bring at least twenty well known instances of the contrary effect of education on this sable generation.6

Similarly, in a letter written on August 28, 1779, Francois, Marquis de Barbé-Marbois writes

Phyllis is a negress, born in Africa, brought to Boston at the age of ten, and sold to a citizen of that city. She learned English with unusual ease, eagerly read and re-read the Bible, the only book which had been put in her hands, became steeped in the poetic images of which it is full, and at the age of seventeen published a number of poems in which there is imagination, poetry, and zeal, though no correctness nor order nor interest. I read them with some surprise. They are printed, and in the front of the book there are certificates of authenticity which leave no doubt that she is its author [italics mine].7

In both the Marquis de Barbé-Marbois and Bernard Romans’ notices of the poet, each author expresses a concern more with Wheatley’s race and its peculiar positionality in colonial society than with her poetry. For example, Romans characterizes Wheatley as a phoenix, that rare sable bird that signifies only the exception of what her race can achieve through assimilating the values of western life. Likewise, the Marquis de Barbé-Marbois’ observance of the poet, though on the surface enthusiastic, also suggests that he too is concerned more with the issue of Wheatley’s race. In both their accounts, Race radicalizes the language of the poet’s discourse.

Perhaps the most illustrious of Wheatley’s contemporary critics was Thomas Jefferson. In his famous Notes on the State of
Virginia (1781-1782), Jefferson critiques the poet in something of a diatribe, saying:

They astonish you with strokes of the most sublime oratory; such as to prove their reason and sentiment strong, their imagination glowing and elevated. But never yet could I find that a black has uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never see even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture. In music they are more generally gifted than the whites with accurate ears for tune and time, and they have been found capable of imagining a small catch. Whether they will be equal to the composition of a more extensive run of melody, or of complicated harmony, is yet to be proved. Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. Among the Blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no 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 Phyllis [sic] Whately [sic]; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism (140).

Here, Jefferson not only remarks, albeit subtly, on the curious space the poet inhabited, but also structures, perhaps unknowingly, the eighteenth-century debate that would eventually ensnare the poet’s brief literary career. Implicit in his criticism is the eighteenth-century concept of Race and its underlying assertion of black inferiority. Like Bernard Romans and the Marquis de Barbé-Marbois, Jefferson’s notice of the poet seems to be more concerned with the issue of her race than with her poetry. In his words, Wheatley’s merit as a poet is "below the dignity of criticism," not because of the quality of her works, but because of the fact that she happens to be a black-poet. Much in the same way that Race radicalizes Wheatley’s works, Race also seems to demystify the substance of the poet’s
writings. For Jefferson, it serves as a pretense to question not only her merit as a poet, but also the authenticity of her authorship. And yet, while Jefferson can concede to the idea that religion—which in itself is a symbol of western thought and culture—can tame the heart of the so-called savage African beast, transforming the brute into a "Phyllis Whately," he foregoes a recognition of religion's ability to transform an allegedly pagan brute into a poet, particularly one who snatches the laurel of western civilization by writing herself into existence. To accept Wheatley as a bonafide poet, Jefferson realizes that such an acknowledgment would challenge, however indirectly, the then popularly held belief of black racial and intellectual inferiority, a belief to which he undoubtedly subscribes. Thus, rather than admit Wheatley's work into the discourse of eighteenth-century letters, Jefferson reduces his comments on the poet to a rather witless discussion of her race, overlooking the significance of slavery, or as he puts it metaphorically, the "misery" that represents the pervading fact of black life in colonial America.

Curiously enough, the modern notices of the poet also seem to characterize Wheatley as a subject suspended between two realities: again, the colonial crucible of slavery and the ideology of Race as a social construct. In much the same way that Race informs Thomas Jefferson's criticism of the poet, Race also informs the modern colloquy of the Wheatley canon. During Jefferson's day, however, the notion of Race was undercut by the
assumption of black cultural and intellectual inferiority. In contrast, the modern notion of Race is underscored by a discourse, political in its origins, of black resistance, or as Mikhail Bakhtin would probably call it, a discourse of antagonistic appropriation.9

Moreover, just as Jefferson's criticism of the poet emphasized the issue of Race over her station as a slave, so have Wheatley's modern critics relegated their analyses of her works to a contemporary discussion of Race. For instance, in "Analysis of Selected Poetry of Phillis Wheatley," Angelene Jamison asserts (with an emphasis on pathology and self-hatred characteristic of much of the 1970's black psychological writings) that the African-born poet did not express any type of identification toward her fellow Africans, nor did she acknowledge the hardships which most blacks experienced under colonial slavery. Jamison goes on to read the supposedly minstrel postures of Wheatley's verse, such as the one assumed by the Ethiopian persona of "To the University of Cambridge," as a document of the poet's self-hatred, an attitude which stems from her acceptance and appropriation of white culture and values:

WHILE an intrinsic ardor prompts to write,
The muses promise to assist my pen;
'Twas not long since I left my native shore
The land of errors and Egyptian gloom:
Father of mercy 'twas thy gracious hand
Brought me in safety from those dark abodes . .

Improve your privileges while they stay,
Ye pupils, and each hour redeem, that bears
Or good or bad report of you to heav'n.
Let sin, that baneful evil to the soul,
By you be shunn'd, nor once remit your guard;
Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg.
Ye blooming plants of human race divine
An Ethlop tells you, 'tis your greatest foe;
Its transient sweetness turns to endless pain,
And in immense perdition sinks the soul (Wheatley, 15-16).

To Jamison, Wheatley "wrote to Whites, for Whites and generally in the Euro-American tradition at the time" (408). As for the poet's ambiguous reference toward herself as an "Ethiop," Jamison argues that this reference does not represent a real sign of black pride nor racial consciousness. On the contrary, this allusion toward Africa signifies self abnegation, self-pity and depicts the poet as a happy, humble slave who "supported, praised, and imitated those who enslaved her and her people" (416).

In a similar vein, Eleanor Smith claims that Wheatley was a privileged bond-servant whose favored position in the Wheatley's household rendered her unable to address the problem of black slavery in colonial America. In "Phillis Wheatley: A Black Perspective," she argues that the poet was "taught by Whites to think white," therefore becoming white and producing texts which reflected a "white orientation" (403). Further, Smith argues that Wheatley's particular experience with slavery desensitized her to the needs of both herself and her people. "Phillis was not treated as an ordinary house slave. Instead of having to do heavy washing, ironing or cooking, Phillis had only slight dusting and other light housework. She was not allowed to mingle with other slaves, thus designating her as someone somehow above the status
of a slave" (403).

Rather than contemplate Wheatley as a simile of a contented slave, Smith holds that Wheatley's experience with slavery was a disassociative one at best, rendering her poetic voice ineffectual to the needs and aspirations of black people during her own century and subsequently that of future generations.

Wheatley was simply one of those blacks who are taught to think white and to divorce themselves from who they are. When they direct their energies, be they creative or otherwise, towards Whites, they are never consciously contributing to their own liberation or the liberation of Black people. Phillis Wheatley did not help herself following all the dictates of Whites nor did she contribute to the well-being of black people of her time (407).

Aside from these arguments postulated by critics like Jamison and Smith, a socio-anthropological reading of the poet is also largely framed by Race. Perhaps the best example of this view can be seen in Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self*. After outlining a critical theory designed specifically for understanding the subtle nuances of black literature, Gates revisits the symbolically flogged subject of Phillis Wheatley only to contextualize her writings within a somewhat narrow socio-anthropological argument. Accordingly, in the second chapter, "Phillis Wheatley and the Nature of the Negro," of his arresting book, Gates examines the critical reception of Wheatley's 1773 *Poems* and uses it as a pretext to argue convincingly that Wheatley's text broke the imposed silence of black illiteracy, as well as challenged the
view that blacks were intellectually inferior.

However, Gates's reassessment of Wheatley's significance lacks a certain cohesiveness within the context of his book's larger theme which advances a critical theory that ventures toward defining a black semantic.\textsuperscript{10} Though in the beginning of the text he constructs and sketchily defines the allegory of the "Signifying Monkey" as a trope with which to explicate the signification of black texts, he fails to incorporate Wheatley's writings in the broader context of his theory. That is, rather than articulate how Wheatley's poetry (a subject which he neglects to some extent) partakes of the duplicitous trope of the Signifying Monkey, Gates spends an excessive amount of time and space on the poet's critical reception. Not surprisingly, what emerges from his text is an overpowering assertion that Wheatley's significance within the African-American milieu is critical only in that she was the first black to receive considerable criticism and attention from eighteenth-century white scholars and critics. Therefore, Wheatley surfaces as an inaugural socio-anthropological sign, an artifactual first in the vast tapestry which symbolizes African-American culture, consequential only within the broader construct of black historicity.

In more recent Wheatley scholarship, Race again informs many critics' arguments. One such example can be found in Russell Reising's intriguing article "Trafficking in White: Phillis Wheatley's Semiotics of Racial Representation." There, he argues
that Wheatley's imaginative works, such as "On Virtue," "An [sic] Hymn to the Morning," and a host of others, operate as astute commentaries on slavery. Expanding Gates's literary theory of the Signifying Monkey, Reising offers "trafficking," a cultural, ideological tension, or in Houston A. Baker's words a "functional opposition," as a trope by which to interpret the subtle topography of Wheatley's writings. Key to his reading of Wheatley's poetry is the poet's embellishment of contrasting imagery, in particular light and darkness, sunshine and shade, morning and evening. In Wheatley's "An [sic] Hymn to the Evening," for example, Reising observes this complexity:

Filled with the praise of him who gives the light;
And draws the sable curtains of the night,
Let placid slumbers soothe each weary mind,
At morn to wake more refined;
So shall the labours of day begin
More pure, more guarded from snares of sin.

Night's leaden sceptre seals my drowsy eyes,
Then cease, my song, till fair Aurora rise (Wheatley, 58-59).

Here, Reising argues that Wheatley's appropriation of light/dark imagery functions as a sub-text which bemoans the racial complexity of being a slave-poet, predating the works of Melville, Dickinson, Frost and Poe who also used light and dark imagery to critique the concept of Race underneath the veil of white hegemony. Accordingly, he explicates this passage, saying

Wheatley's relationship with darkness in these lines is complex. Darkness contrast clearly, in one sense, with light. One praises "him who gives the light" and waits expectantly "till fair Aurora rise." Darkness, by implication, is the opposite of light, sealing one off from the desired illumination. However, the
relationship between dark and light is not, by any means, one of pure opposition, but rather another example of Wheatley's trafficking between them. The "sable curtains" of night allow "placid slumbers" to "soothe each weary mind," with sleep and darkness signaling a period of renovation and renewal similar to Thoreau's winter. Upon awakening from this slumber one is not only "more heavenly," "more pure," and "more guarded" from sin, but also repeating a pivotal term from "On Being Brought from Africa to America," more "refined." In other words, darkness and light are dialectically related: a world of darkness and sleep supplements the world of light and consciousness (247).

