



PENGUIN



CLASSICS

PHILLIS WHEATLEY

Complete Writings

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COMPLETE WRITINGS

Destined to become the first published woman of African descent, Phillis Wheatley was born around 1753 somewhere in West Africa, probably between present-day Gambia and Ghana. She was taken to Boston aboard the slave ship *Phillis* in 1761 and bought by John and Susanna Wheatley, who employed her as a domestic servant. Encouraged by her mistress, Phillis quickly became literate and began writing poetry that soon found its way into Boston newspapers.

Phillis Wheatley gained international recognition with her 1770 funeral elegy on the death of the evangelist George Whitefield, addressed to his English patron, Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, and published in London and Boston in 1771. By 1772 Wheatley had written enough poems to enable her to try to capitalize on her growing transatlantic reputation by producing a book of previously published and new works. Unable to find a publisher in Boston, Susanna and Phillis Wheatley successfully sought a London publisher and Huntingdon's patronage.

Having spent several weeks in London with her master's son in 1773 before the publication there of her *Poems on Various Subjects: Religious and Moral*, Phillis Wheatley returned to Boston to nurse her ailing mistress. Once there, she was soon freed, "at the desire of my friends in England." Wheatley's *Poems* earned the praise of fellow black writers Jupiter Hammon and Ignatius Sancho. Even Thomas Jefferson begrudgingly acknowledged her literary efforts.

The last years of Wheatley's life were marked by personal and financial loss. On April 1, 1778, she married John Peters, a free black who subsequently changed occupations frequently and was often in debt. They had three children, who all died very young. Having failed to find a publisher for her proposed second volume of poems, Phillis Wheatley Peters died in poverty in Boston on December 5, 1784. She was buried in an unmarked grave with her youngest child on December 8.

And mark the systems of revolving worlds.
Still more, ye sons of science ye receive
The blissful news by messengers from heav'n,
How *Jesus*' blood for your redemption flows.
See him with hands out-stretcht upon the cross;
Immense compassion in his bosom glows;
He hears revilers, nor resents their scorn:
What matchless mercy in the Son of God!
When the whole human race by sin had fall'n,
He deign'd to die that they might rise again,
And share with him in the sublimest skies,
Life without death, and glory without end.

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

To the KING's Most Excellent Majesty. 1768.

YOUR subjects hope, dread Sire—
The crown upon your brows may flourish long,
And that your arm may in your God be strong!
O may your sceptre num'rous nations sway,
And all with love and readiness obey!

But how shall we the *British* king reward!
Rule thou in peace, our father, and our lord!
Midst the remembrance of thy favours past,
The meanest peasants most admire the last.*

10 May *George*, belov'd by all the nations round,
Live with heav'n's choicest constant blessings crown'd!
Great God, direct, and guard him from on high,
And from his head let ev'ry evil fly!
And may each clime with equal gladness see
15 A monarch's smile can set his subjects free!

*The Repeal of the Stamp Act.

On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA.

'Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
5 Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

On the Death of the Rev. Dr. SEWELL. 1769.

ERE yet the morn its lovely blushes spread,
See *Sewell* number'd with the happy dead.
Hail, holy man, arriv'd th' immortal shore,
Though we shall hear thy warning voice no more.
5 Come, let us all behold with wishful eyes
The saint ascending to his native skies;
From hence the prophet wing'd his rapt'rous way
To the blest mansions in eternal day.
Then begging for the Spirit of our God,
10 And panting eager for the same abode,
Come, let us all with the same vigour rise,
And take a prospect of the blissful skies;

Beneath him sees the universal whole,
 Planets on planets run their destin'd round,
 And circling wonders fill the vast profound.
 Th' ethereal now, and now th' empyreal skies
 With growing splendors strike his wond'ring eyes:
 The angels view him with delight unknown,
 Press his soft hand, and seat him on his throne;
 Then smiling thus. "To this divine abode,
 The seat of saints, of seraphs, and of God,
 Thrice welcome thou." The raptur'd babe replies,
 "Thanks to my God, who snatch'd me to the skies,
 E'er vice triumphant had possess'd my heart,
 E'er yet the tempter had beguil'd my heart,
 E'er yet on sin's base actions I was bent,
 E'er yet I knew temptation's dire intent;
 E'er yet the lash for horrid crimes I felt,
 E'er vanity had led my way to guilt,
 But, soon arriv'd at my celestial goal,
 Full glories rush on my expanding soul."
 Joyful he spoke: exulting cherubs round
 Clapt their glad wings, the heav'nly vaults resound.

