An “Impartial Savior”: Religious Pluralism in an Age of Revolution

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Eighteenth-Century Studies, Volume 47, Number 4, Summer 2014, pp. 443-446 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/ecs.2014.0022

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“Take him, ye wretched, for your only good,
“Take him ye starving sinners, for your food;
“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:
“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”

Shortly after George Whitefield’s death on 30 September 1770, Phillis Wheatley wrote an elegy that celebrated the life of the Great Awakening firebrand. Besides acknowledging the influence of the minister’s oratory, the slave-poet’s “song” captured unwittingly the spirit of an age in American history. Between 1740 and 1776, evangelical fire had burned across British North America, stirring the passions of the people irrespective of their race or gender, class or creed. At the center of the firestorm lay millennialism—the idea that an “Impartial Savior” promised everyone, be he low or wretched sinner or downtrodden African, grace and therefore paradise. Judging from Vincent Carretta’s biography, Phillis Wheatley embraced that promise; in Thomas Kidd’s history of the American Revolution, so, too, did the founding fathers.

Based on an extensive body of archival sources, Carretta, Professor of English at the University of Maryland, tells a compelling story about the mother of the African American belles-lettres tradition, thus adding to the Wheatley canon. Building on the work of Merle A. Richmond, William H. Robinson, Julian D. Mason Jr., and, more recently, John C. Shields, this full-length biography explores a series of intertwined questions regarding the first person of African descent to publish a book in British North America: “Where did she come from? How did Wheatley overcome the odds against her to gain transatlantic fame? How active a role did she play in the production and distribution of her writings? How was she able to establish a network of associations that included many of the most important people in North American and British military, political, religious, and social life? What more can be found about Phillis Wheatley’s husband, John Peters? Did Phillis die a celebrity or in desperate obscurity?” (x). Examining these questions and others, Carretta explicates the life of the slave-poet once thought too African or too black for a number of her contemporary critics, and too accommodating or too whitewashed for many of her modern ones.
For Carretta, however, the truth about the historical person who was Phillis Wheatley resides somewhere in the middle of these conflicting views. Shortly after being brought from Africa to America in 1761, the seven- or eight-year-old girl attracted the attention of Susana Wheatley, a pious Congregationalist, who pitied the child partly because she reminded her of her own deceased daughter (14). In the Wheatley household, the African native’s exposure to Christianity afforded her the opportunity to learn to read and write. “Phillis Wheatley’s writings,” Carretta explains, reveal “a familiarity with Classical literature, at least in translation, as well as geography, history, politics, and English literature” (23). Although such training had been considered “unusual subjects for girls at the time,” the Wheatleys’ treatment of their bond servant “enabled them to publicize their status, piety, and charity. They also used her to display their commitment to evangelical Christianity” (40). As the protégée of her mistress, Phillis also benefited significantly from the Wheatleys’ coterie of friends. By Carretta’s account, she “employed evangelical Christianity as both the means and the end for getting into print” (44). In this setting, Phillis wrote often of the death and apotheosis of heralded Bostonians or other noteworthy subjects, gaining for herself certain fame. Her elegy about George Whitefield, to be sure, catapulted her to stardom throughout British North America (78). In explaining Phillis Wheatley’s early life, as well as the historical context of several of the poet’s compositions, Carretta adds to our knowledge of this Gambian-born woman. Using court documents, he also tells us more about Wheatley’s husband, John Peters, and likewise the latter part of the poet’s life (173–96).

But, surprisingly, Carretta’s biography does not reveal anything new with regard to the poet’s African past. Although his account of her voyage to America aboard the brig Phillis is masterfully done, he provides little insight into her life before crossing the Atlantic. This oversight is ironic considering Wheatley’s poetry, because in addition to revealing her deep understanding of Christianity, her elegiac writings in particular demonstrate memories of her African homeland. As Gregory Rigsby’s analysis of Wheatley’s elegies shows, Africa is at the center of the poet’s distinct style in her writings about death, the subject of a significant part of her work. (See Rigsby, “Form and Content in Phillis Wheatley’s Elegies,” CLA Journal 19 [1975]: 248–57; and “Phillis Wheatley’s Craft as Reflected in Her Revised Elegies,” Journal of Negro Education 47 [Fall 1978]: 402–13.) But instead of addressing these African elements in Wheatley’s elegies, Carretta opts to avoid the issue altogether, noting that “her biographer must try to resist the urge to read her writing, especially her poems, as transparently autobiographical” (x). This admission might explain the absence from his bibliography of Rigsby, Matson, Isani, and other scholars who do explore Africa in the poet’s writings.

