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Phillis Wheatley and New England slavery

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With her 1773 book *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, Phillis Wheatley became the first African American to publish a book of poems. Wheatley was, for a few years, an international star – clearly exceptional. At the same time, her experience resembled that of other enslaved Africans in New England in the constant tension she lived with between “family” (meaning those from whom she was kidnapped by enslaving foreigners) and the “family” of New England family slavery. Seized into slavery in 1761 as a child of about six, Wheatley was manumitted in 1774 on the death of her slaveholder mistress, Susanna Wheatley.

Wheatley returned to Susanna’s sickbed from London, where she had tended to matters relating to the publication there of *Thoughts on Various Subjects* and where she could have remained, a free woman. She lived with the Wheatley family until the death of John Wheatley, Susanna’s husband, in 1778. Later that same year, she married John Peters, a free Black man who worked, over the course of his life, as a shopkeeper, laborer, and entrepreneur. This marriage may reflect acquaintance with Peters about which we know little; it may reflect economic need borne of the reality that neither Susanna nor John Wheatley had provided for her in their wills. With John Peters, Wheatley had, and buried, three children in the next six years. Her efforts to secure subscribers in Boston for a second volume did not succeed, nor did Peters’ business ventures in the economically challenging Revolutionary years, in a Boston in which there were legal limits to the potential economic rise of non-whites; the family slid steadily into poverty. We do not know the names of Wheatley’s children or where they are buried, and the manuscript of her second book is lost. She died at age 31, an early death considered in more detail in this chapter.

Wheatley’s place in this *Companion to Black Women’s Cultural Histories* is self-evidently assured by her place among the historic “firsts” of African American history. But the importance of taking Wheatley’s life and works as a “companion” also lies in the assistance to the urgent and ongoing project of understanding and dismantling racism that can be derived from reflection on the implications of regarding Wheatley, enslaved poet and transatlantic celebrity, as exceptional. Indeed, to equate Wheatley’s significance with the historic publication of her book carries with it a certain potential, even grave, peril. This chapter suggests that Wheatley’s exceptionality exists on a continuum with her typicality, the ways she did not transcend the material and ideological realities of her region and era. My allegiance here is to Wheatley’s “complex personhood,” Avery Gordon’s recommended goal to historians entering archives in pursuit of understanding
people of the past whose lives are recorded, directly and indirectly, by others and of those who enter history by virtue of their own textual production. "[E]ven those who live in the most dire circumstances possess a complex and oftentimes contradictory humanity and subjectivity that is never adequately glimpsed by viewing them as victims, or, on the other hand, as superhuman agents," she writes:

Complex personhood means that all people (albeit in specific forms whose specificity is sometimes everything) remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others. … At the very least, complex personhood is about conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people's lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning. (4–5)

The conditions in which Wheatley came to be literate and to write pious encomiums in iambic pentameter are profoundly imbricated with her enslavement, the damaging force of which must be probed concomitantly with the task of recognizing Wheatley’s resilience and agency. This latter task also requires closely reading the poems in *Thoughts on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, which have often been understood as a homogeneous monolith, proof of the rightness of the abolitionist cause, of the full humanity of Africans, of the improvement that education can bring, or, for a period in the mid-twentieth century, of Wheatley’s false consciousness. Wheatley’s “complex personhood” can be discerned both in the writerly departure from familiar norms that she made even as a child author and in the skill with which she cultivated a network of white women supporters to develop as a poet and to publish her book. Wheatley’s value to a *Companion to Black Women’s Cultural History* includes, I’ll suggest, attending both to the “complex personhood” of her life in an elite white Bostonian household and to the “complex personhood” of the last six years of her life, the years in which she lived as a free Black woman and fell precipitously into archival obscurity.

