**Rhyming Rivals*:* Phillis Wheatley Peters Plays a Poem Game**

In December 1774, the Royal American Magazine ran a pair of poems written by the poet then known as Phillis Wheatley and by poetry-loving naval lieutenant, John Prime Iron Rochfort. Like all such games between literary wits, Wheatley and Rochfort’s ditties nod to and show off for one another. Wheatley extols the ambition of Rochfort, a young Irish officer, and praises his friendship with a man named “Greaves”, likely Thomas Greaves, another ambitious naval officer known to have explored an African coast. Rochfort, meanwhile, lauds Wheatley as “the muse’s gift” in whom “every grace, and every virtue join,” before setting her talent besides the British “Homer,” John Milton, and Sir Isaac Newton. At a meaning-level, these are praise poems, and at least superficially, they are not conflicting but rather supporting one another.

Yet what is interesting about this pair, apart from certain potentially subversive subtexts, is their existence as a game of skill—a mode of play likely first generated and circulated in private exchange and then rebroadcast publicly, with a very particular frame note and in a very particular magazine. Such a show of skill concludes with a third verse written by Wheatley Peters alone and printed in the same periodical in January 1775. As the poem triad ends, each poet has perversely “won” by conceding defeat to one another.

This presentation will provide a short but deep dive into these two bewitching later Wheatley Peters poems. What are we to make of the collaborative rendition of Rochfort’s dual connections to “pleasing Gambia” and “the power to kill”? Is there an anti-empirical undertow? How shall we understand a joust of language that turns on a model of onomastics? In fact, who has the right to bestow an epithet, to give name, and to what purpose? Why did this private game become public, and who made it so?

Studying these poems also serves to remind us that Wheatley Peters was throughout her career a poet at play, in several senses of the word. As we look for a way to read into the aesthetic prowess and public poetic persona of Phillis Wheatley Peters in her collected works, these verses, along with two-poet pairing of "A Rebus" and “An Answer to the Rebus” which counterintuitively close Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral, may gesture toward a spirit of game and gambit highly relevant to Phillis Wheatley’s project in her verse. Such a critical lens allows us to connect Phillis Wheatley Peters studies not only to an exploration of Black joy but also to a rich literature on Blackness and the field of play studies, including Shakeel A. Harris’ work on the play of enslaved nineteenth-century children and Kyra D. Gaunt’s concept of “kinetic orality.”