

2010

Phillis Wheatley's Abolitionist Text: The 1834 Edition

Eileen Razzari Elrod

Santa Clara University, eelrod@scu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/engl>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Elrod, Eileen Razzari. "Phillis Wheatley's Abolitionist Text: The 1834 Edition." *Imagining Transatlantic Slavery*. Ed. Cora Kaplan and J. R. Oldfield. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 96-109.

This extract is taken from the author's original manuscript and has not been edited. The definitive, published, version of record is available here:

<https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9780230578203>

References provided as a supplemental file.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Sciences at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact rscroggin@scu.edu.

Eileen Razzari Elrod

Phyllis Wheatley's Abolitionist Text:

The 1834 Edition

The problem presented to readers by the late eighteenth-century poet Phillis Wheatley is nearly as well known as her poetry. Alongside many readers' expressions of admiration, others have registered suspicion and disapproval, first in the eighteenth and then again in the mid and late twentieth centuries. And nearly all of Wheatley's critics acknowledge the centrality of the poet's life in responses to her poetry. Whether the questions were framed in terms of literary authorship in the context of racist assumptions (as they were in the eighteenth century) or racial (as well as gendered) authenticity in the context of assumptions about piety and predictable conventions of neoclassical poetry (as they were in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries), Wheatley has disturbed reader's expectations in her moment and in ours. My own undergraduate students, for instance, frequently recall Alice Walker's Wheatley from their U.S. schoolroom curriculum. Brilliant, isolated, enslaved, and deeply conflicted about her race and self, Walker's Wheatley (shaped at least in part by the Black Arts Movement's hostile reception) embodies Virginia Woolf's "contrary instincts," a fraught and unfortunately iconic representation of black women's creative expression. In the widely reprinted 1974 title essay of *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Walker presents Phillis Wheatley as a young black girl combing the golden hair of both her white mistress and the classical goddess of virtue, providing one moment among many when Wheatley served a particular rhetorical function for readers, writers and activists in the trans-Atlantic cultural milieu which first established her as a literary celebrity in 1771.¹

But what of the intervening, nineteenth-century Wheatley who emerges from the first decade of the organized abolitionist movement in America? In 1834 George W. Light published a new edition of Wheatley's poems in Boston. Advertised in William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* and clearly addressed to abolitionist readers, Light's publication was dedicated "to the Friends of the Africans." The publication included, first, an anonymous introduction and, second, a "Memoir," by Margaretta Matilda Odell. The publication's brief "Introduction" makes only one specific reference to Wheatley's life or work, that is to say that the text will "simply . . . present an unvarnished record of African genius, sustained by Christian benevolence and guided by Christian faith." The introduction further presumes that its readers support a "great work of general emancipation" which promises "the early dawning of that bright day," when "the African shall be as the American, and the black man as the white." The text seems, then, to presume an abolitionist readership and an anti-slavery context, but Odell's "Memoir" undermines those assumptions.

The 1834 biographical essay by Margaretta Odell warrants an attentive reading. The "Memoir" shaped the parameters for many readers' receptions of Wheatley's work in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when not only Odell's information but just as importantly her rhetorical framing of Wheatley continued to influence and inform discussions of the poet. Reprinted many times, Odell's essay served as a source of information for scores of other writers interested in Wheatley.ⁱⁱ William Robinson, in his 1981 *Bio-Bibliography*, for instance, notes repeated errors of fact and substance in publications about Wheatley, and Odell is the source for most of these, which get repeated for decades. Further, Odell remains among a handful of early sources widely presumed to be reliable, in part, because she proclaims her own authority in the text of the *Memoir* on the basis of her personal connection to the Wheatley family (in her own

terms as a “collateral descendant”), and in part, surely, because of Wheatley’s early death (at about age 30 in 1784), the absence of any contemporary public life-writing, and the dearth of other biographical accounts.

