

that island—where “Sweet orange groves in lonely valleys rise,” as he put it—however, he could not talk only of “blossoms” and an “endless spring” in a land that abounded in poverty and misery, where the plantation owners grew wealthy on slave labor. In 1778 he returned home and enlisted as a seaman on a blockade runner; two years later he was captured at sea and imprisoned on the British ship *Scorpion*, anchored in New York harbor. He was treated cruelly, an experience he describes in “The British Prison Ship” (1781), his most popular poem with his contemporaries.

After Freneau regained his health, he moved to Philadelphia, where he worked in the post office and won his reputation as a journalist, satirist, and poet. As editor of the *Freeman's Journal*, Freneau wrote impassioned verse in support of the American Revolution, turned all his rhetorical gifts against loyalists to the British monarchy, and became identified as “the poet of the American Revolution.” In 1791 Thomas Jefferson, then serving as secretary of state, hired Freneau as a translator in his department. At that point Philadelphia was the nation's capital, so Freneau remained in that city, devoting much of his time to editing the *National Gazette*, a newspaper associated with Jefferson's political party. That party, the Democratic-Republicans, favored a democratic republic rather than the strong federal government favored by the opposing Federalist party. Freneau had a sharp eye for anyone not sympathetic to the democratic cause. He strongly supported the French Revolution and had a special grudge against Alexander Hamilton, secretary of the Treasury, chief spokesman for the Federalists, who viewed the French Revolution skeptically. President George Washington, officially nonpartisan, found it ironic that “that rascal Freneau” should be employed by his administration when he attacked it outspokenly.

The *National Gazette* ceased publication in 1793, and after Jefferson resigned his office, Freneau left Philadelphia for good, alternating between ship's captain (a job that he had held on and off since 1778) and newspaper editor in New York and New Jersey. He spent his last years on his New Jersey farm, unable to make it self-supporting and with no hope of further employment. Year after year he sold off the land he had inherited from his father. Although he received a pension as a veteran of the American Revolution, he died impoverished and unknown, lost in a blizzard.

Freneau was a prolific writer of prose and poetry, addressing many topics including revolution and slavery, the fate of Native Americans, the sea, and nature. His best poems have a compelling lyricism. They reveal his interest in the beautiful, transient things of nature, and the conflict in his art between the sensuous and the didactic.

The following texts are from *The Poems of Freneau* (1929), edited by H. H. Clark, except as indicated.

The Wild Honey Suckle

Fair flower, that dost so comely grow,
 Hid in this silent, dull retreat,
 Untouched thy honeyed blossoms blow,¹
 Unseen thy little branches greet:
 No roving foot shall crush thee here,
 No busy hand provoke a tear.

5

1. Bloom.

By Nature's self in white arrayed,
 She bade thee shun the vulgar² eye,
 And planted here the guardian shade,
 And sent soft waters murmuring by;
 Thus quietly thy summer goes,
 Thy days declining to repose.

10

Smit with those charms, that must decay,
 I grieve to see your future doom;
 They died—nor were those flowers more gay,
 The flowers that did in Eden bloom;
 Unpitying frosts, and Autumn's power
 Shall leave no vestige of this flower.

15

From morning suns and evening dews
 At first thy little being came:
 If nothing once, you nothing lose,
 For when you die you are the same;
 The space between, is but an hour,
 The frail duration of a flower.

20

1786

The Indian Burying Ground

In spite of all the learned have said,
 I still my old opinion keep;
 The *posture*, that *we* give the dead,
 Points out the soul's eternal sleep.

Not so the ancients of these lands—
 The Indian, when from life released,
 Again is seated¹ with his friends,
 And shares again the joyous feast.

5

His imaged birds, and painted bowl,
 And venison, for a journey dressed,
 Bespeak the nature of the soul,
 Activity, that knows no rest.

10

His bow, for action ready bent,
 And arrows, with a head of stone,
 Can only mean that life is spent,
 And not the old ideas gone.

15

Thou, stranger, that shalt come this way,
 No fraud upon the dead commit—

2. Common; unfeeling.

1. The North American Indians bury their dead in a sitting posture; decorating the corpse with wampum, the images of birds, quadrupeds, etc.:

And (if that of a warrior) with bows, arrows, tomahawks and other military weapons [Freneau's note].

Observe the swelling turf, and say
They do not *lie*, but here they *sit*. 20

Here still a lofty rock remains,
On which the curious eye may trace
(Now wasted, half, by wearing rains)
The fancies of a ruder race.

Here still an agéd elm aspires, 25
Beneath whose far-projecting shade
(And which the shepherd still admires)
The children of the forest played!

There oft a restless Indian queen
(Pale Sheba,² with her braided hair) 30
And many a barbarous form is seen
To chide the man that lingers there.

