

# POETIC ECONOMICS: PHILLIS WHEATLEY AND THE PRODUCTION OF THE BLACK ARTIST IN THE EARLY ATLANTIC WORLD

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To what extent did black artists in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world shape the literary and cultural forces we know associate with romanticism? Although scholars of literature and culture must acknowledge that categories such as *enlightenment* and *romantic* were created after the fact and have been used to forge artificial distinctions between authors and between works, we must also be careful not to assume that such categories have nothing to offer beyond helping to structure undergraduate curriculums and literary anthologies. The abandonment of such categories of analysis threatens to efface the role that black artists played in the development of what we think of as romanticism and obscure certain aspects of their participation in transatlantic literary culture. The life and work of Phillis Wheatley makes a compelling case that black artists played a crucial role in reformulating the late-eighteenth-century literary marketplace and restructuring the relationships between author, text, and reader in ways that become more recognizable to twenty-first-century readers when we position her work against a backdrop of burgeoning romanticism.

This essay reads Wheatley as a key participant in the shifting economic and emotional relationships between artists, audiences, and texts that we now associate with romanticism. To recover facets of the role that the black artist played in the romantic movement(s), I examine three “portraits” of Wheatley—the poetic spectacle managed by her promoters, the actual portrait that appeared as the frontispiece for her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), and the portrait that Wheatley herself created through her poetry. These portraits chart the tensions that circulated around the figure of the black African artist in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world, tensions between genius and “barbarity,” originality and imitation, exteriority and interiority, and artistic expression and commodification. These binaries have often characterized

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the terrain of Wheatley studies, marking opposing positions and points of contention. I argue for a different way of reading, one that sees the figure of Phillis Wheatley as produced through the interplay of all of these forces within the context of the early black Atlantic.<sup>1</sup> Wheatley and her work exposed both the emphasis on “authentic” self-expression through art and the ways in which the mental life of the artist became available to the reader as a consumer product. The promotional efforts of Susannah Wheatley, who along with her husband, John Wheatley, purchased Phillis when she was just a child, drew readers into a complicated economy in which they were positioned not only as consumers of Wheatley and her poetry, but co-producers of this black authorial figure (a category of identity that was being written into existence in the eighteenth century). This poetic economy included a set of relationships between reader, text, and author that was reinforced through the paratextual portrait of the authorial frontispiece. Wheatley herself created a different vision of the black artist, one that fused Christian discourse with romantic elements of imagination, Nature, and the poetic sublime, yet remained distant from and somewhat inaccessible to white readers. What has been taken to be a lack of emotionality in Wheatley’s verse may be read as a kind of strategic distance, which is represented in her work as both emotional and spatial distance from the reader and the literary marketplace.

The argument of this essay speaks to broader concerns in eighteenth-century scholarship, which is currently experiencing a “Wheatleyan Moment” (to borrow a phrase from David Waldstreicher).<sup>2</sup> Recent publications such as Vincent Carretta’s biography of Phillis Wheatley, John Shields’s *Phillis Wheatley and the Romantics* (2010), Helen Thomas’s discussion of Wheatley in *Romanticism and Slave Narratives: Transatlantic Testimonies* (2000), and a number of other critical reevaluations of Wheatley’s life and work, have generated new ways of thinking about the poet and her work within the transatlantic world in which she lived and wrote. Challenging the notion that cultural influence

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<sup>1</sup> Wheatley is only briefly mentioned in Gilroy (17, 79, 152), but his discussion of how “the intellectual traditions of the European Enlightenment” functioned as “both a lifeline and a fetter” for diasporic black writers (30) can certainly be seen in contemporary reactions to Wheatley’s work and later criticism such as May (49-63); Marren (94-105); Carretta (217-18); and Gates and McKay (95-100). Shields (“Phillis Wheatley and the Sublime,” “Phillis Wheatley’s Use of Classicism,” and “Phillis Wheatley’s Subversive Pastoral”) offers close readings of Wheatley’s poetry and contextualizes those readings within eighteenth-century poetic traditions. Erkkila discusses Wheatley alongside her female contemporaries in “Revolutionary Women” (189-223). For a specific comparison with Mercy Otis Warren, see Cima (465-495). Wheatley is discussed in the larger context of African American women writers in Bassard’s *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender, and Community in Early African American Women’s Writing*.

<sup>2</sup> Waldstreicher (522-551) classifies the period from 1772-1784 as a “Wheatleyan moment” because of Wheatley’s contributions to literary and political culture. He also notes the renewed attention to Wheatley in contemporary literary scholarship.

came from Britain and the Continent to America, Shields suggests that Wheatley's poems were read by and exerted influence on writers such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and that she should be read a "a late-eighteenth-century romantic" (Shields 2010, 63). In response to his own question—was Wheatley the "progenetrix" of romanticism—Shields provides a close reading of her poetry to argue in the affirmative. By focusing on the production of the black artist in the eighteenth-century transatlantic world, as seen through the lens of various "portraits" of Wheatley, this essay concludes that Wheatley, like Olaudah Equiano, Ignatius Sancho, and other writers of color, occupied a subject position that was always already romantic, and worked to restructure the ways in which readers imagined their relationships to authors and texts.

## I.

The first portrait of Wheatley was the one created by her promoters as part of their efforts to market her book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. Black Atlantic writers such as Phillis Wheatley entered a complicated literary marketplace where elements of the patronage system and salon culture coexisted with what we think of as a more "modern" capitalist version of the book trade in which the author negotiated various relations with printers, booksellers, and the general public in the promotion and sale of her/his works.<sup>3</sup> Mass publication was changing the nature of exchange between reader, author, and text, and reader tastes and expectations of authors were in transition as well. There was a growing emphasis on reading the work as an extension of the author, which both freed writers from the weight of literary conventions and exploited them as consumer products. For Wheatley, as for Ignatius Sancho and Olaudah Equiano, negotiating these shifting marketplace conditions demanded that they operate both in the private world of drawing rooms and salons and as public figures to be consumed by a larger reading public.<sup>4</sup> This is not to say, however, that black writers were merely acted upon by the forces associated with the literary marketplace; rather, the presence of black writers and artists produced several effects that we associate with the book trade of the late eighteenth century. They put additional pressure on already waning notions of the genteel and anonymous author and participated in the commodification of art

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<sup>3</sup> There are numerous studies of the eighteenth-century literary marketplace and competing notions of authorship. See, for example, Rogers (233-240), Chartier (25-60), Woodmansee (35-56), Deutsch (1-3), Rose (1-30; 67-91), Ingrassia (1-16), and Haynes (287-320). Haynes offers a succinct historiographical summary of the study of authorship over the last ten years. Wilcox (1-29) talks specifically about how Wheatley was marketed to the public.

