

**Roundtable: Phillis Wheatley Peters' Poems on Various Subjects at 250 Years
[Aphra Behn Society]**

Phillis Wheatley Peters' *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London, 1773) was as much a transatlantic material object as was its author. Similar to other contemporaneous books, like later published Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1791), Peters' *Poems* was published both in Britain and in America before the first woman's novel was published in America and, as Katherine Bassard points out, only the second American woman's book of poetry to be published,¹ the first having been by Anne Bradstreet, initially published in London a century earlier. Notably, much of early African American literature would continue to be published in England into the mid-nineteenth century. Peters' *Poems* demonstrates a transatlantic commerce that Peters' herself reflected as someone who had been sold into slavery from Africa to America. The title page of the 1773 London edition suggests transatlantic negotiation as the book was published in London, printed for Archibald Bell, a bookseller at Aldgate in London, and sold by Cox and Berry on King Street in Boston.² Cox and Berry's business and location may have facilitated this transatlantic commerce through their and Peters' proximity in Boston. Vincent Carretta mentions that "Bell's inclusion of the book's Boston distributors indicates that he anticipated a transatlantic audience."³ The title page connotes this transatlantic commerce of Peters' book that may have been initiated in Boston through these distributors. The title page itself suggests a print network between Boston and London that Peters utilized, which also demonstrates Peters' collection as a manifestation of the poet as both

¹ Katherine Clay Bassard, *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender, and Community in Early African American Women's Writing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 30.

² Vincent Carretta explains this connection in his biography of Peters. See Vincent Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 94–95.

³ Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 99.

transatlantic subject and object as she navigated transatlantic print networks and consciously fashioned her collection to embody herself as a poet.

Another aspect of this transatlantic exchange evident in her collection is her dedication to the Countess of Huntingdon Selina Hastings from Peters in Boston on 12 June 1773 though Peters is to have “arrived in London on 17 June 1773,” Peters and Nathaniel Wheatley having “sailed from Boston with Robert Calef on the *London Packet* on 8 May 1773.”⁴ The place and date of this dedication may pertain to Peters’ preparing the manuscript for publication as she was in transit across the Atlantic. Her other overt reference to the Countess is in the fifth stanza, or fourth section, of Peters’ elegy “On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield. 1770.”⁵ Peters penned the elegy in the year of Whitefield’s death and in the same year it was initially published. This reference reflects a transatlantic network and readership and was also an already established publication network through which James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw had published his narrative; this network continued to offer publication opportunities for African Americans.⁶ Dates included in Peters’ poems may hint at Peters’ transatlantic publication arrangements. Interestingly, some of Peters’ poems include dates that she presumably composed them, while others do not: “Ode to Neptune. On Mrs. W—’s Voyage to England,” “Boston, October 10, 1772”; “To His Honour the Lieutenant-Governor, on the Death of his Lady. March 24, 1773”; and “A Farewell to America to Mrs. S. W.” “Boston, May 7, 1773.”⁷ Hence, Peters composed these poems close to the time she traveled to England to publish her collection that includes these poems. Two of these poems pertain to Susannah Wheatley, one her travel to England, the other,

⁴ Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 97, 96.

⁵ Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London, 1773), 24. References are to this edition.

⁶ Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 33.

⁷ Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects*, 76–77, 116–18, 119–22, emphasis and capitalization in original.

Peters' own travel to England. Presumably, the elegy's date in the title is the date of the Lieutenant-Governor's Lady's death. The poems with the Boston dates that refer to the departure of Susannah Wheatley in 1772 and that of Peters in 1773 are the only poems with composition dates in the collection.