Reising goes on to assert that Wheatley's usage of light/dark imagery embodies ambivalences that can be read as subtle criticisms of being an African in America. In addition, he suggests that the poet trafficks in white: that is, she appropriates the cultural signs and symbols of the dominant group in order to realize the articulation of her own voice in the discourse of eighteenth-century letters. Further, in her approximation to whiteness, Reising argues that Wheatley indirectly voices something of her own blackness. Needless to say, Race is implicit in his insightful reading of the poet. Henry Louis Gates's theory of black Signification is also implicit in his reading of the poet (232). For, like Gates' notion of (s)ignifin(g), Reising's trope of trafficking is undercut by the sign of Race, assuming that Race as a sociological sign, connotes a subversive or counter-hegemonic reading.

While Reising explores Race as a meta-text in the poet's use of color and metaphor, Phillip M. Richards "Phillis Wheatley and
Literary Americanization," offers a quite different hermeneutic examination of Race and Wheatley’s poetry. There, Richards suggests that the corpus of the poet’s work serves as a document of literary Americanization. Citing the emergence of a host of eighteenth-century African-American institutions (i.e., the African Methodist Episcopal church, the Free African Society, the Prince Hall African Lodge, etc.) as proof of black Americanization—a term he uses analogously with acculturation and assimilation—Richards argues that in Wheatley’s poetry African and Anglo-American cultural elements congeal into a complex ideological amalgam. In Wheatley’s "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth," for instance, he finds this amalgam in the poet’s self-referential remarks,

    Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,  
    Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung,  
    Whence flow these wishes for common good,  
    By feeling heart 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 sorrow 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 (Wheatley, 74)?

Here, Richards argues that Wheatley’s embellishment of the image of herself as a child who is taken away from her parents demonstrates the poet’s appropriation of the rhetoric of Whig sentimentalism in which many Americans during the eighteenth-century articulated their own eclectic relationship with Great Britain. Discounting the arguments of Bernard Bell and Houston A.
Baker-- both of whom suggest that the Dartmouth verse contains an ideological tension or a functional opposition that alludes to poet's African Self-- Richards asserts that Wheatley's Dartmouth poem expresses solidarity with the American Revolutionaries through the dominant discourses of her day.

Race informs Richards' reading of the poet, notwithstanding his distortions of terminology-- he confuses both the expressions and the meanings of acculturation and assimilation with Americanization-- and likewise his cursory treatment of Wheatley's African Self. Implicit in his analysis of Wheatley is the poet's adoption of Anglo letters, an adoption that becomes problematic within the context of his earlier, though seemingly brief, discussion of black Americanization.

Taken together, many of Wheatley's critics seem to employ Race as a framing device in their explications of her poetry, whether to justify the poet's 'Uncle Tomism' or to qualify her subtle critique of black Otherness. Although the debate which revolves around the poet has changed to some extent since Thomas Jefferson's day, both contemporary and modern notices of her still seem to emphatically situate the poet within the construct of Race.

What Wheatley's modern critics miss, however, whether intentionally or unintentionally, is the insight to be gained by a discussion of the poet's work within the context of the slave tradition. For, after all she was a slave.

By slave tradition, I mean a convention in which the Bible
serves as a multivalent resource for imagining freedom and criticizing slavery, a tradition often recognized as beginning with the slave spiritual. Instead, by placing such a heavy emphasis on Wheatley’s poetry within the framework of Race, many of the poet’s critics seem to have isolated her critically outside of this slave tradition. Surprisingly, in most of the works by Wheatley’s modern critics, slavery emerges as something incidentally black, something already assumed. Implicit in their analyses of the poet is the assumption that slavery and race are synonymous as opposed to being dialogic.

With this, my thesis proposes to untangle the conflation of Race, culture and slave status in Phillis’ poetry. It will do so by attending carefully Phillis Wheatley’s uncelebrated canticles, those songs from the Afric Muse’s celestial lyre which have been buried underneath a vast, hermeneutic sea of black. Drawing on my concept of accentuated signification as a plausible pathway toward understanding the subtler contours of Wheatley’s writings, this thesis will examine the intertextual thematic—by intertextual, I mean a shared underlying motif or a similitude in appropriation—which resonates in both the eighteenth-century poesy of Phillis Wheatley and the nineteenth-century slave spirituals, rejoining the double-voiced discourse of her works symbolically to the rich and complex slave tradition which, in many ways, she mothered.

At this point, an explication of my theory of accentuated
signification may be helpful because it is basic to my broader argument that Wheatley's appropriation of the Bible is similar if not identical to that of the slave spirituals. Accordingly, accentuated signification is a theory which calls into question the implied literary intentions of the Author. Contrary to the works of Roland Barthes, Jonathan Culler, and a number of others who argue that the explanation or the meaning of a work is arrived at by way of the Reader deciphering the signs which create and construct the text in question,\textsuperscript{13} the theory of accentuated signification suggests that the Author of the text intentionally invests within his or her work multiple, perhaps subversive, layers of meanings that transcend the superficiality of their texts' cosmetic designs. Textually, accentuated signs can represent words and/or phrases that are italicized, underlined, boldfaced, or CAPITALIZED. They can also typify an author's appropriation of a specific genre of literature in order to realize a different textual and/or semantic end. Semantically, accentuated signifiers are meta-signs that symbolize texts within themselves. As D. F. McKenzie observes insightfully "form effect[s] meaning" (4). With this thought in mind, the theory of accentuated signification represents an effort to interpret the meaning(s) implicit in the manipulation of form. By having some sense of the author who discursively imposed him or herself onto and into works by way accents, we move closer toward deciphering the Author's implied text: the more subtler messages embedded in the work.
Visually, perhaps one of the first things that the alert reader of Phillis Wheatley notices is the random italics that appears throughout her poetry. Critically, most scholars of the Wheatley canon discount this, assuming that the publisher was more than likely responsible for the italics, not the author. According to Terry Belanger, a leading authority on the subject of eighteenth-century print culture, the italics in Wheatley’s Poems were probably the publishers because at the time it was quite common for publishers to use italics in order to segregate certain parts of a text.14 A closer reading of Phillis Wheatley’s writings, however, particularly the initial pages of Poems and her extant manuscripts, reveals a pattern of meaning that suggests a conscious design organizing the italics that appear in her historic volume.

As alluded to, the earliest sign that Phillis is indeed the Author of her italics can be read in the authenticating machinery that opens Poems. Notwithstanding the biographical significance of the publisher’s "PREFACE" or John Wheatley’s "Letter to the Publisher," the notice, "To the Publick" is perhaps the most critical authenticating text in the volume. It illuminates the extent of authorial control which she more than likely held in regards to her work by informing readers:

As it has been repeatedly suggested to the publisher, by Persons, who have seen the Manuscript, that Numbers would be ready to suspect they were not really the Writings of PHILLIS, he has procured the following attestation, from the most respectable Characters in Boston, that none might have left [sic] Ground for disputing their Original.
WE whose Names are under-written, do assure the World, that the POEMS specified in the following Page [the Contents of the Manuscript Copy], were (as we verily believe) written by PHILLIS, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa, and has ever since been, and now is, under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town. She has been examined by some of the best Judges, and is thought qualified to write them (Wheatley, 8).

This authenticating document was indeed signed by several of Boston's most "respected" citizens, including the city's Governor (Thomas Hutchinson) and Lieutenant Governor (Andrew Oliver). It not only validates Wheatley's assertion of literacy, but also suggest that the volume truly reflects or at the least closely approximates Wheatley's manuscript. Implicit in their endorsement of the Negro-poetess is Wheatley's authorship of the italics which appear in her text.

In addition, Wheatley scholar William H. Robinson attests that the poet watched over the publication of her volume.15 During her month and a half stay in London, a trip partially prescribed as a result of her poor health and partially as a business trip to oversee the final stages of the publication of Poems, Wheatley revised, rewrote and amended several of the verses which became a part of the volume. Accordingly, the advertisement that Wheatley's publisher's, A[rchibald] Bell, used to promote the sale of her text suggests that this much is more than likely true. In the London Morning Post and Daily Advertiser for September 3, 1773, Bell announces,

The book here proposed for publication displays perhaps one of the greatest instances of pure,
unassisted genius, that the world ever produced. The Author is a native of Africa, and left not that dark part of the habitable systems, till she was eight years old. She is now no more than nineteen, and many of the Poems were penned before she arrived at near that age. . .

The Writer, while England a few weeks since, was conversed with by many of the principal Nobility and Gentry of this country, who have been signally distinguished for their learning and abilities, among whom was the Earl of Dartmouth, the late Lord Littleton, and others, who unanimously expressed their approbation of her genius, and their amazement at the gifts with which Infinite Wisdom had furnished her.

But the Publisher means not, in this advertisement, to deliver any peculiar eulogiums on the present publication; he rather desires to submit the striking beauties of its contents to the unbiased candour of the impartial public. . .

Here, Bell's wording of the advertisement is critical. Much in the same way that the attestation "To the PUBLICK" authenticates both Wheatley's assertion of literacy and textual creativity, A. Bell's advertisement, however contrived, suggests that the italics in the body of Wheatley's text are in fact her own. For instance, Bell intentionally cites persons of notability, for example the Earl of Dartmouth, the late Lord Littleton, the Nobility and Gentry who can vouch for the poet's unprecedented genius in order to confirm the peculiarity of Wheatley's presence in the discourse of western letters, as well as ensure for himself a lucrative agency for the sale of Poems. More importantly, however, Bell asserts his "desires to" print the "the striking beauties" of Wheatley's volume. Here, Bell seems to indicate that the printed version of Wheatley's Poems is true to her manuscript. While the second paragraph of Bell's advertisement-- as it appears here-- authenticates both
Wheatley’s role as a poet and Bell’s obvious role as a publisher, particularly one in need of subscribers, the third paragraph of the notice signifies Bell’s effort to magnify the "contents," the "striking beauties" of the volume by indirectly calling attention to the poet’s artistic freedom: a freedom which Bell probably approximates textually so as to realize a greater monetary gain.