<sup>4</sup> For more on Equiano in the eighteenth-century literary marketplace, see Carretta ("Property of Author" 130-150).

and artist the promotion and sale of their works. This section will contextualize Wheatley within this literary and cultural milieu, suggesting how the promotional efforts of Susannah Wheatley and the various publishers of Wheatley's work in London and Boston created a marketable vision of her by emphasizing Wheatley's poetic process as a kind of spectacle, a performance that drew readers into an economy of poetic consumption in which her poetry was framed as a service to and extension of her readers' own emotionality.

Black writers in the Atlantic world commanded audiences' attention if not always their respect. In her discussion of Wheatley's publication history, Kirsten Wilcox asserted that "in the late eighteenth century, the fact that this enslaved woman wrote at all took precedence in the public mind over anything that she said" (1999, 1). Wheatley's gender and racial identity may have heightened the public's emphasis on her "self" rather than on her work, but this emphasis was also part of a larger trend toward a privileging of authors and seeing their works, as Mark Rose put it, as an "objectification of a personality" (1988, 75). Within this transatlantic literary marketplace, the figure of the anonymous *gens du letters* existed alongside that of the strategically self-fashioned and named artist. Helen Deutsch has noted that the challenge for eighteenth-century white poets such as Alexander Pope was to create "a bridge between life and art" so that readers would find them relatable and appealing (1993, 1). She traced the ways in which Pope's physical "deformity" provided such a bridge: "The body that exposes him to a reader's derision provides Pope with the means to orchestrate that reader's response to his literary performance" (Deutsch 1993, 1). Building on Deutsche's points, Pope's physical differences, in some sense, gave the otherwise privileged male poet some traction in the literary marketplace, allowing him to speak a unique "truth" about himself to which the reader could relate, and to make visible his physicality in ways that his whiteness and maleness would have otherwise obscured. Through his poems and correspondence, Pope worked to create a "self" who could be represented on the page, an acknowledgement that some readers were reading his works because of a desire to know *him*, not merely because of an interest in neoclassical verse. In a shifting literary economy, one characterized by the emergence of what Foucault calls the "author function," white writers such as Alexander Pope were impelled to embody their work, to make visible, in the case of Pope, those physical differences that could be read as proof of authenticity/uniqueness and could be used to classify and interpret the work.

By virtue of her subject position, Wheatley's physicality, like that of fellow black writers, was always already visible to readers. Promoting her work required managing the connections that readers made between

her life and physical body and her body of work, which was achieved, in part, through the strategic staging of Wheatley and her poetry. The sense of spectacle that such performances created was amplified by the use of two available discourses of black poetics—exemplary genius and the “uncultivated barbarian” who could merely imitate white models.<sup>5</sup> Both were part of a romanticizing iterative process that had already been used to describe another black Atlantic poet, Francis Williams (1700–1770), born in Jamaica, who, as Vincent Carretta has argued, was “arguably better known than Olaudah Equiano” (2003, 213). Sponsored by the Duke of Montague (patron of Ignatius Sancho) and “introduce[d] to the stage” by slavery apologist Edward Long in his *History of Jamaica*, published in London in 1774, Williams and his poetry were framed as part of a larger debate about African potential for literary genius and famously dismissed by David Hume in his *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*.<sup>6</sup> Like Wheatley, Williams was produced, in part, through the seemingly oppositional, yet mutually reinforcing binaries of genius and “barbaric” imitation, and critics focused on his authorial identity rather than his poetry.<sup>7</sup> During Wheatley’s public displays of her poetry and her visit to London, she was framed as an embodiment of these tensions, with her poetry presented not only as an extension of her “self” (the “self” imagined in the dialogue between genius and “barbarian”), but also as an extension of readers’ emotions. Through this transference of poetic meaning and emotion, readers entered into a kind of poetic economy, both as consumers and producers of Wheatley.

From the outset, Wheatley was both celebrated as a singular genius and denigrated as someone merely mimicking established artistic conventions. Early discussions of her in colonial newspapers praised her as an “ingenious Negro Poet” and an “extraordinary Negro Poet.”<sup>8</sup> In his discussion of her reception by colonial American and British audiences, Mukhtar Isani asserted that Wheatley was frequently mentioned by colonial newspapers, which, while they were less detailed than later British reviews of her book, still testify to her fame in America (2000, 260). Her poems were republished numerous times through the nineteenth century, introducing new generations of readers to her work. They were appended to Olaudah Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* in 1814, published

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<sup>5</sup> This phrase appears in the proposal for Wheatley’s *Poems on Various Subjects* published in the *Boston Censor* in 1772 and in the letter of attestation that accompanied published editions of the work. See Robinson (*Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings* 309, 405).

<sup>6</sup> Hume writes, “. . . ’tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments like a parrot who speaks a few words plainly” (qtd in “Who Was Francis Williams,” 214).

<sup>7</sup> For more, see Carretta (“Who Was Francis Williams” 219–220).

<sup>8</sup> See announcements in the *Boston Evening-Post* (3 May 1772), the *Boston News-Letter* (6 May 1772) and the *Connecticut Journal and New Haven Post-Boy* (7 May 1772). All references quoted in Isani (“Contemporary Reception” 267). For more on the reception of her poems in Britain, see Isani (“British Reception,” 144–49).

serially in *The Liberator* in the 1830s, and included along with the only full-length biography of Wheatley published before the twentieth century, Margaretta Matilda Odell's *Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley* (1834). Wheatley also appears as a character in Hezekiah Butterworth's *The Patriot Schoolmaster* (1894).<sup>9</sup> One particularly enthusiastic writer for *The Critic* wrote in 1888 that Wheatley's book "easily surpasses that of Mrs. Bradstreet's" and "remains the principal achievement of the colored race in America" (Richardson 1888, 34).