Say, parents, why this unavailing moan?
 Why heave your pensive bosoms with the groan?
 To *Charles*, the happy subject of my song,
 A brighter world, and nobler strains belong.
 Say would you tear him from the realms above
 By thoughtless wishes, and prepos't'rous love?
 Doth his felicity increase your pain?
 Or could you welcome to this world again
 The heir of bliss? with a superior air
 Methinks he answers with a smile severe,
 "Thrones and dominions cannot tempt me there."
 But still you cry, "Can we the sigh forbear,
 And still and still must we not pour the tear?
 Our only hope, more dear than vital breath,
 Twelve moons revolv'd, becomes the prey of death;
 Delightful infant, nightly visions give

Thee to our arms, and we with joy receive,
 We fain would clasp the *Phantom* to our breast,
 The *Phantom* flies, and leaves the soul unblest."

To yon bright regions let your faith ascend,
 Prepare to join your dearest infant friend
 In pleasures without measure, without end.

To Captain H—D, of the 65th Regiment.

SAY, muse divine, can hostile scenes delight
 The warrior's bosom in the fields of fight?
 Lo! here the christian, and the hero join
 With mutual grace to form the man divine.
 In H—d see with pleasure and surprize,
 Where *valour* kindles, and where *virtue* lies:
 Go, hero brave, still grace the post of fame,
 And add new glories to thine honour'd name,
 Still to the field, and still to virtue true:
Britannia glories in no son like you.

To the Right Honourable WILLIAM,
 Earl of DARTMOUTH, His Majesty's Principal Secretary
 of State for North-America, &c.

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 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.

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:
 25 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:
 30 Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
 Others may never feel tyrannic sway?

For favours past, great Sir, our thanks are due,
 And thee we ask thy favours to renew,
 Since in thy pow'r, as in thy will before,
 To sooth the griefs, which thou did'st once deplore.
 May heav'nly grace the sacred sanction give
 To all thy works, and thou for ever live
 Not only on the wings of fleeting *Fame*,
 Though praise immortal crowns the patriot's name,
 40 But to conduct to heav'n's refulgent fane,
 May fiery coursers sweep th' ethereal plain,
 And bear thee upwards to that blest abode,
 Where, like the prophet, thou shalt find thy God.

ODE to NEPTUNE.

On Mrs. W—'s Voyage to England.

I.

WHILE raging tempests shake the shore,
 While *Æ'lus'* thunders round us roar,
 And sweep impetuous o'er the plain
 Be still, O tyrant of the main;
 5 Nor let thy brow contracted frowns betray,
 While my *Susannah* skims the wat'ry way.

II.

The *Pow'r* propitious hears the lay,
 The blue-ey'd daughters of the sea
 With sweeter cadence glide along,
 10 And *Thames* responsive joins the song.
 Pleas'd with their notes *Sol* sheds benign his ray,
 And double radiance decks the face of day.

III.

To court thee to *Britannia's* arms
 Serene the climes and mild the sky,
 15 Her region boasts unnumber'd charms,
 Thy welcome smiles in ev'ry eye.
 Thy promise, *Neptune* keep, record my pray'r,
 Nor give my wishes to the empty air.

Boston, October 10, 1772.

To a LADY on her coming to North-America
 with her Son, for the Recovery of her Health.

INDulgent muse! my grov'ling mind inspire,
 And fill my bosom with celestial fire.

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30 Ye thirsty, come to this life-giving stream,
Ye preachers, take him for your joyful theme;
Take him my dear *Americans*, he said,
Be your complaints on his kind bosom laid:
35 Take him, ye *Africans*, he longs for you,
Impartial Saviour is his title due:
Wash'd in the fountain of redeeming blood,
You shall be sons, and kings, and priests to God."

40 Great Countess,* we *Americans* revere
Thy name, and mingle in thy grief sincere;
New England deeply feels, the *Orphans* mourn,
Their more than father will no more return.

45 But, though arrested by the hand of death,
Whitefield no more exerts his lab'ring breath,
Yet let us view him in th' eternal skies,
Let ev'ry heart to this bright vision rise;
While the tomb safe retains its sacred trust,
Till life divine re-animates his dust.

*The Countess of *Huntingdon*, to whom Mr. *Whitefield* was Chaplain.

