# "On *Death's* Domain Intent I Fix My Eyes": Text, Context, and Subtext in the Elegies of Phillis Wheatley


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Early American Literature, Volume 53, Number 2, 2018, pp. 317-341 (Article)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press
*DOI:* *https://doi.org/10.1353/eal.2018.0040*

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## Text, Context, and Subtext in the Elegies of Phillis Wheatley

*Abstract: Phillis Wheatley's modern critics are divided. Some, for example, have characterized the slave-poet's work as examples of a colonized mind. Other scholars, however, have observed in her writings an appropriation of Western traditions to subtly critique slavery, remember her native Africa, and contemplate freedom. In none of these analyses have scholars begun to consider her elegies. Indeed, missing in modern studies of Wheatley's work is a critical examination of how Wheatley manipulated typography as a literary device to transform the literal meanings of her funerary poems: "Sass." An aesthetic adopted by peoples of Africa or of African descent in response to racial prejudice, Sass represents an expression of agency that is at once deferential and defiant, polite and contrarian. In the essay that follows, Wheatley's Sass, a unique part of the poet's elegiac style, is explored.*

KEYWORDS: Phillis Wheatley, elegies, typography, sass, slave agency, colonial New England

> Forms effect meaning.
> —D. F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts*

> The author explains the presence of certain events within a text, as well as their transformations, distortions, and their various modifications.
> —Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-memory, Practice*

> The poet asks, and *Phillis* can't refuse / To shew th'obedience of the Infant muse.
> —Phillis Wheatley, "An Answer to the *Rebus*"

Before she was brought from Africa to America, Phillis Wheatley must have learned the rudiments of reading and writing in her native, so-called "*Pagan* land" (*Poems* 18). According to Margaret Matilda Oddell, who was one of the poet's earliest biographers, the African-born girl did

indeed demonstrate a certain understanding of the significance of literacy. Not long after the slave arrived in New England, recalled the great-grandniece of Phillis Wheatley's mistress, the seven- or eight-year-old African "soon gave indications of uncommon intelligence, and was frequently seen endeavoring to make letters upon the wall with a piece of chalk or charcoal" (Wheatley, *Memoir* 10). Whether Oddell had witnessed Wheatley's achievement firsthand or perhaps had heard of Wheatley's efforts to write as part of the family's oral history is unclear. One thing, however, is certain. Upon entering the Wheatley's household, the African girl tried to communicate with her captors, and her endeavors left a strong impression that soon became a part of the Wheatley family's lore. Indeed, Phillis's early attempts to write might explain why the Wheatleys began teaching the young Gambian child. In "sixteen Months Time from her Arrival," explained John Wheatley, her master and her first biographer, the bondservant who had been an "utter Stranger" to the English language learned "to read any, the most difficult Parts of the Sacred Writings, to the great Astonishment of all who heard her." Not long thereafter, she learned to write. She had also, her master continued, developed an inclination to learn the Latin tongue (Wheatley, *Poems* vi).

Surely Wheatley's exposure to literacy among her native people played a role in how quickly she mastered English and later Latin. Considering the presence of Islam in West Africa at that time, it is reasonable to believe that she tried to write something in Arabic on the wall in the Wheatleys' home. By the middle of the twelfth century, Africans in the Senegambian region had adopted Islam (Gamble 70). Children as young as six or seven were taught to memorize passages from the Quran and received instruction in letters. The Surahs served as their primer. Like her Gambian contemporary Ayuba Suleiman Diallo (also known as Job ben Solomon), Wheatley came of age understanding the importance of literacy.[1] But before the introduction of Islam and Arabic, many West Africans had already developed their own systems of writing. As David Dalby's studies of these African scripts demonstrate, the Wolof (the ethnic group to whom many scholars believe Wheatley belonged) had used their own signs to express themselves—much like their Mende, Fula, Yoruba, Bundu, Vai, Kpelle, and Bassa neighbors. Because most precolonial Africans did not fully give up their old ways—indeed Wheatley herself recalled her mother performing a libation ritual—it is equally reasonable to believe that the Gambian girl

could have tried to communicate with her captors in an indigenous script. Either way, when Phillis Wheatley was brought from Africa to America, it is safe to say, she did not arrive an empty vessel. Rather, she carried with her memories of an African past—including non-Western modes of literacy—that would later inform her body of letters (Dalby, "Survey," "Indigenous Scripts," "Further Indigenous Scripts").

By the time her *Poems on Various Subjects* appeared in print, Wheatley had refined her knowledge of indigenous, Eastern, and Western literacies. Not long after she learned her master's language and begin writing verses in English, the African native created her own unique writing style or signature that incorporated typography as a literary device to complicate the word's ability to mean: "Sass." Unlike the African and European notion of sass as an expression of impudence or as a type of verbal assault, Sass, in the African Atlantic world where race has historically denied people of Africa and African descent humanity, is an expression of agency that on the surface appears either deferential or in keeping with the social etiquette of the day. In that regard, Wheatley proved to be as sassy as other captive Africans and African Americans in British America who were compelled to wear the mask that grinned and lied (Bly, "Pretty" 469–81; Dunbar 71). By highlighting certain words within her compositions, the poet affected the meaning of her compositions, undercutting in most instances the original meaning of the word or phrases highlighted. For instance, her emphasis on the word "*Pagan*" in her poem entitled "On Being Brought from Africa to America" clearly signified something more than an obvious reference to her native land as one void of monotheism:

> '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. (*Poems* 18)

Instead, the italicized word in the first line registered not only a moment of sarcasm and irony but also the poet's understanding of her native culture and the similarities it shared with the culture of her masters. The empha-

sis referenced the fact that Wheatley, like all precolonial African peoples, believed in a supreme being, which may have been Allah or an omnipotent Creator who resided at the center of complex religious systems that included ancestors and lesser deities (Mbiti 29–30). While Wheatley used emphasis in her occasional pieces, the poet's manipulation of typography is particularly evident in her elegiac writings, where her use of the altered word shows multiple levels of meaning. There, Wheatley's use of typography functioned as an important part of her elegiac style wherein she achieved agency without attracting criticism: Sass.[2]