Critiques of Wheatley as derivative emerged not long after the publication of her first volume of poetry. While many of the British reviews of her work were positive, a writer for the *London Monthly Review* offered the following in December of 1773: "The poems written by this young negro bear no endemial marks of solar fire or spirit. . . They are merely imitative" (qtd in Isani 2000, 271). This point of view was reiterated in a subsequent edition of the *Monthly Review*, which referenced Wheatley's "talent for imitation" and refuted more glowing reviews of her poetry (qtd in Isani 2000, 272). Thomas Jefferson famously dismissed her work in *Notes on the State of Virginia* as the product of religion, rather than true poetry ([1781-2] 1975, 189). Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, readers and reviewers increasingly noted Wheatley's indebtedness to neoclassical themes and forms, with one uncharitable reader dubbing her a "third-rate Pope" (Thurman 1928, 555) and another claiming that she produced "pious platitudes, colorless imitations of Pope, and some murmurs of a terrible theology" (William Long qtd in Watson 1996, 104).<sup>10</sup> The implications of a black woman being able to imitate white artistic practices were not lost, however. In an article for the *North American Review* published in 1878, James Parton classified her poems as "the merest echo of the common jingle of the day," but also remarked that "[s]he was a poet only as Christophe and Toussaint L'Ouverture (those colored caricatures of Bonaparte) were generals and emperors" (1878, 489). While ostensibly dismissing her work, Parton also acknowledged the revolutionary potential of black art, which had the ability to destabilize aesthetic categories and hierarchies and effect political change.

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<sup>9</sup> In an article for *The Ladies' Home Journal* in 1895 Butterworth likened his meeting of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to a meeting between Wheatley and George Washington. He writes, "A few evenings alter found me at the poet's [Longfellow's] door at his Cambridge home. . . I paused at the door before ringing the bell. I felt like Phillis Wheatley, as I can imagine, when the poor colored poet stood at the same door in response to an invitation from George Washington (10).

<sup>10</sup> Watson (105-107) surveys twentieth-century evaluations of Wheatley as imitative, from the harsh critiques of the Black Aesthetic movement to the more mild criticism of Wheatley scholars such as John C. Shields, William H. Robinson, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

To counter attacks on her poetic ability, Wheatley made several public performances in which she composed poetry on the spot. While these performances were ostensibly arranged to dismiss doubts about her authorship and poetic capabilities, they also functioned to stage the “act” of Wheatley writing as the event of her art. In the words of William Robinson, Susannah Wheatley invited many of Boston’s leading figures to witness performances by her “little black genius” (1984, 24) and accounts of Wheatley’s “impromptu composition[s]” appeared in newspapers such as the *New York Journal* and the *Newport Mercury* (Isani 2000, 262). Robinson noted that “[i]t was Mrs. Wheatley who eagerly circulated Phillis’s growing reputation by arranging for the touted girl to visit and be visited by the most prominent ministers and merchants and politicians, Whigs and Tories, in town” (1984, 23). Perhaps the most famous example of one of her public performances was the composition of her poem “To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth,” the writing of which was witnessed by Thomas Woolridge, who was visiting the colonies in the service of Dartmouth. Woolridge later recounted to the Earl of Dartmouth his amazement at Wheatley’s abilities and dubbed her “a very extraordinary female slave,” but also “a poor untutor’d slave” (qtd in Robinson 1984, 454). Performances such as this one showcased not so much Wheatley’s poetry, but the spectacle of a black woman *producing* poetry in which the poet was understood through the interplay between familiar discourses of genius and a kind of barbarism (as denoted by her servitude and lack of education). Woolridge emerged here as a consumer of the poetic labor, but also a co-producer in that his account of the event served to create it as an *event* for Dartmouth, a kind of staging of Wheatley’s poetic persona through which the poetry he forwards can be rendered meaningful.

Wheatley’s on-demand performances were documented in more detail in a biography of Wheatley written by Margaretta Matilda Odell, who described herself as a “collateral descendent” (1834, 29) of Susannah Wheatley:

Phillis never indulged her muse in any fits of sullenness or caprice. She was at all times accessible. If any one requested her to write upon a particular subject or event, she immediately set herself to the task, and produced something upon the given theme. This is probably the reason why so many of her pieces are funeral poems, many of them, no doubt, being written at the request of friends. Still, the variety of her compositions affords sufficient proof of the versatility of her genius. We find her at one time occupied in the contemplation of an event affecting the condition of a whole people, and

pouring forth her thoughts in lofty strain. Then the song sinks to the soft tones of sympathy in the affliction occasioned by domestic bereavement. Again, we observe her seeking inspiration from the sacred volume, or from the tomes of heathen lore; now excited by the beauties of art, and now, hymning the praises of nature to 'Nature's God.'" On one occasion, we notice her—a girl of but fourteen years—recognizing a political event, and endeavoring to express the grateful loyalty of the subjects to their rightful king—not as one, indeed, who had been trained to note the events of nations, by a course of historical studies, but one whose habits, taste and opinions, were peculiarly her own; for in Phillis we have an example of originality of no ordinary character. She was allowed, and even encouraged to follow the leading of her own genius; but nothing was forced upon her, nothing suggested, or placed before her as a lure; her literary efforts were altogether the natural workings of her own mind. (Odell 1834, 14-15)

Through the mediating voice of Odell, Wheatley was rendered accessible to nineteenth-century readers who were not privy to her poems in their original context (the use of her first name, Phillis, heightened this sense of intimacy and familiarity). More than that, however, this passage illustrates several important points about how Wheatley's public performance reinforced a poetic persona that spoke to the interests of contemporary readers. She was, as Odell phrased it, "at all times accessible," working on demand to serve the emotional needs of those who asked for occasional poems (many of which were funeral elegies). Rather than working for a single patron, Wheatley was in the service of many of Boston's elite residents, and, through the mass publication of her poems, a larger body of colonial readers. These scenes of production, while glossed over with images of "contemplation" and "lofty strains," documented on a small scale the poetic economy that existed between Wheatley and her contemporary colonial audience: Wheatley was asked to write a poem and she "immediately set herself to the task, and produced something on the given theme." According to Odell, Wheatley did not indulge in emotionality herself (no "fits of sullenness or caprice," traits that would be associated with the male romantics), but was able to channel and synthesize various influences—the Bible, "heathen lore," art, nature, politics—so as to meet the emotional needs of others through her poetry. Her abilities, readers were told, were not the result of formal training and "historical studies," but her own "habits, taste and opinions." Wheatley here appeared as disciplined, inventive, and unique, but the implied message is



that her uniqueness was the result of lived experience rather than training, which is, of course, at odds with what we know of her education and the rigorous neoclassicism of her poems. Associating artistic production with experience, habits, opinions, and so forth makes not only the poet, but also the process of artistic production, accessible to the readers, who were here framed not just as passive consumers, but instead as co-creators of poetic meaning. Readers were not being taught by an Old Master, but instead having their own emotions translated into art, making them, by extension, part of the creative process. Wheatley's writings were only part of the larger poetic performance that was represented, both in her own time and by later biographers as a kind of poetics of service, in which Wheatley transformed the emotional raw materials of others into poetic performance.