On the Death of a young Lady of Five Years of Age.

5 FROM dark abodes to fair etherial light
Th' enraptur'd innocent has wing'd her flight;
On the kind bosom of eternal love
She finds unknown beatitude above.
This know, ye parents, nor her loss deplore,
She feels the iron hand of pain no more;
The dispensations of unerring grace,
Should turn your sorrows into grateful praise;
Let then no tears for her henceforward flow,
10 No more distress'd in our dark vale below.

Her morning sun, which rose divinely bright,
Was quickly mantled with the gloom of night;
But hear in heav'n's blest bow'rs your *Nancy* fair,
And learn to imitate her language there.
15 "Thou, Lord, whom I behold with glory crown'd,
By what sweet name, and in what tuneful sound
Wilt thou be prais'd? Seraphic pow'rs are faint
Infinite love and majesty to paint.
To thee let all their grateful voices raise,
20 And saints and angels join their songs of praise."

Perfect in bliss she from her heav'nly home
Looks down, and smiling beckons you to come;
Why then, fond parents, why these fruitless groans?
Restrain your tears, and cease your plaintive moans.
25 Freed from a world of sin, and snares, and pain,
Why would you wish your daughter back again?
No—bow resign'd. Let hope your grief control,
And check the rising tumult of the soul.
Calm in the prosperous, and adverse day,
30 Adore the God who gives and takes away;
Eye him in all, his holy name revere,
Upright your actions, and your hearts sincere,
Till having sail'd through life's tempestuous sea,
And from its rocks, and boist'rous billows free,
35 Yourselves, safe landed on the blissful shore,
Shall join your happy babe to part no more.

On the Death of a young Gentleman.

WHO taught thee conflict with the pow'rs of night,
To vanquish Satan in the fields of fight?
Who strung thy feeble arms with might unknown,
How great thy conquest, and how bright thy crown!
5 War with each pryncedom, throne, and pow'r is o'er.
The scene is ended to return no more.

O could my muse thy seat on high behold,
 How deckt with laurel, how enrich'd with gold!
 O could she hear what praise thine harp employs,
 How sweet thine anthems, how divine thy joys!
 10 What heav'nly grandeur should exalt her strain!
 What holy raptures in her numbers reign!
 To sooth the troubles of the mind to peace,
 To still the tumult of life's tossing seas,
 15 To ease the anguish of the parents heart,
 What shall my sympathizing verse impart?
 Where is the balm to heal so deep a wound?
 Where shall a sov'reign remedy be found?
 Look, gracious Spirit, from thine heav'nly bow'r,
 20 And thy full joys into their bosoms pour;
 The raging tempest of their grief control,
 And spread the dawn of glory through the soul,
 To eye the path the saint departed trod,
 And trace him to the bosom of his God.

To a Lady on the Death of her Husband.

GRIM monarch! see, depriv'd of vital breath,
 A young physician in the dust of death:
 Dost thou go on incessant to destroy,
 Our griefs to double, and lay waste our joy?
 5 *Enough* thou never yet wast known to say,
 Though millions die, the vassals of thy sway:
 Nor youth, nor science, nor the ties of love,
 Nor aught on earth thy flinty heart can move.
 The friend, the spouse from his dire dart to save,
 10 In vain we ask the sovereign of the grave.
 Fair mourner, there see thy lov'd *Leonard* laid,
 And o'er him spread the deep impervious shade;
 Clos'd are his eyes, and heavy fetters keep
 His senses bound in never-waking sleep,
 15 Till time shall cease, till many a starry world

Shall fall from heav'n, in dire confusion hurl'd,
 Till nature in her final wreck shall lie,
 And her last groan shall rend the azure sky:
 Not, not till then his active soul shall claim
 20 His body, a divine immortal frame.

But see the softly-stealing tears apace
 Pursue each other down the mourner's face;
 But cease thy tears, bid ev'ry sigh depart,
 And cast the load of anguish from thine heart:
 25 From the cold shell of his great soul arise,
 And look beyond, thou native of the skies;
 There fix thy view, where fleeter than the wind
 Thy *Leonard* mounts, and leaves the earth behind.
 Thyself prepare to pass the vale of night
 30 To join for ever on the hills of light:
 To thine embrace his joyful spirit moves
 To thee, the partner of his earthly loves;
 He welcomes thee to pleasures more refin'd,
 And better suited to th' immortal mind.

GOLIATH of GATH.