In this context, the novelty of Being seems to have afforded Phillis Wheatley a certain sphere of authorial control, one ironically buttressed by her publisher’s desire to accentuate her idiosyncrasy. Implicit in this control, of course, is the poet’s command over the textual design of her works.

Notwithstanding this, perhaps the most convincing piece of evidence that Phillis is the author of her italics can be found in her manuscripts. Though no known manuscript of her Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral exists, several surviving manuscripts of her poems suggest that she is the author of the italics that appear in her volume. For example, in 1772 Phillis wrote "A Poem on the Death of Charles Eliot aged 12 mo." to Samuel Eliot, eulogizing the death of his son. Shortly after writing it, she wrote another more polished version of the poem, making slight changes in her spelling and punctuation. In its revised form, now at the Massachusetts Historical Society, she underscores Charles Eliot’s name in the title of the verse, and distinguishes the word "GOD" in the second stanza and "CHARLES" in the third stanza from the rest of the text by inscribing them in bold letters. Comparably, in the printed version of the poem-
"A Funeral POEM on the Death of C. E. an Infant of Twelve Months" which appears in her 1773 volume, the word "Charles" is italicized in the second stanza and the word "Phantom" at the very end of the stanza. Similarly, in the manuscripts "An Address to the Atheist by P. Wheatley at the age of 14 years—1767—" and "An Address to the Deist—1767—," Phillis Wheatley again highlights emphatic words and/ or phrases by underlining them. In the "Address to the Atheist" she underscores the words "greatest" and "minutest" in line eight, the phrase "Corner stone" in line twenty-six, and correspondingly the names of the Greek gods "Apollo," "Minerva," "Pluto," and "Cupid" in lines forty-two, forty-four, forty-five, and forty-seven. In "An Address to the Deist" she simply underlines the words "Eternal" in line seven and "Day" in line twenty-two.

Oddly enough, neither of these verses were printed in Wheatley’s Poems on Various Subjects. While both of these titles appear in the list of poems in her 1772 proposal for a book of poetry, they were dropped from the volume which was printed a year later. Sondra O’Neale offers a possible explanation for this omission. In her insightful article, "A Slave’s Subtle War: Phillis Wheatley’s Use of Biblical Myth and Symbol," she argues that Wheatley’s "An Address to the Deist" rhetorically castigates her white enslavers by inverting the social hierarchy of race and positioning stylistically the "Ethiopian" among the temporally and spiritually chosen. Thus, in light of their similar theme—
chiding the white unbeliever, "An Address to the Deist" and likewise the "An Address to the Atheist" may have been omitted from Wheatley's Poems because of their critical social and racial undertones.

In addition, the manuscripts of Phillis Wheatley's post-Poems poems also suggest that she is the Author of the italics which appear in the body of her writings. For instance, in the manuscript of the poem, "On the Capture of General Lee," now at Bowdoin College's library, Wheatley underscores the word "Lee" in line fifteen and correspondingly "top" and "you" in lines fifty-two and fifty-four. In the manuscript "On the Death of General Wooster," now at the Massachusetts Historical Society in the Hugh Upham Clark Papers, she underlines the word "Columbia" in line twenty-two.

A number of Wheatley's private correspondences are full with similar underscored words and/ or phrases. Within the context of eighteenth-century print conventions, these underscored words and phrases would have more than likely appeared in italic. According to John Smith's The Printer's Grammar, an eighteenth-century printer's manual, publishers imposed italics sparingly, whereas writers were free to use italics creatively (13). As a general rule, publishers often employed italics to distinguish sections of "a book [that may not] belong to the Body thereof, [such] as Prefaces, Introductions, Annotations, congratulatory Poems, [and] Summaries (12). In addition, the "proper names of persons and places" were also placed in italic (50,201). Where a text "is
divided into Heads and Sub-heads, the first are distinguished by \text{Italic of a size larger than the Subject Matter} (210). It was also "common to set the Subject word of each Article in \text{Italic}, and all the rest in \text{Roman} (215)."

Significantly, on the subject of authors, their manuscripts and italic type, Smith observes,

\begin{quote}
To shew [sic] the degrees of emphasis or stress of select words, they [the authors] double-underscore them, for Small capitals; and draw a single stoke under words which they design for \text{Italic}. . . (168)
\end{quote}

With this, it is reasonable to assume that writers used italics to stress a point or to mark stylistically a textual antithesis. More importantly, it is reasonable to assume that the italics that appear in Wheatley's 1773 volume of poetry are probably hers, as opposed to being the discursive intrusions of her publisher, A. Bell. Certainly, the random nature of Wheatley's italics, or what on the surface appears to be random, suggests a conscious design that transcends the structured guidelines of eighteenth-century print grammar.

Semantically, these underscored signatures show Wheatley's ability to inscribe herself inside her texts, not to mention embed within her works multiple levels of meaning. Much like Michel Foucault's notion of the "author-function," Wheatley's italics clearly represent signs of the totality of the author's sovereignty over their literary works (126).

Not surprisingly, Phillis Wheatley was not the only poet, or writer for that matter, to employ accentuated signifiers in her
works in order to invest in them multiple levels of meaning, and thus realize increased control over them. Alexander Pope, one of Phillis Wheatley’s poetic mentors and contemporaries, also manipulated the printed form of his writings. In *Pope and the Early Eighteenth-Century Book Trade*, David Foxon argues compellingly that Alexander Pope employed italics in order to address different spheres of readership. By examining both Pope’s manuscripts and his printed works, Foxon illustrates that Pope deliberately manipulated the cosmetic form of his texts, and subsequently their meanings. With this, it seems evident that Phillis Wheatley, much like her literary mentor Alexander Pope and perhaps a number of other eighteenth-century Authors, used italics as an agency for inscribing different meanings within her works, accentuating the Word’s power to Mean.

Implicitly, slavery as social institution informs this thesis’ reading, that in itself represents one of several possible readings, of Phillis Wheatley’s usage of accentuated signifiers. As the fictionalized prologue "The Whipping of Prince" suggests, slavery more than likely influenced Phillis Wheatley and subsequently her writings in a host of subtle ways. For, Phillis, however relatively privileged, was still a slave who was undoubtedly affected by that status. Oddell’s *Memoir* of the poet puts the matter more plainly, saying, she was not only "painfully conscious of the feelings with which her unfortunate race were regarded," but also "aware of the emptiness of many of the artificial distinctions [for example, the ambiguous title:
slave-poet] of life." Certainly, her manipulation of the printed forms of her works can be read as one such manifestation in which slavery played a role.
Notes for Chapter Two


5. According to Lorenzo Johnson Greene, as early as 1646, there were free blacks in colonial New England. The federal census of 1790, the first tabulation which classified Negroes as being either slave or free, indicates that there were 13, 059 free Negroes in the New England colonies. With this, it is reasonable to assume that during Phillis' literary career there existed a moderate population of free blacks in New England. Lorenzo Johnson Greene. *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1776* (New York: Columbia University, 1942), 297.


17. Phillis Wheatley Collection, *Massachusetts Historical Society*.


20. Ibid.


22. Phillis Wheatley Papers, *Bowdoin College Library*.


CHAPTER THREE

And HE said unto Abram, Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall afflict them four hundred years;

-Genesis 15: 13

"When wants and woes might be our righteous lot, Our God forgetting, by God forgot!"

-Phillis Wheatley, "Thoughts on the Works of Providence"

My army cross o-ber, My army cross o-ber, Pharaoh’s army drowned, My army cross o-ber, My army cross o-ber, We’ll cross de riber Jordan.

-"My Army Cross Over," A Slave Spiritual

Before analyzing Wheatley’s use of italics in print, and later, company them to the spirituals, we must first examine the poet’s post-Poems work. Because it is in these writings where one will rediscover her. It is these writings, where one will encounter the unfettered voice of Phillis Wheatley, a voice which at times deconstructs, questions, and rewrites her more often published and popularized one. For instance, in her largely uncelebrated letter to Samson Occom (a Mohegan Indian and a Presbyterian minister), Wheatley not only challenges the negative assertions of many of her post-modern critics,¹ but also, challenges the self-imposed veil of dissemblance which
constitutes her popular persona. Written on February 11, 1774, the poet’s letter to Samson Occom addresses the timely subject of the "ministers of the Gospel of Jesus" "keep[ing] Negroe [sic] slaves," a practice which she felt was "inconsistent with their character and function."

The following is an extract of a Letter from Phillis, a Negro Girl of Mr. Wheatley's, in Boston, to the Rev. Samson Occom, which we are desired to insert as a Specimen of her Ingenuity.

"Rev'd and honor'd Sir,

I have this Day received your obliging kind Epistle, and am greatly satisfied with your Reasons respecting the Negroes, and think highly reasonable what you offer in Vindication of their natural Rights: Those that invade them cannot be insensible that the divine Light is chasing away the thick Darkness which broods over the Land of Africa; and the Chaos which has reign'd so long, is converting into beautiful Order, and [r]eveals more and more clearly, the glorious Dispensation of civil and religious Liberty, which are so inseparately united, that there is little or no Enjoyment of one without the other: Otherwise, perhaps, the Israelites had been less solicitous for their Freedom from Egyptian slavery; I do not say they would have been contented without it, by no means, for in every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance; and by the Leave of our modern Egyptians I will assert, that the same Principle lives in us. God grant Deliverance in his own Way and Time, and get him honour upon all those Avarice impels them to countenance and help forward the Calamities of their fellow Creatures. This I desire 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 of 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."}

Though her manuscripts suggest that she did not intend to publish this letter, its subsequent publication in the
Connecticut Gazette on March 11, 1774, clearly shows a more condemning tone toward colonial slavery than most critics believed her Poems implied. Written shortly after the publication of her historic volume of poetry and several months after her being emancipation, Phillis Wheatley’s letter to Occom boldly indicts those members of the Christian clergy who preach a gospel of love and humanity and yet fail to see the paradox in their possession of their Negro brothers and sisters. But, perhaps even more important, Wheatley’s letter to Occom reveals a rare moment in which the poet explicitly criticizes slavery. There, she characterizes the institution of slavery and more precisely, those who subscribe to and safeguard the physical subjugation of African humanity as a "strange Absurdity" that violates the dialectical "Principle" of "Freedom" where "the glorious Dispensation of civil and religious Liberty" are "inseparably united."

