

To His Excellency General Washington by Phillis Wheatley

Celestial choir! enthron'd in realms of light,
Columbia's [a goddess personifying America] scenes of glorious toils I write.
While freedom's cause her anxious breast alarms,
She flashes dreadful in refulgent arms.
See mother earth her offspring's fate bemoan,
And nations gaze at scenes before unknown!
See the bright beams of heaven's revolving light
Involved in sorrows and veil of night!

The goddess comes, she moves divinely fair,
Olive and laurel bind her golden hair:
Wherever shines this native of the skies,
Unnumber'd charms and recent graces rise.

Muse! bow propitious while my pen relates
How pour her armies through a thousand gates,
As when Eolus [god of the winds] heaven's fair face deforms,
Enwrapp'd in tempest and a night of storms;
Astonish'd 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.
In bright array they seek the work of war,
Where high unfurl'd the ensign waves in air.
Shall I to Washington their praise recite?
Enough thou know'st them in the fields of fight.
Thee, first in peace and honours,—we demand
The grace and glory of thy martial band.
Fam'd for thy valour, for thy virtues more,
Hear every tongue thy guardian aid implore!

One century scarce perform'd its destined round,
When Gallic powers Columbia's fury found; [French/Indian War]
And so may you, whoever dares disgrace
The land of freedom's heaven-defended race!
Fix'd are the eyes of the nations on the scales,
For in their hopes Columbia's arm prevails.
Anon Britannia droops the pensive head,
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 ev'ry action let the goddess guide.
A crown, a mansion and a throne that shine,
With gold unfading, WASHINGTON! be thine.

Phillis Wheatley

Wheatley was born in 1753 or 1754 in [West Africa](#) (present-day Senegal), kidnapped, and brought to New England in 1761. John Wheatley, a wealthy Boston merchant, bought her for his wife, Susanna, who wanted a youthful personal maid to serve her in her old age. Young Wheatley was frail and sickly, but her gentle, demure manner charmed her master Susanna who was an ardent Christian. The child learned to read and write quickly and became proficient in Latin, so the Wheatleys assigned her only light housekeeping duties and encouraged her to study and write poetry.

As a result, she achieved a high level of education rare for upper-class colonial men, let alone women or slaves. In fact, Wheatley was treated less like a servant and more like a member of the Wheatley family. She was given a private, well-heated room and a lamp to use at night. She was free to visit with the Wheatleys' friends but forbidden to associate with other slaves.

At the age of 14 (in 1770) her first poem—a tribute to George Whitefield that received widespread acclaim—became proof of her giftedness. Many people of the time found it hard to believe that a black woman could be so intelligent as to write poetry, so she even had to defend her literary ability in court. Despite the conclusion by a group of luminaries, one of whom was John Hancock, that she had in fact written the poems ascribed to her, her first book of poetry had to be published in London because of the racist attitudes of Boston publishers. Her book was never reprinted in America during her lifetime; the first American reprinting appeared two years after she died.

Her poem, “To His Excellency General Washington,” was first published by Thomas Paine in his magazine. George Washington liked the poem so much he invited her to visit him. They met in 1775, but no record exists as to what these two different people might have said to each other.

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List three of Wheatley’s life events that you deem worthy to remember.

To understand Wheatley’s poem, you will need to understand the vocabulary and the allusions. Translate the poem, using about one sentence for every 5 lines.