

"To the University
of Cambridge, in
New-England"

By Phillis Wheatley

Transcription, correction, editorial commentary, and markup by Students of Marymount University

TO THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE,^{university} IN NEW-ENGLAND.

1 WHILE an intrinsic ardor,^{ardor} prompts to write,
2 The muses,^{muses} promise to assist my pen;
3 'Twas not long since I left my native shore
4 The land of errors, and Egyptian gloom,^{gloom}:
5 Father of mercy, 'twas thy gracious hand
6 Brought me in safety from those dark abodes.

Students, to you 'tis giv'n to scan the heights
7 Above, to traverse the ethereal space,
8 And mark the systems of revolving worlds,^{systems}.
9 Still more, ye sons of science ye receive
10 The blissful news by messengers from heav'n,
11 How *Jesus* ' blood for your redemption flows.
12 See him with hands out-stretcht upon the cross;
13 Immense compassion in his bosom glows;
14 He hears revilers, nor resents their scorn:
15 What matchless mercy in the Son of God!
16 When the whole human race by sin had fall'n,

17 He deign'd,^{deign} to die that they might rise again,
18 And share with him in the sublimest skies,
19 Life without death, and glory without end.

20 Improve your privileges while they stay,
21 Ye pupils, and each hour redeem, that bears
22 Or good or bad report of you to heav'n.
23 Let sin, that baneful evil to the soul,
24 By you be shunn'd, nor once remit your guard;
25 Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg.
26 Ye blooming plants of human race divine,
27 An Ethiop,^{Ethiop} tells you 'tis your greatest foe;
28 Its transient sweetness turns to endless pain,
29 And in immense perdition,^{perdition} sinks the soul.

Footnotes

- university After describing her own educational journey, Wheatley advises students at the University of Cambridge in New England to appreciate and "[i]mprove" (21) the privilege of their education by "shunn[ing]" (25) the "transient sweetness" (29) of sin using a variety of religious images. The University of Cambridge in New England is now known as [Harvard University](#). According to [Katherine Clay Bassard](#), Wheatley wrote this poem when she was about fourteen years old (41). The engraving included here is by Paul Revere and shows "A Westerly View of The Colledges in Cambridge New England" (1767), [via Wikimedia Commons](#).
- [JW]
- ardor Wheatley works from the premise, commonly used among early women writers and the enslaved who were restricted from intellectual pursuits like writing, that her desire to write is "intrinsic" (1) or God-given, and therefore appropriate. The word "ardor" also connotes physical desire and flame-like passion, according to the OED (n.3).
- [JW]
- muses According to [A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology](#), the Muses are "inspiring goddesses of song" who "presid[e] over the different kinds of poetry, and over the arts and sciences." The "invocation of the muse" to aid the poet's work is often used by neoclassical authors like those whom Wheatley has clearly read and was influenced by, including [Milton](#) and [Pope](#). However, Hilene Flanzbaum suggests that Wheatley's notably frequent invocation of the muse is more significant than formulaic or imitative--it is "the very means by which she usurps power for herself and claims a berth for her own thoughts, emotions and desires. And while some may claim that these functions accompany any appearance of the muse, when the muses bestow their power on a black female slave, they transport Wheatley to a domain surprisingly free of restriction and previously forbidden" ("[Unprecedented Liberties](#)" 75).
- [JW]
- gloom Wheatley here alludes to [Exodus 10:21-22](#), wherein the ninth plague of darkness is visited upon Egypt. This reference is also in line with contemporary Orientalist notions about Egypt and Egyptian religiosity, which was believed to be full of occult practices. Early nineteenth-century British historian and scholar Thomas Maurice explores these ideas of idolatry and superstition in [Observations on the Remains of Ancient Egyptian Grandeur and Superstition](#). A detailed focus on the Egyptian religious practices can be found in the chapter "Strictures on the superstitious rites of the Egyptians, particularly on the Nefarious Worship paid to Beasts, Esteemed Sacred, and called in Scripture the Abominations of Egypt" (74-83). The Book of Exodus also describes the Israelites' delivery from enslavement in Egypt.
- [JW]
- systems The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century development of the microscope and the telescope had made great scientific advancements possible, especially in astronomy; in the title page and pull-out image represented here, you can see an eighteenth-century orrery--a scientific clockwork instrument used to dramatize the motion of the planets in the solar system (via the University of Otago). Possibly an allusion to Alexander Pope's 1733-34 [Essay on Man](#) (I.23-28), Wheatley here may also be referencing contemporary scientific thought about the [plurality of worlds](#).

- [JW]

deign According to the Oxford English Dictionary [deign](#) means "to think it worthy of oneself" or "to think fit" (n.1a). Today, it typically has a negative connotation, though it does not here.

- [JW]

Ethiop According to the OED, the word [Ethiop](#) would have been used during Wheatley's time most often to refer to "[a] black or dark-skinned person; a black African," and only occasionally to the country of Ethiopia, specifically (n.A). Included here, [via the Norwich Collection at Stanford University](#), is a 1666 map of Africa and the surrounding oceans, embellished with a variety of images.

- [JW]

perdition In theological discussion, the word [perdition](#) means "the state of final spiritual ruin or damnation; the consignment of the unredeemed or wicked and impenitent soul to hell; the fate of those in hell; eternal death" (OED, "perdition" n.2a). In more general terms, it suggests ruin or degradation (n.1a).

- [JW]