Several years later, Wheatley would find yet another occasion to openly condemn colonial slavery. This time, in an elegy commemorating the memory of General David Wooster, an American patriot who was mortally wounded during Tryon’s raid on Danbury on April 27, 1770, the African-born poet seized the event of his death to address the contradiction in America’s germinating struggle for independence while at the same time holding African slaves in bondage. Addressing Wooster’s widow, Phillis wrote:

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 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.⁵

These defiant words from Phillis Wheatley, now a freedwoman, clearly betray an ideological tension within the poet. It is one in which Phillis Wheatley, as the bond-servant of John and Susanna Wheatley, could not openly acknowledge nor freely address in her poetry.

Though the poet's remarks on the colonists' developing revolution exemplify this tension, her letter to Samson Occom, in particular her appropriation and use of biblical allusion, is telling. Characterizing the corrupt "Preachers or ministers" as "Modern Egyptians," Wheatley's appropriation of biblical syntax, in particular her reference toward the Bible's Exodus story, suggests a direct relationship between the biblical Israelites and the African slaves. To put it another way, the utterance of "our Modern Egyptians," and to an equal extent the phrases "impatient of Oppression" and "pants for Deliverance" underscore silences that suggest that the African in colonial America is the modern Israelite and further that black slavery is the modern equivalent of the biblical Israelites' bondage in Egypt [emphasis mine]. By concealing her criticism of her enslavers within a biblical vernacular, Wheatley not only assumes the religious
discourse of her white enslavers, but also uses the language of
the Bible as meta-text that hides her true feelings from readers
not able or prepared to "read" them.

In this thesis, the poet's letter to Occom thus functions as
a symbolic template which unlocks and deciphers the veiled and/
or accentuated meaning of her works, making the implicit
explicit, the metaphorically textual trans-textual, the
stylistically invisible visible.

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In the poem, "To The University of Cambridge, In New-
England," for example, Wheatley not only admonishes the students
at Harvard College in Cambridge, Massachusetts for their
boisterous reputation, but also remarks subtly on the enslavement
of the African. Using accentuated signifiers, the poet
underscores the poem's superficial design which cautions the
Harvard students to "redeem" and "Improve [their] privileges
while they stay," with a sub-text that signifies on the Bible,
exposing the paradox of black slavery under the aegis of
Christianity. Central to her underlying text within the text is
her use of the profuse symbols of Christ and the biblical
Israelites. For instance, in the first stanza of the poem,
Wheatley writes:

WHILE an intrinsic ardor prompts to write,
The muses promise to assist my pen;
Twas not long since I left my native shore
The land of errors, and Egyptian gloom:
Father of mercy, 'twas thy gracious hand
Brought me in safety from those dark abodes (Wheatley, 15).

Writing in the neoclassic tradition of her day, Wheatley opens the verse by calling on the creative spirit of the muses for inspiration. In the following four lines of the stanza, she creates a colorful metaphor of herself as a benighted saint who has been delivered, much like the ancient Israelites, from a land immersed in sin. There, Wheatley’s allusion towards "Father" simultaneously entreats the image of Christ as the Great Saviour who affords mankind a recourse from sin, and likewise, John Wheatley, the colonial slave master whose purchase of her made her Salvation possible.

In the climate of the racial discourses of her day, however, this stanza can also be read as a simile of a gratified slave. Much in the same way that Poems’ attestation "To the Publick" legitimizes Wheatley’s assertion of literacy, not to mention affording her a certain cultural space within the larger discourse of eighteenth-century letters, Wheatley’s simile can be read as qualifying text which in a racial context locates the poet humbly at the feet, figuratively speaking, of the Harvard students whom she addresses. Thus, in line six, her reference towards a "Father of mercy" whose "gracious hand" literally "Brought" her from the "dark abode" of Africa communicates an image of a slave who is thankful at having been taken from her native land. There, her ambivalent reference toward "those dark
abodes" seems to suggest three possible readings: one, her appropriation of western religion and its subsequent demonization of black Otherness vis-a-vis the Hamitic myth; two, her acceptance of African enslavement as a recourse, though inhuman in its nature, to actualized black Salvation; and three, her assumption that her African identity signifies a particular intimacy with sin, one that is not available to the Harvard students she admonishes. Within the context of these readings, Wheatley’s simile of a happy slave clearly parrots the commonplace ideology of the eighteenth century in regards to the politics of Race and its peculiar relationship with Christianity and colonial industry.

But, when one ponders the significance of the poet’s ambiguous remark, "Egyptian gloom," particularly the author’s deliberate accentuation of the expression, a more subversive sub­text begins to emerge. On the surface, this idiom seems to buttress the superficial images that Wheatley paints of herself as being either a benighted saint or a contented slave or simultaneously both. As the persona of the rescued saint, "Egyptian gloom" qualifies her spiritual authority to address the Harvard students. Similarly, as a contented slave, "Egyptian gloom" reinforces Wheatley’s simile which locates her as one of those benighted souls who was "Brought" from Africa to America, and more importantly, whose apparent affinity with evil and sin justifies her didactic stance.

On another level, however, "Egyptian" possesses more depth
than its cosmetic design. For instance, the sign "Egyptian," as an accentuated signifier, in the expression "Egyptian gloom" can be read as a meta-sign and/or text which appropriates the biblical story of the Israelites' toil under the yoke of Egyptian slavery:

Now there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph. And he said unto his people, Behold, the people of the children of Israel are more and mightier than we. Come, let us deal wisely with them; lest they multiply, and it come to pass, that, when there falleth out any war, they join also unto our enemies, and fight against us. . . Therefore they did set over them taskmasters to afflict them with their burdens. Any they built for Pharaoh treasure cities, Pi-thom and Ra-am-ses. But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew (Exodus 1: 8-12).

While one reading of the expression "Egyptian gloom" bolsters Wheatley's personas of the benighted saint and the happy slave, Wheatley's italic accentuation of the term "Egyptian" suggests an inversed reading which positions the poet and likewise her African brethren among the enslaved Israelites who are led by Moses from "The land of errors, and Egyptian gloom."

Correspondingly, this reading places her white enslavers among the antagonistic Egyptians who eventually inherit God's wrath. Thus, the poet's allusion toward "The land of errors, and Egyptian gloom" refers to the symbols of idolatry and the malicious enslavement of God's Chosen people. "Egyptian gloom," becomes a meta-text which supports a symbolic identification between the biblical Israelites and the colonial slaves. Although most whites during the eighteenth-century would have more than likely understood the religious implications of such a reference-
- in that it qualifies Wheatley's assertion of sainthood, and inadvertently justifies her enslavement on a superficial level--most whites would have overlooked or disregarded the inverted reading of the expression in relation to its author and her station in colonial society. In either case, as an accentuated signifier, Wheatley's "Egyptian gloom" more than likely functions as an encyclopedic sign that conjures up the image of the Bible's Exodus story, an image which she undoubtedly uses as a reflective portrait of her own status as a slave.

In the second stanza of the poem, Wheatley continues to employ biblical signs, creating a sophisticated collage where her accents expose one text literally peeling from the loosely pasted surface of another text.

Students, to you 'tis giv'n to scan the heights
Above, to traverse the ethereal space,
And mark the systems of revolving worlds.
Still more, ye sons of science, ye receive
The blissful news by messengers from heav'n,
How Jesus' blood for your redemption flows.
See him, with hands out-stretcht upon the cross;
Immense compassion in his bosom glows;
He hears revilers, nor resents their scorn:
What matchless mercy in the Son of God!
When the whole human race by sin had fall'n,
He deign'd to die, that they might rise again,
And share with him, in the sublimest skies,
Life without death, and glory without end (Wheatley, 15-16).

On the surface, the poet celebrates, in a very flattering tone, the Harvard students' privilege of education and Christian enlightenment: binary figures which during her day presupposed one another. Accordingly, in lines two and three of the stanza, she praises the students for their bestowed privilege to
"transverse the ethereal heights" of the heavens, chart "the systems of revolving worlds" and exemplify the "blissful news" of Christ’s resurrection. There, Wheatley preaches to the Harvard students of the maintenance of piety.

A closer reading of the stanza, however, particularly of the poet’s deliberate use of accentuation, suggests a different interpretation. A cosmetic reading of the sign "Jesus" indicates that it refers to the biblical story of Christ’s sacrifice for humanity, and as such signifies redemption, or as Wheatley clearly puts it,

How Jesus’ blood for your redemption flows... When the whole human race by sin had fall’n, He deign’d to die, that they might rise again, And share with him, in the sublimest skies, Life without death, and glory without end [underline mine].

Thus, explicit in the poet’s beatific vision of Jesus’ sacrifice is the idea of Christian redemption. That is, Jesus’ death redeemed humanity of its past sins and accorded the recourse of paradise. Significantly, redemption, within the context of the religious vernacular of the eighteenth-century, connotes deliverance.

Understandably, as an accentuated signifier, the expression "Jesus’ blood" characterizes a sign that is more than likely informed by the fact that Wheatley is a slave. Anticipating her 1774 letter to Samson Occom where she states that "the glorious Dispensation of civil and religious Liberty, which are so inseparatably united, that there is little or no Enjoyment of one
without the other," Wheatley's accentuation of the expression "Jesus blood" can be read as a metaphor: one where the poet's idea of Christian redemption signifies both a spiritual and political deliverance. With this, Wheatley's accentuated utterance "Jesus' blood," seems to divulge the underlying irony of Christian redemption in relation to black conversion: a redemption that Wheatley as a slave-poet could only address by way of metaphor, or in this case accentuated signification, but later as a freedwoman writing Samson Occom could refer to openly.

Foregrounding both the first and second stanzas of "To the University of Cambridge," the poem's final stanza explicates both the text and the accentuated text underneath the text.

Improve your privileges while they stay,
Ye pupils, and each hour redeem, that bears
Or good or bad report of you to heav'n.
Let sin, that baneful evil to the soul,
By you be shunn'd, nor once remit your guard;
Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg.
Ye blooming plants of human race divine

An Ethiop tells you, 'tis your greatest foe;
Its transient sweetness turns to endless pain,
And in immense perdition sinks the soul (Wheatley, 16).