This transatlantic publication conveys Peters' transaction in intellectual commerce, while John Wheatley's paratext accentuates Peters herself as an object of commerce correlative to her book, emblematic in the book's frontispiece.⁸ John Wheatley also mentions Peters' transatlantic discourse in letter writing: "As to her Writing, her own Curiosity led her to it; and this she learnt in so short a Time, that in the Year 1765, she wrote a Letter to the Rev. Mr. Occom, the *Indian* Minister, while in *England*."⁹ John Wheatley's paratext indicates he composed it in Boston on 14 November 1772. A statement "To the Publick" further attests to the authenticity of Peters' poetry and reaffirms this transatlantic frame: "the Poems . . . 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 [Boston]."¹⁰ This transatlantic frame is additionally addressed in the note, "The original Attestation, signed by the above Gentlemen, may be seen by applying to *Archibald Bell*, Bookseller, No. 8, *Aldgate-Street*."¹¹ Thus framed and interwoven with references to the Countess; poems to Susannah Wheatley; the frontispiece's connection to the "Afric muse," "Ethiop," and the first-person narration; and the iteration of "from Africa to America"; Peters' *Poems* resituates her from an object of the transatlantic slave trade to the intellectual commerce of the transatlantic book trade.

⁸ See Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, 99–101.

⁹ Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects*, [vi], emphasis in original.

¹⁰ Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects*, [vii], capitalization and emphasis in original.

¹¹ Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects*, [vii], emphasis in original.

In these paratexts and throughout her poems, Peters situates her verse as transatlantic, which Bassard identifies as diasporic and triangular and “specifically not African and, more important in Wheatley’s context, *not America*.”¹² Yet, Wheatley’s poetics are simultaneously American, British, African, and oceanic, connecting the three continents through her initial exchange through African slavery, “snatch’d from *Afric*’s fancy’d happy seat” (“To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth”), to her later exchange as an enslaved African poet, “heav’nly tidings from the *Afric* muse” (“To His Honour the Lieutenant-Governor on the Death of His Lady”).¹³ Introducing her collection with the poem “To Maecenas,” the poem’s persona inquires, “But say, ye *Muses*, why this partial grace, / To one alone of *Afric*’s sable race,” and later in the same poem, she mentions the Thames, thus addressing British geography.¹⁴ Peters closes her collection, acknowledging “Britain’s royal standards” in “A Rebus, by *I.B.*” and “An Answer to the Rebus, by the Author of these Poems.”¹⁵ She mentions Boston and Quebec in the latter. This framing situates the African poet within this transatlantic discourse as a voice of exchange, as the voice of the object, or other, simultaneously transforming her into a subject, what Bassard describes as “a sort of self-ventriloquism” especially in Peters’ elegies: “The poet asks, and *Phillis* can’t refuse.”¹⁶

Though some of her poems do not possess this apparent transatlantic connection, they do employ recurring motifs, such as virtue as a “bright jewel” in her poem “On Virtue” to which she returns in the final poem “An Answer”: “The *Emerald* with a vivid verdure glows / Among the

¹² Bassard, *Spiritual Interrogations*, 38, 39. Both Bassard and William J. Scheick explore Peters’ ambiguous and liminal discourse as well as her Christian poetics. See Bassard, *Spiritual Interrogations*, 28-70; and William J. Scheick, *Authority and Female Authorship in Colonial America* (University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 107-27.

¹³ Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects*, 73-75, 116-18, emphasis in original.

¹⁴ Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects*, 9-12, emphasis in original.

¹⁵ Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects*, 123, 124, emphasis in original.

¹⁶ Bassard, *Spiritual Interrogations*, 70; Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects*, 124, emphasis in original.

