



The Norton Anthology of American Literature

FIFTH EDITION
VOLUME 1

Nina Baym, *General Editor*

JUBILEE PROFESSOR OF THE LIBERAL
ARTS AND SCIENCES
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Wheatley



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Editor: Julia Reidhead
Developmental Editor/Associate Managing Editor: Marian Johnson
Production Manager: Diane O'Connor
Manuscript Editors: Candace Levy, Alice Falk, Kurt Wildermuth, Kate Lovelady
Editorial Assistants: Tara Parmiter, Katharine Nicholson Ings
Cover and Text Design: Antonina Krass
Art Research: Neil Ryder Hoos
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WHEATLEY

LETTERS / 835

As when Eolus⁴ heaven's fair face deforms, 15
Enwrapped in tempest and a night of storms;
Astonished ocean feels the wild uproar,
The refluent surges beat the sounding shore;
Or thick as leaves in Autumn's golden reign,
Such, and so many, moves the warrior's train. 20
In bright array they seek the work of war,
Where high unfurled the ensign⁵ waves in air.
Shall I to Washington their praise recite?
Enough thou know'st them in the fields of fight.
Thee, first in place and honors—we demand 25
The grace and glory of thy martial band.
Famed for thy valor, for thy virtues more,
Hear every tongue thy guardian aid implore!
One century scarce performed its destined round,
When Gallic⁶ powers Columbia's fury found; 30
And so may you, whoever dares disgrace
The land of freedom's heaven-defended race!
Fixed are the eyes of nations on the scales,
For in their hopes Columbia's arm prevails.
Anon Britannia droops the pensive head, 35
While round increase the rising hills of dead.
Ah! cruel blindness to Columbia's state!
Lament thy thirst of boundless power too late.
Proceed, great chief, with virtue on thy side,
Thy every action let the goddess guide. 40
A crown, a mansion, and a throne that shine,
With gold unfading, WASHINGTON! be thine.

1775–76

1776, 1834

Letters

To John Thornton,¹ London

[THE BIBLE MY CHIEF STUDY]

[Boston, April 21, 1772]

Hon'd, Sir

I rec'd your instructive fav^r2 of Feb. 29, for which, return you ten thousand thanks, I did not flatter myself with the tho'ts of your honouring me with an Answer to my letter, I thank you for recommending the Bible to be my chief Study, I find and Acknowledge it the best of Books, it contains an endless treasure of wisdom, and knowledge. O that my eyes were more open'd to see the real worth, and true excellence of the word of truth, my flinty heart

4. Ruler of the winds.

5. Flag or banner.

6. The French and Indian War (1754–63), which comprised four wars between France and England, ended the French colonial empire in North America.

1. A London merchant (1720–1790), who was

a devout Anglican and lived outside London at Clapham, where a small group of Christians were committed to helping the poor and abolishing slavery. He was a friend of John and Susannah Wheatley and sent them money to be used for work among the American Indians.

2. Favor, i.e., letter.

Softened with the grateful dews of divine grace and the Stubborn will, and affections, bent on God alone their proper object; and the vitiated palate may be corrected to relish heav'nly things. It has pleas'd God to lay me on a bed of Sickness, and I knew not but my deathbed, but he has been graciously pleas'd to restore me in a great measure. I beg your prayers, that I may be made thankful for his paternal corrections, and that I may make a proper use of them to the glory of his grace. I am Still very weak & the Physicians, seem to think there is danger of a consumpsion.³ And O that when my flesh and my heart fail me God would be my strength and portion for ever, that I might put my whole trust and Confidence in him, who has promis'd never to forsake those who Seek him with the whole heart. You could not, I am sure have express greater tenderness and affection for me, than by being a welwisher to my Soul, the friends of Souls bear Some resemblance to the father of Spirits and are made partakers of his divine Nature. I am affraid I have entruded on your patient, but if I had not tho't it ungrateful to omit writing in answer to your favour Should not have troubl'd you, but I can't expect you to answer this,

I am Sir with greatest respect,
your very hum. sert.