Here, Wheatley's caution to the Harvard students comes full circle. In the initial lines of the stanza, she advises, in an almost satirical fashion, the "blooming plants of human race divine" to "Improve [their] privileges while they stay," to "each hour redeem" and most importantly to "Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg." By identifying herself as an "Ethiop," Wheatley again qualifies her voice as that of an outsider (either the
prophetic saint and/or the contented slave) blessed with a tragic vision of sin (her African past), warning the privileged inheritors of western rationality of the cankerous nature of sin. In this context, it is quite apparent that Wheatley uses the first two stanzas of the poem as authenticating documents or texts which justify the presence of her voice through a characterization of herself as a "Noble" African who is saved from her pagan homeland and baptized in the Word. Here, the expression "Ethiop" represents an allusion toward both Wheatley's pagan past and an affirmation of her Christian present.

However, on a subversive level, the third stanza reveals that Wheatley concedes to the notion of white privilege only to challenge it, as well as condemn its underlining pretext of African racial inferiority, and likewise, the white justification of black slavery. For instance, "Ethiop" as an accentuated signifier can be read as an idiom of racial consciousness. As Sondra O'Neale suggests the term "Ethiop,"

might compel eighteenth-century Christians to consider that they had enslaved the heirs of biblical patriarchs: descendants of Moses and his Ethiopian wife (Num. 12:1); of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba—Sheba is an Old Testament term for Ethiopian, 1 Kings 10: 1-13 (2 Chron. 9: 1-12); of Ebed-Melech, the Ethiopian who rescued the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 38 and 39); or of the Ethiopian eunuch whose conversion comprises a chapter in Acts and who, as the first Gentile convert, took the gospel to Africa long before it was taken to Europe (Acts 8: 26-39).³

More than this, "Ethiop," within the context of the stanza's sub-text, induces Wheatley's white enslavers. Through the act of accentuation, she contrasts the position of the Harvard students-
- whom she depicts as boisterous, over-privileged and religiously insincere, (potentially) damned to "endless pain" and eternal damnation ("immense perdition")-- with her own position as a black Christian who resides among God's Chosen children.

Stylistically, her subtle complaint against black slavery becomes even more explicit when one considers the sixth line of the stanza where she advises the students to "Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg," an assertion which in the handwritten manuscript of the poem reads "Suppress the sable monster in its growth." Sable, in the context of eighteenth-century diction, connotes darkness, somberness, shadow, and the color black. The Oxford English Dictionary attributes the word's origin to a carnivorous mammal of northern Europe and Asia which has soft, dark fur [emphasis mine]. Thus, the poet's allusion towards the "sable monster"-- which is understandably changed to "deadly serpent" in its printed version-- whose "baneful evil" turns "transient sweetness" to "endless pain" is probably a sophisticated characterization of black slavery.

Taken as a whole, Wheatley's Cambridge verse can be read as a type of jeremiad that admonishes the Harvard students for their boisterous reputation. Another reading of the poem, however, particularly of the poet's accents and the meta-textual reading they suggest, reveals that Wheatley appropriates the biblical signs of Christ and the Israelites in order condemn subtly her white Christian brethren who hold their African brothers and sisters in bondage.
In much the same way that "To the University of Cambridge" signifies on biblical tradition and allegory, Wheatley's frequently anthologized poem, "On Being Brought from AFRICA to AMERICA" signifies on "To the University of Cambridge."

'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 (Wheatley, 18).

In the first four lines of this verse, Wheatley once again employs the dialogic metaphors (the prophetic saint and the gratified slave) she uses in the Cambridge poem. Thus, one reading of these lines creates an image of Wheatley as an outsider who by the Grace of the "Saviour," finds redemption and likewise salvation in being "brought" from her native land. Another reading of the these lines, however, suggests that the poet assumes a minstrel posture of a contented slave who discovers a redemption which at one point she ironically "neither sought nor knew" in being literally "brought" from her "Pagan [home] land." There, the expression "Pagan land" distinguishes the poet from her white audience by alluding to the allegedly idolatrous character of Wheatley's past which also denotes her ethnic origins. Interestingly enough, in her usage of the term "brought," Wheatley creates a semantic intersection that, in part, joins stylistically the personas of the foreboding saint and the simile of the gratified slave, and, in part, punctuates
the underlying individuality of each metaphor independently.

In lines five and six, she calls attention to her African past, and more precisely, its sociological relevancy in a racially stratified society. There, the poet’s direct invocation toward Race can be read as an authenticating strategy in which Wheatley qualifies her admonishment of her white audience. Much like her caution to the Harvard students in the Cambridge verse, Wheatley assumes the posture of a benighted messenger who is "view[ed]" "with [a] scornful eye" because her "colour" represents a "diabolic[al]" dye. By emphasizing her racial Otherness, Wheatley suggests that Race again assumes a certain religious capital with regards to sin, one where blackness seems to approximate evil, thus locating Wheatley’s persona(s) in an accommodating position in relation to the white audience she warns.

In the final lines of "On Being Brought from AFRICA to AMERICA," Wheatley’s caution to her white, Christian brothers and sisters fully emerges. There, the poet offers Christian redemption to her benighted brethren, while at the same time, moderately castigating her white "Christian" brethren, particularly those whose "scornful eye" prejudge the "Negro[’s]" spiritual character because of his "sable race." Syntactically, the connected terms "Christians" and "Negros" in the seventh line suggest that the poem is a versified observance of the themes of Christian brotherhood and spiritual egalitarianism.

Another reading of the final couplet of "On Being Brought,"
however, underscores an acknowledgment on Wheatley's part of the social determinacy of Race within colonial society. Wheatley’s allusion toward black spiritual transformation, or more specifically, the "angelic train" that "Negros," although "black as Cain" can join, seems to critique the institution of slavery which is partially justified by the white assumption of black idolatry. More than this, her ambivalent reference to black "redemption," much like her Cambridge verse, seems to anticipate her letter to Samson Occom in which she explicates Christian redemption as both a "civil and religious Liberty, which are so inseparably united, that there is little or no Enjoyment of one without the other."

As meta-texts, the accentuated signs in "On Being Brought from AFRICA to AMERICA" suggest yet another reading of the verse. The title of the poem, for instance, can be read as the poet’s initial signal that the verse contains a sub-text that is quite different from the surface design of the verse affirming Wheatley’s faith in her race and their potential for religious conversion. For example, by accentuating the terms "AFRICA" and "AMERICA" and connecting them syntactically with the verb "Brought," Wheatley intentionally creates a level of ambivalence in the title that suggests a sub-text in which the poet seems to voice something of her experience in being forcibly transported from "AFRICA to AMERICA." There, the accentuation of the terms "AFRICA" and "AMERICA" denotes a juxtaposition: one where Wheatley, as both a Middle Passage survivor and subsequently a
slave, apparently contemplates the contrast of being once free in her native "AFRICA," however "Pagan," with the state of being "Brought" and enslaved in "AMERICA."

The sign "Pagan," as an accentuated signifier, in the expression "Pagan land" can also be read as a meta-sign which possesses more depth than it implies superficially. On the surface, "Pagan" authenticates the didactic stance Wheatley assumes toward her white audience. Another reading of the expression, however, suggests that "Pagan land" operates as a metaphorical synonym for the expression "Egyptian gloom," which Wheatley employs in her verse "To the University of Cambridge." Much in the same way that the phrase "Egyptian gloom" colors a symbolic analogy between the biblical Israelites and the colonial slaves, the expression "Pagan land" seems to signify on the first stanza of the Cambridge verse, more precisely, its underlying text which appropriates the Bible’s Exodus story in order to juxtapose the image of the Israelites’ enslavement with that of the African in colonial America, and likewise, the image of the tyrannical Egyptians with the colonial slave-holding aristocracy.

The idea that Wheatley’s accentuated sign "Pagan" (much like the sign, "Egyptian") adopts the Exodus story and uses it as pretext that alludes to slavery is reinforced in the third and the fourth lines of the poem where she writes:

That there’s a God, that there’s a Saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.

One the surface, Wheatley’s reference to "Saviour" clearly draws
on the Bible’s story of Christ’s death and resurrection. Much like the second stanza of the Cambridge poem, the third line of “On Being Brought” operates as authenticating strategy that enables Wheatley’s underlying caution to her white “Christian” brethren. However, “Saviour,” as an accentuated signifier can be read as a meta-textual referent: one that appropriates the Bible’s Exodus story and uses it as a veiled allusion toward slavery. Semantically, line three characterizes a versified refrain: one in which the terms “God” and “Saviour” insinuate one and the same thing. Moreover, in the religious vernacular of the eighteenth-century,10 “Saviour” identifies not only the title of Christ as the Savior in the New Testament, whose death and redemption ‘saved’ mankind, but also the title of Yahweh and/or Jehovah, who delivered the Children of Israel from their bondage in Egyptian. Biblical examples include 2 Samuel 22: 2-3: “And he said, The LORD is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliver; The God of my rock; in him will I trust: he is my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my high tower, and my refuge, my savior. . .”; Psalms 106: 21: “They forgot God their saviour, which had done great things in Egypt”; Isaiah 43:3: “For I am the Lord thy God, the Holy One of Israel, the Saviour”; Isaiah 49:26: “And I will feed them that oppress thee with their own flesh; and they shall be drunken with their own blood, as with sweet wine: and all flesh shall know that I the LORD am thy Saviour and thy Redeemer. . .” With this, Wheatley’s accentuation of the term “Pagan” obviously colors a symbolic identification between the
biblical Israelites and colonial slaves.

Similarly, in line four, Wheatley's reference to "redemption" can also be read as an allusion toward slavery. Foreshadowing her letter to Samson Occom, Wheatley's reference more than likely had both a "civil and religious Liberty" in mind when she penned the term. June Jordan observes that line four, in particular the word "once," suggest that "Once I [the poet] existed beyond and without these terms [white hegemony] under consideration" (255). In a similar vein, Katherine Clay Bassard asserts that the fourth line denotes a semantic rupture that not only breaks the poem in two structurally, but also reveals a silence that bemoans the poet's past, as well as her memory, albeit short-lived, of freedom (32).

In the final couplet, the poet's accentuated meta-text comes full circle. A cosmetic reading of the couplet indicates an affirmation of Wheatley's faith in her race and their ability to realize Christian redemption. On a literal level, she seems to be saying that "Christians" should "Remember" that "Negros," black as Cain" have souls that can be saved. There, her reference "black as Cain" can be read as an allusion toward the western notion of the Hamitic myth. Another reading of the couplet, however, suggests the poet calls into question the notion of Christian brotherhood, and more importantly, those whose behaviors as Christians, the colonial slave master or the African slave, exemplifies true Christendom. Central to this reading is the poet's use of accentuated signifiers. Insightfully, James
Levernier observes,

by italicizing the words "Christians," "Negroes," and "Cain," she links the three terms rhetorically, thereby creating a level of ambiguity in the line with the deeper message of the poem. This deeper message is that both Christians and Negroes, like Cain, are sons of Adam and that as sons of Adam they both inherit equally the fruits of original sin, of which slavery and economic greed are a part (26).