While drawing room performances and the composition of occasional poems for members of Boston society were enough to win Wheatley local fame, the publication of her poems in book form required not only the support of a powerful patron (the Countess of Huntingdon), but also a promotional tour in which London audiences could be drawn into the economy created by Wheatley and her work. After her book proposal failed to generate enough subscribers for publication in Boston, Phillis Wheatley traveled to London along with Nathaniel Wheatley, the son of John and Susannah Wheatley. This was no mere pleasure tour, but a chance for Wheatley to circulate in the drawing rooms of British elites and garner support for a London edition of her works. While Wheatley was en route to London, Susannah Wheatley wrote to the *London Chronicle* to announce the poet's arrival:

You have no doubt heard of Phillis the extraordinary negro girl here, who has by her own application, unassisted by others cultivated her natural talents for poetry in such a manner as to write several pieces which (all circumstances considered) have great merit. This girl, who is a servant to Mr. John Wheatley of this place, sailed last Saturday for London, under the protection of Mr. Nathaniel Wheatley: since which the following little piece of her's ["Farewell to America"] has been published here. (qtd in Robinson 1984, 34)

Here the poetic persona, one that is characterized by race and servitude as well as "extraordinary" and "natural talents," is foregrounded, while the poetic accomplishments are diminished. It is Wheatley herself, rather than her poetry, that readers are expected to know and appreciate.<sup>11</sup> She

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<sup>11</sup> Like Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano's work was also talked about in the press in the larger context of his deportment. A profile of Equiano that appeared in *The Morning Chroni-*

is “extraordinary,” yet her poetry is framed as diminutive; “Farewell to America,” the poem that followed, was dubbed a “little piece.” It was Wheatley herself that was the product offered to London readers.

In the proposal to the London edition of her poems, as in the Boston proposal, Wheatley as author is produced by the mutually constitutive relationship between the two roles of “unassisted genius” and “uncultivated barbarian.” There does not seem to be a temporal shift from one image to the next (i.e. a fixed progression from barbarism to civility) or a geographical shift (i.e. the poems were marketed as a work of genius in London, but not in Boston).<sup>12</sup> Rather, both images exist together, forming a picture of Wheatley, and by extension, the black artist, through their dialogic performance for the reader. While readers of the Boston proposal were expected to accept the book based on the approval of local dignitaries, as Wilcox has noted, the London version emphasizes the “evaluative power of the print consumer” (1999, 12). Near the conclusion of the proposal, publisher Archibald Bell declared, “But the publisher means not, in this advertisement, to deliver any particular eulogiums on the present publication; he rather desires to submit the striking beauties of its contents to the unbiased candour of the impartial Public” (Robinson 1984, 405). Wilcox argues that this proposal “turns the purchase of Wheatley’s *Poems* into an opportunity for every reader to replicate the validating power of Dartmouth and Lyttleton” (1999, 12). To this I would add that through its account of Wheatley’s circulation among “many of the principal Nobility and Gentry of this country,” the proposal rehearsed Wheatley’s poetic performances for London readers who were not able to view them first hand and refigured *Poems* as a kind of textual performance. In purchasing the book, readers were not just buying “validating power,” but consuming a poetic performance that had previously occurred only in the drawing rooms of the upper class, the meaning of which depended on the reading not only of the poems, but of the competing discourses of Wheatley as artist that the proposals offered.

“Selling” Wheatley to the British public required rendering her “natural” talents and poetic “self” visible, through printed discussions of her poetry, through the figure of Phillis herself, and through the visual representation of her that would accompany her poetry. Susannah Wheatley was well aware of how dress could reinforce Phillis’s performance abroad. In a letter to the Countess of Huntingdon, Susannah Wheatley mentioned that while time had not permitted Phillis to obtain new cloth-

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*cle* in 1788 noted that “besides having an irreproachable moral character, [he] has frequently distinguished himself by occasional essays in the different papers, which manifest a strong and sound understanding” (qtd in Carretta, “Property of Author” 131).

<sup>12</sup> For alternative readings of the ways in which Wheatley was marketed see Nott (21-32) and Wilcox (1-29).

ing in Boston, she had given Phillis money to purchase whatever clothing the Countess thought would be “most proper.” As a caveat, she added, “I like she should be dress’d plain” (qtd in Robinson 1984, 33). For Susannah Wheatley, modest and “plain” clothing was part of staging Wheatley in that it constantly reiterated for the public the contrast between her African body and social position as a “servant” and the “extraordinary” literary achievements that provided the occasion for her visit. Her dress served to amplify and enhance these discursive tensions rather than to resolve them and reinforced the subtext of her poetic compositions and performances as a kind of service to her literary patron, the Countess of Huntingdon (a relationship that was reinforced in the dedication to *Poems on Various Subjects*).<sup>13</sup>

Wheatley’s body and literary work were collapsed into a consumer product and performed for readers against a backdrop of enlightenment discourse, with its juxtaposition of “genius” and “barbarism.” Wheatley, like her contemporary Williams, was packaged in a way that anticipated the emergence of the “romantic” artist; she emerged as an extraordinary and singular artist communicating a “truth” about herself and evoking an emotional response in her audiences that was necessary to the production of meaning in her poems. The enlightenment themes and forms contained in her verses often were overshadowed by the romantic elements of her poetic persona. Her poetry, much of which was occasional verse that relied in part on emotional input from readers positioned reader/viewers within an economy of poetic meaning as not only consumers, but also as participants. Through their accounts of her poetic performances, audience members also functioned to create “Phillis Wheatley” as literary figure. The vision of Wheatley that emerged from the publication of her poems would reiterate the portrait of the artist that was circulated in promotional materials and performed by Wheatley herself both in theme and function.

