

# THE SLAVE'S CAUSE

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*A History of Abolition*

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Black writers in English, who first emerged in colonial America, cast doubt on the racist logic that dehumanized Africans as slave property. Educated by her mistress, Lucy Terry Prince, in her unpublished poem "Bars Fight" (1746) described an Indian raid on Deerfield, Massachusetts, from the perspective of the colonists. The poem is usually viewed as adopting a white mindset and attitudes, but one might speculate about the relish with which Prince describe

in detail the killing of the colonists, including the grisly tomahawking of the unfortunate young Eunice Allen. Satire was a common mode of expressing resistance in the larger oral culture of African slaves in eighteenth-century New England. A resourceful, articulate woman, Prince did not hesitate to petition the governor for protection on behalf of her husband, Abijah Prince, and family against her considerably more wealthy neighbors, the Noyes family. Two of her sons, Ceasar and Festus, fought in the Revolution. She argued on behalf of the two boys' land claims before the Vermont Supreme Court and fought unsuccessfully to get one of them admitted to Williams College. The black abolitionist Congregational minister Lemuel Haynes eulogized Prince on her death in 1821:

And shall proud tyrants boast with brazen face,  
Of birth—of genius, over Africa's race:  
Go to the tomb where lies their matron's dust . . .  
How long must Ethaopia's murder'd race  
Be doom'd by men to bondage & disgrace?<sup>28</sup>

Like Prince's satirical poem, the narrative of Briton Hammon published in 1760 appears to adopt the views of European colonists toward Native Americans. It refers to Indians as devils and savages and celebrates English liberty. Hammon's narrative reads like any other adventure-filled Indian captivity narrative, a popular colonial genre with Iberian roots. Hammon describes his escape attempts from the Spanish, prefiguring aspects of fugitive slave narratives. Hammon's astonishing reunion with his master at the end after suffering through Indian captivity in Florida, Spanish dungeons in Havana, Cuba, and poverty on the streets of London was not a simple endorsement of American slavery. If anything, it illustrated the highly precarious existence of the Atlantic Creole, people of African descent, slave and free, who navigated the confusing world of European imperialism in the Americas.<sup>29</sup>

Twelve years after Hammon, James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw chronicled his narrative of enslavement from the African country of Bournou by the Dutch, his life as a domestic slave in New York, his education and emancipation by his last master, and, finally, his life of extreme poverty in England, a fate he shared with a majority of the black British population in the eighteenth century. He was befriended by Whitefield and traveled to Holland before marrying a poor English widow. Gronniosaw's story reads like a conversion narrative, as he discovers the "talking book," the Bible. Its religious imprimatur was reinforced by Gronniosaw's amanuensis, a "young lady," and by Rev. Walter Shirley, who wrote the foreword. Dedicated to the Countess of Huntingdon, who sponsored

its publication, the work sought to raise money for its author, and in fact, having been published in the immediate aftermath of the *Somerset* case, it became a best seller. Though assisted by Quakers, who refused to baptize his dead child, Gronniosaw describes a life of trials. A veritable black book of Job, Gronniosaw's narrative emphasizes his Christian piety and forbearance, poignantly revealing the un-Christian character of the society he inhabits.<sup>30</sup>

The ideological underpinnings of black antislavery lay in an antiracist construction of Christianity. The rise of religious egalitarianism and evangelical Christianity, based on the spiritual equality of slaves, initially posed a challenge to the institution of slavery, one that Africans, who started to convert in large numbers with the First Great Awakening, were quick to recognize. Slaves adapted evangelical Christianity to their own largely African-inspired styles of worship. Despite their early commitment to abolitionism, Quakers' spare liturgy attracted few African Americans. Like most Quaker abolitionists, evangelicals were suspicious of the acquisitive, self-interested nature of early capitalism, which propelled the expansion of racial slavery in the Americas. The Methodists John Wesley, Francis Asbury, and Thomas Coke were antislavery, and separatist Baptists preached a message of humility and spiritual equality that appealed to African slaves, Native Americans, and women. The Moravians allowed black women such as Rebecca from the Danish colony of St. Thomas to assume positions of authority in their church. After the death of her German husband, Rebecca married an Afro-Dane Moravian, Christian Prottten, a contemporary of Amo and Capitein. Like them, the Protttens spent their last days in Africa as missionaries in an uneasy relationship with their European sponsors.<sup>31</sup>

