

Phillis Wheatley's poem on tyranny and slavery in the colonies, 1772

Introduction

Born in Africa, Phillis Wheatley was captured and sold into slavery as a child. She was purchased by John Wheatley of Boston in 1761. The Wheatleys soon recognized Phillis's intelligence and taught her to read and write. She became well known locally for her poetry. Through the Wheatley family, Phillis came into contact with many prominent figures.

In October 1772, Thomas Woolridge, a British businessman and supporter of William Legge, the Earl of Dartmouth, asked her to write a poem for Legge, who had just been appointed secretary of state for the colonies. Entitled "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth," the poem reflects the colonists' hopes that Dartmouth would be less tyrannical than his predecessor. Wheatley then declares that her love of freedom comes from being a slave and describes being kidnapped from her parents, comparing the colonies' relationship with England to a slave's relationship with a slave holder:

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

This poem was printed in her book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, published in London in 1773. With this book's appearance, Wheatley became the first English-speaking person of African descent to publish a book.

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Excerpt

. . . No more, *America*, in mournful strain
 Of wrongs, and grievance unredress'd complain,
 No longer shall thou dread the iron chain,
 Which wanton *Tyranny* with lawless hand
 Had made, and with it meant t'enslave the land.

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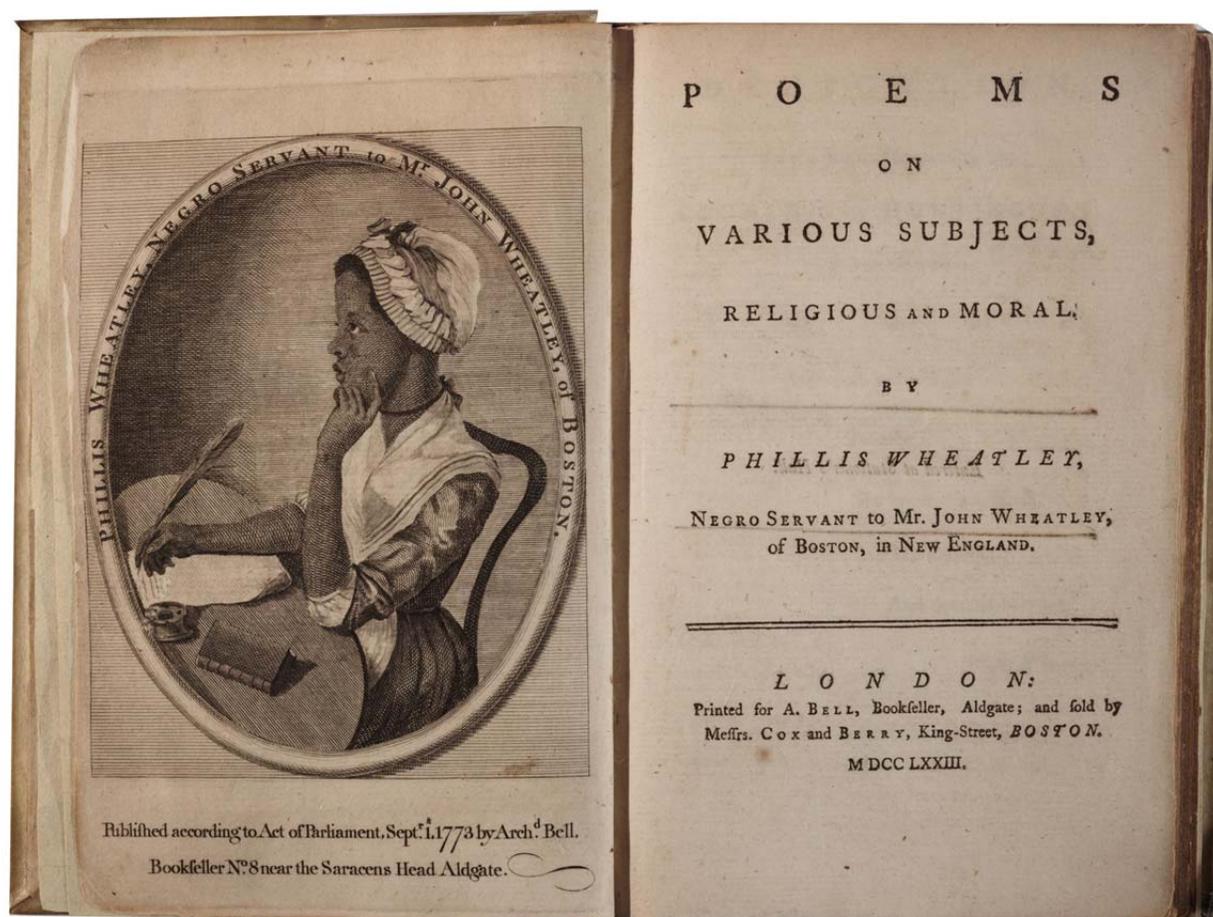
Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction and the excerpt from the poem or the complete poem from Wheatley's book. Then apply your knowledge of American history to answer the following questions:

1. Describe the unusual circumstances that led to Phillis Wheatley's publication of her collection, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*.
2. Identify specific lines from Wheatley's poem in which she describes the horror of enslavement.
3. Why did Wheatley dedicate this work to the Earl of Dartmouth?
4. Create a two-columned chart. Citing passages from either the excerpt or the full poem, in one column identify passages that describe Wheatley's personal experience; in the other column identify corresponding passages that describe an experience of the American colonists.
5. Carefully examine the frontispiece of Wheatley's book. Why would her image and the wording surrounding her portrait be unusual at the time of publication?

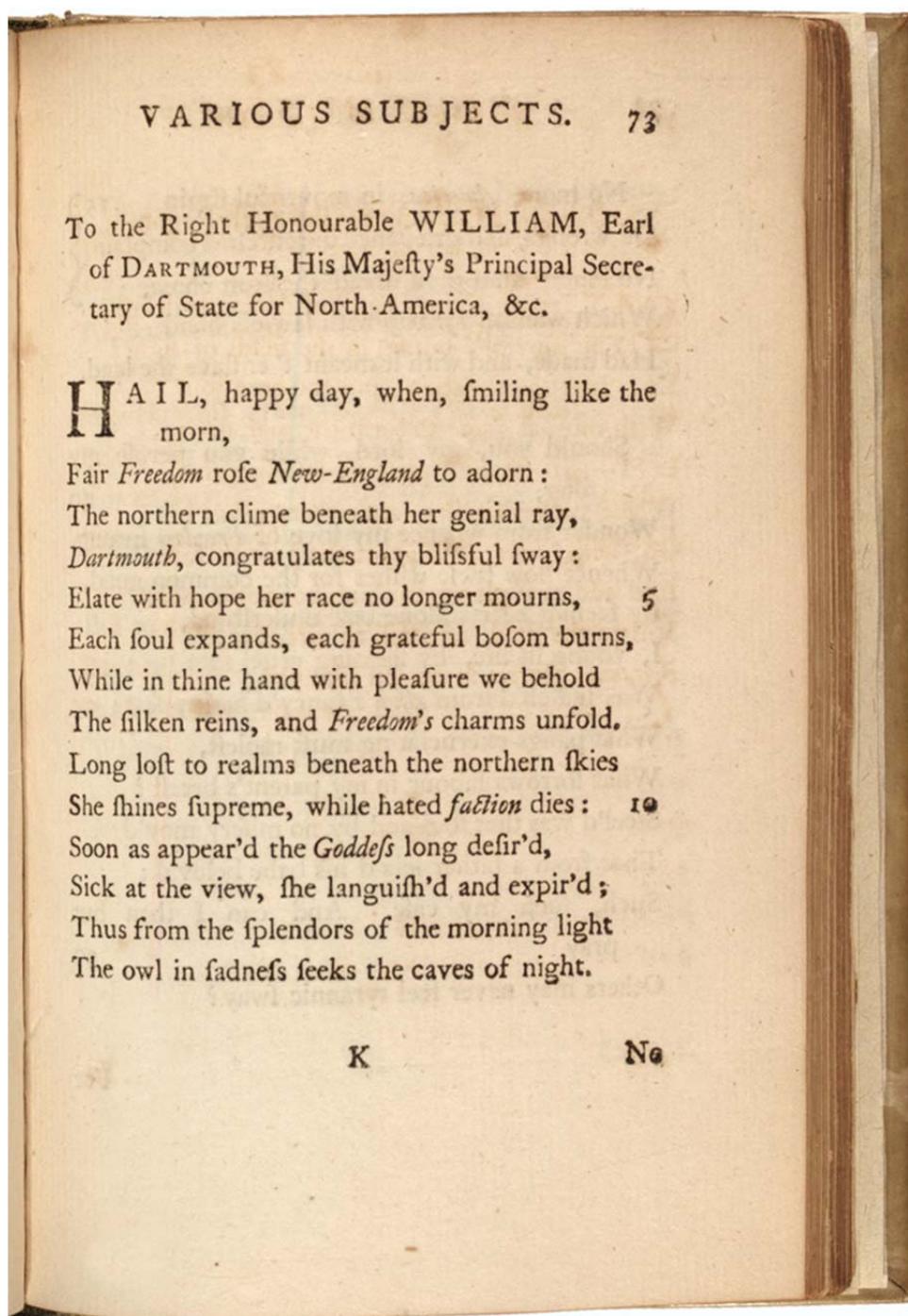
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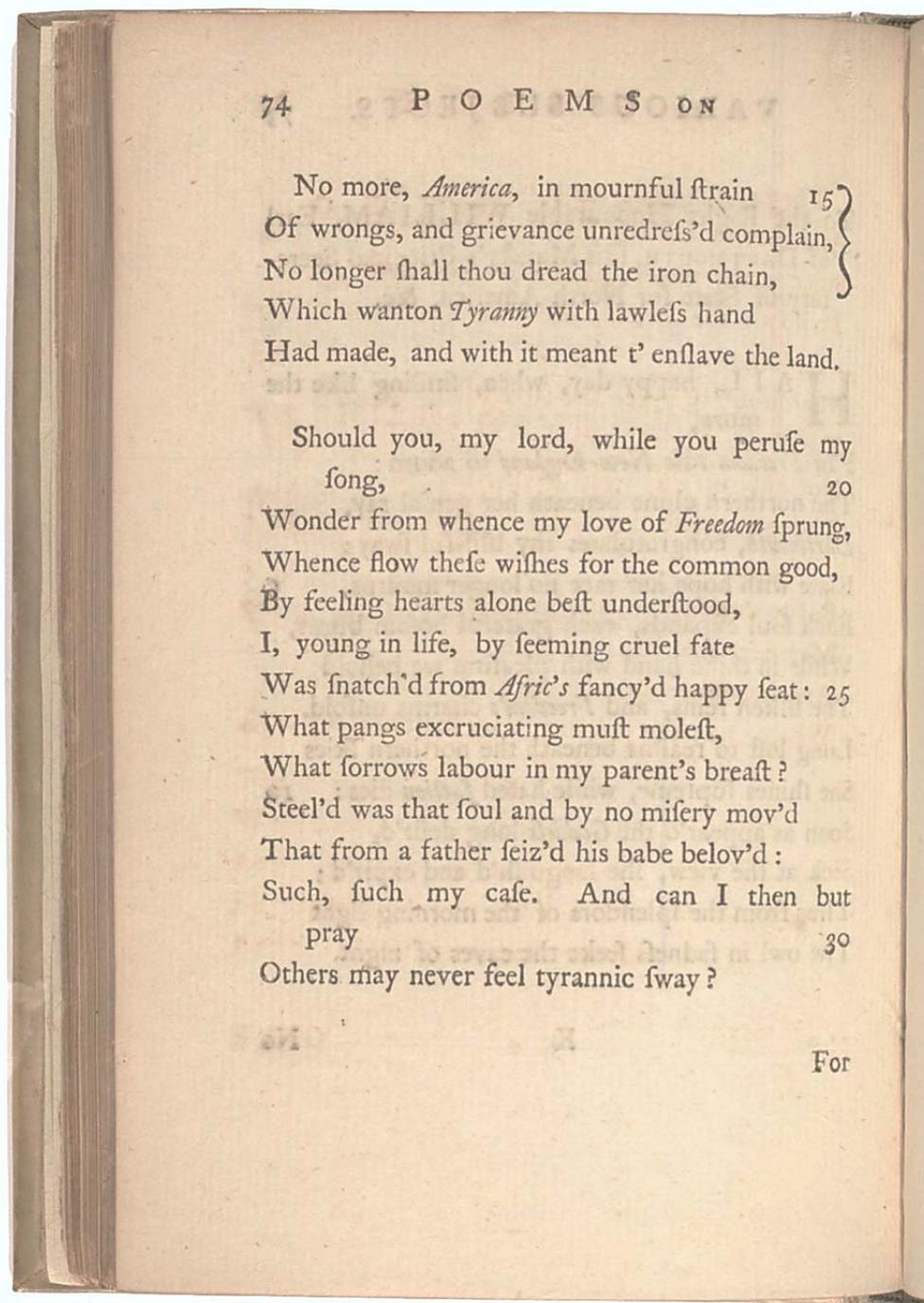
Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, London, 1773. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC06154)