The slave-poet's world was indeed filled with loss and uncertainty, and death is a central theme in her work. A survivor of the Middle Passage, where she likely witnessed the deaths of many fellow captives, and routinely made aware of death's presence in a precarious New England, the mother of the African American belletristic tradition appears to have found solace in the subject. Her first significant published work had been an elegy dedicated to the leading voice of the First Great Awakening: George Whitefield.[3] Of the thirty-nine poems that appeared in her historic volume of poetry, *Poems on Various Subjects*, *Religious and Moral* (1773), almost half of them are elegies. One-quarter of the poems she wrote after the publication of her book are also elegies.[4] Using her song to Whitefield as a symbolic key, this essay explores how the poet's manipulation of typography as an instance of Sass functioned as an essential part of her elegiac style or signature wherein she protested slavery, imagined freedom, and remembered her African past.

Wheatley's use of typographical emphasis represents an unheralded aspect of the poet's elegiac style. In other words, no one has examined how the poet used typography to introduce within her funeral verses multiple levels of meaning. In a previous study of her extant manuscripts and published poems ("'By Her Unveil'd'"), I have demonstrated that she determined emphasis, punctuation, and stress in the transition of her writings from manuscript form to print. In that transition, her race clearly afforded her an unusual degree of authorial control. That is to say, because of her novelty in the eighteenth century, Wheatley's contemporaries celebrated her achievement all while paying no attention to *how* she composed her verses. Instead, they were fixated on the fact that an African could write. While some were admirers, others were not. All, however, *acknowledged*

her genius, a genius that they considered a singular expression of letters on the part of a person of African descent. In that regard, Thomas Jefferson captured the mixed sentiments expressed by many of Wheatley's contemporaries perhaps best when he observed of her work:

> 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. The heroes of the Dunciad are to her, as Hercules to the author of that poem. (*Notes* 234)

Like others who attempted to deny the slave-poet of the laurel of civilization, Jefferson felt compelled to offer some comment about her accomplishment of writing in an era when most African Americans were not instructed and whose supposed lack of letters bolstered racist views. Wheatley, however, had her own ideas about her work, ideas that clearly eluded a biased Jefferson and many of her other contemporaries. Through her sorrow-filled rhymes, or *songs* as she preferred to call them, the poet proved herself artful and quite imaginative, achieving celebrity as she lamented the passing of local Bostonians, all while registering something of her own tragic story. Specifically, by highlighting the names of the subjects of her elegies, she included an additional layer of subtext within her funeral texts that escaped the attention of many of her readers who more than likely mistook her *emphasis* as simply a matter determined by printers.[5]

Wheatley's song on the death of "Rev. Mr. George Whitefield" (1770) is undoubtedly the best known of those symbolic occasions. Written shortly after the passing of the Great Awakening minister, this song embodied several aspects of what Gregory Rigsby would regard as her unique elegiac signature. Furthermore, as my analysis of her extant manuscripts and printed verse reveals, it also demonstrates how the poet used typography to achieve multiple meanings and ultimately agency: Sass.[6] In the title Wheatley highlights the name of the famous subject of her verse. By accenting Whitefield's name in the title and in the third stanza, she followed the conventional practice of setting important names in italic or block letters. But as her extant manuscripts suggest, there is more to Wheatley's use of italics

than a printers' convention. Over the course of the poem, Whitefield's song becomes hers, as does his flight. While his flight was one toward death and heavenly bliss, hers was one toward freedom, albeit imagined, unfettered expression, and, of course, toward the celestial world of her Gambian homeland. Significantly, Wheatley's use of typography as a literary device to complicate the power of words to mean is emblematic of her unique elegiac style. Of the thirteen elegies that appear in her *Poems on Various Subjects*, over half highlighted the names of the subjects of the composition. In her elegy to Reverend Sewell, for example, Wheatley stressed his name in the title of the poem and in stanzas 1 and 2. Similarly, in "On the Death of a Young Lady of Five Years of Age," Nancy's name is italicized. In her two-stanza song to a "Lady on the Death of Her Husband," the poet highlights the husband's name in the composition. In Wheatley's "A Funeral POEM on the Death of C.E. an Infant of Twelve Months," Charles's name is emphasized. Likewise, in her "To a GENTLEMAN and LADY on the Death of Lady's Brother and Sister, and a Child of the Name *Avis*, Aged One Year," "On the Death of Dr. SAMUEL MARSHALL, 1771," and "On the Death of J.C. an Infant," the poet highlighted the names of the subject of each verse.

In Whitefield's poem, as early as the first stanza the poet's veiled apotheosis begins to take shape. In the first line, Wheatley demonstrates a certain refinement of the song, one that underscores the potential for multiple readings, multiple cultural orientations. In traditional New England fashion, she places the minister in his heavenly abode, observing "HAIL, happy saint, on thine immortal throne" (*Poems* 22). Her use of the word *throne* is important because it signifies at once hierarchy and status. Wheatley's use of the word, however, does not seem to be limited to the seats of ruling monarchs, nor is it simply a reference to a chair. Rather, throne for the poet underscored African traditions of ancestor worship, traditions that eluded several of her contemporary critics, most of whom were not inclined to consider her African past when it came to the content of her compositions. As Gregory Rigsby points out in his analysis of the poet's elegiac style, Wheatley's visions of heaven were not "objective and fixed for all alike; rather, [they were] . . . the topmost rung of the hierarchical ladder—the seat of the ancestors" (251).