Wheatley left no written personal account (aside from her poems and letters), and while her letters have become increasingly important, they offer little information to readers interested in the details of Wheatley’s biography. In terms of factual narrative records for Wheatley’s life, then, prior to Odell there is John Wheatley’s brief 1772 letter, the famous attestation note “To the Publick” signed by eighteen of the most “respectable characters” in Boston, and the preface to the poems, all published with the first edition of Wheatley’s *Poems* in 1773. Other than brief references from the poet herself on her life and experiences in her letters and poems, then, readers have no textual descriptions of her life with the Wheatleys, her manumission, her professional/commercial ventures as a writer before or after procuring her freedom, the War for Independence, or her marriage or children. In the context of this relative silence concerning the person of Wheatley, then, and the overwhelming fact of her life experience as a kidnapped slave and literary child prodigy, Odell’s *Memoir*, though rarely actually cited, has taken on a greater authority and significance than it might have otherwise.

Odell’s *Wheatley* shows us something of the poet’s rhetorical function for abolitionists in the 1830’s, revealing the 1834 edition’s imagined readers’ creative and sentimental construction of their own as well as Wheatley’s identities. Moreover, it may well be Odell’s *Wheatley* who becomes and remains the subject of readers’ interest from the 1830’s onward. She is the explicit source for some of the crucial features that consistently appear in nearly every rendering of Phillis Wheatly: the detailed portrayals and specific anecdotes of the loving, even sacrificial Wheatley family, the devoted, precocious slave, the nearly overlooked manumission, the

unfortunate marriage and the apolitical and conventionally pious poet. Some of these features, of course, are clearly corroborated in Wheatley's poetry (her piety, for instance), but many are not. While there are issues in any biography where silence might accurately be read as the subject's disinterest or the event's irrelevance, it seems safe to assume that manumission from slavery would not be one of those.

Wheatley herself (intentionally or not) avoided narrative autobiographical presentations, in an era where life writing, particularly by pious Christians such as herself, was extremely popular. Nonetheless, Wheatley was always embodied in her work as a racial, gendered and aged subject. Her life, her self, as an African slave girl was at least in part the point, the subject, indivisible from her literature, her artistic production. So as often as she was writing about publicly prominent others, such as her trio of tributes to famous Georges (III, Whitefield and Washington) she was, always and for every part of her audience, writing of and about herself as an ethnographic subject for Europeans, as an enslaved, then formerly enslaved, African girl. Her celebrity as a literary protégée of the Wheatleys and their famous friend the Countess of Huntingdon Selina Hastings (the enormously influential patron to whom she addressed the Whitefield elegy and later her *Poems*) depended upon her white audience's interest in her as an African slave, as a part of the extraordinarily fraught discussion of slavery, race, religion, empire and liberty in the late eighteenth-century, particularly among evangelical Christians who favored Whitefield's and the Countess's equally contradictory stances on the issue. Both of these influential Methodists believed in a kind of theological egalitarianism (which suggested a dismantling of racial hierarchies), urged African Americans to take part in the work of the church, and simultaneously defended the practice of slavery (Lovejoy 199).

Before and after her death readers found her self as interesting as her poetry. While some Bostonian white women were finding rhetorical power via anonymity, Wheatley's relative fame and power depended upon the public's interest in her identity and experience.ⁱⁱⁱ Part of the public interest in her in England and America concerned her novelty as a kind of genius who emerged somehow despite her social circumstances. Her contemporaries had demonstrated robust interest in surprising prodigies who demonstrated talent apparently inconsistent with their class and station (Wilcox 12). But of course much more of the interest revolved around race. She was, as Gay Cima has pointed out, performing her own identity for readers from her first publication. Carretta suggests that if Wheatley had remained in London in 1773 (rather than returning to Boston in response to the Wheatley family summons) she might have enjoyed a more successful commercial career, trading and building on the evident celebrity and cultural capital brought by her first volume of poems and her status as a woman writer of color (xxxv). Early anti-slavery activists made use of both her self and her poetry in arguments for the humanity, intellect, and creative capacity of African Americans, and the corollary inhumanity of slavery: Gregory (1785), Clarkson (1786) and Stedman (1796) (Carretta xxxvi).

