Oxford Scholarly Editions Online

Phillis Wheatley, The Writings of Phillis Wheatley (1784): [8] "America" (1768)

Vincent Carretta (ed.), The Writings of Phillis Wheatley

Published in print: 2019

Published online:

May 2020

[8] "AMERICA"

New England first a wilderness was found
Till for a continent 'twas destin'd round
From feild to feild the savage monsters run
E'r yet Brittania had her work begun
Thy Power, O Liberty, makes strong the weak
And (wond'rous instinct) Ethiopians speak

pg 13

Sometimes by Simile, a victory's won
A certain lady had an only son
He grew up daily virtuous as he grew
Fearing his Strength which she undoubted knew
She laid some taxes on her darling son
And would have laid another act there on
Amend your manners I'll the task remove
Was said with seeming Sympathy and Love
By many scourges she his goodness try'd
Untill at length the Best of Infants cry'd
He wept, Brittania turn'd a sens^eless ear
At last awaken'd by maternal fear
Why weeps americus why weeps my Child
Thus spake Brittania, thus benign and mild
My dear mama said he, shall I repeat—
Then Prostrate fell, at her maternal feet
What ails the rebel, great Brittania Cry'd
Indeed said he, you have no cause to Chide
You see each day my fluent tears my food.
Without regard, what no more English blood?

Has length of time drove from our English viens
The kindred he to Great Brittania deigns?
Tis thus with thee O Brittain keeping down
30 New English force, thou fear'st his Tyranny and thou didst frown
He weeps afresh to feel this Iron chain
Turn, O Brittania claim thy child again
Riecho Love drive by thy powerful charms
Indolence Slumbering in forgetful arms
35 See Agenoria diligent imploy's
Her sons, and thus with rapture she replys
Arise my sons with one consent arise
Lest distant continents with vult'ring eyes
Should charge America with Negligence
40 They praise Industry but no pride commence
To raise their own Profusion, O Brittain See
By this, New England will increase like thee

[1768]

NOTES

[8] "America"

Library Company of Philadelphia manuscript at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (Rush Family Papers, Series IV. Miscellaneous Documents, Box 14/Folder 27). Included in Wheatley's 1772 "Proposals" [18]. Unpublished.

Wheatley responded to the growing tension between Britain and its colonies in several poems, only one of which was published during her lifetime. "America" is more subversive than her published work on the Stamp Act crisis and Britain's other efforts to tax the colonies. "America" is no doubt a draft version of "On America, 1768," listed in her 1772 "Proposals." "America" is a brief allegorical history of New England from its founding to the crisis of relations between "A certain lady" [i.e., Britannia] and her "only son" [i.e., America]. The poem calls for reconciliation between the mother and son before the child grows strong enough to overpower the parent. The invocation of "Liberty" in a work by an enslaved person of African descent, who identifies herself as such—"Thy Power, O Liberty, makes strong the weak | And (wond'rous instinct) Ethiopians speak" (ll. 5-6)—as well as her mention of "scourges" (l. 15) and "rebel" (l. 23), and her comment that "[America] weeps afresh to feel this Iron chain" (l. 31), introduce the subtext of slavery to the poem.

13:33 "Riecho": probably re-echo.

13:35 "Agenoria": In light of "Indolence" (line 34) and "Industry" (line 40), cf. *An Universal, Historical, Geographic, Chronological and Poetical Dictionary* (London, 1703), 2 vols.: "Agenoria, or Agenora, the Goddess of Industry, that makes Men Active"; Society of Gentlemen, *A New and Complete Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* (London, 1754), 1: 68: "AGENORIA, in mythology, the goddess of courage and industry, as Vacuna was of indolence."