An astute student of the Bible, her master John Wheatley considered Phillis's understanding of "the most difficult Parts of the Sacred Writings" astonishing (*Poems* vi). On one level, for example, the poet's throne ref-

erence reflected her reading of the Bible. In the book of Revelation, the Apostle John recounts a vision of the throne of God in which the living creatures (cherubs), the lamb (Christ), the seven spirits of God, the four and twenty crowned elders, the seraphs, and likewise, the souls of the dead all assume their respective places in relation to the throne of God (4:1–11, *KJV*). Ezekiel recounts a similar revelation of the throne of God (1:1–28). The Gospel of John also captures an orderly cosmos, specifically in Christ's promise to his followers of mansions in heaven of which they would rule as minor lords of their own estates (14:2–3). In all these examples, hierarchy clearly mattered; everyone observed their place—no matter how major or minor the figure.

If indeed she was from the Gambia region of Africa, as she herself once claimed, and, more specifically, of the Wolof people, as John Shields and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., have asserted, ancestor worship represents a likely source for the sable muse as well, one that she found had common ground with her newly adopted Christian faith (Wheatley, "Philis's Reply" 35; Shields 43; Gates 17). The Wolof of the Senegambia region were a complex people who believed prior to the introduction of Islam and Christianity that their ancestors acted as intermediaries between those who lived in the present world and those who did not. In reverence, they offered libations. Theirs was a world in which deceased love ones existed on a spiritual plane not much unlike the world they left behind. In their cosmology, the land of the living was simply a world that mirrored the land of the dead, a shadowy underworld where the souls of the deceased existed in multiple forms. Despite the numerous forms of the souls that followed death, each world enjoyed its kings and priests, its villagers and slaves. Everyone appeared to live in accordance to their place and as they had before (Ellis, *Tshi-Speaking Peoples* 166, *Ewe-Speaking Peoples* 16–23, *Yoruba-Speaking Peoples* 127). What is more, because the deceased served as significant cultural mediators between the worlds of God and man, the living honored them daily (Gamble 71). As noted earlier, Margareta Matilda Oddell observed in her memoir that Wheatley recalled "her mother [who] *poured out water before the sun at his rising*—in reference, no doubt, to an ancient African custom," suggesting that the poet retained memories of Wolof practices and beliefs, practices and beliefs that were commonplace throughout Africa (Wheatley, *Memoir* 10; see Hall 5–55; Ellis, *Ewe-Speaking Peoples* 105-08; Bradbury 52–53).

This veiled reference to ancestor worship is present not only in Whitefield's elegy but also in others that appeared in Wheatley's body of work. In her elegy to Joseph Sewell, for example, she positions the esteemed minister on the "immortal shore" that is. . ."number'd with happy dead" (*Poems* 19). In a similar manner, in her song to "A Lady on the Death of Three Relations," Wheatley places the deceased among the ancestors where they sat in accordance to their place or throne. In her elegy to Reverend Pitkin, her reference to ancestor worships seems even more explicit. There, she puts the minister "Amid the seats of heav'n [where] a place is free" (*Poems* 52). The seat of the ancestors is also foremost in the African-born poet's mind in her "Funeral POEM on the Death of C.E. an Infant of Twelve Months." In that verse, she notes of the infant child:

> THROUGH airy roads he wings his instant flight
> To purer regions of celestial light;
> Enlarg'd he sees unnumber'd systems roll,
> Beneath him sees the universal whole,
> Planets on planets run their destin'd round,
> And circling wonders fill the vast profound.
> Th' ethereal now, and now th' empyreal skies
> With growing splendors strike his wond'ring eyes:
> The angels view him with delight unknown,
>
> Press his soft hand, and seat him on his throne;
> Then smiling thus. "To this divine abode,
>
> "The seat of saints, of seraphs, and of God,
> "Thrice welcome thou." The raptur'd babe replies,
> "Thanks to my God, who snatch'd me to the skies. (*Poems* 69)

For Wheatley, the word *throne* unmistakably signifies hierarchy and status, an orientation to the seat "of saints, of seraphs, and of God," or as Christ explained in the Gospel of John, he had prepared "many mansions," or distinct places for the deceased, in his "Father's house" (14: 2–3).

In addition to this allusion to ancestor worship, the African poet's song for Whitefield reveals other aspects of her artfully crafted veil in which she manipulated typography to achieve duality, agency: Sass. In the third line, for example, Wheatley likens Whitefield's preaching to music in the phrase "We hear no more the music of thy tongue." There, the poet com-

bines African, American, and European traditions. In eighteenth-century Boston, a world in which music had been embraced but with a certain degree of ambivalence, particularly within the sacred realm of the church, the poet's choice of words, equating speech with song, is again a significant one. For while New Englanders certainly enjoyed music (hymns to be specific), music seldom appeared to enter their minds when they took up the quills to compose elegiac verses—that is outside the polite invocation of classical literature, specifically Apollo, the Greek God of poetry and music (Daniels 52–66). But as Rigsby's analysis of the poet's elegiac style shows, music played an important part in many of her *songs* for the dead, indeed a part that reflected powerful sites of memories of her beloved Gambian homeland (254–55). Of the fourteen elegies that appear in her *Poems on Various Subjects*, eight invoke images of sound over visual objects.

Indeed, Wheatley's heaven is a place full of melody and harmony. In her elegy "On the Death of a Young Lady of Five Years of Age," the "saints and angels" fill the heavens with "songs of praise" to the Lord whose "sweet name" produces a "tuneful sound" (*Poems* 25–26). In "On the Death of a Young Gentleman," the afterlife is depicted as a place where harps sound abundantly (*Poems* 27). "To a Lady on the Death of Three Relations" describes how the "raptur'd seraphs tune th' immortal strings" (*Poems* 52). In her elegy "To a Clergyman on the Death of His Lady," "heav'nly music" and choirs of angels welcome the minister's wife, Temperance Clap, who died tragically in childbirth (*Poems* 53). In her elegy on the death of Charles Eliot, Wheatley envisions the twelve-month-old infant in heaven where cherubs "Clapt their glad wings," producing music that echoes throughout the "heav'nly vaults" (*Poems* 70). In "To a Lady and Her Children," the poet offers comfort to Mrs. Boylston, observing her deceased son on "the heav'nly shore" where the angels play "[o]n harps of gold to [the] tune [of] immortal lays" (*Poems* 83). When the lieutenant-governor's wife died, the poet again imagined a heaven immersed in music. In that beatific vision, "heav'nly choirs" greet Mary Sanford Oliver on "th' immortal coast" where she is depicted tuning her "vocal strings" while "heav'n's high concave with the music rings" (*Poems* 116–17).