Also missing from Carretta’s account is an answer to one of the most important questions he poses at its beginning: how active a role did Phillis Wheatley play in the production and distribution of her writings? Though an analysis of Wheatley’s extant manuscript poems and their printed variants strongly suggests that she indeed determined how her writings appeared in print, Carretta’s memoir focuses only on the role Wheatley played in publicizing her volume of poetry, and, in the wake of the Somerset decision, in securing her freedom. Unfortunately, he neglects the larger subject of the extensive authorial control she enjoyed during an era in which many authors could not boast of such agency. (For a discussion of this subject, see my forthcoming article, “‘By her unveil’d each horrid crime appears’: Authorship, Text, and Subtext in Phillis Wheatley’s POEMS ON VARIOUS SUBJECTS, RELIGIOUS AND MORAL,” Textual Cultures [in press]).
Drawing on an assorted body of primary research, Thomas S. Kidd also uncovers a compelling story in which religion plays an important role. Adding to the ever growing body of scholarship concerning the American Revolution—Bernard Bailyn’s *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967), Robert A. Gross’s *The Minutemen and Their World* (1976), Gordon Woods’s *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (1993), and, more recently, Woody Holton’s *Forced Founders* (1999), T. H. Breen’s *The Marketplace of Revolution* (2004), and Carol Berkin’s *Revolutionary Mothers* (2007)—Kidd’s *God of Liberty* reveals the Great Awakening as something more than just an evangelical moment of religious revivalism in early America. By his account, the Awakening played a pivotal part in the colonies’ break from the British Empire. In an era filled with religious pluralism, the Associate Professor of History at Baylor University reveals the true meaning of the phrase, “The Spirit of ’76.” Indeed, essential to the colonials of the day had been the idea that all men were created equal. In *God of Liberty*, such bold ideas began not so much with the writings of John Locke, but with the Bible.

Well before James Otis had penned those lines proclaiming no taxation without representation, early Americans imagined themselves not so much the subjects of King George as of King Jesus. For with the Glorious Revolution of the 1680s, there emerged deep concerns throughout the English-speaking world about issues concerning the price of empire—or, more succinctly put, the corruption of the soul in an era betwixt mercantilism and early capitalism (11–35). Ever fearful of popery, Samuel Davis, Jonathan Mayhew, and other men of faith denounced excess, embraced universal brotherhood, and preached a gospel that seemed to level socially constructed divides between persons (50–51; 60–74). “Reverend William Cooper of Old South Church in Boston,” for example, “declared that salvation made all social distinctions irrelevant” (137). But perhaps the most radical of this lot were George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards, whose spirited sermons “introduced new possibilities of equality into the American landscape by giving prominent roles to African Americans, Native Americans, the poor and uneducated, and women” (135). In this context, Kidd makes a convincing argument that the religious pluralism embodied in the First Great Awakening set the stage for the American Revolution.

Overlooked in this insightful account is the role that the Atlantic slave trade played in the evangelical movement of the day. Undeniably, as shown in such studies of the period as those of Eric Williams, James Walvin, and Edmund Morgan, the Atlantic system played a pivotal role in the development of the British Empire and its North American colonies. (See Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* [1944; reprint, University of North Carolina, 1994], 98–125; Walvin, *Making the Black Atlantic: Britain and the African Diaspora* [Cassell, 2000]; and Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* [1975; reprint, W. W. Norton, 2003], 295–388.) Great Britain’s rise to power, to be sure, owed an enormous debt to slavery that in turn caused the English and likewise their Americans cousins to question their faith and their new-found wealth. As early as 1700, the Reverend Samuel Sewall observed this paradox when he wrote *The Selling of Joseph*, the antislavery tract denouncing human cruelty and the insincere rationale many rich New Englanders adopted to justify their involvement in the atrocities of the traffic (134). And although Kidd does acknowledge the paradox of American slavery and freedom, he neglects altogether the central role of the institution in the growth of evangelicalism in the West (147–65).

In both Kidd’s *God of Liberty* and Carretta’s *Phillis Wheatley*, religion clearly plays a prominent role. For Kidd, religion forged a republic in which the
Creator had many titles, several names, or none at all for those who chose not to believe. For Carretta, however, religion created that republic’s first poet laureate. Indeed, when Phillis Wheatley lamented the death of the Great Awakening demagogue, she not only captured the spirit of an age, she not only claimed the laurel of history and humanity for people of African descent, but she also inscribed in print the idea of the transformative power of religion. Washed in “the fountain of redeeming blood,” persons could be reborn not just spiritually but secularly as well. Like many other colonial Americans, Wheatley declared that all men (including women) are equal. Likewise, she declared that all held in their faith in an “Impartial Savior” the ability to aspire, to be “sons, and kings, and priests to God.”