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Phillis Wheatley and Judith Sargent Murray:
Revolutionary Founders in Women's Political Activism and Women's American Literary
Tradition

By
Rebecca Warwick

Revolutionary War was a nation-wide struggle that catalyzed the changes taking place in nearly every aspect of women's lives throughout the thirteen colonies. Many women were privy to the politics of the American Revolutionary War often by association through their husbands, sons, and male friends. Even so, it was the dominant belief, held by men and women alike, that women did not possess the capacity or intelligence for politics. Many perceived that they were strictly domestic beings, and therefore could not participate nor contribute to the inherently political war effort.¹ Nonetheless, a few brave women such as Phillis Wheatley and Judith Sargent Murray insisted on participating in the political dialogue of their new nation.

In 1772, just four years before fifty-six American patriots would issue a Declaration of Independence to their colonizer, “‘The most respectable Characters in Boston,’ as [the group] would later define itself,” assembled in Boston to assess the competence and ability of an eighteen-year-old, African slave and domestic servant by the name of Phillis Wheatley.² Their note began: “We whose Names are under-written, do assure the World, that the Poems specified in the following Page, were [...] written by Phillis, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa.”³ Without these esteemed gentlemen's published “attestation” in the preface of Wheatley's 1773 book of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, few would have observed the authenticity of her works on faith alone. Despite the overwhelming odds, Wheatley went on to become first significantly published African woman poet in the thirteen colonies.

Born only three years before Wheatley, Judith Sargent Murray also began to flex her literary muscles and test her convictions around the same time. Unlike Wheatley however, Murray was a white, well-educated woman from a privileged background. Murray began composing her prose around 1775, but she did not seek publication until the early 1780s.⁴

Murray married much earlier than Wheatley, in 1769;⁵ although, the marriage resulted in financial ruin due to the impacts of the Revolutionary War on her then deceased husband's maritime business.⁶

While it was uncommon for even white, native-born, New England, middle to upper class women to be literate and rival their male college graduate counterparts, some such as Murray built a career around her published works. However, while that may have also been true to an extent for black women like Wheatley, it was extremely rare, seeing as she is one of the earliest and most dramatic examples. Through the respective lenses of gender and race, Murray and Wheatley used their literary skills and intellectual abilities to engage with the themes of patriotism, freedom and religion within their poetry. Ultimately, they shaped the nation's broader political dialogue, pushed gender boundaries, and aided in strengthening the foundation and growth of women's American literary tradition.

There is no scarcity of scholarship on politically active women in New England during the Revolutionary War, largely thanks to the rise of the study of women's history in the 1970s. For the purpose of my research paper, I am focusing on primary source scholarship as it pertains to Judith Sargent Murray and Phillis Wheatley. However, the secondary scholarship greatly aids in creating context around these two women. Several recurring themes in the literature on early American women's history are status, citizenship, the location of power in society and the family unit, women's prescriptive sphere, as well as women's intellectual abilities and formal education.

In an article titled "The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America," scholar Mary Beth Norton observes the inconsistent opinions presented over the course of the mid to late 1900s regarding and beginning with Elisabeth Anthony Dexter's classic book *Colonial Women of Affairs*, published in 1931, wherein she asserts the theory of the "golden

age.” The golden age theory is “the notion that colonial women were better off than either their English contemporaries or their nineteenth-century descendants.”⁷ Norton disputes this idea by acknowledging all the many other factors that shape women’s lives and status besides economic function, which Dexter solely prioritizes, such as “definitions of gender roles, the nature of the colonial economy, demographic patterns, religion, the law, household organization, ideas and behavior brought from the Old World (especially England), and the colonists’ attitudes toward themselves and their society.”⁸

However, she states that more than anything, during the early colonial period (roughly 1600-1700), “an adult woman’s status was everywhere determined by her marital state...Her social standing depended on her husband’s position in the colonial hierarchy.”⁹ Historian Linda Kerber supports this assertion in her article, “The Meanings of Citizenship,” wherein she demonstrates that this dependency was in logical harmony with English common law and the “elaborate system of *coverture*,” or the idea that once married, a woman was not recognized as an individual under the law but as the property of her husband.¹⁰

A similar situation, although to a lesser extent, seems to be true for women who lived during the revolutionary period (roughly 1765 to 1783). The extent to which women were involved or involved themselves in political activism was at least made easier or harder by the situation in which each woman was born into, married into, like Murray, or “bought” into, as was Wheatley’s situation.

