

## Phillis Wheatley (1753–84)

### **‘To the Right Honourable WILLIAM, Earl of Dartmouth’ (1773)**

Wheatley, though enslaved by a Philadelphia family, capitalised on their support of her literacy to cultivate an authorship so at odds with that identity that some doubted her writing’s authenticity. Thomas Jefferson, for example, dismissed Wheatley’s poetry as ‘compositions published under her name,’ yet ‘below the dignity of criticism’ (Jefferson, qtd in Coviello, 447). Notably, in that context, Wheatley’s poem below anticipates language in the Declaration of Independence he co-authored while extending her claim beyond the literary into transatlantic politics.

Her lyric addresses William, second Earl of Dartmouth (1731–1801), on his arrival in New England as Secretary of State for the colonies. Prior to his 1772 appointment, he had asserted the ultimate governing authority of Parliament but also promoted a generous, conciliatory stance toward the colonies when possible. Thus Wheatley’s prediction that the ‘iron chain’ of prior colonial policy would shift under his leadership seemed possible (‘Legge, William’, *ODNB*). Wheatley portrays the Earl optimistically, predicting he will end suppressive practices in favour of ‘Fair *Freedom*’. Midway through her text, she envisions him reading her poem. She associates her right to address political questions, though ‘young in life’, as grounded in having lost freedom herself, ‘snatch’d from *Afric’s* fancy’d happy seat’. If Wheatley elsewhere in her poetry extolled how being enslaved did bring the boon of Christianity, here she asserts the ironic different benefit of enslavement as carrying a type of experience-based knowledge.

### **‘To the Right Honourable WILLIAM, Earl of Dartmouth’**

HAIL, happy day, when smiling like the morn,  
 Fair *Freedom* rose *New-England* to adorn:  
 The northern clime beneath her genial ray,  
*Dartmouth*, congratulates thy blissful sway:  
 Elate with hope her race no longer mourns,  
 Each soul expands, each grateful bosom burns,  
 While in thine hand with pleasure we behold  
 The silken reins, and *Freedom’s* charms unfold.  
 Long lost to realms beneath the northern skies  
 She shines supreme, while hated *faction* dies:  
 Soon as appear’d the *Goddess* long desir’d,  
 Sick at the view, she languish’d and expir’d;  
 Thus from the splendors of the morning light  
 The owl in sadness seeks the caves of night.  
 No more, *America*, in mournful strain  
 Of wrongs, and grievance unredress’d complain,

No longer shall thou dread the iron chain,  
Which wanton *Tyranny* with lawless hand  
Had made, and with it meant t'enslave the land.

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 below'd:  
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray  
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?<sup>9</sup>

For favours past, great Sir, our thanks are due,  
And thee we ask thy favours to renew,  
Since in thy pow'r, as in thy will before,  
To sooth the griefs, which thou did'st once deplore.  
May heav'nly grace the sacred sanction give  
To all thy works, and thou for ever live  
Not only on the wings of fleeting *Fame*,  
Though praise immortal crowns the patriot's name,  
But to conduct to heav'n's refulgent fane,  
May fiery coursers sweep th' ethereal plain,  
And bear thee upwards to that blest abode,  
Where, like the prophet, thou shalt find thy God.

### Source text

Wheatley, Phillis, *Poems on various subjects, religious and moral* (London: A. Bell, 1773).

### References

- Coviello, Peter, 'Agonizing Affection: Affect and Nation in Early America', *Early American Literature* 37.3 (2002), 439–68.  
Hodgson, Lucia, 'Infant Muse: Phillis Wheatley and the Revolutionary Rhetoric of Childhood', *Early American Literature* 49.3 (2014), 663–82.  
'Legge, William, second earl of Dartmouth', *ODNB*.

<sup>9</sup> Lucia Hodgson argues that in this stanza Wheatley appropriates agency to critique not merely tyrannic rule of the colonies but her own enslaved status and separation from her family, a theme that carried over into much later abolitionist discourse.



Figure 1.2 Wedgwood ceramic anti-slavery piece *c.*1787/88. Catalog number: 68.150 1987.0005.51. Courtesy Division of Cultural and Community Life, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.



Figure 1.3 The Virginian Slave. John Tenniel, Intended as a Companion to [Hiram] Powers' 'Greek Slave', *Punch* 20 (1851), 236. Courtesy Mary Coats Burnett Library, TCU.

Along with its numerous expressions in print, the transatlantic anti-slavery movement generated a range of material culture texts. Famous examples included pendants representing the cause and art works such as an adaptation of a Greek slave statue from the Classical era.