William Lloyd Garrison had drawn readers' attentions to Wheatley's poetry from the beginning of his publication of *The Liberator*. Between February and December of 1832 Garrison ran nearly all of Wheatley's poetry. The February issue of that year included a brief biographical sketch by Abigail Mott and an excerpt from a speech by Samuel Knapp. In the same issue, the 1834 and 1835 reprintings of Wheatley's volume of poetry were advertised. And after its 1834 publication, Light's volume with Odell's memoir was advertised among Garrison's list of available antislavery publications for sale (Robinson *Essays* 53). The publisher would have been familiar to many American readers. George W. Light edited and published *The*

Boston Book and *Young America's Magazine*, publications directed at readers interested in self-improvement and reprinted works by well-known writers of the day (including Longfellow and Hawthorne). Joseph Kett describes Light as a machinist turned editor who began publishing somewhat coincidentally as a result of his involvement with emergent labor associations. Other publications he put forward suggest a domestic and traditionally Christian focus. During this same decade he published several titles by William Alcott, notably on the duties of young wives to their husbands and children, advocating a familiar doctrine of sacrificial love and domestic efficiency (*The Young Woman's Guide*, *The Young Husband*, *The Young Wife*, *The Young Housekeeper*, *The Young Mother*, and *The House I live In, or The Human Body*). Light's publications of Alcott's treatises on the young wife and the young mother were particularly good sellers. The reading audience for Odell's "Memoir" and George Light's republication of Wheatley's poetry would have presumably shared some of the concerns represented by both publishers—Garrisonian abolitionism synthesized with moderate political reform, domestic, sentimental Christianity and conventional feminine piety.

The anonymous introduction (which preceded Odell's *Memoir*) to George Light's 1834 edition of Wheatley's poetry suggests that the pages to follow will present a sweeping argument against slavery and for racial equality, taking into account the full humanity of blacks. Noting that slavery has been "erased" in New England, the writer of the "Introduction" then poses a set of rhetorical questions: "How can a free people be a slaveholding people? Surely. . . where man is claimed as the property of his fellow, the cornerstone of the Temple of Liberty must be laid in the sand; and whither shall we flee when such frail foundation is unsettled? We have been told of the happiness of the Negro in his bondage. . . But would the free man change places with the slave? Does he envy his condition?" The writer goes on to acknowledge the social effects, "the

poisonous operations of slavery on public sentiment,” at the same time issuing a call for abolition and education. The overall tone of the “Introduction” suggests a fairly politicized perspective, as he/she ends with a general call for emancipation and an imaginative yearning for the “early dawning of that bright day, when, in the moral view of his fellow-men, no less than of that creator who has ‘made them all of one blood,’ the African shall be as the American, and the black man as the white.”

Despite this assertion of racial equality as well as a commitment to liberty and social and cultural enfranchisement, however, what follows, instead, is a thoroughly exceptionalist argument, an account of a unique individual, a “genius” whose extraordinary talent, along with her extraordinary virtue, repeatedly requires the reader to understand her as not just unusual, nor even rare, but unique. Odell’s essay seems, in fact, to provide a foundation for an argument *against* a more sweeping, politicized and theorized position regarding slavery and race, by distinguishing her not only from all other African American slaves, but also from all other Africans. Moreover while Odell does not make this a part of an explicit argument (or problem for an implied argument), Phillis Wheatley’s actual experience in slavery is happy, even fortuitous in this narrative depicting benevolent slaveholders and dangerous freedom. The actual argument (rather than the one forecasted in the “Introduction”) that emerges from Odell’s biographical narrative seems no anti-slavery argument at all, but rather an affirmation of the prevailing values held by white readers considerably less progressive than Garrison’s. Christian humility and compassion are quite unsurprisingly endorsed, and the location for these virtues is not the slaveholder but rather the enslaved; conventional racial hierarchies are not only unquestioned but vigorously reinscribed.