Though varied, the poet's invocation of music, like her references to ancestor worship, made use of African, American, and European traditions. In the Western sense, Wheatley's assorted references to a heaven filled with sound are partly a classical one, one directly inspired by her reading of

history; specifically of the Greek god Apollo, who filled the halls of Olympus with music and poetry (Hamilton 29–31). In addition to the joyous sounds of the god of beauty's golden lyre, the poet also found inspiration in her reading of both the Old and New Testaments, where trumpets and voices are invoked interchangeably, or as the Apostle John explains just before he received revelation, "a door w*as* opened in heaven: and the first voice which I heard *was* as it were of a trumpet talking with me" (Rev. 4: 1). In contrast, Wheatley's references to music also reflect her African past. As John S. Mbiti's study of African religions and philosophies make plain, music played a central role in all traditional African societies, where it was used for multiple purposes (29, 67, 80, 167–68). Among the Wolof people of the Senegambia region of West Africa, for example, speech and song are employed to relate a distinctive sense of history, memory, and cultural identity. Since time immemorial, Griots or Géwèls (oral historians) were entrusted with the vital task of preserving a record of the past through song, words, and performance. Thus, considering her African background, hers is likely a heaven filled with the sound of drumming, polyrhythmic hand clapping, improvisational singing: jazz (Gamble 25–26).

Returning to Whitefield's song, Wheatley reveals yet another memory of her African past. In the second stanza she has the minister ascending to the "unmeasur'd height" of heaven (another reference to ancestor worship) from the earth. By the fifth line, she illustrates his "tow'ring flight" as a passenger aboard a vessel, sailing "to *Zion* through vast seas of day." In this poetic allusion to water as a divide that separates heaven and earth, the poet introduces a certain level of nuance and subtext that reflects a multiplicity of meaning when taking into account the past experience of the writer. "*Zion*," for example, signifies at once the heavenly city referenced in the book of Revelation and the blissful scene of the poet's native African village that lies on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. Overlooked by Rigsby and others, Wheatley's invocation of water as a spiritual divide is another example of her unique elegiac style. To be sure, it is one that appears in well over half of her elegies—eight out of the fourteen in her *Poems*. 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 and in highlighted letters, takes flight from the "mortal shore" where "*Death* reigns tyrant" (*Poems* 85). Similarly, in her elegy to Reverend Sewell, Wheatley places the "holy man" on "the'

immortal shore" (*Poems* 19). In "To His Honour the Lieutenant-Governor, on the Death of His Lady," "*Death*" carries Mrs. Oliver safely to "th' immortal coast" (*Poems* 116). In "To the Honourable T. H. Esq; on the Death of His Daughter," Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Hubbard watch their daughter, "[Thankfull Hubbard] *Leonard*," ascend to the skies, leaving behind the "earth's dusky shore" (*Poems* 98–99). In "On the Death of a Young Lady of Five Years of Age," Wheatley consoled "*Nancy*['s]" bereft parents, reminding them that one day after "sail[ing] through life's tempestuous sea" they too will join their "happy babe" "on the blissful shore." Likewise, in her "On the Death of a Young Gentleman," the poet describes the temporal plane as "the tumult of life's tossing seas" (*Poems* 26–27).

Much like her other veiled references, Wheatley's allusion to crossing over water reflects a poetic amalgam of African, American, and European traditions. On one level, for example, her references represented an invocation of the classical education she received in the Wheatley household. Specifically, the poet's crossing images reflected vignettes involving the River Styx that in Greek lore formed a boundary between the earth and the land of the dead (Hamilton 43, 131–32). The poet's references also reflect her reading of the Bible. In the book of Genesis, the Garden of Eden is situated near four rivers: Pishon, Gihon, Tigris, and the Euphrates (2: 10–15). In that context, much like John Milton's epic verse, Wheatley's veiled invocation of the story of Adam and Eve represents the here and now as a paradise lost. In her version, the couple has to cross over water, leaving bliss behind. Having eaten of the Tree of Life, they become aware of the knowledge of good and evil and therefore are no longer welcomed in God's presence. Such was certainly the case in other contemporary elegies, including Anne Eliza Bleecker's "Elegy on the Death of Cleora" (215), Nathaniel Evans's elegy on the death of Theophilus Grew (17), and Benjamin Church's "Elegy on the Death of the Reverend Jonathan Mayhew," where Greek and Christian invocations were not uncommon.

On another level, Wheatley's crossing reference also reflects the poet's African past. Compared to those of the African muse, scarce are similar references by other New England elegists. Indeed, most of the water references by her contemporaries were either literal or metaphorical in nature. Joel Barlow's elegy on "The Late Honorable Titus Hosmer, Esq." (8-9), Ann Eliza Bleecker's "Elegy on the Death of Gen. Montgomery" (228), and Cotton Mather's "Elegy upon the Death of Mrs. Mary Brown" (76) offer us ex-

amples of those particular sorts (10, 12). By contrast, Wheatley's crossings were both real and imagined. In other words, the poet's references reveal her own transatlantic voyage, and, in so doing, function as an artful allusion to slavery. But on both a literal and symbolic level, she transforms the subject of her elegies semantically. By her highlighting the names of the departed whom she laments, their journey becomes hers both spiritually and physically; their familial separation becomes her familial reunification.