The world of New England slavery

New England’s practice of “family slavery” saw enslaved people living under the same roofs as their enslavers – typically one to four enslaved people per elite household – and thus lacking the opportunity to develop a sense of the distinctness of their condition relative to their enslavers that came, on Southern plantations, with separate quarters for enslaved people. The difference between this way of housing, supervising, and disciplining enslaved people and Southern and Caribbean practices of enslavement has in the past led observers to present New England slavery as quasi-slavery, such as in the view of one historian that “the brutality of the system” of New England slavery was “lessened” by the side-by-side work and shared living quarters of enslavers and enslaved. 2

With the significant exception of the plantations of Rhode Island, enslaved people in eighteenth-century New England typically labored in elite households that were steadily shifting from household economies toward diversification for exchange and trade. Recent scholarship on New England slavery stresses that its economic value to slaveholders often lay in its enabling travel away from home, for work, of the male heads of slaveholding households. Elise Lemire, for example, finds lawyers, clergymen, doctors, and merchants among slaveholders of eighteenth-century Walden, Massachusetts; in 1772, 10 of the 15 known slaveholders of the town “had a professional, military, or civic title,” as “an ambitious man with sufficient education and wealth to pursue a title typically used slave labor and the prestige of owning slaves to ensure his rise.” 3
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These households were predominantly based along the coast, in cities like Boston that were tied to ocean trade, entwining the New England economy with those of the South and the Caribbean.

Though Susanna Wheatley, like most other elite women of eighteenth-century Boston, could not participate in public, remunerated labor as a lawyer, doctor, or merchant, the work done for her by Phillis Wheatley was nonetheless of economic value that accords loosely with this model. Susanna Wheatley’s championing of the poetry of the enslaved person she owned for 14 years advanced the status and efficacy of the evangelical and missionary projects in which she was involved. With, and on behalf of, Phillis Wheatley, she became known to such evangelical luminaries as George Whitefield and Selina, Countess of Huntingdon. As Joanna Brooks has shown, Wheatley’s literary fame was the consequence of her cultivation of “a network of white female supporters” in whose private homes she performed her poetry, who “purchased her books for themselves and commissioned original works on personal or occasional topics” – women who circulated her manuscript poems “as a currency of friendship, familial relationship, education, and consolation.” In a sense, then, Wheatley herself was a kind of “currency” in an economy productive of pious and cultured gentility, an economy in which Susanna could regard herself, and be regarded, as central even as the public nature of that centrality could be understood both as feminine piety and as compliance with the duty of Christian householders to attend to the religious instruction of the subordinates of the household.

Religion and understandings of racial and class identity were intimately associated in early New England, a complex culture that persisted through the Awakenings into the eighteenth century. The most prominent early articulation of the duty of Christian householders to work actively to protect all dependents from “the Rage of Sin, and Wrath of God” was Cotton Mather’s 1706 “The Negro Christianized: An Essay to Excite and Assist that Good Work, the Instruction of Negro-Servants in New England,” an important text for understanding Wheatley’s enslavement and piety, even as the cultures of Puritanism and the Congregationalism that it became are not identical. Mather’s essay rejects the “Brutish insinuation” that “Negroes” lack “Rational Souls” even as it unquestioningly accepts that slavery is fully compatible with church and civil law, as did the Wheatleys; Mather himself was an enslaver. “Thy Negro is thy Neighbour … he is thy Brother too. No canst thou love thy Negro, and be willing to see him ly under the Rage of Sin, and Wrath of God?” (Mather, 5–6): here, both “love” and privilege require the conversion of all dependents. This framing of coercion as generosity is of a piece with the blurred kind of agency implied by Mather’s instructing of the elite. Householders’ personal salvation requires their active protection of all dependents from eternal damnation: “[t]he Blood of the Souls of your poor Negroes, lies upon you” (Mather, 16). If the fate of enslaver and enslaved are bound together here, elsewhere the two roles are starkly differentiated, as in Mather’s declaration that the piety of the enslaved accrues not to them but to their enslavers. Both kinds of subject–object relations share the assumption that the enslaved object can possess neither identity nor virtue except as these are projected by the enslaving subject: the two are one, and the one is the householder.