It's worth reading these materials about Wheatley as much in terms of what seems missing as what is actually there. Making sense of the biographical essay in terms of the popular genres with which Odell's American Christian readers (to whom she specifically addresses herself) would have been familiar, several omissions seem notable, at least. For instance, she gives readers a religious biography without a conversion story. For all of the lessons of piety (and there are many) contained in the biographical sketch, Wheatley's religious experience and sensibility is assumed, rather than narrated. Her Christian virtues (particularly humility) are repeatedly extolled and presented in a conventionally religious context. But, for example, her actual conversion to Christianity (a key genre convention of nearly all Protestant spiritual autobiography and biography) is missing. And although the narrative of conversion was often particularly important to writers marginalized by race, sex, or class as a crucial tool for establishing the transformation and hence authorial credentials of the writer looking to secure the interests of pious readers, Odell does not discuss Wheatley in these transformative terms.

Furthermore, conversion is only one of the transformational experiences that seems to be missing in this personal narrative. Interested readers, certainly abolitionist readers, would have been familiar with the emerging genre of the slave narrative. Though perhaps not yet seen as a distinct genre by many readers in 1834, personal narratives by slaves formed part of the rich body of religious life-writing popular with readers on both sides of the Atlantic. Many of these spiritual autobiographies featured literal, physical captivity at the heart of the narrative drama, often metaphorizing it into a personal story of trial and triumph, including a story of conversion or spiritual transformation. Personal accounts featuring Africans captured and enslaved by whites, whites captured by Indians in America and Muslims in Algiers, all rendered for readers cultural and racial conflicts that personalized and spiritualized the larger story of cultural

conquest, so that the individual narrative became, in many cases, not about the conflict of communities and culture, nor about the unequal power dynamics that shaped the outcome, but, instead more often, an intensely *personal* story of spiritual travail and individual triumph. The most popular personal narratives of the period featured both conversion to Christianity and liberation from spiritual and literal bondage (from slavery, and, in a related genre, from Indian captivity). The two genres were related in the readerly needs they served (for violence, horror, depictions of racial others, all packaged into a suitable didactic package with a pious narrator) and both became important ideological tools for swaying public opinion concerning race relations in the nineteenth century. The eventually more overtly polemical and politicized slave narrative genre of, say, Frederick Douglass or Harriet Jacobs, emerges from this literary, commercial and religious legacy. Equiano's 1789 *Narrative* is the best example, but there were other early examples as well, sometimes in form of a brief broadside such as Johnson Green's *Life and Confessions*, 1786.

Late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century readers were both familiar with and hungry for these ostensibly pious tales of cultural conflict, which frequently offered dramatic sensation and graphic violence. Such narratives were particularly appealing for readers squeamish about the less socially acceptable form of the novel. By way of the personal narrative, then, readers could encounter the violence and drama they craved without the social censure associated with the reading of novels (presumed by some readers to be spiritually wicked and intellectually and civically vacuous). Equiano's narrative is important in part because it crosses so many lines of genre and audience appeal. Offering readers a story of captivity, spiritual meaning (specifically Christian conversion) cultural transformation, personal triumph, commercial success and nascent political protest it captured a robust audience on both sides of the Atlantic. During the decades

after Equiano, as abolition became an organized international political force, slave narrators increasingly made use of the political potentialities of the genre. And it is during the 1830's at the time of Odell's publication and in the context of Garrisonian abolitionism that the slave narrative shifted from a spiritual story of captivity to an anti-slavery polemic, as William L. Andrews describes it, from a presentation of the slavery of sin to one of the sin of slavery. The slave narrative energized abolitionism (even as the Indian captivity narrative helped to lay a foundation for systematic Indian "removal" of Andrew Jackson's presidency in the 1830's). So it is all the more notable that Odell's Wheatley is neither converted nor freed during the course of the 1834 "Memoir."