gems which regal crowns compose.”¹⁷ This “virtue” is a centrally conveyed theme connected to Peters’ poetry, her art, insistent as she begins her poem “To the University of Cambridge, in New-England”: “While an intrinsic ardor prompts to write, / The muses promise to assist my pen.”¹⁸ In this poem, Peters returns to the setting of Africa mentioned in the first poem in the collection “To Maecenas.” In this role, the poem’s persona traverses the sea and the sky, the latter to which she addresses the students: “Students, to you ‘tis given to scan the heights / Above, to traverse the ethereal space.”¹⁹ She returns to these “heights” in various poems when referring to poetry and the imagination. The poem to the university students and the one that follows, “To the King’s Most Excellent Majesty. 1768.,” center privilege and power to which she does not have access, then ensues her poem, “On Being Brought from Africa to America.”²⁰ Throughout Peters’ collection, she engages the celestial realms and the terrestrial continents on both sides of the Atlantic, connecting them as she herself had crossed the ocean, with references to the gem of virtue, whether “smiling in immortal green” (“On Recollection”) or “beaming on her [the Lieutenant-Governor’s lady’s] brows” (“To His Honour . . .”) within and framing the collection.²¹ Peters’ collection demonstrates cohesion and coherence with the poems organized in such a way that focuses her poetic identity and skill. Hence, the collection personifies Peters the poet and is a collection about poetry and a role of a poet.

¹⁷ Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects*, 13, 124, emphasis in original.

¹⁸ Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects*, 15. Bassard recognizes the centrality of Peters’ poetry for Peters as poet: “Though the temptation to stay [in London] would have been great, Wheatley must have perceived that her future lay in the poems she had so carefully prepared and revised, and she put her faith in them as the ticket to her freedom” (*Spiritual Interrogations*, 56). Bassard, who mentions that she agrees with Cynthia J. Smith, suggests that Wheatley’s poetry was a central concern for Wheatley in the poem “To Maecenas”: “she [Wheatley] also inscribes herself as poet in a gesture of self-authentication that establishes the terms by which she will negotiate for poetic power throughout the volume” (*Spiritual Interrogations*, 62).

¹⁹ Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects*, 15.

²⁰ Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects*, 17, 18.

²¹ Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects*, 64, 117, emphasis in original.

Peters' letters also demonstrate Peters' conscious awareness of herself as a poet. She writes to Obour about her poetry collection proposals and the shipment of her books.²² While Peters' transatlantic social networks may have facilitated the publication of her book of poems, they situate her as a transatlantic subject, for Samson Occom associated with George Whitefield and the Countess as mentioned in Occom's journal.²³ Peters had written to Occom in 1765.²⁴ At the end of his journal, he lists the letters he sent to America in March 1766, which include letters to Susanna Wheatley and "a Negro Girl, Boston."²⁵ Susanna Wheatley wrote to Occom on 29 March 1773 to inform him that Peters' poems would be published in London and that she was awaiting the preparation of the frontispiece.²⁶ Peters had herself written to the Countess on 25 October 1770 and had sent the Countess Peters' elegy on Whitefield.²⁷ Thus, her letters reflecting her networks convey that her book of poetry was a transatlantic project as she herself was both a transatlantic subject and object. Culminating in this transatlantic subjectivity with transatlantic poetics, she composed her poem "Ocean" on her return from England:

Saw you not[,] Sire, a tall and Gallant ship
Which proudly skims the surface of the deep[?]
With pompous form from Boston's port she came[,]
She flies, and London her resounding name[.]²⁸

²² Phillis Wheatley, *Letters of Phillis Wheatley, the Negro-Slave Poet of Boston* (Boston, 1864), 15. See also Phillis Wheatley, *Complete Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin, 2001), 148; for the proposals, see 165–70. William H. Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley: A Bio-Bibliography* (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1981), also lists the proposals: For Peters' first collection, see entry 1772.B2; for her second volume, see 1779.B3.

²³ Samson Occom, "Sabbath April 6," in "Journal, 1765 November 21 [to July 22, 1766]," MS 765621.6, 11R, *The Occom Circle*, Dartmouth, 2020.

²⁴ Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects*, [vi]. See also Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley*, 1765.01.

²⁵ Occom, "Journal, 1765 November 21 [to July 22, 1766]."

²⁶ Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley*, 1773.B9.

²⁷ Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley*, 1770.B8. See also Wheatley, *Complete Writings*, 139, 163.

²⁸ Wheatley, *Complete Writings*, 80.