Most Africans of the Senegambia region believed that a body of water divided the land of the living from the land of the dead. The Wolof, as David P. Gamble explains, believed that the spirit (*jine*) of their ancestors lived either under the sea or in the earth, presumably underneath the sea that lay under the earth (71). The same is true of the Wolof's neighbors, the Bambara people, who as Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's study demonstrates believed that water or *Faro* was the source of both life and death (45–50). Other West Africans also held a similar, if not identical, belief. "Amongst the eastern Ewe tribes," A. B. Ellis notes, it is believed that the spirit world is "situated to the west, across the river Volta, the exact reverse of the belief of the inhabitants of the Gold Coast, who place Dead-land across the same river, to the east" (*Ewe-Speaking Peoples* 107; cf. *Tshi-Speaking Peoples* 150–57). Similarly, in his ethnographic study of the Edo-speaking peoples of southwestern Nigeria, R. E. Bradbury observed that Africans of the Kingdom of Benin envisioned "the land as being surrounded by water into which all the rivers flow. The path to *erivi* [the spirit realm] lies through or across this water and it is this way that human souls pass on their way to be born and after death" (53). Considering the poet's African past, Wheatley's water references do not fit easily within the New England elegiac tradition she wrote in.

Besides remembering Africa, her song for Whitefield seized the occasion of his death to imagine freedom and protest slavery. The key unlocking that alternate reading of Wheatley's elegy lies in the poet's manipulation of typography, specifically her emphasis on the reverend's name that intentionally inserts additional layers of subtlety into the verse. In the opening stanzas, for example, she creates two images, one of the passionate minister, whose voice could "Inflame the heart, and captivate the mind," the other of the deceased "prophet" in midflight between heaven and earth (*Poems* 22). On the surface, these images do not appear to trespass either

colonial etiquette or the form or content of the New England elegy. Read in another context, however, these images are striking in that they may reveal something of the poet's life as an enslaved African in America.

Routinely, Wheatley situated her subjects as being trapped briefly between worlds. While this motif is not necessarily an unusual one—indeed it appears later in the work of a few others (i.e., Joel Barlow's "Elegy on the Late Honourable Titus Hosmer" (1782), Ann Eliza Bleecker's "Elegy on the Death of Cleora" (1793), Francis Hopkinson's elegies on Josiah Martin and Mrs. Anne Græme, and Cotton Mather's "An Elegy on the Much-to-Be-Deplored Death of *That Never-to-Be-forgotten Person*, the Reverend Mr. *Nathanael Collins*" (1762) (68)—Wheatley uses it often.[7] Of the fourteen elegies that appear in her *Poems on Various Subjects*, eleven depicted the deceased in this manner. By Rigsby's account, this convention is demonstrative of the poet's elegiac style (252). Moreover, considering her status as a slave, what Rigsby described as a convention can be read in another way, as something beyond simply signifying a literary motif. A recurring theme in the poet's elegies, the interpolated state of Wheatley's subject reflected the poet's own peculiar place in eighteenth-century America. Both a slave, whose humanity had been denied her because of her race, and a poet, whose very craft demanded of her a certain degree of freedom to express herself, Wheatley understood—perhaps all too well and too often, considering how she was made to routinely demonstrate her talent—that trapped state in which she often placed the subjects of her elegies. In much the same way, her subjects were rendered caught between heaven and earth, so too did the society in which she lived render her subject. Neither fully slave nor free, Wheatley found herself trapped somewhere in the middle. Even so, in that divided state she managed to find a voice for herself; she registered a moment of Sass.

In the fourth stanza of the verse on Whitefield, the poet's subtle war intensifies.[8] There, she exclaims, mimicking perhaps the Great Awakening preacher's "strains of eloquence refin'd":

"Take him, ye wretched, for your only good,
"Take him ye starving sinners, for your food;
"Ye thirsty, come to this life-giving stream,
"Ye preachers, take him for your joyful theme;
"Take him my dear *Americans*, he said,

"Be your complaints on his kind bosom laid:
"Take him, ye *Africans*, he longs for you,
"*Impartial Saviour* is his title due:
"Wash'd in the fountain of redeeming blood,
"You shall be sons, and kings, and priests to God." (*Poems* 23)

As the source of Whitefield's oratory, Wheatley envisions an impartial savior, one whose sacrifice offered at once the wretch, the starving sinner, and "ye *Africans*" the promise of redemption. On the face of it, the stanza celebrates the joint Christian themes of salvation and deliverance. Subtly, however, Wheatley used this poetic façade to chide her fellow Christians for their insincerity as it applied to her supposedly benighted race. Key to that reading is the poet's use of italics. By emphasizing "*Americans*," "*Africans*," and "*Impartial Saviour*," she creates another text within her text, one that raises the question of whether Americans are themselves impartial, like their "*Saviour*." In effect, she seems to ask her fellow Christians a question: what would Christ make of your treatment of your African bond servants? In this context, the stanza functions as a jeremiad, a clever criticism of racial slavery in British North America, an institution she would later in life characterize as "Egyptian Slavery" in a letter to Samson Occom. This critique is even more explicit in an earlier broadside variant of her Whitefield song. There, she announces:

Take him, ye Wretched, for your only Good;
Take him, ye hungry Souls, to be your Food;
Take him, ye Thirsty, for your cooling Stream;
Ye Preachers, take him for your joyful Theme;
Take him, my dear *Americans*, he said,
Be your Complaints in his kind Bosom laid;
Take him, ye *Africans*, he longs for you,
Impartial Saviour is his Title due.
If you will walk in Grace's heavenly Road,
He'll make you free, and Kings, and Priest to God. ("Ode of Verses" 372)

In this version, Wheatley connects freedom to the acceptance of Christ. The African's transformation, as such, is both a spiritual and a physical or literal one. Such boldness on the part of a slave-poet clearly warranted revision. Understandably, she would later make changes to her song on

the death of Whitefield, perhaps to ensure for herself a wider transatlantic audience, as Kirstin Wilcox's study suggests. However, considering the precarious world in which she lived, she may have had more practical reasons for the revision, such as not drawing unwanted attention to herself, as well as discouraging criticism from those invested in the institution of slavery.