Norton names several significant changes to the lives of women and their children during the revolutionary years, such as: swiftly increasing premarital pregnancy rates, “implying a breakdown in parental authority over youths;” more leeway in partner selection (especially for sons); greater differentiation in status between women and children, as seen in family portraits;

the unexplained drop in birth rates during a time of longer life expectancy, lower infant mortality rate, industrialization, urbanization, and steady rise in consumerism, referred to by scholars as the demographic transition; the increase of control by widows over family estates; and lastly, the growing legalization of divorce across the colonies.¹¹

Norton interprets these developments as the results of women's changing consciousnesses and perceptions of their own capabilities due to the Revolution and the expansion of their roles and duties to include those of the absent men of the family (such as politics and managing the family property),¹² a conclusion scholar Rosemarie Zagarri supports in her book *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic*.¹³ Norton acknowledges the interpretations of other historians on the topic, such as Linda K. Kerber, who "contended that the postwar changes decreased rather than increased women's autonomy, and still others, most notably Suzanne Leacock, advanced precisely the opposite interpretation."¹⁴ Norton seems to promote the interpretation that the Revolutionary War increased women's autonomy, due to the far-reaching religious implications of women's entry into the public sphere; this is a connection I will endorse in the conclusion.¹⁵

Each of Norton's and Kerber's interpretations add to my research in that they strive to broadly assess the progress, or lack thereof, of women's gender equality immediately post revolution. Interestingly, I think each may be correct depending on which region of the colonies one is observing. In her book *Claiming the Pen: Women and Intellectual Life in the Early American South*, author Catherine Kerrison would seem to support Kerber's interpretation in that, as scholar Anya Jabour conveyed in her review, "southern white women's work in 'claiming the self' ([Kerrison] p.82) was hindered by their complicity with the system of slavery that granted them class and racial privilege while upholding female inferiority," meaning

southern women's progress in gender equality was inextricably linked to the systemic oppression of people of color and thus, the abolition of slavery.¹⁶ Kerrison's conclusions and research in the early "origins of an intellectual tradition of southern women,"¹⁷ informs my research through the realization that Wheatley, certainly, and even Murray may not have been able to support themselves through their literature in societies of the American south. These conclusions serve to point out the rare opportunities to engage with public discussions and literature that were available to New England women such as Murray and Wheatley.

As Norton asserts, the most notable shift between colonial and revolutionary eras, "was that Americans initiated a public dialogue on the subject of women and their proper roles," due to the rise of women's education and a "combination of wartime experiences and republican ideology."¹⁸ Republican ideology in this instance references the idea of the republican mother, which became a powerful driving force during the Revolution and well into the 1800s, for the education of women in order to better serve in the early schooling of their sons (to become morally grounded and ideal citizens) via their capacities as mothers, a point Norton explores in the end of her article.

Although different conversations, governed by geographical location, were happening across the colonies in regard to women's place, roles, and intellect, the cat was out of the bag in short. Americans were forced to acknowledge women's emergence into the public sphere, from their place as solely domestic beings, due to their involvement (even minimal support or opposition) in the war, making them politically involved even by the simple existence of their respective opinions (politics being a prescriptively public, male activity and realm). In *Revolutionary Backlash*, Zagarri expands on this broad definition of political participation, the change it brought about to women's emerging public status, and the conservative backlash that

came about by 1830. “The recognition of women’s political potential, as much as actual changes in their role, unleashed this reaction,” she insists.¹⁹ I will leave the post-war results of women’s revolutionary and political participation to the epilogue; however, Zagari’s reinforcement of Norton’s broad interpretation of political action provides the space and setting wherein Wheatley’s and Murray’s works transform from external narratives into groundbreaking and central plot points.