Phillis Wheatley

1989

To Arbour Tanner,⁴ Newport, Rhode Island

[A SENSE OF THE BEAUTIES AND EXCELLENCE OF THE CRUCIFIED SAVIOUR]

[Boston, May 19, 1772]

Dear Sister

I rec'd your favour of February 6th for which I give you my sincere thanks, I greatly rejoice with you in that realizing view,⁵ and I hope experience, of the Saving change which you So emphatically describe. Happy were it for us if we could arrive to that evangelical Repentance, and the true holiness of heart which you mention. Inexpressibly happy Should we be could we have a due Sense of the Beauties and excellence of the Crucified Saviour. In his Crucifixion may be seen marvellous displays of Grace and Love, Sufficient to draw and invite us to the rich and endless treasures of his mercy, let us rejoice in and adore the wonders of God's infinite Love in bringing us from a land Semblant of darkness itself, and where the divine light of revelation (being obscur'd) is as darkness. Here, the knowledge of the true God and eternal life are made manifest; But there, profound ignorance overshadows the Land, Your observation is true, namely, that there was nothing in us to recommend us to God. Many of our fellow creatures are pass'd by, when the bowels⁶ of divine love expanded towards us. May this goodness & long Suffering of God lead us to unfeign'd repentance

It gives me very great pleasure to hear of so many of my Nation, Seeking with eagerness the way to true felicity, O may we all meet at length in that

3. Disease of the lungs.

4. There are more extant Wheatley letters to Arbour (sometimes spelled "Obour") Tanner, a black servant in the family of James Tanner, than

to any other person.

5. I.e., to a new realization of Christianity.

6. The seat of compassion.

happy mansion. I hope the correspondence between us will continue, (my being much indispos'd this winter past was the reason of my not answering yours before now) which correspondence I hope may have the happy effect of improving our mutual friendship. Till we meet in the regions of consummate blessedness, let us endeavor by the assistance of divine grace, to live the life, and we shall die the death of the Righteous. May this be our happy case and of those who are travelling to the region of Felicity is the earnest request of your affectionate

Friend & hum. Sert. Phillis Wheatley

1863

To John Thornton, London

[THE GIFT OF GOD IS ETERNAL LIFE]

[Boston, December 1, 1773]

Hon'd Sir

It is with great satisfaction, I acquaint you with my experience of the goodness of God in safely conducting my passage over the mighty waters, and returning me in safety to my American Friends.⁷ I presume you will join with them and m[e] in praise to God for so distinguishing a favour, it was amazing Mercy, altogether unmerited by me: and if possible it is augmented by the consideration of the bitter r[e]verse, which is the deserved wages of my evil doings. The Apostle Paul, tells us that the wages of Sin is death.⁸ I don't imagine he excepted any sin whatsoever being equally hateful in its nature in the sight of God, who is essential Purity.

Should we not sink hon'd Sir, under this Sentence of Death, pronounced on every Sin, from the comparatively least to the greatest, were not this blessed Co[n]trast annexed to it, "But the Gift of God is eternal Life,[" through Jesus Christ our Lord? It is his Gift. O let us be thankful for it! What a load is taken from the Sinner's Shoulder when he thinks that Jesus has done that work for him which he could never have done, and Suffer'd, that punishment of his imputed Rebellions, for which a long Eternity of Torments could not have made sufficient expiation. O that I could meditate continually on this work of wonde[r] in Deity itself. This, which Kings & Prophets have desir'd to see, & have not See[n]. This, which Angels are continually exploring, yet are not equal to the search,—Millions of Ages shall roll away, and they may try in vain to find out to perfection, the sublime mysteries of Christ's Incarnation. Nor will this desir[e] to look into the deep things of God, cease, in the Breasts of glorified Saints & Angels. It's duration will be coeval with Eternity. This Eternity how dreadf[ul,] how delightful! Delightful to those who have an interest in the Crucifi[ed] Saviour, who has dignified our Nature, by seating it at the Right Hand of the divine Majesty.—They alone who are thus interested have Cause to rejoy[ce] even on the brink of that Bottomless Profound:⁹ and I doubt not (without the [lea]st Adulation) that you are one of that happy number. O pray that I may be one

7. Wheatley accompanied John Wheatley to London in the spring of 1773 and returned to Boston hurriedly when they received news of Susannah Wheatley's illness. They arrived in Boston on Sep-

tember 13.

