Reimagining Phillis Wheatley-Peters: Religion and Resistance

In 1773, Phillis Wheatley, later Phillis Wheatley Peters, published her anthology of poems. She aptly titled it *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. As the title suggests, the collection covered the spectrum of topics ranging from classical themes, Christianity, the 'new world' of America, her African heritage, and her experiences with slavery. And while critics celebrated Wheatley-Peters’ work because of this Black, enslaved woman’s ability to engage with concepts like the iambic pentameter, trochee, and elegy, Wheatley-Peters’ complex relationship with Christianity and Spirituality thenas well as now continues to trouble scholars of this eighteenth century poet phenomenon. For example, in “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” and what I describe as a microcosm of her anthology because of the ways it touches on all other poems in her compilation, is Wheatley celebrating the likes of John and Susannah Wheatley for her seeming conversion to Christianity? Or, read in another way in tandem with the overall thematic of her anthology, is she implicitly rebuking, repudiating, and challenging colonial American Christianity because of its seeming hypocritical and cognitively dissonant ethos? Will Harris intuitively suggested that Wheatley resorts to “disruptive coding” and was a master of deploying covert strategies to achieve her objectives (6). Harris’s theory is an idea I further explore in this discussion on the spiritual dimensions of Wheatley’s work. Doing so demonstrates the subversive nature of this poet, the complex strategies she employs to animate her subjectivity, and the African antecedents she continues to draw on in the colonies to resist her enslavement and redefine her positionality.

My paper therefore reveals strategies Wheatley deploys to illuminate her complex, Abrahamic spirituality, which she makes a part of her corpus even as a seven-year-old sickly child. Additionally, I argue that Wheatley channels the personal memory of her African homeland, not necessarily the United States, and allows it to shape her time and agency in Boston. In privileging her awareness of the discourse that dismissed the intelligence of Africans and placed them on the same plane as chattel, I posit that Wheatley Peters uses her ability to deftly navigate spiritual orthodoxy and thus creates a present and future for herself that she would have been otherwise denied in an antebellum American colony.