Thought provoking poems, plays, and essays, such as Murray’s 1790 publication “On the Equality of the Sexes,” demonstrate a resolute will power, a fierce intellect, and adept persuasive argumentation abilities, all of which Sheila Skemp highlights throughout her biography on Murray: *First Lady of Letters: Judith Sargent Murray and the Struggle for Female Independence*.²⁰ Furthermore, I will draw poetry from the *Selected Writings of Judith Sargent Murray*, edited by Sharon M. Harris, to contrast with Wheatley’s.²¹

In her book *Liberty’s Daughters*, Norton gives the impression that it was rare across the colonies for black children to possess reading and writing skills.²² To this point, scholar Sondra O’Neale’s article “Challenge to Wheatley’s Critics: ‘There Was No Other ‘Game’ in Town”” addresses Wheatley’s significance as literate, enslaved, black women in the revolutionary era.²³ O’Neale also makes a strong rebuttal in regards to the modern-day opinions among some academics that Wheatley was more complacent than she was subversive and did little to further the abolitionist movement.²⁴ In addition, editor John C. Shields of *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, also supports O’Neale’s positions.²⁵ Author Mary Clare Carruth, in her book *Feminist Interventions in Early American Studies*, observes the interplay of race, gender and class and strives to incorporate the voices and perspectives of women like Phillis Wheatley into the existing discussion.²⁶ Given the context of Wheatley’s life, the era, and close readings of her

poetry, Wheatley without a doubt merits her laurels and her place in African-American and women's history, especially. This topic is revisited again in the body of this paper as it relates to the theme of freedom and Wheatley's perspective thereof.

The dissertation "Print and Gender: British and American Women Writers, 1770 to 1820," by Kirstin Wilcox, primarily examines Judith Sargent Murray's and Phillis Wheatley's respective relationships with the medium of print but also surveys how their race and status of free or enslaved effects the prominence of their work.²⁷ Furthermore, Jennifer Kokai's dissertation, "Even In Their Dresses the Females Seem to Bid Us Defiance: Boston Women and Performance 1762-1823," discusses Judith Sargent Murray in the context of a communal trio of like women, but analyzes Phillis Wheatley individually, as a self-supporting author.²⁸ While all these pieces highlight or allude to the aspects of gender and race in Murray's and Wheatley's lives, none of them give special attention to their poetry and its inherent political nature.²⁹

Although research exists on both Judith Sargent Murray and Phillis Wheatley individually and together in the same work, no scholarship seems to exist which solely focuses on the comparison and contrast of the two women alone. My research will aim to fill this niche and to compare and contrast each author's lens and exploration of patriotism, freedom, and religion.

My research into politically active women during the Revolutionary War began with the page "Top 10 Women Writers" from the online *Journal of the American Revolution* and Carole Chandler Waldrup's book *More Colonial Women: 25 Pioneers of Early America*, which both contain brief profiles on an assortment of women, including Phillis Wheatley.³⁰ I selected Murray and Wheatley from the plethora of politically active and revolutionary women because they really took advantage of the opportunities they were given and their lives stand out as

authoritative representatives of many New England women who share similar backgrounds. Furthermore, they both share similar achievements in life and suggest the arena of possibility for women during the Revolution.