Wheatley's veiled reference to slavery in her song on the death of George Whitefield is not her only one. Quite the contrary, under the guise of the New England elegy, Wheatley enjoyed a certain degree of anonymity in other elegiac verses. In many of her elegies, as mentioned before, she highlighted the names of her subjects and transformed those occasions that celebrated the lives of others into one in which she expressed something of herself. For example, in her song on the death of Joseph Sewell, the poet contrasts the blissful image of the minister ascending into heaven assuming his place "number'd with the happy dead" with a dark image of the here-and-now that she characterizes as "the evils past!" and the "chains of guilt" (*Poems* 19, 21). In this elegy, as well as her others, the contrast between heaven and earth is quite significant: on one plane, she is a slave; on the other, she is free. For that reason, much as she had in her song for Whitefield, Wheatley transformed the piece through Sass. But in addition to her use of typography, the poet's choice of words inserted within her elegy on Sewell's death creates levels of ambivalence that raise the issue of intent, an issue that seems to transcend the conventional boundaries of the elegiac form. Considering Wheatley's status as a slave-poet in America, the poet's semantic choices introduced into her writing multiple levels of meaning. Such is the case of the "evil past!" and "chains of guilt" references in her Sewell song that function as allusions to slavery. In both instances, Wheatley appeared to register something of a critique of the institution. Considering that Sewell's father, Samuel Sewell, had been the author of *The Selling of Joseph*, which protested on biblical grounds the legitimacy of racial slavery in America, it is likely that the poet's dark allusions to slavery, specifically her reference to chains and the exclamation mark she added to "evils past," may deliberately imitate and echo Sewell's biting critique. While there is no historical evidence that Wheatley ever read the broadside, it is nonetheless reasonable to assume that she had some knowledge of the work. She was, after all, a member of that congregation who were inspired by the reverend's passionate words. Furthermore, her owners were, as James A. Levernier's study demonstrates, more progressive with

regard to the subject of slavery, as were many of the members of the clergy, including Joseph Sewall, in New England. Still, perhaps most important, in Wheatley's Boston, the discussion of race and slavery did not simply end with the minister's passing in 1730. It persisted up to the American Revolution, which brought an end to the institution in Massachusetts as early as 1777, as slaves demanded their freedom and the conflict between Great Britain and her colonial subjects, who liken themselves to slaves, intensified.

Of the fourteen elegies that appeared in her *Poems on Various Subject*, nine others were subject to such veiled references to slavery, as she had been subject to her owners and the "silken fetters" of her celebrity and fame (*Poems* 65). In her "On the Death of a Young Gentleman," Wheatley depicts the earthly plane as "the tumult of life's tossing seas" (*Poems* 27), another invocation that raises questions about whose turmoil or suffering does the poet speak of? Similarly, in "To a Lady on the Death of Her Husband," the earth left behind is described as a "vale of night" (*Poems* 30). In her elegy to Reverend Pitkin on the death of his wife, a rebellious Wheatley emerges, one who celebrates God's victory over the injustice and darkness that threaten to "Chain us to hell, and bar the gates of light" (*Poems* 54). For an enslaved African American in the eighteenth century, hell undoubtedly represented the injustice of slavery. Likewise, in her elegy to Thomas Hubbard on the death of his daughter, Thankfull Hubbard Leonard, Wheatley depicts the temporal life as a "dusky shore" and as "tumultuous billows" (*Poems* 98–99).

The most striking are those songs that had children as their subjects. Indeed, in most of those instances, they had not lived long enough to feel life's bittersweet sting. Their lives were lives without suffering or pain. And yet it is in these songs for infants where Wheatley seems to find her most defiant voice—perhaps because she had been taken from Africa as a young child. It is in these songs where the poet's use of Sass is most effective.

Wheatley's song on the death of Charles Eliot provides us one example of how the poet used emphasis to transform the verse. In addition to embodying several elements of the poet's elegiac style (e.g., the interpolated state of the deceased, ancestor worship, and a hereafter immersed in sound), Wheatley's elegy used the occasion of the twelve-month-old child's death to make unspeakable things spoken. Much as in her song for Reverend Whitefield, the poet used stress artfully. Midway in the song,

Charles, or should we say Wheatley, who emphasized the boy's name in both the extant manuscript and printed versions of the verse, looks back and describes the world that he (or she, metaphorically speaking) has left behind as a "lash for horrid crimes I felt" (*Poems* 70). Considering the fact that the subject of the elegy is a baby, who after "Twelve moons revolv'd, becomes the prey of death," the child of a well-to-do family (*Poems* 71), this depiction of the earthly plane seems at best a peculiar one as it raises the question about who is speaking, as well as whose view of world is being given? The meaning of the verse is only further complicated when taking into account Wheatley's status as a slave. Although the reference reflects the poet's reading of the Old Testament, specifically Solomon's injunction on rearing children, the "horrid crimes" reference is an altogether different matter. Because for Wheatley, the "lash" and "horrid crimes" associated with the world more than likely represent a site of memory, an autobiographical allusion, albeit veiled, to the beating of Prince, the Wheatleys' domestic who incurred the wrath of his mistress one evening after she observed the saucy coachman riding home alongside her beloved protégée after one of her visits with an admirer (*Poems* 71, *Memoir* 13).[9] This reading is further substantiated if we take into account Wheatley's assertion that she knew the sting of the lash ("horrid crime") she invokes. The punctuation and grammar she used in the verse clearly introduced a certain degree of uncertainty with respect to voice or at least a level of nuance with regard to who is speaking and about what. Though Wheatley's subtle reference to Prince's beating is not as explicit as that of Frederick Douglass or Booker T. Washington observing other slaves (in both of their cases, family members) being punished, it is no less powerful. Like the comments of both Douglass and Washington, who wrote decades later, Wheatley's "lash for horrid crimes" reference revealed a common aspect of slave life. Particularly peculiar had been the pain she "knew," a pain she had inadvertently caused, or as Odell recalled the matter, Prince had received "a severe reprimand" (*Memoir* 13).[10]