Similarly, Charles Scruggs, also observes the significance of the poet's italics, saying,

Although the Negro appears to be Cain to white Americans, he is not Cain in Christ's eyes. The italicized words not only emphasize the falsehood of the analogy but they also serve as a reminder that all human beings--including whites--need to be "refined" before they "join th' angelic train" (287).

Thus, implicit in her accentuation of the terms of "Christians," "Negroes," and "Cain," is Wheatley's own peculiar status as a slave. Moreover, by accentuating the expression "Remember Christians," Wheatley reveals that those Christians who justify black enslavement on the nonsensical basis of their racial Otherness, the "diabolic[al] die" of colour, are in fact hypocrites. Much like her Cambridge poem, Wheatley's "On Being Brought from AFRICA to AMERICA" also seems to anticipate her letter to Samson Occom where she openly censures those "minister of the Gospel of Jesus" who engage in the corruptive practice of "keep[ing] Negro [sic] slaves."

Taken together, Phillis Wheatley's "To the University of Cambridge, In New-England," and likewise, "On Being Brought from AFRICA to AMERICA" appropriate the biblical stories of the Israelites bondage in Egypt and Christ's resurrection in order to
articulate her loathing of those who violate the "natural Rights" of black humanity. In both poems, Wheatley employs accentuated signifiers as a literary strategy to point to a meta-discourse in which she criticizes slavery.

Still, within the larger framework of the black vernacular, Wheatley's appropriation of biblical allegory is not unusual. During the nineteenth century, for example, Black slaves from different regions of the United States also signified on the biblical stories that surround Christ and the Israelites, creating an enormous idiomatic text which underscored both a complex narrative of dissent and a pervasive black consciousness. Much like Phillis Wheatley (and arguably a number of other slave-poets of the eighteenth century), the slave spiritual transformed, through the acts of semantic appropriation and cultural inheritance and/or creolization, the slave's melody into a subtle articulation of their enslavement, one that went unnoticed by most whites.

On the subject of the slave spiritual's critique of slavery, historian Charles Joyner observes insightfully that the slave songs "did not make a sharp distinction between the sacred and secular worlds" (167). Donald H. Matthews argues that the slave spiritual created "a liminal space [suspended] between heaven and earth," where the slaves fought "the dominant society's effort to negate" their resistive, cultural identity (27-28). Semantically, spirituals contain what V.N. Volosinov and Mikhail Bakhtin call double voiced discourse. This involves an inversion of surface
meaning and a subversion of its acculturated form. In addition, such specialist on spirituals as, Mark Miles Fisher, John Lovell, Jr., Lawrence Levine, Albert J. Raboteau, John White and Jon Michael Spencer all agree that the spirituals appropriate and rewrite the narratives of the Bible into a metalanguage which absorbed the religious traditions of white society only to expose its deep-seated hypocrisies and contradictions.¹⁴

Much like Phillis Wheatley’s "To the University of Cambridge" and "On Being Brought from AFRICA to AMERICA," the complex signs of Christ and the Israelites lie at the center of the slave singers’ acts of protest and resistance. "Go Down Moses," for example, uses the biblical story of Moses and the Israelites’ Egyptian bondage to express subtler messages about black slavery in antebellum America:

When Israel was in Egypt’s land,
O let my people go!
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
O let my people go!

CHORUS
O go down, Moses
Away down to Egypt’s land,
And tell King Pharaoh
To let my people go!

Thus saith the Lord bold Moses said
O let my people go!
If not I’ll smite your first born dead
O let my people go!

No more shall they in bondage toil
O let my people go!
Let them come out with Egypt’s spoil,
O let my people go. . .”¹⁵

Recorded by Harwood Vernon in 1861, these three stanzas from "Go
Down Moses" not only recount the Exodus parable, but also identify the Negro’s antebellum slavery with its Old Testament archetype. Similarly, in "Come Along, Moses," the slave singer again signifies on the Bible’s Exodus story.

Come along, Moses, don’t get lost,  
don’t get lost, don’t get lost,  
Come along, Moses, don’t get lost,  
We are the people of God.

1. We have a just God to plead-a our cause,  
to plead-a our cause, to plead-a our cause,  
We have a just God to plead-a our cause,  
We are the people of God.

2. He sits in Heaven and he answers prayer.

3. Stretch out your rod and come across.16

The spiritual "Let God’s Saints Come In," also colors the story of Moses and the Israelites.

Come down, angel, and trouble the water,  
Come down, angel, and trouble the water,  
Come down, angel, and trouble the water,  
And let God’s saints come in.

1. Canaan land is the land for me,  
And let God’s saints come in.  
Canaan land is the land for me,  
And let God’s saints come in.

2. There was a wicked man,  
He kept them children in Egypt land.

3. God did say to Moses one day,  
Say, Moses go to Egypt land,  

4. And tell him to let my people go  
And Pharaoh would not let’em go...

Much in the same way that Phillis Wheatley’s "To the University of Cambridge" and "On Being Brought" rewrite the Bible’s Exodus story into an agency which criticizes slavery, the antebellum
slave spirituals, in particular these "Exodus" songs, also appropriate the same biblical parable in order to express their grievances as slaves. To Jon Michael Spencer, these "Exodus" songs not only betray selective appropriation on the part of the slave singers, but also, on a subversive level, express the slave's belief "that God would do for them what was done for the Israelites" (18).

Yet, another reading of these "Exodus" songs underscores the notion that the antebellum slaves were the modern Israelites of the Bible. As Lawrence Levine observes, the slave spiritual's appropriation of the Bible and subsequently its mythic heroes, in this case Moses and implicitly the Israelites, represents a dialogic discourse in which the slave singers adopted biblical narratives that reflected their situation and embodied their desires. Not surprisingly, the single most persistent image the spirituals contain is that of the Chosen people. A number of the spirituals, for instance, identify the slave singers as the "true believer," "We are de people of de Lord," "God's chil'n," "We are the people of God," "a child of God," "Dese all my fader's children," "I'm born of God, I know I am."

Interestingly enough, when examined along side each other, the "Exodus" spirituals, Wheatley's "To the University of Cambridge" and "On Being Brought from AFRICA and AMERICA" appropriate the Bible's Exodus story in similar ways. Both use Exodus to criticize the peculiarity of being a slave. Both characterize the African slave as the modern incarnation of the
biblical Israelites. While this idea is evident in the slave spiritual, it is implicit in Wheatley's accentuation of the expressions "Egyptian gloom" and "Pagan land." Both, also share the same implied text which conveys the impression that the Egyptians represent the colonial slave masters.

While the Bible's story of Moses and the enslaved Israelites unquestionably influenced both the writings of Phillis Wheatley and the antebellum slaves who sang the spirituals, the Bible's story of Christ's resurrection and the Redemption of mankind also provided them (Phillis and the slave singers) with inspiration. In the slave spirituals, for instance, Christ signified the promise of another life, one unfettered by the shackles of slavery. To the slave singers, Jesus was the gatekeeper to door that led to heaven, a world in which they would finally gain their freedom. According to Howard Thurman's *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*, Christ represented freedom, "freedom from slavery and freedom from life" (32). In a similar tone, Benjamin Mays asserts that the slave spiritual's appropriation of Christ served as a "compensatory" discourse where the slave believed that he or she was entitled to paradise in Heaven in exchange for hellish life on earth (26).

Understandably, in many of these "Redemption" spirituals, the slave singers sought communion with Christ by identifying symbolically with him in their songs. In "Lord, Remember Me," for instance, the slave sang "I want to die like--a Jesus die," whereas in "Go In The Wilderness" they sang about meeting Jesus
In "The Golden Altar," they sang about going home to "see [their beloved] Jesus,"

John saw-r-O,
John saw-r-O,
John saw de holy number settin on de gold alter!

1. It’s a little while longer yere below.
   yere below
   It’s a little while longer yere below,
   Before de Lamb of God!

2. And home to Jesus we will go,
   We will go, etc.;
   We are de people of the Lord.
   John saw-r-O, etc.

3. Dere’s golden slipper in de heavens for, etc.,
   Before de Lamb of God.

4. I wish I’d been dere when prayer begun, etc.

5. To see my Jesus about my sins, etc.

6. Then home to glory we will go, etc.

In "Don’t Be Weary, Traveler," the subtle undertones, which suggest a yearning for freedom in another life, appear even more evident:

Don’t be weary, traveler,
Come along home to Jesus;
Don’t be weary, traveler,
Come along home to Jesus;

1. My head got wet with the midnight dew,
   Come along home to Jesus;
   Angels bear me witness too,
   Come along home to Jesus.

2. Where to go I did not know
   Ever since he freed my soul.

3. I look at de worl’ and de worl’ look new,
   I look at de worl’ and de worl’ look new.

A number of Phillis Wheatley’s elegies also appropriate and
 rewrite the Bible’s story of Christ’s death and the Redemption of mankind as a recourse toward imagining freedom. However, before examining this particular aspect of Wheatley’s elegiac writings, one must address the form and content of the poet’s elegies and the elegiac tradition she adopts.

On one level, Wheatley’s elegies are illustrative of the “Puritan” elegiac tradition in which she wrote. Like most of the elegies produced during her day, Wheatley’s elegies are poetic songs which mourn the death of their subjects. Stylistically, they had the triple purpose of praising the deceased, lamenting his or her death, and comforting the bereaved, stressing the Puritan elements of portraiture and exhortation. Consistent with this tradition, Wheatley includes the beatific vision of the souls of the deceased in winged flight toward Christ and the abode of the blessed. Throughout the body of her elegiac work, Death was often characterized by the poet as a radiant “immortal shore,” an abode of “etherial light,” a “perfect bliss,” a region “of celestial light,” a place of “pleasures without measure, without end.” In contrast, Life on earth was depicted as a “dark vale below,” a “vale of night,” or a dusty “mortal shore.”