1 Sam. Chap. xvii.

YE martial pow'rs, and all ye tuneful nine,
 Inspire my song, and aid my high design.
 The dreadful scenes and toils of war I write,
 The ardent warriors, and the fields of fight:
 5 You best remember, and you best can sing
 The acts of heroes to the vocal string:
 Resume the lays with which your sacred lyre,
 Did then the poet and the sage inspire.

Now front to front the armies were display'd,
 10 Here *Israel* rang'd, and there the foes array'd;
 The hosts on two opposing mountains stood,

PHILLIS WHEATLEY

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Where night eternal holds her awful reign.
 But, lo! in him Britania's prophet dies,
 And whence, ah! whence, shall other *Newton's* rise?
 Muse, bid thy Rochford's matchless pen display
 The charms of friendship in the sprightly lay.
 Queen of his song, thro' all his numbers shine,
 And plausive glories, goddess! shall be thine.
 With partial grace thou mak'st his verse excel,
 And *his* the glory to describe so well.
 Cerulean bard! to thee these strains belong,
 The Muse's darling and the prince of song.

DECEMBER 5th, 1774.

[from the *Pennsylvania Magazine* 2 (April 1776)]

To His Excellency General Washington.

The following LETTER and VERSES, were written by the famous Phillis Wheatley, the African Poetess, and presented to his Excellency Gen. Washington.

SIR,

I Have taken the freedom to address your Excellency in the enclosed poem, and entreat your acceptance, though I am not insensible of its inaccuracies. Your being appointed by the Grand Continental Congress to be Generalissimo of the armies of North America, together with the fame of your virtues, excite sensations not easy to suppress. Your generosity, therefore, I presume, will pardon the attempt. Wishing your Excellency all possible success in the great cause you are so generously engaged in. I am,

Your Excellency's most obedient humble servant, PHILLIS WHEATLEY. Providence, Oct. 26, 1775. His Excellency Gen. Washington.

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Celestial choir! entron'd in realms of light
 Columbia's 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 the veil of night!

The goddess comes, she moves divinely fair,
 Olive and laurel binds 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 heaven's fair face deforms,
 Enwrapp'd in tempest and a night of storms;
 Astonish'd ocean feels the wild uproar,
 The reflux 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 place 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 destin'd round,
 When Gallic powers Columbia's fury found;
 And so may you, whoever dares disgrace
 The land of freedom's heaven-defended race!
 Fix'd are the eyes of 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.

[manuscript at Bowdoin College library]

On the Capture of General Lee

The following thoughts on his Excellency Major General Lee being betray'd into the hands of the Enemy by the treachery of a pretended Friend; To the Honourable James Bowdoin Esq.^r are most respectfully Inscrib'd, By his most obedient and devoted humble Servant.

The deed perfidious, and the Hero's fate,
In tender strains, celestial Muse! relate.
The latent foe to friendship makes pretence
The name assumes without the sacred sense!
He, with a rapture well dissembl'd, press'd
The hero's hand, and fraudful, thus address'd.

"O friend below'd! may heaven its aid afford,
And spread yon troops beneath thy conquering sword!
Grant to America's united prayer
A glorious conquest on the field of war.
But thou indulgent to my warm request
Vouchsafe thy presence as my honour'd guest:
From martial cares a space unbend thy soul
In social banquet, and the sprightly bowl."
Thus spoke the foe; and warlike Lee reply'd,
"Ill fits it me, who such an army guide;
To whom his conduct each brave soldier owes

To waste an hour in banquets or repose:
This day important, with loud voice demands
Our wisest Counsels, and our bravest hands."
Thus having said he heav'd a boding sigh.
The hour approach'd that damps Columbia's Joy.
Inform'd, conducted, by the treach'rous friend
With winged speed the adverse train attend
Ascend the Dome, and seize with frantic air
The self surrender'd glorious prize of war!
On sixty coursers, swifter than the wind
They fly, and reach the British camp assign'd.
Arriv'd, what transport touch'd their leader's breast!
Who thus deriding, the brave Chief address'd.
"Say, art thou he, beneath whose vengeful hands
Our best of heroes grasp'd in death the sands?
One fierce regard of thine indignant eye
Turn'd Brittain pale, and made her armies fly;
But Oh! how chang'd! a prisoner in our arms
Till martial honour, dreadful in her charms,
Shall grace Britannia at her sons' return,
And widow'd thousands in our triumphs mourn."
While thus he spoke, the hero of renown
Survey'd the boaster with a gloomy frown
And stern reply'd. "Oh arrogance of tongue!
And wild ambition, ever prone to wrong!
Believ'st thou Chief, that armies such as thine
Can stretch in dust that heaven-defended line?
In vain allies may swarm from distant lands
And demons aid in formidable bands.
Great as thou art, thou shun'st the field of fame
Disgrace to Brittain, and the British name!
When offer'd combat by the noble foe,
(Foe to mis-rule,) why did thy sword forgo
The easy conquest of the rebel-land?
Perhaps too easy for thy martial hand.
What various causes to the field invite!
For plunder *you*, and we for freedom fight:
Her cause divine with generous ardor fires,