Phillis Wheatley was born in approximately 1753 in the Senegal-Gambia region of West Africa. She was captured and arrived in Boston on July 11, 1761 to be sold into slavery at the age of seven.³¹ Due to either her young age or fragile physical condition she was deemed unfit to be a laborer in the West Indian and Southern colonies and was purchased by Susanna Wheatley, wife to John Wheatley, a prominent Boston tailor and publisher.³² Phillis Wheatley worked as a domestic servant in the Wheatleys' home. While they did not altogether excuse her from her responsibilities, the Wheatleys taught her to read and write, introduced her to Christianity, in addition to "astronomy, geography, history, British literature (particularly John Milton and Alexander Pope), and the Greek and Latin classics."³³ Wheatley published her first poem at thirteen, "On Messrs. Hussey and Coffin," December 21, 1767, in the Newport, Rhode Island, *Mercury*.³⁴

After American colonists failed to demonstrate support for the publishing of an African American woman's work, at 18 years old and with the help of Mrs. Wheatley, Wheatley turned to Selina Hastings, the English Countess of Huntingdon.³⁵ One of Wheatley's best known poems was named for Hastings's chaplain, George Whitefield, and as a wealthy evangelical and abolitionist supporter, Hastings arranged for the publishing of Wheatley's book titled *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in 1773, a collection of 28 poems.³⁶ Wheatley was the first African American to publish a book of poetry "in modern times."³⁷

On the other hand, Judith Sargent Murray was a white woman and a native-born New Englander from an upper class, merchant family.³⁸ She was the first of eight children born on

May 1st, 1751, to Judith and Winthrop Sargent.³⁹ Murray received a minimal early education until her parents decided she would be tutored by Reverend John Rogers alongside her brother, Winthrop, Jr., who was Harvard bound.⁴⁰ Although Murray was far more advanced in her learning than most women her age, she continued to pursue a lifetime of self-education and advocate for women's formal education.⁴¹

In 1769, Murray married John Stevens, a union that would last for seventeen years, wherein she began writing her poetry as early as 1775.⁴² Murray was first published in 1784 in the *Bostonian Gentleman and Lady's Town and Country Magazine* for some of her early poems.⁴³ Post revolution, and as means of supporting herself and her debt-riddled marriage, Murray primarily took up the essay format; however, many of her essays thereafter included a preceding poem in which she concisely summarized the main points of her argument.⁴⁴ In 1788, then Judith Sargent Stevens, she entered her second marriage with John Murray.⁴⁵ In 1793, Murray left her home in Gloucester, Massachusetts to take up permanent residence in Boston.⁴⁶

Phillis Wheatley died in poverty, soon after giving birth in her apartment in Boston,⁴⁷ at the young age of thirty-one on December 5th, 1784.⁴⁸ Judith Sargent Murray would live over twice as long, dying at the age of sixty-nine on July 6th, 1820, in Natchez, Mississippi.⁴⁹ Wheatley and Murray experienced very different realities largely due to their race and increasingly diverging economic situations later in life. Although their lives differed in these ways, they were similar in others.

For instance, both Wheatley and Murray lived out a portion of their lives in urban settings and grew up as accomplished and literate women in elite and religious households. Moreover, both Murray and Wheatley began writing poetry for publication as young women, a skill which they eventually turned to as a means of financial support. Their extensive publications as well as

unpublished works, makes them some of the most accessible early American women writers to research, which is another reason why I was decided to write on them. Furthermore, Wheatley's and Murray's works share similar themes and achievements for women's American literary tradition.

In the subsequent pages of this research paper I will examine Wheatley's and Murray's poetry by engaging with one poem from each woman per theme, briefly describing in what context the poem was written, and by observing the ways in which they compare and contrast. I will analyze the influence of religion on their poetry, their assertions of patriotism, and lastly, Murray's gendered perspective and Wheatley's racial lens on what freedom means to them respectively. I will discuss how both women stepped outside of their prescribed domains and aided in the growth of women's American literary tradition.

Each of these themes overlap with one another. Given Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, or the interconnected and interdependent nature of systems of oppression as well as a person's identity as both, for example, a woman and a person of color, I will not be able to keep such themes entirely separate.⁵⁰ Even so, such connections will only prove to strengthen Murray's and Wheatley's contributions to the political dialogue of their time given the difficulties they had to overcome.

In the 1730s, only a few decades before the Revolutionary War, the colonies experienced a spiritual "Great Awakening."⁵¹ This movement rejuvenated interest in Christianity and sparked new ideologies.⁵² Both Wheatley's and Murray's lives and worldviews were impacted by religion, and it showed in their poetry. In writing on religion and engaging with the atheist male critics and contemporaries of their time, Wheatley and Murray pushed the boundaries of women's sphere.