And yet, notwithstanding the Puritan elegiac tradition she appropriated, Phillis, like most poets, developed her own distinctive elegiac style. As Gregory Rigsby’s informative essay, "Form and Content in Phillis Wheatley’s Elegies" suggests, Wheatley’s elegies possessed elements that were seemingly unconventional, considering the tradition in which she wrote. For
example, Wheatley’s beatific vision of heaven often emphasized a poetic montage in which music played a central role. The sense of hearing "seraphic strains," "the heavenly court resound[ing]," "The Choirs angelic shout[ing]," and songs of praise of the saints and angels equated happiness. However, traditionally, elegiac discourse tended to stress the sense of sight over the sense of sound in the Beatific Vision. Therefore, Rigsby argues compellingly, the poet’s melodious Vision signifies on the musical tradition of her African past (254). He also suggests that Wheatley’s emphasis on a Vision of the celestial life over a terrestrial is another characteristic of her particular style. Customarily, Puritan elegies read like epitaphs in which the life of the deceased is recounted in some detail. They usually portray death as a tyrant of sorts who snatches man away from his temporal existence in order for him to realize a higher state of being. In contrast, Phillis Wheatley did not seem to stress earthly portraiture. Instead, she focused more on the celestial life of the deceased, ascending to the sky, joining the souls of the righteous in Heaven, being counted within the community of the blessed. There, the deceased enjoyed a life identical to their life on earth. According to Rigsby, this emphasis colors the poet’s Memory of the African tradition of ancestral worship.26

What Rigsby misses, however, is Wheatley’s use of accentuated signifiers. These accents can be read as a metaphorical double voice in which she articulates her own yearning for freedom in Christ whose death signified both a
spiritual and a political Salvation. Or, as she would later put it, in her letter to Samson Occom, a Redemption in which "the glorious Dispensation of civil and religious Liberty, are so inseparably united, that there is little or no Enjoyment of one without the other." Much as her poetic mentor, Alexander Pope, used italics intentionally to affect both the form and meaning of his works, Wheatley’s accentuated signifiers, particularly in her elegies, also manipulate the form and meaning of her works.

For example, in her eulogy to Joseph Sewall, Wheatley not only expressed her desire for freedom, but also found an occasion to critique slavery. Accordingly, in the first stanza of the poem, she writes:

EREd yet morn its lovely blushes spread,
See Sewell number’d with the happy dead.
Hail, holy man, arriv’d th’ immortal shore,
Though we shall hear thy warning voice no more.
Come, let us all behold with wishful eyes
The saint ascending to his native skies;
From hence the prophet wing’d his rapt’rous way
To the blest mansions in eternal day.
Then begging for the Spirit of our God,
And panting eager for the same abode,
Come, let us all with the same vigour rise,
And take a prospect of the blissful skies;
While on our minds Christ’s image is imprest,
And the dear Saviour glows in ev’ry breast.
Thrice happy saint! to find thy heav’n at last
What compensation for the evils past (Wheatley, 19)!

Stylistically, the stanza is an exhortation. In lines one through eight, Wheatley envisions the prophetic "Sewall" in winged flight, "ascending to his native skies" "to the blest mansions in eternal day." In line three, she characterizes Heaven as an "immortal shore." In lines eleven through fourteen, the poet
urges her white readers to aspire toward the Christian piety that Sewall exemplifies.

Joseph Sewall was the minister of the Old South Church and Meeting House. He fervently preached that "man was indelibly scarred by the original sin, and only by the knowledge of Christ and through good works could he hope for salvation in eternity." In a social-political context, he had many of the same social reform interests as did Susanna Wheatley (Phillis' mistress), the Countess of Huntingdon, and John Thornton who were quite active in improving conditions for Africans and Native Americans through education and missionary work. Like many of his acquaintances, Sewall maintained a continuing interest in the Moor's Indian Charity School. He also stirred some controversy by performing slave marriages.

Wheatley's accents, however, suggest another reading of the stanza. On the surface, "Sewall" can be read as a mode in which Wheatley simply calls attention to the subject of her elegy. This form was quite common in the eighteenth-century "Puritan" elegy. More often than not, Phillis personally knew the people whose deaths prompted her elegiac poems. However, another reading of "Sewall,"--particularly in light of Rigsby's analysis of Wheatley's elegiac style, and likewise the significance that water (a point that I will discuss later) plays metaphorically in her elegies--suggests that the poet's accentuation of the name of the deceased possesses more depth than it conveys cosmetically. As a meta-text, the accentuation of "Sewall" can be
interpreted as a sign of dissemblance in which Wheatley deliberately obscures the subject of the elegy, inverting her own role as the Author into that of the Subject of the elegy's subtext. Or to put it another way, by accenting "Sewall," the poet camouflages her own imaginary flight towards Christ and freedom underneath the veil of her deceased Subject's flight toward Christ and a new life. Certainly, the image of the betwixt soul, suspend between this world and "th' immortal shore," seems to foreshadow the peculiar social space that Wheatley, as a slave-poet, occupied. Stylistically, this reading of Wheatley’s accent is bolstered when one considers the fact that it was common practice for Puritan elegists, after glorifying the deceased, to return to earth to admonish the living.

Wheatley’s imaginary flight towards freedom and Christ is reinforced structurally in the thirteenth line of the verse where she accentuates the expression "Christ’s image." This phrase locates the figure of Christ at the crest of Wheatley’s Beatific Vision. Following the Puritan tradition of her day, she challenges her fellow Christian to live up to Christ’s example, to aspire to the promise of Redemption which "Sewall" achieved both in life and death. As an accentuated signifier, however, "Christ" signifies on the Bible’s story of mankind’s redemption by way of Jesus’ death. Much like her accentuation of the expression "Jesus’ blood" in her Cambridge verse, the expression "Christ’s image" also seems to underscore the poet’s desire for a truer sense of freedom, one which as a Christian, she possesses
spiritually, yet, as a black slave is denied to her physically. Again, Wheatley seems to anticipate her letter to Samson Occom in composing the phrase "Christ’s image," and likewise, the accentuated expression "Jesus’ blood" in line thirty and the phrase "Christ, the bread descending from above" in line forty-four of the verse.

Further, in this reading, her references to the "compensation [for] the evils past" in line sixteen, and the Christian redemption which "rescues sinners from the chains of guilt" in line forty-one underscore a level of ambiguity that can be read, in light of the Subject of the elegy’s sub-text, as allusions toward slavery.

In "On The Death of a Young Lady of Five Years of Age," Wheatley, again, uses accentuated signifiers to transcend, at least symbolically, the tradition of the colonial Puritan funeral elegy, voicing her poetic cry for Freedom. As in "On the Death of the Rev. Dr. Sewall. 1769," she again accentuates the name of the deceased, "Nancy," to point to her own imaginary flight toward Christ and freedom. Thus, in the first stanza of this verse, she writes:

FROM dark abodes to fair ethereal light
Th' enraptured innocent has wing'd her flight;
On the kind bosom of eternal love
She finds unknown beatitude above.
This know, ye parent, nor her loss deplore,
She feels the iron hand of pain no more;
The dispensation of unerring grace,
Should turn your sorrows into grateful praise;
Let then no tears for her henceforward flow,
No more distress'd in our dark vale below (Wheatley, 25).
In the initial four lines of the stanza, Wheatley envisions her subject, the "fair" "Nancy," "enraptur'd" in a spiritual flight toward "bosom of eternal love." In line eleven, she characterizes life on earth as "dark vale below", whereas in line one and seven "fair ethereal life" and "unerring grace" typifies Life after Death. As in many of Wheatley’s elegies, the Beatific Vision of "Nancy['s]" flight is depicted as one suspended between the "dark abodes" of temporality and the "etherial light" of the celestial abode of Christ.

As the subject of the poem’s accentuated sub-text, "Nancy['s]" flight veils Wheatley’s own imaginary flight towards Christ and freedom. Symbolically, "Nancy['s]" flight between heaven and the "dark vale below" can be read as an allusion toward Wheatley’s betwixt station as a slave-poet in colonial society. Further, her reference to "the iron hand of pain" in line six clearly embodies an ambivalence which can read as an allusion toward slavery.

In the final stanza of the poem, her subtle reference toward slavery is even more apparent. There, she writes:

Perfect in bliss she from her heav’nly home
Look down, and smiling beckons you to come;
Why then, fond parent, why these fruitless groans?
Restrain your tears, and cease your plaintive moans.
Freed from a world of sin, and snares, and pain
Why would you wish your daughter back again?
No--bow resign’d. Let hope your grief control,
And check the rising tumult of the soul.
Calm in the prosperous, and adverse day,
Adore the God who gives and takes away;
Eye him in all, his holy name revere,
Upright your actions, and hearts sincere,
Till having sail’d through life’s tempestuous sea,
And from its rocks, and boist’rous billows free,
Yourselves, safe landed on the blissful shore,
Shall join your happy babe to part no more (Wheatley, 26).

Although on the surface, this stanza beckons the parents of the deceased child not to mourn their loss, the sub-text of this stanza clearly exhibits Wheatley’s aversion to slavery. In the poem’s accentuated text, Wheatley’s reference to "a world of sin, and snares, and pain," can be interpreted as an allusion toward the poet’s own ambiguous station as a "Negro Girl, belonging to one Mr. [John] Wheatley of Boston." Thus, implicit in poet’s joyous flight which "Free[s] [her] from a world of sin, and snares, and pain," is the idea that she realizes Freedom through Death, freedom from slavery.

In several other elegies, Wheatley again transforms the literary tradition of the Puritan elegy into a subversive occasion to reveal something of black slavery in colonial America. In "A Funeral Poem on the Death of C. E. an Infant of Twelve Months," she describes slavery as "the lash for horrid crimes I felt," whereas, "the trick’ling tear from Mis’ry’s eye," characterizes slavery in her elegy, "TO His Honour the Lieutenant-Governor, on the Death of his Lady." In "To a Lady On the Death of Three Relations," she makes an allusion to slavery in the line that reads "From bondage freed, the exulting spirit flies."