For black writers of the eighteenth century, a Christian identity became a way to challenge slavery. The "democratization of American Christianity" in its forms and style of worship resulted in the growth of a distinct African American Christianity. Blacks began the long process of making Christianity their own, developing a liberation theology that identified with the enslaved Israelites as the chosen people of God and the story of Exodus. In 1669 the biblically named Hagar Blackmore, an enslaved woman impregnated by her master's son, was brought up on charges of fornication in Massachusetts. She pointed out that she had been stolen from Africa from her husband and baby. Her charge of "man stealing," sure to resonate in the Puritan court, became a staple of early black Christian antislavery. In 1754 a slave named Greenwich in Canterbury, Connecticut, issued a Christian indictment of the enslavement of Africans. Racial slavery transgressed the biblical injunctions against imprisoning a man "if he hath done the[m] no harm" and against man stealing, which was punishable by death. In 1759 South Carolinians executed a black preacher named

Philip Johns for preaching earthly deliverance to the slaves. Two decades later David Margrett (also known as Margate), the first ordained black preacher with the Huntingdon Connexion, the Countess of Huntingdon's Methodist church, said, "God would send Deliverance to the Negroes, from the power of their Masters, as He freed the Children of Israel from Egyptian Bondage." He narrowly escaped being lynched in South Carolina before returning to England.<sup>52</sup>

The Christian origins of early African American literature gave it an anti-slavery cast. Starting with Phillis Wheatley, black writers and poets confronted the colonial social and intellectual order that ranked them at the bottom by representing themselves as especially worthy and pious Christians. In terms of the history of abolition, Wheatley is particularly important. In her own time, Wheatley was a subject of debate among antislavery proponents and slaveholders, and she met such prominent abolitionists and American revolutionaries as Sharp and Franklin. Wesley and Thomas Paine reprinted her poems. Rush alluded to her talents in his debate on race and slavery with the West Indian planter Richard Nisbet, who dismissed her "silly poems." Thomas Jefferson singled out the poetry of this young slave girl from Massachusetts for heavy-handed criticism. That Wheatley could evoke the ire of Jefferson and the praise of the French philosophe Voltaire and Clarkson probably secures her place in history. John Paul Jones, the daring patriot naval commander, also a Wheatley admirer, sent his verses to her. So remarkable were her poems that a bevy of Boston worthies, including John Hancock, examined her poems and testified on their authenticity.<sup>53</sup> Wheatley's work is the earliest literary expression of an African American consciousness and reveals an antislavery purpose. Wheatley secured her manumission on the basis of her literary talents, which became an argument for the emancipation of the entire race.

A majority of Wheatley's poems are elegies on the dead. Death was a motif that haunted the lives of African slaves. Incarceration in the holds of a slave ship was a "living death" and enslavement itself, as the sociologist Orlando Patterson has put it, "social death." While death portended Christian salvation, suicide as a form of resistance and the belief that one's soul would transmigrate to Africa were common among enslaved Africans. Named after the slaver in which she was brought in 1761, the seven-year-old Phillis became a privileged slave of John and Susannah Wheatley, who had lost their daughter, who was Phillis's age. Educated by her owners, Wheatley mastered English as well as Latin and composed her first poem in 1765. She was a genius by any standard. Literary scholars have debated the meaning of her mastery and use of contemporary and classical styles of poetry. More interestingly, Wheatley, like her predecessors, repeatedly asserted her identity as an "Ethiop" and African, anticipating the naming

practices of northern free blacks. Africa in her writings is a pagan continent but also a “blissful plain,” the land of her childhood from which she was snatched. Her poem “On Recollection,” asks “MNEME” to inspire “Your vent’rous Afric in her great design” to remember “the acts of long departed years.” There is no doubt that Wheatley was referring to her own history in writing,