Odell's account fails altogether to mention not only her Christian conversion, but also her manumission. The most popular personal narratives emerging from this period featured conversion to Christianity and liberation from literal bondage, but Wheatley's 1773 passage from slavery into freedom is entirely unnoted. In fact Odell's Wheatley moves from being ostensibly within the loving Wheatley's family protection to being entirely outside of it without accompanying explanation. The shift in legal status seems to occur as a function of the deaths and removals that are noted in the biography, rather than as a result of her (or anyone else's) agency. Indeed her manumission seems to be framed as profound familial loss rather than dramatic liberation. This despite what we know of her crucial trip to a post-Somerset decision England, where she met with Granville Sharp, as Vincent Carretta notes, the most dangerous tour guide imaginable for a colonial slave visiting England (xxvi). Indeed, as Carretta speculates, after her return to America from her trip to England, Wheatley may well have aggressively pursued the manumission that goes entirely unmentioned in Odell's biography.

The failure to acknowledge Wheatley's manumission would have had a number of possible rhetorical effects on nineteenth-century readers. Readers might have imagined away her slavery, picturing her 12 years with the Wheatleys exclusively as a time of literary patronage and familial nurture. Or they might have assumed that she was freed immediately or early on in her time with the Wheatleys. In any case the omission of a discussion of Wheatley's transformation from slave to free puts her somehow beyond the reach of such terms. Readers are not faced with her agency, nor are they invited to see her as complicated by such questions of political or national identity. She remains relentlessly domestic, and her story is told in almost entirely personal terms, Mrs. Wheatly's servant (rather than slave), the perennial child and companion to her aging and ill mistress. She neither seeks nor secures her freedom, and like the rhetorically appealing and profoundly gendered early descriptions of the seventeenth-century Puritan poet Anne Bradstreet, her publication occurs only because others will it, not because she seeks it herself.

Odell's Wheatley, with her complete absence of agency, would have offered a reassuring antidote to an American populace riveted by Nat Turner's revolt just a little over two years earlier. Albert Stone asserts that "no slave narrative had a swifter impact on the American public than *The Confessions of Nat Turner*." Turner and Thomas Gray (to whom Turner dictated his memoir) tapped readers' desire for accounts of slave experience and racial violence. In the hands of court-appointed attorney Gray, Turner's *Confessions*, became, to a certain extent, an anti-abolitionist tool, designed, certainly, to reassure slave-holders that Turner was a crazed aberration, neither strategic nor sensible. Gray may have designed the narrative to persuade readers of Turner's lunacy as the central point of the story. And yet, despite the rich and critically fraught history of the reception and reinterpretation of Gray's handling of Turner's

Confessions, readers have long noted the compelling power of Nat Turner's words despite the intervening presence of Gray. Most memorable, perhaps, is the moment when Gray invites Turner to repent by asking him what was likely intended as a rhetorical question: "Do you not find yourself mistaken now?" But to which Turner responds with the rhetorically stunning "Was not Christ crucified?" Published almost immediately after his execution, fifty thousand copies of Turner's dictated story were printed.

In contrast to Turner, who embodied and articulated rage over slavery and an unconditional quest for freedom, Odell's Wheatley didn't seek freedom at all. Rather, she faces the most oppressive circumstances in her life *after* her unacknowledged manumission and the subsequent death of Susanna Wheatley. The happy years with the loving family (actually the period of Wheatley's enslavement), then, is book ended by two periods of dramatically depicted hardship: first, the moment before she is initially sold, and, second, after she is free and no longer with the Wheatley household. Indeed, the most dangerous periods of her adult life occur, first, as a result of the War for Independence, which Odell presents as an event that brings economic disorder rather than political liberty; and second, (in that context of difficult freedom) when she acts with agency to choose to marry. Odell's intriguing reference to the war seems to cohere with her presentation of Wheatley. Political and personal liberty are dangerous; revolt, even the idealized historical revolt of the War for Independence, is unseemly. Such a view coheres with Odell's vague, entirely personal anti-slavery position which elides any discussion of the potentially unseemly or embarrassing transition from slavery to freedom.