One such poem wherein Wheatley clearly articulates her Christian faith is both titled and addressed to, “To the Reverend Doctor Thomas Amory on Reading His Sermons on Daily Devotion, In which Duty is Recommended and Assisted.”⁵³ In her opening lines, Wheatley reflects in a wistful tone: “To cultivate in ev’ry noble mind/ Habitual grace, and sentiments refin’d.”⁵⁴ She continues “O may each bosom catch the sacred fire,” using “sacred fire” to reference the fast spread of religious fervor.⁵⁵ Wheatley sings Reverend Amory’s praises in the lines, “Artists may paint the sun’s effulgent rays/ But Amory’s pen the brighter God displays,” describing her enthusiasm and appreciation for his sermons.⁵⁶ “The Atheist sure no more can boast aloud.../ As if the clay without the potter’s aid/ Should rise in various forms, and shapes self-made.”⁵⁷ In these lines, Wheatley addresses the contemporary skepticism of atheism that was not uncommon during the Enlightenment period. Her rebuttal likens the disbelief in god to the impossibility of clay molding itself without the help of a higher power, the potter.

Just like Wheatley, Murray also finds resolve and a sense of vindication in religion. In the *First Lady of Letters*, Skemp asserts “at least in the short run, Judith’s understanding of women’s rights was probably more a product of her own decision to embrace [...] Universalism than it was a consequence of the war for independence.”⁵⁸ Murray came into her Christian faith of Universalism through her family and her experience growing up in Gloucester.⁵⁹ In her second marriage, Murray even espoused one of the earliest American Universalist preachers, John Murray.⁶⁰

Murray’s commitment to the tenants of Universalism such as universal salvation and individual religious freedom were reflected in much of her writing. Like Wheatley, in her poem, “Necessity of Religion, Especially in Adversity,” Murray writes to in part to defend her belief in god against enlightenment thinker and French revolutionary Maximilien Robespierre’s

promotion of atheism.⁶¹ “Turn how we may, avoid it how we will/ Innate conviction must attend us still,” Murray contends.⁶² She elaborates in the following line and likens religion to a “guardian shade,” or an inescapable shadow.⁶³ In doing this, Murray characterizes the struggle of nonbelievers against faith as naïve and futile. Furthermore, in meeting Robespierre on the plane of theological thought, Murray shatters eighteenth century perceptions of women’s intellectual abilities and women’s place.

Murray continues to emphasize her conclusion by pointing to the omnipresence of god in nature: “The breeze is his—the uprooting whirlwind’s roar—/ The gentle rill—the waves of every shore.”⁶⁴ In the ending verses: “’Tis God directs the day—and God the night/ As erst he spake, and Nature sprang to light,”⁶⁵ Murray alludes to the biblical story of creation and illustrates her constant faith.

Both Wheatley’s and Murray’s religious beliefs served to strengthen their like-minded worldviews and greatly impact their poetry. Furthermore, their employment of religion as support for the social and political reform of racial and gender inequalities, lends a political nature to their faith and exemplifies a philosophical level of intellectual engagement.

As Zaggarri expands on in *Revolutionary Backlash*, the broad definition of political action includes more than voting or holding political office.⁶⁶ The writings of women such as Wheatley and Murray were inherently political due to the themes of patriotism and freedom that they explored through race and gender, thus, making them active participants in the formation of their new nation through their literature.⁶⁷ Both Wheatley and Murray wrote about the pride they felt for the young United States.