By her unveil’d each horrid crime appears,  
Her awful hand a cup of wormwood bears.  
Days, years misspent, O what a hell of woe!  
Hers the worst tortures that our souls can know.<sup>34</sup>

Although the British writer Aphra Behn wrote a fictional account of a slave rebellion in *Oroonoko* (1688) that preceded her work, Wheatley originated a distinct genre of antislavery literature, poems written by women. Throughout the Anglo-American world, female antislavery poets would refer to her well after her death. As early as 1771 Jane Dunlap called the “young Afric damsel” an inspiration in her book of religious poems on Whitefield published in Boston. Wheatley dedicated her anthology *Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral* (London, 1773) to her patron, the Countess of Huntingdon, and one of her most famous poems was on the death of Whitefield. Christianity, not the crimes perpetrated against Africans, is the dominant motif in Wheatley’s most well known poem, “On being brought from Africa to America.” In the poem Wheatley thanks “mercy” for saving her “benighted soul,” but she makes it clear that “once I redemption neither sought nor knew.” It ends with a Christian condemnation of racism. “Some view our sable race with a scornful eye, ‘Their colour is a diabolic dye,’” but she reminds her readers that “*Christians, Negros, black as Cain, / May be refin’d and join th’ angelic strain.*” Similarly, Francis Williams, a free black Jamaican whose antiracist Latin poem was ironically translated by the proslavery writer Edward Long in his *History of Jamaica* (1774), wrote:

This rule was ’stablish’d by th’Eternal Mind;  
Nor virtue’s self, nor prudence are confin’d  
To *colour*; none imbues the honest heart;  
To science none belongs, none to art.

Christian universalism, for black writers, was an antidote to the new science of man that classified humankind in a Great Chain of Being in which Europeans were on top and Africans at the bottom.<sup>35</sup>

Christian motifs pervade the poetry of another of Wheatley’s contemporaries, the slave poet from Long Island, New York, Jupiter Hammon. The self-taught Hammon was a preacher and held a position of trust in his master’s

family, the Lloyds, as an accountant in their community store. His patriot master had escaped the British occupation and relocated his slaves, including Hammon, to Hartford, Connecticut. Wheatley's poetry evoked a response from Hammon. He had published his first poem, a prayer titled "An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ, with Penitential Cries," in a broadside of 1760 and was far more steeped in the Bible than Wheatley. In his "An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatley" (1778) Hammon emphasized the regenerating power Christianity held for enslaved Africans like the young poet who had been "Tost o'er the raging main" and saved "From the dangers that come down." Hammon's poetry was not a simple capitulation to Christian servitude. In his dialogue between a "kind master" and "dutiful servant," the latter asserts, "The only safety that I see, Is Jesus' holy word." His master's suicide, which resulted from his mistaken belief that the Americans had lost the war, only underscored his slave's claim to spiritual superiority.<sup>36</sup>

Wheatley, who is often portrayed as a lone genius, was in fact representative of an emerging African American antislavery critique of revolutionary republicanism. She saw herself as a member of an oppressed people rather than as just the pet slave of the Wheatley family or the exotic black poetess of the Atlantic world. As her letter to the British evangelical John Thornton, with whom she stayed while in London, attests, God is "no respecter of Persons," and he should "Therfor disdain not to be called the Father of Humble Africans and Indians; though despised on earth on account of our colour, we have this Consolation, if he enables us to deserve it." Wheatley's letters to a fellow slave named Obour Tanner and her moving poem to Scipio Moorhead, the African painter most likely responsible for producing the woodcut that graced her book of poems, testify to her attempts to seek out a community of African Americans. Most of her extant letters are to Tanner, to whom she wrote, "It gives me very great pleasure to hear of so many of my Nation." A similar impulse no doubt led Hammon to address his poem to her. In searching for literary predecessors in the West, Wheatley evoked not the European poets she emulated but the African poet Terence from antiquity, though Jefferson insisted he was "of the race of whites."<sup>37</sup>

Wheatley openly questioned the enslavement of Africans. In championing the cause of the colonists in a poem dedicated to the Earl of Dartmouth, principal secretary of state for North America, she explains that her "love of *Freedom*" springs from her personal experience:

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 belov'd:  
 Such, such my case. And can I then but pray  
 Others may never feel tyrannic sway?