Which brings this discussion to the genre conventions that *are* present in Odell's story. Though accounts of spiritual and political transformations are missing, the conventional signposts of a woman's life narrative are emphatically present. In fact, the biographical subject

Phyllis Wheatley is presented in ways quite familiar to readers of novels in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century. The “Memoir” reads rather like a sentimental novel. Phyllis Wheatley is, first, the pious and vulnerable orphan in need of the sacred domestic space for spiritual and material protection and survival, and, second, the virtuous, but ultimately fallen woman, tragically seduced by a bad man into fatal circumstances.

Odell’s memoir emphasizes the conventional female virtues marketed by the popular sentimental fictions of the day and noted decades ago by literary scholars and historians: purity, piety, submissiveness and domesticity. The sacred domestic space, important and deeply gendered in early nineteenth-century fiction, trumps political, economic and civic space (as in revolution, manumission). And domesticity seems, in the main, apolitical here, in contrast to the way writers such as Stowe employ the domestic sphere in qualified ways toward political ends. Phillis Wheatley’s virtue, specifically her self-deprecation and humility, is commended to the reader from her first appearance in the narrative. Rhetorically, Odell presents Phillis’s humility initially almost as a natural result of her original state, when she is first envisioned at auction as a very young child. The emphasis in the portrayal is on Wheatley’s vulnerability, on her obvious need for the Wheatley’s, and by extension, readers’, sympathy and kind intervention. Wheatley’s forcefully narrated vulnerability establishes the frame in which she will be viewed by readers for centuries. In what now seems a strange and startling rhetorical coup, the slave purchase becomes a rescue, and ultimately, an adoption, of a submissive, vulnerable orphan, perhaps even an anticipation of the orphan of mid-century novels such as the record breakingly popular *Wide, Wide World*. The reader, perhaps, is situated to envision herself as a textual corollary to the fostering family who will for good or ill take charge of the vulnerable child. The presentation of slave as orphan then enables, perhaps even requires readers to position the Wheatley family not

as slaveholders but as a compassionate family enlarging their sacred domestic space to include a needy outsider. Odell presents a scene (repeated often in the Wheatley biographies that follow this one) featuring Phillis Wheatley as a poor, weak, child, wrapped in a dirty carpet, not so much abducted, really, as abandoned, an orphan awaiting rescue and adoption into a family. And the Wheatleys become that family—kind, compassionate liberators, even, who, incidentally almost, held slaves.

The sentimental space into which the reader is invited features a highly qualified liberation. Phillis' years with the Wheatleys are presented not as bondage but, rather, as liberation from unspoken horrors that preceded them, and as a literary apprenticeship that allowed her genius to bloom. The Wheatleys replace her lost mother (a primitive figure imagined in the vaguest of possible terms) with another (a "benevolent" New England Christian): "We cannot know at how early a period she was beguiled from the hut of her mother, or how long a time elapsed between her abduction from her first home and her being transferred to the abode of her benevolent mistress, where she must have felt like one awaking from a fearful dream." (11). What readers "cannot know" is nonetheless conjured up by Odell. The Wheatleys have nothing whatever to do with the "beguiling" that takes Phillis from her family and culture. Moreover, her abduction consists specifically not of enslavement, but instead loss of mother, loss of home. On the one hand the powerful rhetorical effects of these losses will reverberate throughout abolitionists' anti-slavery arguments for the next three decades where writers will repeatedly marshal readers' feeling responses to descriptions of familial losses, sentimental passages that will underscore the inhumanity of race slavery even as it sentimentalized the grief of these losses. On the other hand, framing the immorality of Wheatley's situation in this exclusively familial context allows resolution or redemption to occur within the kind household

of the Wheatley family where the fact of slavery is eclipsed, even negated, by kindness and education.