8. "The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life" (Romans 6.23).

9. Eternity.

also, who Shall Join with you in Songs of praise at the Throne of him, who is no respecter of Persons: being equally the great Maker of all:—Therefor disdain not to be called the Father of Humble Africans and Indians; though despisd on earth on account of our colour, we have this Consolation, if he enables us to deserve it. “That God dwells in the humble & contrite heart.” O that I were more & more possess’d of this inestimable blessing; to be directed by the immediate influence of the divine Spirit in my daily walk & Conversation.

Do you, my hon’d Sir, who have abundant Reason to be thankful for the great Share you possess of it, be always mindful in your Closet,¹ of those who want it—of me in particular.— When I first arrivd at home my mistress was so bad as not to be expected to live above two or three days, but through the goodness of God She is still alive, but remains in a very weak & languishing Condition, She begs a continued interest in your most earnest prayers, that she may be surly prepar’d for that great Change which [She] is likely Soon to undergo; She intreats you, as her Son is Still in England, that you would take all opportun[i]ties to advise & counsel him; She says she is going to leave him & desires you’d be a Spiritual Fath[er] to hi[m]. She will take it very kind. *She thanks you heartily for the kind notice you took of me while in England.* Pleas[e] to give my best Respects to Mrs. & miss Thornton, and masters Henry and Robert who held with me a long conversation on many subjects which Mrs. Drinkwater² knows very well, hope she is in better Health than when I left her. Please to remember me to your whole family & I than[k] them for their kindness to me. begging Still an interest in your best hours
I am Hon’d Sir

most respectfully your Humble Servt.
Phillis Wheatley

I have written to Mrs. Wilberforce³ Sometime since Please to give my duty to her; Since writing the above the Rev’d Mr. Moorhead⁴ has made his Exit from this world, in whom we lament the loss of the Zealous Pious & true christian

1989

To Rev. Samson Occom,⁵ New London, Connecticut

[THE NATURAL RIGHTS OF NEGROES]

[February 11, 1774]

Rev’d and honor’d Sir,

I have this Day received your obliging kind Epistle, and am greatly satisfied with your Reasons respecting the Negroes, and think highly reasonable

1. Place of prayer, study.

2. A mutual friend.

3. Thornton’s sister.

4. Rev. John Moorhead (d. 1773) came to Boston from Scotland in 1730 and was the pastor of a Scotch Presbyterian church near the Wheatley home. Wheatley wrote an elegy on his death and dedicated it to his daughter Mary.

5. A Mohegan Indian (1723–1792) born and living in New London; he was in England from 1766 to 1767. Mason in his edition notes that Occom, an ordained Presbyterian minister and friend of the Wheatleys, suggested to Wheatley that she go to Africa as a missionary, but she rejected the idea. This extract was published in several New England newspapers.

what you offer in Vindication of their natural Rights: Those that invade them cannot be insensible that the divine Light is chasing away the thick Darkness⁶ which broods over the Land of Africa; and the Chaos which has reign'd so long, is converting into beautiful Order, and [r]eveals more and more clearly, the glorious Dispensation of civil and religious Liberty, which are so inseparably united, that there is little or no Enjoyment of one without the other: Otherwise, perhaps, the Israelites had been less solicitous for their Freedom from Egyptian slavery; I do not say they would have been contented without it, by no means, for in every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance; and by the Leave of our modern Egyptians I will assert, that the same Principle lives in us. God grant Deliverance in his own Way and Time, and get him honour upon all those whose Avarice impels them to countenance and help forward the Calamities of their fellow Creatures. This I desire not for their Hurt, but to convince them of the strange Absurdity of their Conduct whose Words and Actions are so diametrically opposite. How well the Cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the exercise of oppressive Power over others agree,—I humbly think it does not require the Penetration of a philosopher to determine.