In her unpublished poem on the death of Gen. David Wooster she recited her opinion of slaveholding patriots freely:

But how, presumptuous shall we hope to find  
 Divine acceptance with th' Almighty mind—  
 While yet (O deed ungenerous!) they disgrace  
 And hold in bondage Afric's blameless race?

In a letter of 1774 to the Native American minister Samson Occom, published in several newspapers throughout New England, she caustically writes, "By the leave of our Modern Egyptians I will assert, the same Principle [love of freedom] lives in us." She remarks on "the strange Absurdity of their Conduct whose Words and Actions are so diametrically opposite. How well the Cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the exercise of oppressive Power over others agree, — I humbly think it does not require the Penetration of a Philosopher to determine."<sup>38</sup>

During the American Revolution, Wheatley became actively engaged in the politics of freedom and slavery. Her poem to George Washington, written in 1775 and read usually as pure flattery, gently chides him for his order excluding African Americans, including those who had fought in the initial revolutionary battles of Bunker Hill, Lexington, and Concord, from the Continental Army:

Shall I to Washington their praise recite?  
 Enough thou knows't them in the fields of fight.  
 Thee, first in place and honours, — we demand  
 The grace and glory of thy martial band.

A recent biographer of Washington attributes the growth in his views on race — as he evolved from a provincial Virginia planter to the more cosmopolitan revolutionary military commander — to his encounter with Wheatley (Washington invited her to his headquarters on receiving her poem, although they may have never met). Wheatley chose to fight her battles in America. She rejected acclaim in Britain and when asked to return to Africa as a missionary wrote that there she would appear to be a barbarian (a telling usage that belies the notion that she viewed Africa as an inferior, uncivilized continent), having forgotten the language of her childhood. Through Rev. Samuel Hopkins, the abolitionist



Congregational minister in Newport, Rhode Island, she became aware of the missionary work of Philip Quaque, the African minister in the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel who condemned the patriots for their hypocrisy: "I behold with Sorrowful sighing my poor abject Countryman over whom You, without the Bowels of Christian Love and Pity, hold in cruel Bondage."

Wheatley claimed an African American identity that, while evoking Western Christianity and the colonists' struggle for liberty, remained critical of both. As a Christian, she wrote that Africa was suffering from a "Spiritual Famine" but "Europe and America have long been fed with the heavenly provision, and I fear they loathe it." She later married John Peters, a free black storekeeper, doctor, and lawyer of sorts who was known to plead cases for people of color. Though unable to publish a second edition of her poems dedicated to Franklin, whom she met in London and whose antislavery reputation she was undoubtedly aware of, stories of her later poverty and her husband's alleged shiftlessness are exaggerated. Peters, who was charged with barratry for his litigious nature, was imprisoned for debt but recovered much of his fortune after Wheatley's death. All three of the children she had with Peters died, and she herself died shortly before the youngest, in 1784. Her "An Elegy on Leaving," published by Wesley that year, was prescient. Despite Wheatley's cosmopolitan background and international life—she was born in Africa, experienced slavery in America, and traveled to Britain—she chose to live as a free woman identifying with the emerging African American community in the United States. She became the black female icon of the Anglo-American abolition movement, her poems reprinted by the abolitionist Quaker printer Joseph Crukshank of Philadelphia in 1786. In the 1830s Garrison published a memoir of her by a Wheatley family descendant, Margaretta Matilda Odell. Despite Odell's attempt to reduce Wheatley to a faithful and exceptional servant favored by her owners, the introduction averred that Wheatley's poetry was proof of "African genius."<sup>39</sup>

Forgotten antislavery voices and actions of Quaker and African pioneers, slave rebels and runaways, radical, dissenting Christianity, English antislavery lawyers and judges, and early black writers all played a part in laying the foundation of revolutionary abolitionism. During the American War of Independence their ideas gained currency.