## II.

The portrait of Wheatley that was presented in her first and only published volume of poetry, *Poems on Various Subjects*, resonated with a growing emphasis among visual artists on depicting black individuals and echoed the poetic persona that she performed in London. This portrait, based on a painting likely done by Scipio Morehead, an artist of African descent who lived in Boston, was added to the book at the suggestion of Wheatley’s patron, Selina Hastings, Countess of Hunting-

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<sup>13</sup> Wheatley’s dedication read, “To the Right Honorable the/COUNTESS OF HUNTINGDON,/THE FOLLOWING POEMS/Are Most Respectfully /Inscribed./By her much obliged/Very humble,/And devoted Servant,/Phillis Wheatley (“Complete Writings” 4)

don.<sup>14</sup> In its suggested interiority and emotionality, Wheatley's image departed from the conventions of eighteenth-century frontispieces and anticipated images of romantic artists such as Lord Byron and Percy Shelley. *Poems on Various Subjects* was published along with an authentication of her authorship signed by many of Massachusetts's leading figures and by her "master," John Wheatley. This document, addressed "To the PUBLICK" introduced Wheatley as someone recently brought from Africa as an "uncultivated barbarian." Walt Nott notes the contrast between how Wheatley was presented by this document ("uncultivated barbarian") and the *Boston Gazette's* description of her upon her return from London as "the exceptional Poetical Genius" (Nott 1993, 21). Several scholars, including Nott, have pointed to the importance that Wheatley's frontispiece, played in audiences' readings of Wheatley not as "barbarian," but as "Poetical Genius." Seen another way, however, it is not that the frontispiece *replaces* the idea of "uncultivated barbarian" with that of "Poetical Genius"; rather, as this section will suggest, the frontispiece played on the tensions between the two readings of Wheatley—the "barbarity" that some eighteenth-century readers would associate with her Africanness and the "genius" of her poetic achievements—and the two readings reinforced one another. The visual rhetoric of the frontispiece, with its depiction of Wheatley's poetic labor and contemplation, also connected her inner life with the consumer product of the poems, suggesting that her interiority itself was available for consumption.

While only one frontispiece depicting a black African writer predated Wheatley's (that of Ignatius Sancho), there was a longer history of black portraiture in the Atlantic world and Northern Europe. According to Peter Erickson, in portraits of the early modern period, African people often appeared only to help constitute the subject position of their white masters (2009, 24). The figure of the black servant functioned, he argued, as a "literal extension and figurative appendage of the white subject" (2009, 34). There were, however, notable exceptions such as Rembrandt's *Two Africans* (1661), which did not feature white people at all. A 1740 portrait of Francis Williams by an anonymous artist (presumed by Carretta to be colonial) demonstrated many of the conventions of eighteenth-century portraiture. Williams, standing in a library, is dressed as a gentleman, with one hand on an open book that sits on the table in front of him. Also on the table are a globe and writing instruments, which, along with the books and Williams's dress, frame him as a literate and worldly gentleman. Although he looks at the viewer directly,

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<sup>14</sup> For a comparison between the Wheatley portrait and one representing the Countess of Huntingdon, see Franke (224-27).

there is very little interiority suggested by the portrait.<sup>15</sup> Erickson has noted that beginning in the 1760s in England, there was an increased focus on black men as individuals in works such as Thomas Gainsborough's *Ignatius Sancho* (1768) and Joshua Reynolds's *Study of a Black Man* (c.1770). While Gainsborough's depiction of Sancho resonated with many features of conventional eighteenth-century portraiture, Reynolds's unfinished study demonstrated a decidedly more romantic sensibility. The young man is set against a cloud background and does not meet the viewer's gaze, but looked up and away. His expression is, as Erickson has suggested, "contemplative" and the background gives him an "ethereal, floating quality" (2009, 45). Furthermore, there is a sensuousness to the man and his expression that anticipates what we think of as "romantic" portraits, such as George Sanders's 1807-08 portrait of Lord Byron and Amelia Curran's 1819 watercolor of Percy Shelley.<sup>16</sup> Unlike many other eighteenth-century portraits, viewers were not offered representative items—books, globes, furniture, and so forth—which could be used to interpret this man. Any insight viewers get must be gleaned from their reading of his expression and what they imagine he might be thinking and feeling.

Portraiture was linked to poetic productions through the paratextual element of the frontispiece and through the science of physiognomy. Beginning in the seventeenth century, frontispieces that included an "engraved likeness of the book's author within a masonry frame" became a common feature of many books of poetry (Barchas 1998, 261). As Gerald Egan has argued, these portraits conferred a sense of authority and created an imagined relationship between reader and author. Portraits of poets such as Dryden, Milton, and Pope were highly stylized and contained markers of national identity (which was frequently linked with the classical past) and artistic prowess within a formal frame. Egan noted that "[f]rontispiece portraits in eighteenth-century editions of Milton and Dryden are not so much likenesses of their subjects in life as *representations* of likenesses, visual allusions to memorial statuary and monuments" (Egan 2010, 193). Readers did not necessarily get an accurate representation of what an author looked like, a window into their artistic soul, but rather a representation of a type. The implied relationship between author and reader was one of master and student, with the framing, classical allusions, and formal pose denoting the author's authority. Readers were not asked to identify or sympathize with the author, but to respect him and appreciate the poetic productions of the highly trained specialist.

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<sup>15</sup> For more on Williams's portrait, see Carretta ("Who Was Francis Williams?" 213, 225)

<sup>16</sup> See Egan (185-205).

To understand the visual rhetoric of Wheatley's frontispiece, readers had to process the both the exterior features, including the frame, which labeled her as "Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley of Boston," her dress, and her racial identity, and the suggested interiority of Wheatley herself. Interpreting the portrait hinged on reading the contrasts and tensions it depicted—exterior/interior, enslaved person/"Poetical Genius," formality/intimacy—a new way of reading, required in part by Wheatley's subject position. In this image, Wheatley, dressed in a manner that would have marked her as a servant, is shown in profile, seated at a table, looking up from the page upon which she is writing, as though caught in an unguarded moment of contemplation. Her chin rests in her hand and her elbow rests casually on the table. The portrait is both formal in its frame and setting, and oddly intimate in the way that it presumes to observe the subject in a moment of reflection. Scholar David Grimsted has argued that the portrait of a black woman writing would have served as a "refutation" of some readers' racial prejudices, while Carretta has suggested that readers' sense of their own authority might have been reinforced in comparison to Wheatley's social position.<sup>17</sup> These effects were not mutually exclusive, however, but instead reiterated the dialogic relationship between binaries of "genius" and "barbarism" that circulated throughout print discussions of Wheatley's work. While the exterior markers pointed to Wheatley's racial identity and status as a slave, her contemplative pose emphasized the presence of an interior poetic "self"; the figure of Wheatley as an author was produced through the unresolved tensions between the two. What readers could "know" about her—that which was communicated through the external features of the portrait—was counterbalanced by the suggestion of an inner life that could only be speculated about, or perhaps, it is suggested, accessed through the poems that follow.

