



## Women in the Liberal Arts Tradition with Dr. Angel Parham

### Lecture 7: Phillis Wheatley

#### Outline:

##### Phillis Wheatley

- Phillis Wheatley came from Senegal, however, it is hard to know for sure.
- She was about 7 years old when she was picked up in Senegal, and taken on a horrific trip across the sea.
- She remembered that her mother would pour a libation into the dirt each morning. This connected her to her ancestors.

##### Critiques of Phillis Wheatley

- Her most anthologized poem, “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” caused a reconsideration of her legacy.
  - Why was this poem so anthologized? It tarnished her reputation as someone who was satisfied with her enslavement. That could not be farther from the truth.
  - We have to understand who Phillis Wheatley was as a woman of faith. She was deeply committed to having everyone know the gospel, especially those who she left in Africa.
  - Phillis Wheatley was very critical about the slave trade and the way that she and other Africans have been treated.
  - Her emphasis is on having the gospel.
  - She was in support of two African men who would return to Africa to share the gospel.
  - She would have been just as happy to have the gospel presented to her in Africa.
  - At the end of the poem she is reminding white Christians that black people are just as human as everyone else.

##### Phillis Wheatley

- She arrives in Boston on July 1761 on the ship called The Phyllis, which she was named after.
- She was bought by John and Susanna Wheatley.
- Phillis was not an economic investment, she was seen as a “luxury good”.
- Phillis was almost the same age as the Wheatley’s daughter Sarah, who they had lost. Phillis may have reminded them of Sarah.
- Phillis mourned her enslavement greatly, even though she was well treated.



- She was given access to a dictionary and place to write at a time when it was illegal.
- Phillis was educated and she learned Latin. She had a great command of the English language.

## **Phillis Wheatley's Poetry, Freedom and the Imagination**

- She was ready to publish her poetry in May 1772, but she was rejected.
- She wrote a poem dedicated to the Earl of Dartmouth, as well as a letter to the Earl. He helped her to publish her poetry.
- **Freedom**, "To the Right Honorable 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 is saying that the Earl is going to be a more benevolent and fair person in this role. She was incredibly politically savvy and smart about what she did.
  - 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 shalt thou dread the iron chain,  
Which wanton Tyranny with lawless hand  
Had made, and with it meant t' enslave the land.
    - There will be no more wanton Tyranny.
  - 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 belov'd:  
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray  
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?



- She goes from talking about political oppression of the colonists to talking about why she cares about freedom.
- She wishes that no one else be held under slavery.
- She is extraordinarily committed to liberty.
- Imagination: “On Imagination”
  - Thy various works, imperial queen, we see,  
How bright their forms! how deck'd with pomp by thee!  
Thy wond'rous acts in beauteous order stand,  
And all attest how potent is thine hand
  - From Helicon's refulgent heights attend,  
Ye sacred choir, and my attempts befriend:  
To tell her glories with a faithful tongue,  
Ye blooming graces, triumph in my song.
  - Now here, now there, the roving Fancy flies,  
Till some lov'd object strikes her wand'ring eyes,  
Whose silken fetters all the senses bind,  
And soft captivity involves the mind.
  - Imagination! who can sing thy force?  
Or who describe the swiftness of thy course?  
Soaring through air to find the bright abode,  
Th' empyreal palace of the thund'ring God,  
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' unbounded soul.
    - Imagination can take us to the highest heaven of the cosmos, where human and divine will are one.
  - Such is thy pow'r, nor are thine orders vain,  
O thou the leader of the mental train:  
In full perfection all thy works are wrought,  
And thine the sceptre o'er the realms of thought.  
Before thy throne the subject-passions bow,  
Of subject-passions sov'reign ruler thou;  
At thy command joy rushes on the heart,  
And through the glowing veins the spirits dart.
    - Imagination leads the mental train, she orders and rules the passions, which act as her obedient subjects. This is central to living a good and virtuous life.
    - Without imagination we don't have freedom at all.
  - 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.

- Imaginations fire has been quenched.
- Her experience of being enslaved casts a chill over the fires of the imagination.
- She is held down by literal and metaphorical fetters.

What is Phillis Wheatley's legacy?

- She leaves a mighty legacy of faith, dedication to freedom, and of the joys and beauties of the imagination that we can all learn from.