Wheatley’s poem, “Liberty and Peace,” published in 1784, is one such example.⁶⁸ She addresses the bloodshed of the Revolutionary War and personifies the fledging country as

Columbia, a sovereign and peace-bringing daughter from heaven. In lines 29 and 30, Wheatley writes “But thou appeas’d submit to Heaven’s decree/ That bids the Realm of Freedom rival thee!” indicating that god is on Columbia’s side and has commanded the rise of a nation of freedom over the tyranny of England.⁶⁹ As a devout Christian woman, Wheatley suggests that the pursuit of freedom is a holy one and demonstrates a strong pride for her country which holds such an earnest aspiration. Halfway through the poem, Wheatley takes a step back and observes humanity as a whole: “The Muse’s Ear hears mother Earth deplore/Her ample Surface smok with kindred Gore,” grouping all the deceased together as relatives by virtue of their shared humanity.⁷⁰ The latter is a curious line in that Wheatley sets aside national origins, an ability likely enabled by her egalitarian perspective on race, to exhibit the bigger picture of a human race undivided in death. Wheatley concludes with the lines “To every Realm shall Peace her charms display/ And Heavenly *Freedom* spread her golden Ray,” wherein she wishfully envisions the spread of freedom from tyranny around the world, and in effect, the proliferation of American ideals and values.⁷¹ The types of freedom Wheatley is referencing in this exact passage is unknown. Although, seeing as Wheatley was an enslaved domestic servant during the time she wrote this poem, it is highly likely she meant the abolishment of slavery. By nature of her subjects and her commitment to America’s victory over tyranny, her poem is inherently political and implies political rights for those persecuted or oppressed, such as herself.

Murray began seeking out her patriotic identity as soon as independence was declared.⁷² However, she was weary of the war’s attention to gender, due to the implication that men’s physical superiority was immediately necessary for women’s security (the only area Murray conceded to).⁷³ “Reason allows a measure of patriotism even to the female bosom,” Murray insisted by end of the war.⁷⁴ Although it seems Murray accepted the institutions of marriage and

motherhood in women's lives, she seized onto the patriotic duty of republican motherhood to not only demonstrate her commitment but also to encourage formal education for women.

Murray's poem preceding her essay: "Observations on Female Abilities," proclaims her pride for her American countrywomen in strong terms, invoking authoritative language, often associated with men's sphere, around their many abilities. Murray begins her list of desirable female attributes with the line: "The patriots zeal, the laurell'd warrior's claim," wherein she employs political vernacular like "patriot" and "warrior" to describe not men, but women.⁷⁵ She conveys women's decorated "warrior's claim"⁷⁶ to their passionate patriotism as militant, implying that women fought—a public and societally prescribed male role—in the Revolutionary War out of pride for their nation. Murray contrasts this line with more traditionally female characteristics: "The scepter'd virtues, wisdom's sacred name," through which she indicates women's affinity with wisdom as both female and as both possessing sovereign "virtues."⁷⁷ In this line, Murray may be hinting at women's capacity for intellect as well as the foundations of the patriotic ideology of republican motherhood, due to women's alleged, natural morality and untaught virtue.⁷⁸ Murray continues, "With heroism, with perseverance fraught/ By honour, truth, and constancy enwrought," again claiming conventionally male pursuits and ideals as female, in the name of their shared country.⁷⁹ In the concluding lines, Murray trumpets: "With female genius these are all combin'd," meaning the female mind can do more than merely conceive of all these aforementioned traits.⁸⁰ However, mindful of her current limited societal circumstances, Murray looks to the future for recognition of women's patriotic and numerous other capacities: "And mellowing time awards their fair renown."⁸¹

Although Wheatley writes about her pride for her country through her hopes for freedom for all human race and Murray conveys her patriotism through the heroic abilities of her American countrywomen, their alternate means to the same end of a shared pride in their self-emancipated nation create a shared impact on the discussion of women's place in American society.

The question of freedom and who merited what rights, is one the United States struggled with from the start. The Founding Fathers exercised extreme caution in the formation of the 1787 Constitution, as evidenced in their inaction towards issues such as slavery and coverture—systems of profit and oppression of which they were not ignorant of in the slightest.⁸² Both Murray and Wheatley viewed their positions in life as hindered by either her gender or race (respectively), and wrote about these inequalities during the formation of their new nation that preached freedom for all.