By hinting at her interiority and emotionality, the portrait shared some of the romantic elements of Reynolds's *Study*, but was positioned more fully within a consumer economy. Unlike Reynolds's work, Wheatley's portrait was produced to be reproducible, to be engraved and reprinted as the frontispiece for her *Poems*. These engraved likenesses of Wheatley in the act of writing (presumably the poems that follow) made

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<sup>17</sup> See Grimsted (396) and Carretta ("Property of Artist" 136). In his comparison of Wheatley's portrait to those of Equiano and Sancho, Vincent Carretta focuses on the "modest" nature of the portrait's content and form and impact such modesty has on readers: "The frontispiece displays the aspiring poet very modestly dressed as a domestic servant or slave, depicted in a contemplative pose. Her social status is clearly inferior to that of most of her likely readers, she stares upward, to the viewer's left, as if hoping for inspiration for the pen she holds. The book on the table before her may be intended to represent her own poems, as well as to indicate that her literacy enables her to have been influenced by earlier writers. The artistic quality of her frontispiece is as modest as her status" (Carretta 136).

her inner life, her thinking, at least partially available for consumption. The portrait is, for Grimsted “an icon of the respectable, literary, and thoughtful black” (1989, 396) that challenged racist assumptions about black intelligence and interiority (1989, 396-97). It is crucial to recognize, however, that even as it granted interiority, this image of Wheatley conflated her interiority with the material product of the book, transforming that interiority into a consumer product. Like Wheatley’s public compositions and performances and the advertisements of her work, the frontispiece, which asked viewers not just to “read” symbolic objects, but to imagine the subject’s intellectual life, positioned viewers/readers within a complex economy wherein they were coproducing Wheatley even as they functioned as consumers of her and her work.

The frontispiece to Wheatley’s *Poems on Various Subjects* has been read as resolving, or at least mediating between, the conflicting perspectives on the black African artist that circulated around Wheatley and her work. Yet, as with her other poetic performances, Wheatley as artist emerged out of the dynamic tensions between civilization and “barbarism,” servant and artist, Enlightenment imitator and romantic “genius.” This authorial image shared some similarities with other eighteenth-century authorial portraits, but also resonated with images of black African individuals and looked forward to the frontispieces that would accompany the definitive nineteenth-century editions of Shelley and Byron. Later versions of the frontispiece, such as that which accompanied Odell’s *Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley* (1834) would resolve some of these tensions, portraying Wheatley in an unabashedly romantic way. The masonry frontispiece was removed and the text within it was moved to below the portrait. Wheatley’s name was written in a cursive font, as though to represent the author’s own signature and give a different, more personal kind of authentication to the work that followed than that originally provided by Boston dignitaries. Although her dress still communicated her social position, the written statement that she is “servant to Mr. John Wheatley” was given second billing to her authorial “signature.” This was a portrait characterized by blurred boundaries—between Wheatley and her poetry and between the poet and the reader—created by the removal of the frame that contained the image of the artist, and the shift in style from the rigid lines of steel or copper engraving to the softer and more nuanced contrasts of stipple engraving. The frontispiece, like Odell’s biography, served to make Wheatley accessible to the reader. In the poems themselves, however, the poet worked to maintain a strategic distance from the reader, a space for productivity in which she offered only pieces of her “self” to the reader/viewer.

## III.

The third portrait of Phillis Wheatley was the one that she herself created through her poetry, a poetic persona that was at times emotionally and spatially removed from the reader of the poem. She expressed little of her own emotional life in her poems, scholars have argued, because she “remained marginal” to those for whom she wrote her elegies (Cavitch 2007, 187) or because she was prevented from speaking the truth of her experiences. Wilcox has argued that “[n]ot only did Wheatley’s dependence on white patrons who countenanced slavery make it impossible for her to write unambiguously about her experience of oppression, but the transatlantic promotion of her poetry deliberately directed readers away from the interpretive frame of her servitude” (1999, 8). Put in the language of economic exchange, Wheatley “paid for her public voice,” according to Wilcox, “with her power to represent on the printed page her racialized experience of enslavement” (1999, 2). Such a reading of Wheatley and her work assumes that it was the poet’s desire to narrate her experiences in print, to offer up her inner life and experiences of slavery to the reader, and that she was prevented from doing so by both her white patrons and the market forces of the transatlantic book trade. The previous sections have argued that both Wheatley’s patrons and the literary culture in which she worked were invested in promoting her work as an extension of her “self”—albeit a self that was produced and understood through mutually reinforcing discourses of the black artist not through the exercise of individual artistic agency. In this context, we might question the extent to which Wheatley herself saw her poetry as a means of expressing her inner life. We might then read the lack of interiority in her work as an attempt to maintain a strategic distance so as not to make her own thoughts and emotions fully available for public consumption. What emerges instead in Wheatley’s elegies is a vision of the poet as serving the emotional needs of others in an almost pastoral manner that shielded her own emotions and differed from the economic model offered by her promoters.<sup>18</sup> In several of her non-elegiac writings, readers were presented with a slightly different view of poetic service and a poetic persona that was spatially removed from the reader’s view. Through a fusion of Christian and romantic imagery, the poet was able to ascend beyond the material plane and create, at least temporarily, new worlds in which to dwell. This rhetoric of ascent reinforced the strategic distance between poet and reader, challenging the notion that she was “accessible” to readers and available for public consumption.<sup>19</sup>

Wheatley’s elegiac writings, which account for about one-third of her poetic productions, depended, in large part, on the emotional input of

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<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of the “clerical” elements of Wheatley’s poetry, see Cavitch 187-88.



the families of the deceased and the role of the poet within these writings was to both translate their grief into art and offer them some kind of consolation. Whether or not she knew the deceased or the grieving families personally, Wheatley used their situation and what she imagined to be their emotions as the raw materials of her poetry to appeal to a readership that appreciated the established genre of the elegy and showed increasing desire for emotionality and interiority on the part of the poet. As with all elegies, the poet served as a vehicle for the expression of others' loss and filled an almost pastoral role, lecturing the living about their response to this loss. This process, according to Max Cavitch, was a response to the "ungrievable" losses that Wheatley herself suffered. "Not recognized as a mourner, perhaps even by herself," he argued, "Wheatley set about acquiring the means of recognizing and managing the mourning of others" (Cavitch 2007, 187). The poet functioned as a conduit between mourners and readers for the expression of grief and promoted the practice of emotional restraint to the mourners themselves. An example of this kind of call for restraint occurs in "On the Death of a Young Lady Five Years of Age:"