Indeed, religious instruction was central to the legal definition of “family” put in place in New England with the 1620 founding of Plymouth and the 1630 founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. “Family” was then legally defined as a household headed by a householder, including his wife, his children, other relatives, and all hired servants, indentured servants, enslaved people, and apprentices. These laws required unattached newcomers to affiliate themselves with a family in order to receive, within the “family,” legally required religious instruction. In this early era, most towns required household catechizing by law; many wrote their own catechisms. “Family” thus indicated a civic entity central to religious instruction and regional governance.
Phillis Wheatley was received into Boston’s Old South Church on August 18, 1771, by Dr. Joseph Sewall. She was 16 years old and had been part of the Wheatleys’ household for a decade, since their purchase of her in 1761. As Joanna Brooks has described, Wheatley’s attendance at Old South Church with her enslavers introduced her to elite women who would become her supporters, hosting poetry performances in their home, hand-copying and circulating her manuscripts, commissioning poems on particular topics, and in time, seeking subscribers to the proposal for the publication of a book manuscript, which would become *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) (Brooks, 10–13). As Brooks notes, “twenty-one of the thirty-nine poems in the 1773 volume are elegies or occasional poems, and at least twelve of them are written about or for white women” (Brooks 11) – women encountered at Old South Church and in the genteel coteries devoted to the exchange of poems in manuscript with which that circle overlapped. Wheatley’s piety, then, reflects the highly gendered nature of her experience of enslavement. The white people who most significantly shaped her career and life are not the men (half of them, ministers) whose names preface *Poems on Various Subjects*, their signatures confirming her authorship of the poems, but women who encountered Susanna’s “little black genius,” in William Robinson’s phrase, as the two circulated in Boston’s pious and literary circles of elite women.

These experiences might seem to mark Wheatley’s specific circumstances as emphatically different from those of other enslaved people in the North, but there is important continuity, too, with the qualities of face-to-face encounters that Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese have seen in the South, interactions reflective of both “planters’ needs to think well of themselves and slaves’ needs to foster and manipulate planters’ feelings in order to encourage care and limit abuse.” The benefits, if they should be called such, that Wheatley received through her membership in Old South Church also coexist with realities less amenable to perception as potential benefits. Wheatley shared with other New England Christians of African descent, enslaved and free, the reality of race-based discrimination in worship and church governance, policies that included, in most Protestant churches and for most services, being required to receive the sacrament only after white congregants had done so, baptism after the regular service was over and white congregants had largely left, the refusal by some white ministers to hold Black babies as they baptized them, exclusion from church governance and leadership, racially segregated church seating, and after death, burial in racially segregated cemeteries rather than in cemeteries affiliated with the churches they had attended. For all Wheatley’s fame, for all her accomplishments, we don’t know for sure whether she is buried in the part of Copp’s Hill Burying Ground in which people of African descent were buried or in an unmarked grave in the Granary Burying Ground, where John Wheatley is buried.

**Phillis Wheatley’s life and poetry**

From the perspective that this end of life offers to the consideration of Wheatley’s socialization with elite white women and the transatlantic fame that it enabled, let us turn to the beginning not of Wheatley’s life, but of her life in America. Her name marks her as enslaved in two ways. Her first name commemorates the ship, the *Phillis*, on which she was brought to Boston in July 1761. The size of the *Phillis*, requiring only an eight-man crew, was typical of the slaving ships that comprised a considerable part of New England’s economy. During the eight-month voyage to Boston, 75 of the 96 enslaved people on board died, twice the expected death rate for the Middle Passage. In Boston, the child who would be renamed Phillis Wheatley was purchased by John Wheatley, a prosperous tailor, merchant, and city official, and his pious wife, Susanna, then 58 and 52 years old, to be Susanna’s personal servant. The purchase of children to attend to
the personal needs of adults and to act as companions was typical of Northern enslavement. Also living in the Wheatley mansion on King Street were the Wheatleys’ children, the 18-year-old twins Mary and Nathaniel (the only two of the Wheatleys’ five children to survive to adulthood), and three or four enslaved people.