Through the poet’s use of accentuated signifiers these elegies also underscore the notion of a return, at least
symbolically, to her homeland in Africa. Throughout her elegies, Wheatley depicts death and spiritual ascension as a metaphor where the winged soul of the deceased journeys over Water. In "On the Death of the Rev. Dr. Sewell. 1769," for example, "Sewell," "arriv[es] [safely on] th' immortal shore," whereas in "To a Gentleman and Lady on the Death of the Lady's Brother and Sister, and a Child of the Name Avis, Aged One Year," "Avis," the only person Wheatley mentions directly by name, takes flight from the "mortal shore," where "Death reigns tyrant." In "To His Honour the Lieutenant-Governor, On the Death of His Lady," "Death" carries Mary Sanford Oliver to "th' immortal coast," while in "To the Honourable T.H. Esq; On the Death of His Daughter," Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Hubbards watch their daughter, "[Thankfull Hubbard] Leonard" ascend to the skies, leaving behind the "earth's dusky shore." In "On the Death of a Young Lady of Five Years of Age," Wheatley consoles "Nancy['s]" parents, reminding them that one day after "sail[ing] through life's tempestuous sea" they will join their "happy babe" "on the blissful shore." Equally telling, in her famous elegiac poem to George Whitefield, Wheatley pictures the reverent "Whitefield" "sail[ing] to Zion, through [the] vast seas of day." In each of these elegies, Wheatley's allusion to crossing over water--a literary motif which does not seem to appear in the elegiac works of her contemporaries--more than likely colors the memory of her Middle Passage experience. As a slave who survived the horrible ordeal, her metaphorical crossing can be read as a symbolic return. By accentuating the
names of the departed whom she elegizes, their journey becomes hers: both spiritually and physically, their familial separation becomes her familial reunification.

The metaphor of crossing over water also figures in the nineteenth-century slave spiritual. Much like the African-born poet’s concealed flight under the veil of the elegiac mode, the slave spirituals suggest that the singers also pictured themselves crossing over water in order to reach Christ and Freedom. For instance, in the spiritual "Hold Your Light," the slaves sang of crossing over to "Canaan shore," while in "O Brother, Don’t Get Weary," they "landed on Canaan’s shore." In the spiritual, "Sail, O Believer," the slave singers "Sail, Sail, over yonder, And view de promised land." On several other occasions, interestingly enough, they characterized Jesus as a Captain of a ship or vessel who ferried them over the river, in most cases the Jordan River, to the Promised Land. Accordingly, in "The Old Ship of Zion," the slave singers sang,

1. What ship is that you’re enlisted upon?
   O glory hallelujah!
   ‘Tis the old ship of Zion, hallelujah!
   ‘Tis the old ship of Zion, hallelujah!

2. And who is the Captain of the ship that you’re on?
   O glory, etc.
   My Saviour is the Captain, hallelujah!

3. Don’t you see that ship a sail-in’,
   a sail-in’, a sail-in’,
   Don’t you see that ship sail-in’,
   Gwine over to the Promised Land. . . .

Correspondingly, in "Children Do Linger," they sang:

1. O member, will you linger?
See de chil-en’ do linger here.

2. I go to glory wid you, Member, join.
3. O Jesus is our Captain.
4. He lead on to glory.
5. We’ll meet at Zion gateway.
6. We’ll talk dis story over.
7. We’ll enter into glory.
8. When we done wid dis world trials.
9. We done wid all our crosses.
10. O brudder, will you meet us?
11. When de ship is out a-sailin’.
12. O Jesus got de hellum.
13. Fader, gader in your chil’en.
15. ’Twas a beauituous Sunday mornin’.
16. When he rose from de dead.
17. He will bring you milk and honey.\(^{32}\)

Like Phillis Wheatley’s elegies, the slave spirituals’ allusion toward crossing over water also referred to their memory of their African homeland where a number of these songs indicate they were reunited with their relatives. For many of the nineteenth-century slave singers, Africa was a Memory, undeniably black, passed from one generation to another through African oral tradition. Water, as a literary device, concealed their longing to return to their ancestral home. For instance, in the slave spiritual "Deep River," a slave revealed to his Quaker benefactor that the song’s reference to "cross[ing] over" actually meant crossing over to Africa, the home of the camp meetings:

Deep River, my home is Jordan, Deep River,
Lord, I want to cross over into camp ground;
Lord, I want to cross over into camp ground;
Lord, I want to cross over into camp ground;
Lord, I want to cross over into camp ground;
Lord, I want to cross over into camp ground.\(^{33}\)

In sum, both the slave spirituals of the nineteenth century and the eighteenth-century funerary psalms of Phillis Wheatley
signified on biblical stories surrounding Christ's resurrection and redemption of mankind. In their celebration of death and their subsequent rebirth in Christ, both Phillis and the slave singers voiced their deep yearning for freedom, a yearning which reflected their immense antipathy toward their enslavement.
Notes for Chapter Three


2. The Connecticut Gazette; and the Universal Intelligencer, March 11, 1774, 3.

3. In her 1779 proposal for the publication of a second volume of poetry, there is no mention of the letter she wrote to Samson Occom.


Within the Wheatley canon itself, few scholars have addressed the subject of Wheatley's appropriation of biblical signs, and more importantly, how this appropriation connects to the larger discourse of the slave tradition. Except for Sondra O'Neale's insightful essay, "A Slave's Subtle War: Phillis Wheatley's Use of Biblical Myth and Symbol," and Lonnell Edward Johnson's penetrating doctoral dissertation, Portrait of the Bondslave in the Bible: Slavery and Freedom in the Work of Four Afro-American Poets, the subject is an altogether untreated topic.


17. Aside from Moses, the slave singers appropriated a number of the Bible’s heroes. For example, in "O my Lord, Delivered Daniel," they sang,

He delivered Daniel from the lion’s den,
Jonah from de belly ob de whale,
And de Hebrew children from de fiery furnace,
And why not every man?

There, the singers appropriation of the biblical allegories of Daniel and the lion’s den, Jonah and the whale, and the parable where Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are thrown into a furnace for not bowing to an idol god, not only underscores a symbolic identification between the slave singers and the biblical Israelites, but also suggests that the Negro is entitled to the same deliverance that God accorded Daniel and the other articulate heroes of the Bible. In "O Daniel," the slave singers’ identification with Israelites, and therefore God’s Chosen lot, is even more explicit.

O my Lord delivered Daniel,
O Daniel, O Daniel,
O my Lord delivered Daniel,
O why not deliver me too?


19. Allen, 24, 30, 32; 77; 56, 51, 60; 126; 72; 101; 58.

20. Allen, 12.


22. Allen, 77.

23. Allen, 75.


26. Ibid., 251-252, 256.


32. Allen, 51.

CHAPTER FOUR

*Un Dénouement.* In the Beginning, according to the apostle John, there was the Word, and it only existed with God before man, before time. To Christians that word signifies Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, the word incarnate. To Jews, the descendants of the Ancient Israelites, that word represents the Law and probably more importantly God’s Covenant with them. In the broader context of the Judeo-Christian tradition, however, that word signifies the Bible, the written Memory of God-- some would argue, a text which essentially recounts the trials and tribulations of both the Ancient Israelites and the emergence/ career of Christ. Metaphorically though, the Word symbolizes struggle, resistance, perseverance, and most importantly, faith.

For the newly arriving African slave that Word provided much of the imagery that fashioned the first tools of his rebellion against his forced enslavement in the new world. As a repository of symbolic and figurative language, the ambiguities of the Bible provided the enslaved with a strong metaphorical foundation that he or she could use to protest against the cruel conditions of his situation. Understandably, at the core of the struggle against slavery lay the powerful images of Christ's crucifixion/resurrection and the stories which surrounded the Ancient Israelites. To the slaves, the story of Christ
sacrificing himself for humanity, the Israelites toiling in Egyptian slave-labor camps, making bricks without straw, and afterwards struggling for a sense of identity after becoming free were not only personal, in that these stories somewhat mirrored their condition in bondage, but also supplied Hope in an otherworldly life which would serve as a reward for the wretched austerity of their temporal predicament.

For instance, in eighteenth century Boston, New England the biblical narratives of Christ and the Israelites afforded a sickly, informally educated, eighteen year old, slave-woman by the name of Phillis Wheatley the transcendental agency that helped her to overcome the psychological and spiritual confines of her particular drudgery and sustained her with a voice of subtle discourse which critiqued and criticized the very system that held her physically shackled. To Wheatley, the metaphors of Christ and the Chosen not only provided precedents to challenge the white assertion of black inferiority, but also provided the poet with a religious language to protest her enslavement without the fear of white detection or reproach. Christ simultaneously signified black spiritual Salvation and Freedom. Further, the biblical Israelites’ Egyptian bondage revealed both God’s omnipotent power to both Deliver and Destroy.

Similarly, in the nineteenth century, black slave singers from various parts of the southern region of the United States also signified on the Gospels as a way of revealing the hardships of their condition. Intertwining the rhythmic pulse of song with
the allegorical character of the Scriptures, they, too, afforded themselves symbolic occasions to surmount the inescapable restrictions of their society, and voiced deeply held emotions which they ordinarily were not allowed to express. Slave spirituals such as "Go Down Moses, Go," "Steal Away to Jesus," and "We'll Cross De Mighty River" not only operated as a sophisticated medium where they cleverly communicated with one another without arousing the suspicion of their masters, but also in Kerran L. Sanger's words, as a "rhetorical self-definition that served to refute limiting definitions pressed on them by whites" (177). In short, the antebellum slave managed to hold on to a sense of humanity, self-worth and identity by voicing his grievances vicariously though parable, metaphor and song.

As a whole, the intertextual thematic underlining Phillis Wheatley's poetry and the slave spirituals is a repressed narrative, a palimpsestic tablet within the larger text of the black vernacular. Like a double-faced Janus head, the two genres reflect and refract one another, each exposing the subtle contours of the other, signifying on the other's subversive nuance. Like a double-faced Janus head, the two genres unveil the similarities of each other, expanding the symbolic yet real base of antagonistic appropriation which underpins the black experience in America, demanding of its critic, more precisely--its Wheatley critic, a more analytical, intertextual examination. Put simply, both the eighteenth century poesy of Phillis Wheatley and the slave spirituals of the nineteenth-century appropriated
the Gospels of the Bible and transformed them into a vehicle that expressed their own distinct yet similar experiences with slavery. Together, they signified on the wider cultural sub-texts of American slavery and American racism. Together, they, though somewhat dissimilar in their forms, sang the same song. Thus, a comparative analysis of Wheatley’s poems and the spirituals unearths, excavates, acknowledges and celebrates, the intertextual cadences of both.

All o’ God’s Chillun Got a Song
All o’ God’s Chillun Got a Song
All o’ God’s Chillun Got a Song
Notes for Chapter Four

1. In *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, Julia Kristeva argues that social and cultural systems represent intertextual signs that can also be seen as a text(s) of sorts (36-37).
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