Murray was careful at first to claim interest in politics due to women's relation to men, which then allowed for women's emotional investment in the nation's welfare.⁸³ However, towards the end of the Revolution, Murray began to affirm that "a love of freedom was not distinctly male or female."⁸⁴ Throughout her life, Murray called for the formal education of women and composed numerous poems and essays arguing for the cause. Murray began writing what was arguably her best-known essay, "On the Equality of the Sexes," in the early years of her first marriage, although it was not published until ten years thereafter in 1790.⁸⁵ As evidenced in the poem preceding her essay, Murray seeks to undermine the dominant perception that differing intellectual ability is natural as opposed to nurtured.⁸⁶

She begins the poem by stating, "That minds are not alike, full well I know/ This truth each day's experience will show," as if to logically illustrate that each person and their intellect

is entirely unique.⁸⁷ A few verses down, Murray delves into her argument against the idea of natural intellectual endowments to one sex above another in asserting that anyone who pursues their studies may achieve greatness: “And Genius, led by Study, wears the crown.”⁸⁸ In lines 26 and 37: “Who this distinction to the sex ascribe/ ... They rob us of the power t’improve,” Murray observes the superficial act of ascribing generalizations to an entire sex while explaining that “they,” the oppressors, do not even allow women the chance to compete, much less possess the tools to prove them otherwise.⁸⁹ Nearing the conclusion of the poem, Murray affirms: “The soul unfettere’d, to no sex confin’d,” by which she means a truly free soul or mind (presumably emancipated by education) is not held back by the inequalities associated with one’s flesh and body.⁹⁰ Lastly, she attests that the only characteristic natural to the sexes is equality: “Yet nature with equality imparts.”⁹¹ Murray points to access to education and widespread social constructions of gender norms as preventative in the development of women’s intellect, not a limited natural aptitude.

Just as much of Murray’s writings focus on gender, much of Wheatley’s poetry intentionally focused on race. This is telling in that it suggests Wheatley’s perspective in life derived first from her identity as a person of color, placing her gender identity as secondary, whereas the inverse might have been closer to the truth in Murray’s case. It is ambiguous as to whether Wheatley recognized the compounding intersectionality of her inequalities as an enslaved, African woman, however, her pursuit of knowledge, literacy, and publication certainly prove she did not intend to be complacent with dominant gender norms for women at the time.

One common critique of Wheatley is that she did nothing to enhance “black thought” in her time and therefore was “one of those ‘Blacks who [was] taught to think white and to divorce themselves from who they are.’”⁹² However, as both scholars Shields and O’Neale

counter, Wheatley's writing did significantly challenge then-existing social conceptions and constructions of race.⁹³ Considering Wheatley's disadvantages as an enslaved African woman, her achievements such as a published book of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, were no small feat.

In Wheatley's 1768 poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America," she engages with both race and religion as they unite in pursuit of freedom. In her opening line, "Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land," Wheatley conveys her gratitude in coming to America while using the religious descriptor "pagan" to communicate an "other" and disdainful feeling towards her country of birth.⁹⁴ In doing this, she indicates a severe preference to America. In the lines two and three she writes "[Mercy] Taught my benighted soul to understand/ That there's a God, there's a *Saviour* too."⁹⁵ Here, Wheatley correlates her religious enlightenment with her arrival in the United States. In choosing the word "benighted," she connotes a prior ignorance due to her lack of opportunity in Africa. This implies that she sees her circumstances as having drastically improved in America in comparison to her life in Africa. In this instance, Wheatley describes herself as both freed by her new-found faith as well as her improved life opportunities. "Some view our sable race with scornful eye/ 'Their colour is a diabolic die'," Wheatley writes, exhibiting the racist perspective and language of her time.⁹⁶ However, in her concluding lines, Wheatley heads: "Remember, *Christians*, *Negros* black as *Cain*/ May be refin'd and join the' angelic train."⁹⁷ Here, like Murray, Wheatley subverts the pervading ideology that intellect or social behavior is natural, not taught, by asserting that anyone regardless of race or creed may be learn to better themselves, just like the anecdote of Cain from the *Bible*. Wheatley also implies the freeing nature of religion and the idea that god welcomes and accepts all souls "to join the' angelic train," or heaven.