Phillis Wheatley's virtuous humility is present from the start and emphasized throughout Odell's story. She seems (essentially, even) both literary genius and humble Christian. Selected for purchase by Mrs. Wheatley precisely because of her humility, Odell's Phillis exhibits virtues which, in this challenging rhetorical context, seem to humanize her, without vilifying the Wheatleys, despite the fact that they are actively engaged in the purchase of a child. While the Wheatley's participation in the system of chattel slavery goes entirely unnoted, and in fact is hard to see in this version, their kindness, instead, along with Phillis' humility, seems to be the point of the story. Ironically, Odell emphasizes Phillis Wheatley's humanity and piety even as she *dehumanizes* Wheatley's cohort of female slaves, without a hint of self-consciousness. Even in this first instance, then, Phillis is exceptional. In contrast to other slaves, who are described as "robust, healthy females," descriptors that reify but fail to critique their status as human chattel, Phillis's humanity is emphasized by a focus on vulnerability and virtue. She is "slender," and "suffering," and her "humble and modest demeanor" attracts Mrs. Wheatley's attention. Consequently Mrs. Wheatley is not so much purchasing and then enslaving a child as she is coming to the aid of a vulnerable and innocent lost child. Odell's narrative invites readers rhetorically into the same compassionate stance as the one Mrs. Wheatley seems to occupy in the narrative.

This rhetorical frame persists throughout the narrative, as Odell both implicitly and explicitly presents Wheatley's enslavement not as bondage but adoption. Mrs. Wheatley is never slave mistress. Rather she moves from being a hospitable hostess to an indulgent adoptive mother. "Phillis ate of her bread and drank of her cup, and was to her as a daughter; for she

returned her affection with unbounded gratitude, and was so devoted to her interests as to have no will in opposition.” When she is not “daughter,” she is Mrs. Wheatley’s “protegee.” (13,18). And Mrs. Wheatley is her “benefactress” and “benevolent mistress.” Odell’s portrayal occasionally acknowledges a more realistic description of the power relations at work here, but only as she overturns such starkness with sentiment, as in “The chains which bound her to her master and mistress were the golden links of love, and the silken bands of gratitude. She had a child’s place in their house and in their hearts.” In other passages Odell indicates dominion but only in an intensified context of love and intimacy, expressed, for example, in emphatically placed possessive pronouns as she has Mrs. Wheatley repeatedly referring to “my Phillis” in family anecdotes. Further, the unacknowledged distinctions between Phillis and all other African American slaves, explicitly made at the scene of the auction, persist. Odell describes Mrs. Wheatley singling out Phillis for favor and privilege. She goes on to describe the other Wheatley slaves’ bewilderment at such treatment, but offers no reflective comment, allowing the others (such as Prince) to serve as rhetorical comic relief or entertaining local color. Phillis is special, human, known, and worth a readers’ attention and sympathy; her enslaved cohorts are in an entirely separate class and category

While Odell presents the enslaved Wheatley as a rescued orphan, she portrays the free adult Wheatley as a victimized woman, perhaps even as a fallen woman from a seduction novel. Wheatley is seduced, however, not into illicit sex resulting in an illegitimate child, but, rather, into a bad marriage with a man decidedly beneath her in terms of virtue and class. The outcome remains the same: Wheatley’s “fall,” specifically her marriage to John Peters determines the same ending as, say, Susanna Rowson’s Charlotte Temple’s: loss of “virtue.” Each precipitates a decline into poverty, illness, unhappy maternity, and then the deaths of mother and child.