A descendant of Susanna Wheatley opined in an 1834 memoir of Phillis Wheatley that “the chains which bound [Wheatley] to her master and mistress were the golden links of love, and the silken bonds of gratitude”; Susanna is to this day described as having acted “like a mother” to Phillis Wheatley.11 “Love” may perhaps have motivated Susanna in the years in which the child she had purchased grew to womanhood, piety, and literary fame, but that love, that intimate relationship, is profoundly shadowed by Susanna’s slowness to manumit her and by the lack of provision made for her life after manumission, almost as if such a life were unimaginable by her enslavers. Susanna’s love for Phillis as a “daughter” is not like her love for Mary, who was prepared by her family life to marry well, enabled by their social circles to meet and marry the prominent minister John Lathrop, and included in their parents’ will. In contrast, Susanna made no provision for the life that her “daughter” would live after her (Susanna’s) death, such as marriage, a bequest in her will, or even training in domestic skills that might allow her to support herself.12 The self-deception infusing this “love” is not specific to New England; the “fatal self-deception” of Southern enslavers was also evidenced in their self-styling as “the best, the sincerest, indeed, the only friends that American blacks ever had” (Genovese and Fox-Genovese, 3).

Children learning to read in early New England did so with texts that taught Christianity: hornbooks, primers, psalters, and Bibles. The omnipresence of these texts can hardly be overemphasized: the most popular psalter in eighteenth-century New England, Isaac Watts’ Divine Songs for Children, was “part of English-speaking childhood for two centuries,” and the New England Primer was, “well into the nineteenth century, the USA’s most popular book after the Bible.”13 It was Mary Wheatley who taught Phillis Wheatley to read, on her mother’s instruction, instructing her in Christianity and the Bible and also exposing her to Greek and Latin classics by Virgil, Ovid, Terence, and Homer; the poetry of John Milton and Alexander Pope; and history, geography, and astronomy. The Christian texts with which it is likely Wheatley was taught to read offered a model of rhetorical authority, the pious child, as well as metaphors, rhythms, allusions, and themes that she would adapt and respond to in her poems. Wheatley’s poetry is usefully approached in relation to the New England Primer and the so-called juvenile death literature that it partially exemplified. In these narratives and poems, pious children instruct, criticize, and warn their backsliding elders – a highly specific and scripted disruption of social hierarchy in the name of its preservation. The New England Primer differs from the Negro Christianized in that the former empowers children and adults to imagine children’s authority over adults and the latter urges spiritual care of alleged inferiors in order to be spared the guilt of their damned souls; but they are alike in blurring the boundaries between subject and object and the specific, provisional kinds of individual agency and responsibility that they sanction and imagine.

The role of pious child, and the kinds of provisional authority granted to the pious child to preach to social superiors, could not but have helped make Wheatley legible, and acceptable, as a poet to her elite white audiences. Of the 39 poems included in Poems on Various Subjects, five are elegies to infants and children, first-person laments that sometimes assume the point of view of the recently deceased offspring, looking down from Heaven to tell their parents to stop crying and repent. In “A Funeral Poem on the Death of C.E. an Infant of Twelve Months,” Wheatley makes double use of this role, gently chastising the parents who long for their lost baby (“Why this unavailing moan? / … To Charles, the happy subject of my song, / A brighter world, and noble strains belong,” lines 25, 27–8) – and then ventriloquizing the dead child as he explains to his parents why he prefers Heaven (“Thrones and dominions cannot tempt me there,” line
Wheatley’s skills in writing and in performing “emotional labor of condolences and sympathy” are evident in this poem and its reception (Brooks, 8). At least two occasional poems in the book assume the persona of a Christian advising members of the elite to repent; in “To the University of Cambridge, in New-England,” for example, the speaker commands students in the college that would become Harvard to suppress sin – “An Ethiop tells you ’tis your greatest foe” (Carretta, 2001, 12). Other poems in the book make use of Bible verses included in primers and children’s Bibles (“Goliath of Gath,” Isaiah liii.1–8).