Why then fond parents, why these fruitless groans?  
 Restrain your tears, and cease your plaintive moans.  
 Freed from a world of sin, and snares, and pain,  
 Why would you wish your daughter back again?  
 No-bow resign'd. Let hope your grief control.  
 And check the rising tumult of the soul. (*Complete Writings*, 17, ll. 23-28)<sup>20</sup>

The wording here blended stoic self-control and resignation with the Christian view of death as a release from the sinful world. Even as it asserted that these parents should find comfort in God, Wheatley's poem affirmed that the natural reaction of the parents is one of tumultuous grief. Similar sentiments were expressed in poems such as "On the Death of a Young Gentleman," "To a Lady on the Death of Her Husband," and "To a Lady and Her Children on the Death of Her Son, and their Brother." Unchecked grief, it was implied, is destructive, while grief properly channeled through the voice of the poet could become the building blocks of artistic expression and Christian consolation. The tone and content of these poems subtly changed the poetic economy represented by Wheatley's promoters; the poet served the needs of others, but by providing that service, took a secondary role as facilitator and achieved a kind of strategic distance from the poems themselves, trading on emotionality and interiority, but keeping her own emotions and interior life away from the poems meant for a mass audience.

Wheatley's "Niobe in Distress for Her Children, Slain by Apollo," generally considered to be an epyllion, can also be read as a type of

elegy, for a classical rather than contemporary mother who has lost her children. Thematically, this poem shared some similarities with Wheatley's earlier elegies, reproaching Niobe for emotional excess even as it showed that excess as material that the poet could use. Niobe was, to use the language of the time, overly fond of her children, and the poem suggested "Thou had'st far the happier mother prov'd/ If these fair offspring had been less beloved" (54, ll. 31-2). Her pride caused her to demand sacrifices for herself and her children, instead of for Latona (Leto, mother of Apollo and Aphrodite). The punishment for Niobe's actions was the loss of all of her children, who were, as the title suggests, killed by Apollo. In Wheatley's version of the story, the beauty and charm of Niobe's children was emphasized and she too was "beautiful in woe" (53, ll. 174-5). Niobe's emotionality was both the cause of her downfall and also the source of artistic inspiration. While in Ovid's original, Niobe was transformed into a statue, Wheatley's version ended with the still human Niobe clutching her dying daughter to her breast and crying out for fate to spare her one child. This cry was echoed back to her, thus perpetuating her emotional pleas rather than silencing them. While some "other hand" added lines to the poem to make it align with Ovid's original, that which we know to be Wheatley's ended with Niobe's "streaming eyes" and echoing pleas—maternal grief transformed into art rather than stone. Here as with Wheatley's more conventional elegies, the poet was only present as a vehicle for someone else's emotional expression. While readers can and do speculate about her personal relationship as an enslaved woman to the topic of familial separation and loss, it is the reader who produces such meaning. In the poems published in her first volume, Wheatley did not make her emotions available to the public, but maintained a kind of strategic distance.

Her later elegy to Samuel Cooper, which was to be published as part of her second volume of poetry, marked a departure from her earlier work in that it allowed readers to share in the experience of grief without rebuke, transformed the process of grieving into poetic art, and offered a rare glimpse of the poet's own emotions. It demonstrates a much more romantic sensibility, replete with emotionality and an extended reference to the poetic consciousness. However, the poem remained focused on expressing the grief of all of those who were impacted by Cooper. The opening of the poem reads:

O THOU whose exit wraps in boundless woe,  
 For Thee the tears of various Nations flow:  
 For Thee the floods of virtuous sorrows rise  
 From the full heart and burst from streaming eyes. (97,  
 ll. 1-4)

Here we have not the language of restraint, but the language of emotional excess—"boundless woe," "floods of virtuous sorrows," "full heart. . .[and] streaming eyes." We also get a more personal picture of the deceased than we do of previous subjects; Cooper was loved by his wife and apparently an inspired writer: "Thy every sentence was with grace inspir'd/ And every period with devotion fir'd" (97, ll. 19-20).

Rather than trying to check the grief of its audience, the poem encouraged and reflected that grief. After its description of Cooper, the poem noted that his wife grieved for him, the "gay" and the "sober" respected him, and the "Sons of Learning" were influenced by him. Moving outward from his immediate acquaintances, the poem asserted that Cooper's "Country mourns th' Afflicting Hand divine/ That now forbids thy radiant lamp to shine" (97, ll. 23-4). Cooper, "a resplendent source of light," was compared to the sun who "chear'd our night of gloom" (98, ll. 25-6). Then the poem moved to the grief felt by Cooper's church, who will keep his memory alive. And finally, the poem ended with a discussion of the poet's own grief, which does not detail her feelings as unique, but as connected to this larger community of mourners:

The hapless Muse, her loss in COOPER mourns,  
And as she sits, she writes, and weeps, by turns;  
A Friend sincere, whose mild indulgent grace  
Encourag'd oft, and oft approv'd her lays. (98, ll. 41-4)

This poem is significant because it represents one of the only mentions of personal loss among the elegies that Wheatley produced. Elsewhere described as "Afric's muse," here Wheatley described herself as a "hapless Muse," who alternates between writing and weeping. Artistic production and the expression of emotion are here inextricably linked, yet the grief that the poet felt part of a larger communal experience. Moreover, the speaking subject here is that of writer/poet, which still maintained a slight sense of distance between the reader and Wheatley herself.

In addition to the emotional distance created in her elegies, Wheatley invoked a sense of spatial distance between the poet consciousness and the material world of the reader in several of her poems in which the poet is framed as the servant of God and the servant of imagination or "Fancy." Works such as "Thoughts on the Works of Providence" and "On Imagination" portray God and imagination as the "monarch of the earth and skies" (26 ll. 2) and "the imperial queen" (36 ll.1), and present the poet as serving these sovereign powers. Imagination is framed as wielding a "sceptre o'er the realms of thought" (37 ll. 36) and all, including the poet, bow before her command. In these works, part of the poetic service involves transcending the earthly plane and imagining new possibilities in a celestial or heavenly realm. "Thoughts on the Works of Providence" opens with such a scene of ascent: "ARISE, my soul, on

wings enraptur'd, rise/To praise the monarch of earth and skies" (26 ll. 1-2). The poet's contemplation of providence was described as an "arduous flight," which was guided by the "Celestial muse" (26 ll. 9-10). Similar themes are discussed in "On Imagination," in which the poet and her imagination were depicted as "soaring through the air" to find "Th' empyreal palace of the thund'ring God" (36 ll. 15-16). The poet and her imagination were borne upwards:

We on thy pinions can surpass the wind,  
And leave the rolling universe behind;  
From star to star the mental optics rove,  
Measure the skies, and range the realms above.  
There in one view we grasp the mighty whole,  
Or with new worlds amaze th' unburdened soul. (36 ll.  
17-22)

Like her meditation on "Providence," this passage made use of a "poetics of ascent" (a phrase I borrow from John Shields), in which the poetic mind was elevated above every day concerns.<sup>21</sup> The reference to optics has been described by May as an engagement of scientific discourse, but the more dominant theme seems to be the blending of the religious and secular sublime (52-55). The poetic mind, lifted by imagination, can "surpass the wind" and "leave the rolling universe behind." During this poetic ascent, the poet can "in one view. . .grasp the mighty whole" and contemplate "new worlds" which "amaze" and expand the soul. Yet it is also important to note that this elevation of the poet creates a gap between the poet and the reader, who cannot completely share in this transcendent experience and whose perspective on the "mighty whole" is only partial, and mediated by the poet herself. The perspective of the reader is that of one who looks up from the ground.

Even as the poet is able to climb to new heights and imagine alternative possibilities, this perspective is ultimately fraught with images of temporality and of the impossibility of remaining in a world of the mind's creation. "On Imagination" ends on a melancholy note:

But I reluctant leave the pleasing views  
Which Fancy dresses to delight the *Muse*;  
*Winter* austere forbids me to aspire,  
And northern tempests damp the rising fire;  
They chill the tides of *Fancy's* flowing sea,  
Cease then, my song, cease the unequal lay. (68, ll. 48-  
53)

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<sup>21</sup> Shields (189-209), performs a close reading of the "poetics of ascent" within the context of the literary sublime.

The poet cannot remain in this imaginative space and the poem must “cease.” According to John Shields, this poem “foreshadow[ed] Keats” (“Phyllis Wheatley’s Struggle,” 256), and while he did not explain the connection, the ending of Wheatley’s poem does express sentiments similar to those of “Ode to a Nightingale.” Keats’s “Ode” expressed a similar reluctance to leave the poetic world he has created: “Forlorn! the very word is like a bell/ To toll me back from thee to my sole self!/Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well/ As she is famed to do, deceiving elf” (*Complete Poems*, 348, ll.71-4). For Wheatley, abandoning her poetic world and returning to the material one would have been even more poignant, as she was returning to a world that was marked by racism and slavery. Returning to the world of the reader also necessitated an end to the poem, an end to the imaginative flight. But the art, the poetic rendering of the journey, remains, documenting the brief moment in which the poet was able to rise above the material plane and dwell in a world of her own making.

This kind of transcendence is something that artists can share with one another, suggested Wheatley in “To S.M., a young *African* Painter, on seeing his Works,” a poem dedicated to Scipio Morehead. In this poem, Wheatley imagined she and Morehead having a kind of visionary experience, during which she counsels him to look to Christian rather than classical sources:

On what seraphic pinions shall we move,  
 And view the landscapes in the realms above?  
 There shall thy tongue in heav’nly murmurs flow,  
 And there my muse with heav’nly transport glow,  
 No more to tell of *Damon’s* tender sighs,  
 Or rising radiance of *Aurora’s* eyes,  
 For nobler themes demand a nobler strain,  
 And purer language on th’ ethereal plain. (60 ll. 25-32)

Here Christian language (“seraphic pinions” and “heav’nly murmurs”) was fused with a romantic notion of artists as visionaries who can transport themselves to a higher plane of existence in order to gain new insight and perspective on the world. The poet advocated this kind of transcendence for Morehead, because her muse will help him focus on Christian rather than classical materials (she alluded to the story of Damon and Pythias). As with several of her other imaginative poems, the poet provided a service to someone else, but here there is an element of this service in which the reader cannot fully share. Wheatley’s predominantly white readers were kept at a distance from Morehead and the poet, neither being addressed directly nor able to access the world of the “ethereal plain.”

Even in our own historical moment there remains a tendency to disallow the black artist the option of maintaining a critical distance from her or his work. They are expected to speak the “truth” of themselves (which is often understood as the truth of their race) in their work. This was all the more true for black artists living and working in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. What has been seen as a lack of sympathy or personality in Wheatley’s work can also be read as a resistance to this economy wherein she herself must be offered to the public as a spectacle to be consumed and in part, produced, by others. This is not to say that she did not cultivate an authorial persona, but rather that the persona she created was held somewhat aloof from the reader while nonetheless working in an emotional register. Her elegiac writings worked with the emotions of others (people she knew and classical figures), translating familial grief into public occasions, a process that dovetailed with presentations of her poetry as a kind of service to others. In several of her other works, readers were placed in the role of onlookers, watching from below as the poet experiences moments of romantic transcendence. As readers, we are reminded that there are things that we cannot know, and of how dependent we are on the poet’s narration for our understanding. Thus, the poetry functioned, in part, to counteract the other portrayals of Wheatley that presented her physical being and her interiority as already available for reader consumption. While Pope’s challenge was to create connections between his life and work, Wheatley sought in her poetry to renegotiate the terms by which her life and work were understood.

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Wheatley as artist was marketed through the interplay of competing perspectives of the black artist that were co-created and consumed by the reading public. Writing from within this literary and cultural milieu, Wheatley worked to create within her writing a space of productivity in which readers were both dependent on her authorial perspective and limited in their access to her poetic “self.” She adopted a pastoral tone, infused with Christian and romantic discourse, so as to make the authorial persona of servant-poet into a mode of agency that would be strategically useful to her and allow her to renegotiate the connections that were made between her lived experiences and poetic productions. She challenged the framing of her as “servant to Mr. John Wheatley” and the “Very humble [a]nd devoted servant” of the Countess of Huntingdon by presenting herself someone who served many—the muse, the Christian God, imagination, the grieving, and a fellow black artist—and offered that service on her own terms. Given her position as an enslaved woman, drawing on rhetorics of poetry as service was not unproblematic, but it allowed her to engage the ways in which she was marketed to and pro-

duced by eighteenth-century readers. In the context of binaries of genius and “barbarity,” imitation and originality, artist and commodity, using service as a metaphor for poetic production helped her carve out a kind of third space from which to offer her poems and speak a “truth” about herself that was not already overdetermined by reader assumptions about black Africans and the creation of art.

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