The poet's song on the death of an infant named Nancy represents another bold moment. In the first stanza of the verse, Wheatley, in an effort to console the five-year-old child's parents, advises them not to deplore their loss because "She feels the iron hand of pain no more." No more, she continued, would their beloved child suffer distress "in our dark vale below." Much like her "horrid crime" allusion in her song to Charles, this "iron

hand of pain" reference is clearly a remark about the institution of slavery in America, where enslaved Africans were tethered both literarily and figuratively. The poet makes that point even more explicitly when near the end of her song she offers Nancy's parents comfort by describing their baby as being "Freed from a world of sin, and snares, and pain" (*Poems* 25–6).

In all of these instances, Wheatley manipulated typography (that is, her emphasis of the subject's name) to achieve duality and agency: Sass. In addition, because of the fact that the subject of her verse had been a child and the source an African, who by her own account "Was snatch'd from *Afric's* fancy'd happy seat" (*Poems* 74), these allusions obviously speak to the poet's personal experiences in the New World. Unlike her song to Whitefield, where she used her faith to insulate herself from criticism, Wheatley's clarification of what she considered the "dark vale below" appears at once audacious and brave, not to mention dangerous, taking into account the inherent insecurity of her status as a slave. Still, courageous to the end, the poet concluded her song to Nancy's bereft parents with a vignette in which she imagines the parents one day joining their child on "the blissful shore":

> 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. (*Poems* 26)

Such a reference to crossing over conceals the poet's own tragic Middle Passage as the source of the song, a voyage that would leave her sickly all of her life. There, her memory of Africa and her own sad story of being brought from Africa to America inspired the poet as she wrote. Indeed, tempestuous is certainly an artful description of her voyage aboard the *Phillis* that brought the native of Gambia to the Americas with ninety-four other unfortunate souls.[11] To some extent, the poet's moving efforts to console masked her own excruciating pangs of sorrow she must have felt at being kidnapped and torn from her parent's breast.

That particular pain found perhaps its fullest expression in her poem to the Earl of Dartmouth. There, Wheatley wrote,

> Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,
> Wonder from whence my love of *Freedom* sprung,
> Whence flow these wishes for the common good,

By feeling hearts alone best understood,
I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
Was snatch'd from *Afric's* fancy'd happy seat:
What pangs excruciating must molest,
What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?
Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd
That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd:
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
Others may never feel tyrannic sway? (*Poems* 74)

Much as she does in her elegiac songs on the death of George Whitefield and others, Wheatley used emphasis to introduce multiple layers of subtext into her writings. There, her italics convey an alternate reading, one that stresses the lack of freedom Africans, who were once happy in their native lands, experienced as slaves in America. Imagine, she declares, the sorrow and misery African parents and children felt after being torn from one another. Literally, her love of "*Freedom* sprung . . . from *Afric's* fancy'd happy seat."

Ultimately, death afforded Phillis Wheatley refuge. In her song "To a Clergyman on the Death of His Lady," she describes it as the great redeemer that in the form of Christ broke the chains of hell and offered both salvation and light (*Poems* 54). In her "To a LADY and Her Children, on the Death of Her Son and Their Brother," Wheatley calls death "the friend" where "the kind companion lies" (*Poems* 82). In light of the violence and oppression that she suffered, it should come as no surprise that the poet found solace in death and its promise of freedom and reunion. In contrast, life seemed to have offered her little but pain: the pain of being kidnapped and forcibly brought from Africa to America, the pain of having to wait on the members of Wheatley household—as both a poet and a domestic ("On Messrs"). A prized symbol of her master's prestige, subject to the curiosity of others, Wheatley had been forced to go about town, proving her literary merit and legitimizing Africa's humanity. And although such an existence would come with certain benefits and rewards, fame nonetheless offered the poet little to nothing in the way of a guard against the "iron hand of pain" (*Poems* 25) that was slavery and the veiled bigotry of some of her would-be admirers.

A survivor of the Middle Passage and a bond servant for much of her

life, Wheatley turned to death and found comfort, as well as her voice. In the New England elegiac form, she remembered Africa, and she dreamed of freedom. In doing so, she claimed ownership of herself, but not so much in the act of writing, as some of her critics would suggest, but in what she wrote. Possibly the earliest to invoke the veil as a metaphor of the divided nature of black folk in the Americas, Phillis Wheatley may have been foremost in W. E. B. DuBois's mind when he defined double consciousness. Indeed, her life was that of the quintessential soul divided, torn between two distinctly different worldviews. Truly, hers was "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone [kept] it from being torn asunder" (DuBois 2). Though this comment is somewhat gloomy in its portrayal of the African American experience in the United States, during slavery and arguably during freedom as well, within DuBois's remarks lies a truth that pervades the poet's work. That truth simply being, death becomes Phillis Wheatley, who managed to articulate herself artfully within the veil of the New England elegy, using Sass, using African, American, European traditions to shield herself. Or, as Wheatley herself once put the matter more eloquently and in of all places in an elegy: "ON *Death's* domain intent I fix my eyes" (*Poems* 84).