Phillis Wheatley’s first published poem, written and published while she was still a child, makes use of the rhetorical authority of pious children and presages the complexity of her later poems. She was 13 years old and had been living in Boston for only six years when “On Messrs. Hussey and Coffin” appeared on December 21, 1767, in the Newport Mercury, a weekly Rhode Island newspaper. “Hussey and Coffin” shares with other poems by Wheatley a depiction of the ocean’s power and unpredictability – suggestive, perhaps, of a memory of her own experience of the Middle Passage. That Wheatley’s appeal as a poet rested initially on her legibility as a child is also suggested by the preface, probably written by Susanna, foregrounding Wheatley’s enslavement even as it asserts, and values, her precocity. “To the Printer. Please to insert the following Lines, composed by a Negro Girl (belonging to one Mr. Wheatley of Boston),” the statement begins, going on to note that the poem is the product of an overheard conversation in the Wheatley household. “[W]hile at Dinner” at the Wheatleys’, Hussey and Coffin “told of their Narrow Escape, this Negro Girl at the same Time ’tending Table, heard the Relation, from which she composed the following Verses” (Carretta, 2001, 73). This preface mediates the reader’s potential engagement with the poem that follows, just as family slavery mediates the vision of domestic intimacy – the child and the enslaving family in a room together – that it provides.

The iambic pentameter, tone, and allusions of “On Messrs. Hussey and Coffin” can make it easy to miss the ambiguities and ambivalences that it conveys. Comprised of a single stanza, it can be understood as having three parts, each directing a specific audience, “you.” The first 10 lines address Hussey and Coffin directly in a series of questions that ask them how they felt in the storm and how they understood it. Did “Fear and Danger” in the “whistling Wind” confuse you?, the speaker asks (Carretta, 2001, 74). Did you think that the wind – “Boreas” – was “Against you,” and did you wonder if a malicious Eolus “with Contempt look[ed] down” on your terror? This section ends with an admonition to Hussey and Coffin to disregard such fears and affirm the divine plan, “something hidden from our Eyes.”

The poem then addresses the audience as “you,” asking questions that seem to be also directed to the speaker herself and that take us back into the ambivalence and uncertainty of the poem’s opening. Here, the poem imagines things going quite badly for Hussey and Coffin: “the groundless Gulph” could have “snatch’d [them] away.” The poem then asks, “Where wou’d they go? where wou’d be their Abode?” – repeated questions at odds with the poem’s earlier promise of divine protection, “something hidden from our Eyes.” The violent storm might mean that the dead seamen “ma[k]e their Beds down in the Shades below, / Where neither Pleasure nor Content can flow” – a frank openness to suffering then countered, again, by pious aphorism: “To Heaven their Souls with eager Raptures soar, // Enjoy the Bliss of him they wou’d adore.” The verb here is conditional; “him they do adore” would scan as iambic pentameter just as well.

In a kind of breaking of the fourth wall, two italicized sentences then shift the target under consideration from the threatened captains and the existential questions they face to the speaker’s personal wish for eloquence: “Had I the Tongue of a Seraphim, how would I exalt thy Praise; thy Name as Incense to the Heavens should fly, and the Remembrance of thy Goodness to the shoreless Ocean of Beatitude? – Then should the Earth glow with seraphick Ardour.” These lines address an audience of God so intensely and personally that the two sea captains seem entirely
irrelevant. Here is a declaration of submission that at the same time draws attention to the personal aspirations and abilities of the speaker as an individual. All this interesting complexity is left unresolved in the poem’s ambiguous final couplet, lines closely evocative of Isaac Watts’ hymns for children: “Blest Soul, which sees the Day while Light doth shine, / To guide his Steps to trace the Mark divine” (Carretta, 2001, 74). Whose soul? Which “he” has steps that need “guid[ing]”? Which “Mark divine,” on what or whom? The couplet’s use of the cadences and vocabulary of evangelicalism leave unresolved the two stories of hope unfulfilled that the poem has told: the sea captains who want to live and to know that the sea does not mean them harm, and the speaker who wants to make the “Earth … glow” with the power of eloquence.