1774, 1989

To John Thornton, London

[THE DEATH OF MRS. WHEATLEY]

[Boston, March 29, 1774]

Much honoured Sir,

I should not so soon have troubled you with the 2d. Letter, but the mournful *Occasion* will sufficiently Apologize. It is the death of Mrs. Wheatley. She has been labouring under a languishing illness for many months past and has at length took her flight from hence to those blissful regions, which need not the light of any, but the Sun of Righteousness. O could you have been present, to See how She long'd to drop the tabernacle of Clay, and to be freed from the cumbrous Shackles of a mortal Body, which had so many Times retarded her desires when Soaring upward. She has often told me how your Letters hav[e] quicken'd her in her spiritual Course: when She has been in darkness of mind they have rais'd and enliven'd her insomuch, that She went on, with chearfuln[ess] and alacrity in the path of her duty. She did truely, *run with patience the race that was Set before her*,⁷ and hath, at length obtained the celestial Goal. She is now Sure, that the afflictions of this present time, were not worthy to be compared to the Glory, which is now, revealed in her, Seeing they have wrought out for her, *a far more exceeding and eternal weight of Glory*:⁸ This, Sure, is Sufficient encouragement under the bitterest Sufferings, which we can endure.—About half an hour before her Death, She Spoke with a more

6. "And Moses stretched forth his hand toward heaven; and there was a thick darkness in all the land of Egypt three days" (Exodus 10.22).

7. "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so

easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12.1).

8. "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" (2 Corinthians 4.17).

audible voice, than She had for 3 months before. She call'd. her friends & relations around her, and charg'd them not to leave their great work undone till *that* hour, but to fear God, and keep his Commandments. being ask'd if her faith fail'd her She answer'd, No. Then Spr[ead] out her arms crying come! come quickly! come, come! O pray for an eas[y] and quick Passage! She eagerly longed to depart to be with Christ. She retain'd her Senses till the very last moment when "fare well, fare well." with a very low voice, were the last words She utter'd. I sat the whole time by her bed Side, and Saw with Grief and Wonder, the Effects of Sin on the human race. Had not Christ taken away the envenom'd Sting, where had been our hopes? what might we not have fear'd, what might we not have expect'd from the dreadful King of Terrors? But *this* is matter of endless praise; to the King eternal immortal, invisible; that, *it is finished*. I hope her Son will be interested in Your Closet duties,⁹ & that the prayers which she was continually putting up, & wch. are recorded before God, in the Book of his remembrance for her Son & for me may be answer'd, I can Scarcely think that an Object of so many prayers, will fail of the Blessings implor'd for him ever Since he was born. I intreat the same Interest in your best thoughts for my Self, that her prayers, in my behalf, may be favour'd with an Answer of *Peace*. We received and forwarded your Letter to the rev'd Mr. Occom, but first, took the freedom to peruse it, and am exceeding glad, that you have order'd him to draw immediately for £25. for I really think he is in absolute necessity for that and as much more, he is so loth to run in debt for fear he Shall not be able to repay, that he has not the Least Shelter for his Creatures to defend them from the inclemencies of the weather, and he has lost some already for want of it, His hay is quite as defenceless, thus the former are in a fair way of being lost, and the latter to be wasted; It were to be wished that his *dwelling house* was like the Ark, with appartments, to contain the beasts and their provision; He said Mrs. Wheatley and the rev'd Mr. Moorhead were his best friends in Boston, But alas! they are gone. I trust gone to recieve the rewards promis'd to those, who Offer a Cup of cold water in the name & for the sake of Jesus—They have both been very instrum[ental in meetin]g the wants of that child of God, Mr. Occom—but I fear your pa[ti]ence has been] exhausted, it remains only that we thank you for your kind Letter to my mistress it came above a fortnight after her Death.—Hoping for an interest in your prayers for these [and the] Sanctification of this bereaving Providence, I am hon'd Sir with dutiful respect ever your obliged

and devoted Humble Servant Phillis Wheatley

1989

9. I.e., his meditations and prayers.