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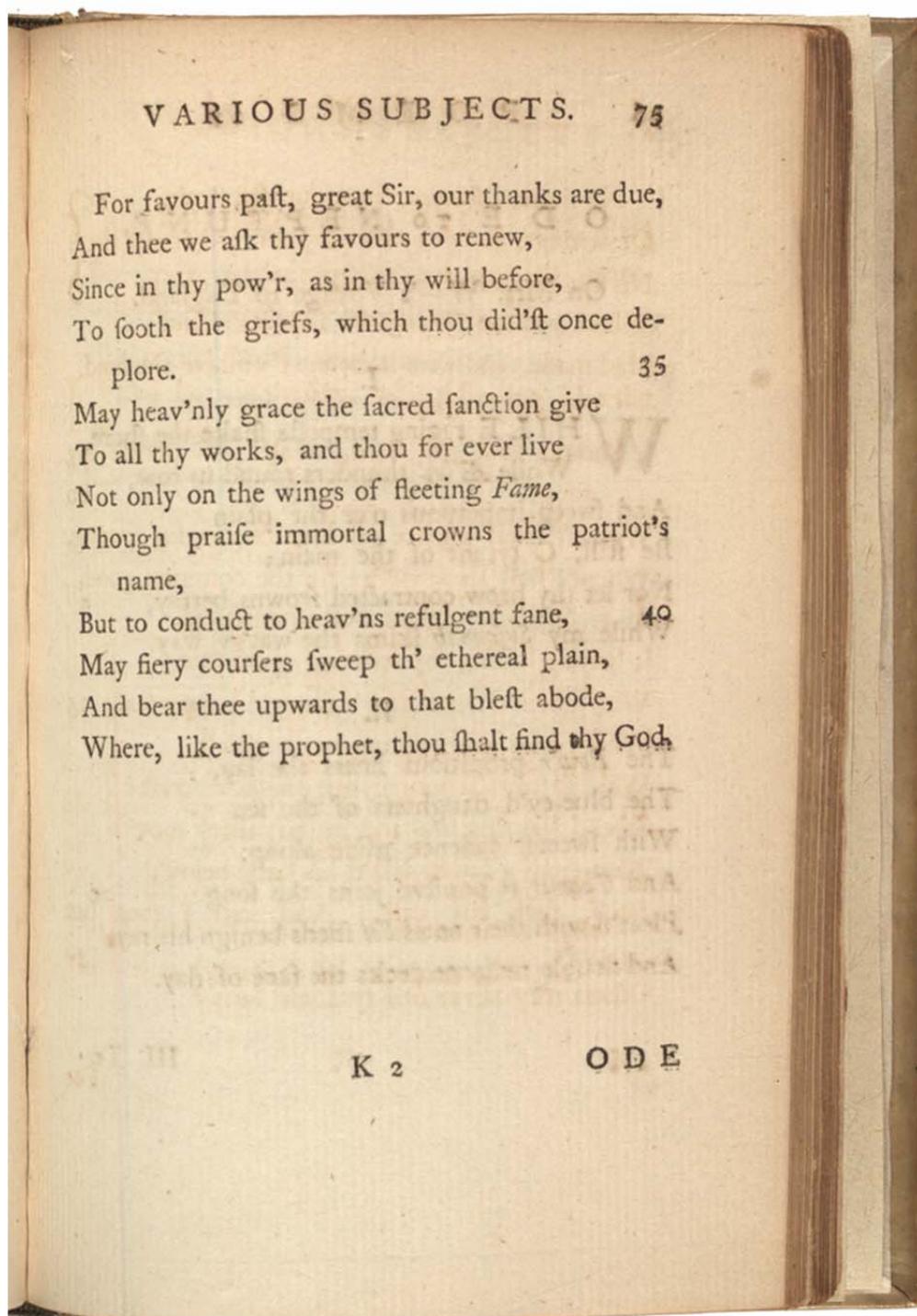


Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, 1773, p. 73. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC06154)

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Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, 1773, p. 74. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC06154)

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Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, 1773, p. 75. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC06154)