Marissa Fuentes reminds us that the “ethics of history” require that we attend steadily to “the consequences of reproducing indifference to violence against and the silencing of black lives” and that we “acknowledge and actively resist the perpetuation of their subjugation and commodification in our own discourse and historical practices.” The material comfort in which Wheatley lived during her 17 years in the Wheatley household and the records of Wheatley left by white people who understood themselves as her loving champions can make it seem counterintuitive to see “violence” as characteristic, even constitutive, of her life and her achievement in publishing Thoughts on Various Subjects. Even more unlikely might seem to be the description as a kind of “silencing” of the publication of a book that brought Wheatley transatlantic fame. This chapter has framed Wheatley in relation to violence and silencing both to attend to her “complex personhood” and to recognize both the complexity and the contingency of “violence” and “silence” and their imbrication with conditions and effects that can appear to be their opposites. To “companion” Wheatley, that is, is to be pushed to articulate with greater precision the ways that racism thwarts Black lives and the ways that Black lives persist in, with, and through it.

To learn about Wheatley is to grapple with the fact that the “deep prejudice against blacks that was typical of eighteenth-century New England” took forms that can be surprising and hard to see – forms not unrelated to the microaggressions of today. Joanne Pope Melish vividly describes the “terrible psychological burden” of the New England slave system, the autonomy that it sometimes seemed to offer, and steadily withheld from, enslaved people: this system “in practice demanded agency and feared it, demanded passivity and was disgusted by it,” “imposing” upon slaves the obligation to be exactly like whites while remaining absolutely unlike them” (Melish, 26). Wheatley’s life in the family, yet not of the family – and in the coterie of literary and pious white women, yet not of this coterie – is just of this kind, a “now you see it, now you don’t” of enslavement that is of a piece with the persistent erasure of New England slavery. Her life and her poetry challenge us to rethink assumptions about the nature of resistance and complicity, the relation of emotion to enslavement and disenfranchisement, and the value and cost of exceptionality.

Notes
1 Avery Gordon, Ghostly Matters: Hauntings and the Sociological Imagination (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 4.
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6 Cotton Mather, “The Negro Christianized: An Essay to Excite and Assist that Good Work, the Instruction of Negro-Servants in Christianity” (Boston: Printed by B. Green, 1706), 23.

7 The phrase “little black genius” is William H. Robinson’s: “Several visitors to the Wheatley home would be obliged by a persuasive Mrs. Wheatley to listen to her little black genius recite an original poem, or two, or three.” Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings (New York: Garland, 1984), 23. For a discussion of the role of white women in the publication of Wheatley’s poetry, see Caroline Wigginton, In the Neighborhood: Women’s Publication in Early America (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 97–100.


9 Julius Bailey, Down in the Valley: An Introduction to African American Religious History (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2016), 53.


11 Margareta Matilda Odell, Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley, A Native African and a Slave (Boston: George Light, 1834), 34.

12 Chloe Spear (c. 1767–1815), who, like Phillis Wheatley, was kidnapped as a child and enslaved to elite Bostonians, earned enough money by working as a laundress and keeper of a boarding house to purchase a home in Boston’s North End; she left a will bequeathing $1500 to relatives in nearby towns. In the last few decades of the eighteenth century, it became more common in New England for enslaved favorites to be left money, property, or goods to assure them of support. See Melish, 89–114, and see Robinson, 52–4, for discussion of the non-inclusion of Phillis Wheatley in the wills of John and Nathaniel Wheatley.


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**Primary sources**