*An Elegy, to Miss Mary Moorhead, on the Death of her Father,
the Rev. Mr. John Moorhead.*

Not included in her 1779 Proposals. Shade (line 5): spirit, ghost. Doom (line 41): judgment. Tophet (line 42): cf. Isaiah 30:33. "Moses' Serpent": the brazen serpent Moses fashioned in the wilderness (Numbers 21:8-9). Line 66: Moorhead apparently was also a poet.

[To a Gentleman of the Navy].

Included in her 1779 Proposals as "To Lieut. R _____ of the Royal Navy." "Lieut. R _____" was probably John Prime Iron Rochfort, promoted to lieutenant December 30, 1775. Greaves has not been identified. Achaian (line 11): Greek. Albion (line 19): Britain. Cerulean (line 33): sky-blue.

The Answer [By the Gentleman of the Navy].

Included in her 1779 Proposals as "To the same." Line 26 is adapted from Alexander Pope, *Windsor Forest* (London, 1713), line 2: "At once the Monarch's and the Muse's Seats." "Great Sir Isaac" (line 33): Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727), English mathematician, scientist, and religious writer. "Nature's bard" (line 41): John Milton (1608-1674), English epic poet, author of *Paradise Lost* (1667), to which the unknown author of "The Answer" refers.

*Philis's [sic] Reply to the Answer in our last by the
Gentleman in the Navy.*

Not included in her 1779 Proposals. "Guilded shore" (line 15): Guinea, or the Gold Coast. "Cancers torrid heat" (line 19): Africa, under the zodiacal sign of Cancer. "At British Homer's and Sir Isaac's feet" (line 16): at the feet of Milton and Newton.

→ *To his Excellency General Washington.*

Included in her 1779 Proposals. Wheatley enclosed this poem in a letter to Washington (1732-1799) dated October 26, 1775. Washington responded from Cambridge on February 28, 1776:

[Miss] Phillis, Your favor of the 26th of October did not reach my hands, 'till the middle of December. Time enough, you will say, to have given an answer ere this. Granted. But a variety of important occurrences, continually interposing to distract the mind and withdraw the attention, I hope will apologize for the delay, and plead my excuse for the seeming but not real neglect. I thank you most sincerely for your polite notice of me, in the elegant Lines you enclosed; and however undeserving I may be of such encomium and panegyrick, the style and manner exhibit a striking proof of your poetical Talents; in honor of which, and as a tribute justly due to you, I would have published the Poem, had I not been apprehensive, that, while I only meant to give the World this new instance of your genius, I might have incurred the imputation of Vanity. This, and nothing else, determined me not to give it place in the public Prints.

If you should ever come to Cambridge, or near Head Quarters, I shall be happy to see a person so favored by the Muses, and to whom Nature has been so liberal and beneficent in her dispensations. I am, with great Respect, your obedient humble servant.

Washington sent Wheatley's poem and letter to his former secretary, Colonel Joseph Reed on February 10, 1776, telling him,

I recollect nothing else worth giving you the trouble of, unless you can be amused by reading a letter and poem addressed to me by Miss Phillis Wheatley. In searching over a parcel of papers the other day, in order to destroy such as were useless, I brought it to light again. At first, with a view of doing justice to her poetical genius, I had a great mind to publish the poem; but not knowing whether it might not be considered rather as a mark of my own vanity, than a compliment to her, I laid it aside, till I came across it again in the manner just mentioned.

Reed apparently took Washington's hint and sent the poem and letter with his own headnote to the editors of the *Virginia Gazette*, who published them on March 20, 1776. Thomas Paine (1737-1809) republished them in the April 1776 issue of his *The Pennsylvania Magazine or American Monthly Museum*.