Born out of the Great Awakening, the abolitionist movement primarily expanded through literature, supported by Christianity in its moral imperative.⁹⁸ As exemplified by Wheatley's book of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, and her relationships to religious and abolitionist supporters, she obviously was attempting to involve herself into the literary discussion of her time. Wheatley clearly claims her ethnicity and demonstrates a strong preference towards America due to the freedom and opportunity it has offered her. As Shields suggests, Wheatley's book carries heavy significance in that it represents the emergence of black and black women's American literary traditions, and as such, serves as the founding matrilineal origin.⁹⁹

Although Wheatley and Murray express a desire for freedom through the lenses of two different social ills, they share the same broader goal. Their discussions of women's and African Americans' political rights create a shared impact on the expansion of freedoms moving forward into American history.

In contributing to the inherently political conversations regarding religion, patriotism, and freedom of the Revolutionary era, Wheatley and Murray demonstrated adept literary prowess and intellectual capability. Through Wheatley's authoritative awareness of race in her poetry and Murray's unwavering focus on gender, both women brought boundary pushing perspectives to the contemporary literature of their day. In seeking publication and compensation for their work, Wheatley and Murray prioritized and fundamentally contributed to the growth of women's American literary tradition. Not only did they shatter commonly held perceptions of women as domestic beings, but proved to progress and broaden the nation's political dialogue on women's sphere and women's involvement in public affairs.

Murray's discussions of gender equality and Wheatley's subtle references to the beginnings of the abolitionist movement further progressed American women's entry into the public sphere. Their efforts galvanized the abolitionist and feminist movements through the power of their convictions and testimonies of both black and white women's intellectual capacities for political dialogue. As Norton advances, the development of republican motherhood and the feminization of religion soon provided, albeit limited, public spaces of which women could assume absolute authority.¹⁰⁰ Although they were closely observed and constricted allowances for women, the domains of republican motherhood and morality proved crucial prerequisites for the beginnings of First Wave feminism.¹⁰¹

¹ Zagari, Rosemarie. *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

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⁴ Harris, Sharon M., ed. *Selected Writings of Judith Sargent Murray*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

⁵ Sharon M. Harris, ed., *Selected Writings of Judith Sargent Murray* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), xviii.

⁶ Harris, ed., *Selected Writings of Judith Sargent Murray*, xix.

⁷ Norton, Mary Beth. "The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America." *American Historical Review*, Vol. 89, No. 3 (June 1984), 593 (593)-619.

⁸ Mary Beth Norton, "The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 89, No. 3 (June 1984), 593 (595)-619.

⁹ Norton, "The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America," 600.

¹⁰ Kerber, Linda K. "The Meanings of Citizenship." *Journal of American History*, Vol. 84, No. 3 (December 1997), 833-854.

¹¹ Norton, "The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America," 614 & 615.

¹² Norton, "The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America," 615.

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- ¹³ Rosemarie Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), Chap. 1.
- ¹⁴ Norton, "The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America," 615.
- ¹⁵ Norton, "The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America," 615 & 616.
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- ¹⁹ Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 2.
- ²⁰ Sheila L. Skemp, *First Lady of Letters: Judith Sargent Murray and the Struggle for Female Independence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), Chap. 1.
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- ³² Sondra A. O'Neale, "Phillis Wheatley." *Poetry Foundation*. (Poetry Foundation, 2019), 1.
- ³³ O'Neale, "Phillis Wheatley," 1 & 2.
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- ⁴¹ Harris, ed., *Selected Writings of Judith Sargent Murray*, xvii.
- ⁴² Harris, ed., *Selected Writings of Judith Sargent Murray*, xviii.
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- ⁶⁷ Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 2.
- ⁶⁸ Shields, ed., *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, 154.
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