Odell's Phyllis Wheatley adheres to the formulaic set of events that threatened so many other women of virtue in the fiction of the period. Like the tragically fallen heroines of the novels, she provides a negative moral lesson founded on a bedrock assumption that the central choice, the only meaningful choice, of a woman's life, concerns whom to love and marry. Sentimental language and dramatic circumstances, mirroring those featured in many late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century women's novels, dominate Odell's narrative.

Wheatley's resemblance here to stock characters (vulnerable orphans, fallen women) from sentimental novels foregrounds her gender in strikingly conventional ways, simultaneously rendering her race (specifically the way her race determines her circumstances) nearly invisible, despite her race and her enslavement constituting most readers' first concern. This, despite her experience of slavery, despite the explicitly abolitionist contexts and market for this edition. The effects of race on her narrowly circumscribed situation are entirely overlooked as the biographer presents Wheatley, first, as a vulnerable child in need of a family, and then later, post-slavery, again as a vulnerable, this time tragic, heroine, not as a newly liberated person of color. Suddenly and sadly bereft of the love and protection of her "family," Wheatley is prey to the designs of an apparently bad man. Her life ends as those of so many popular fictional women did--one more extraordinary woman of great promise, pious like Rowson's Charlotte Temple, brilliant like Foster's Eliza Wharton, who loves the wrong man and dies abandoned by him in a dirty garret with his unfortunate or dead child by her side.

Odell's rendering of Phillis Wheatley invites readers to imagine themselves as liberators in the benign and sentimental tradition of the Wheatleys. While the primary virtue displayed by Phillis Wheatley is her submissiveness, the primary virtue displayed by her "family," is kindness/compassion—of a particular sort. Readers are invited to identify with the Wheatleys,

who are presented as benevolent and virtuous, embodiments of Christian compassion, despite the fact that they held slaves, indeed continued to hold Phillis Wheatley as a slave, long after recognizing her “genius.” Such a message, while theoretically refuted by the arguments in the paper that advertised this volume, would nonetheless have worked effectively to reassure readers of the comfortably limited scope of the ethical demands made upon them by an anti-slavery position.

Odell’s 1834 “Memoir,” situated as it was at the beginning of the edition of Wheatley’s poems, invited readers to see Wheatley’s poetry in the context of a life story in which she becomes not so much a part of an argument for abolition, but rather contrastingly, a self-congratulatory account of the kindness and virtue of whites who, first, recognize a (rare) black genius, outstanding for her personal virtue as well as her intellect, as humble as she was brilliant, and then acted in compassion on her behalf, fostering her talent and protecting her, not because of her common humanity, nor because of their understanding of the immorality of their own actions, nor, even, because of her suffering, but, rather, because of her remarkable talent and humble Christian character. Such a story would have assured white New England readers of their moral and political safety in the face of increasingly organized and vocal blacks who made claims upon white America that were vastly different than Odell’s modest and virtuous Phillis.

ⁱ 1771 was the year Phillis Wheatley published the funeral elegy for George Whitefield (addressed to Selina Hastings and composed in 1770) in Boston and London. She had published earlier poems, including one published in 1767, and had composed poems at least two years prior to that (Carretta XIV). The Whitefield elegy, however, brought her significant attention and fame on both sides of the Atlantic.

ⁱⁱ Another source for biographical error and confusion regarding Phillis Wheatley is Henri Gregoire's 1808 *De La Litterature De Negres*. . . which was translated into English in 1810 by D.B. Warden. Gregoire claimed to draw his information from a letter from M. Girard who claimed to know Wheatley's husband personally, but, as William Robinson points out, the Gregoire text contains numerous errors, which Warden's translation then repeats and compounds. Subsequent accounts of Wheatley's biography by John Russwurm and Abigail Mott repeat these errors.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gay Gibson Cima offers intriguing comparative readings of Phillis Wheatley and Mercy Otis Warren as performance critics, focusing on the issues and effects of anonymity.