## NOTES

I thank Sandra Gustafson and the outside readers of *EAL* whose comments and suggestions proved invaluable. I also acknowledge the late William Carroll and William H. Robinson, whose friendship and scholarship have immensely shaped this work. Last, because the best scholarship is usually informed by teaching and vice versa, I believe I would be remiss if I did not thank the students of my Afro-Atlantic material culture class who reminded me daily of the interconnected relationship between scholarship and teaching. Specifically, I would like to thank Cadesha Clarke, Alexandrea Posley, Aicha Dougan, Ky Greene, Johanna Addison, Nichole Sumpter, Hannah Mellon, Deziree Baker, Jesse Ware, and Avery Walter for further strengthening my love for Phillis Wheatley.

1. Like Wheatley, Ayuba Suleiman Diallo (Job ben Solomon) had been a victim of the transatlantic slave trade. Like Wheatley, Ayuba Suleiman Diallo called Gambia home. According to his memoir he was born in Bundu, Senegal, kidnapped by Mandingo traders, and transported to Annapolis, Maryland. Not long after he had become a part of the estate of Mr. Tolsey of Kent Island, the African man, much like Wheatley, tried to communicate with his captor by writing. His efforts

in that regard proved quite successful. Impressed by his ability to write in Arabic, Reverend Thomas Bluett and others interceded on the slave's behalf, purchased his freedom, and eventually returned the son of Africa to his native land (Bluett).

2. An examination of both her extant manuscripts and her published poems demonstrated that Wheatley was responsible for many, if not all, of the diacritical marks (italics, bold letters, capitalized words, parentheses, braces, etc.) that appeared in her printed works. (Bly "By Her Unveil'd").

   Aesthetically, Wheatley's manipulation of typography represents occasions in which the poet intentionally highlighted words to emphasize the power of words to mean. In that setting, the poet achieved agency and voice: Sass. Throughout her writings this manipulation underscores a confluence of African, European, and American ideas about literacy and the spoken word. In both her manuscript writings and in her printed work, Wheatley demonstrated an understanding of Western book traditions. Those same writings also show that she had her own ideas about how to use those traditions to different ends. In that regard, the African-born poet relied on multiple traditions in which the performance of written or printed text and typographic practices intersected. In all three cultures, African, European, and American, as Gustatfson's study of as oratory and literacy in early America demonstrates, orality and the performance of print (i.e., reading aloud) went hand and hand. Simply put, the inflection of words mattered—in print and orally (xiii–xxv). Graphically, Wheatley's manipulation of typography represents a type of *nsibidi*. *Nsibidi* is a graphic writing system common throughout precolonial West Africa. In her own unique way, Wheatley's alteration of print represented her own form of graphic writing. For a fuller account of *nsibidi*, see Thompson 227–29, 244–68; Gundaker 42–44, 53; and Dalby, "Survey," "Indigenous Scripts," and "Further Indigenous Scripts."

3. Wheatley's elegy on Whitefield earned her widespread acclaim. Advertisements for copies of the verse would appear in print in newspapers in the *Boston News-Letter*, October 18, 1770, p. 4; the *Pennsylvania Chronicle*, October 29, 1770, p. 161; and the *New York Gazette*, November 12, 1770, p. 4.

4. The main studies of Wheatley's elegies are by Rigsby; Isani, "Far from 'Gambia's Golden Shore'" and "Phillis Wheatley"; Bassard 28–70; and Harris. In their analyses of Wheatley's work, both Brooks and Hodgson 664–69 observe that elegies provided the African-born poet a literary device to forge a particular kind of coterie that consisted primarily of women readers who played an active role in the development of Wheatley's career as a writer. See also Carretta 182–95.

   In a world in which reading signified power largely because few could afford printed texts, Wheatley's visits to the homes of New England admirers, many of whom were women, played a significant role in the development of her coterie of readers who took considerable delight in listening to the Gambian native recite her works. In her oratory that matched her artful pen, she achieved not only celebrity but also power. See Gustafson xiii–xxv.

5. Bly, "By Her Unveil'd." Reflecting perhaps the polite nature of eighteenth-century

writing, Wheatley's manipulation of typography, particularly in comparison to the black abolitionist David Walker's use of typography, subtly transforms her composition. Walker incorporated the use of multiple exclamation marks and pointing hand symbols to make his anger against slavery almost audible, if not palatable (Dinius). By comparison, Wheatley's work is not as forceful. Instead, her manipulation of typography has eluded both her contemporary and modern critics.

6. Rigsby identifies six literary motifs that make up Wheatley's adaptation of the elegiac mode: (1) the deceased in heaven, (2) the deceased "winged" his way to heaven, (3)an appreciation of the deceased's work on earth, (4) seraphic strains of heavenly bliss, (5) consolation of the living, and (6) exhortation (250). In his assessment of the poet's style, Rigsby acknowledges how the poet's African past shaped her elegiac writing. Missing in his analysis is an examination of Wheatley's manipulation of typography. Accordingly, my analysis of Wheatley's elegies not only builds on Rigbys' work but also expands what he means by the poet's signature or style by exploring how her use of emphasis afforded the poet occasions to protest slavery, imagine freedom, and remember her African past: Sass.
7. Incidentally, Rigsby's analyses of the poet's elegies suggest that Wheatley's elegiac style was unique compared to other New England elegists. As a point of fact, many of the conventions of the African-born poet explored in this essay predate similar literary devices included in the work of her contemporaries.
8. The politics of race in early America were precarious at best for most, if not all, African American writers. By writing themselves into existence, authors like Phillis Wheatley challenged racist notions that Americans of African descent could not read or write. Understandably, when taking up their quills, eighteenth-century African American writers had to tread lightly so as not to attract unwarranted attention. For a useful account of Wheatley's subtle war, see O'Neale.
9. For a fuller analysis of the twelve-moon reference, see my "On Wheatley's Poem on the Death of Charles Eliot."
10. In their autobiographies, both Douglass and Washington recounted in detail the beating of a relative and how it shaped their lives. For Douglass it had been his Aunt Hester (6–8); for Washington, it had been his uncle (18–19).
11. Almost one-quarter of the Africans brought to the Americas abroad the *Phillis* died en route (Carretta 7).

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