By midnight moons, o'er moistening dews,
In habit for the chase arrayed,
The hunter still the deer pursues, 35
The hunter and the deer, a shade!³

And long shall timorous fancy see
The painted chief, and pointed spear,
And Reason's self shall bow the knee
To shadows and delusions here. 40

1788

To Sir Toby¹

*A Sugar Planter in the Interior Parts of Jamaica,
Near the City of San Jago de la Vega (Spanish Town), 1784*

*"The motions of his spirit are black as night,
And his affections dark as Erebus."*

—Shakespeare²

If there exists a hell—the case is clear—
Sir Toby's slaves enjoy that portion here:
Here are no blazing brimstone lakes—'tis true;
But kindled rum too often burns as blue;
In which some fiend, whom nature must detest, 5

2. The queen who visited King Solomon to test his renowned wisdom (1 Kings 10.1–13).

3. Has double meaning as shadow and spirit.

1. The text is from *The Poems of Philip Freneau* (1902), edited by F. L. Pattee.

2. *The Merchant of Venice* 5.1. 86–87. Freneau has substituted "black" for "dull." "Erebus": in Greek mythology, a place of darkness in the underworld, through which the dead must pass before entering Hades.

Steeps Toby's brand, and marks poor Cudjoe's³ breast.

Here whips on whips excite perpetual fears,
 And mingled howlings vibrate on my ears:
 Here Nature's plagues abound, to fret and tease,
 Snakes, scorpions, despots, lizards, centipedes—
 No art, no care escapes the busy lash;
 All have their dues—and all are paid in cash—
 The eternal driver keeps a steady eye
 On a black herd, who would his vengeance fly,
 But chained, imprisoned, on a burning soil,
 For the mean avarice of a tyrant toil!⁴

The lengthy cart-whip guards this monster's reign—
 And cracks, like pistols, from the fields of cane.

Ye powers! who formed these wretched tribes, relate,
 What had they done, to merit such a fate!
 Why were they brought from Eboe's⁵ sultry waste,
 To see that plenty which they must not taste—
 Food, which they cannot buy, and dare not steal;
 Yams and potatoes—many a scanty meal!—

One, with a gibbet⁶ wakes his negro's fears,
 One to the windmill nails him by the ears;
 One keeps his slave in darkened dens, unfed,
 One puts the wretch in pickle ere he's dead:
 This, from a tree suspends him by the thumbs,
 That, from his table grudges even the crumbs!

O'er yond' rough hills a tribe of females go,
 Each with her gourd,⁷ her infant, and her hoe;
 Scorched by a sun that has no mercy here,
 Driven by a devil, whom men call overseer—
 In chains, twelve wretches to their labors haste;
 Twice twelve I saw, with iron collars graced!—

Are such the fruits that spring from vast domains?
 Is wealth, thus got, Sir Toby, worth your pains!—
 Who would your wealth on terms, like these, possess,
 Where all we see is pregnant with distress—
 Angola's⁸ natives scourged by ruffian hands,
 And toil's hard product shipped to foreign lands.

Talk not of blossoms, and your endless spring;
 What joy, what smile, can scenes of misery bring?—
 Though Nature, here, has every blessing spread,
 Poor is the laborer—and how meanly fed!—

Here Stygian⁹ paintings light and shade renew,
 Pictures of hell, that Virgil's¹ pencil drew:

3. "This passage has a reference to the West Indian custom (sanctioned by law) of branding a newly imported slave on the breast, with a red hot iron, as evidence of the purchaser's property" [Freneau's note]. Cudge or Cudjoe was a common name for a slave.

4. Lines 13–16 were added in 1809.

5. A small Negro kingdom near the river Senegal [Freneau's note].

6. Gallows.

7. Water cup.

8. West African Portuguese colony.

9. Hellish; taken from the river Styx, over which, in Greek mythology, souls of the dead must cross.

1. "See *Aeneid*, Book 6th.—and Fenelon's *Telemaque*, Book 18" [Freneau's note]. Aeneas descends to the underworld in the sixth book of the epic of the Roman poet Virgil (70–19 B.C.E.). The French theologian François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon (1651–1715) wrote *Télémaque* (1699), a didactic romance concerning the son of Ulysses as he searches for his father.

Here, surly Charons² make their annual trip,
 And ghosts arrive in every Guinea ship,³ 50
 To find what beasts these western isles afford,
 Plutonian⁴ scourges, and despotic lords:—

Here, they, of stuff determined to be free,
 Must climb the rude cliffs of the Liguanees;⁵
 Beyond the clouds, in sculking haste repair, 55
 And hardly safe from brother traitors⁶ there.—

1784

1791, 1809

On Mr. Paine's Rights of Man¹

Thus briefly sketched the sacred rights of man,
 How inconsistent with the royal plan!
 Which for itself exclusive honor craves,
 Where some are masters born, and millions slaves.
 With what contempt must every eye look down 5
 On that base, childish bauble called a *crown*,
 The gilded bait, that lures the crowd, to come,
 Bow down their necks, and meet a slavish doom;
 The source of half the miseries men endure,
 The quack² that kills them, while it seems to cure, 10
 Roused by the reason of his manly page,
 Once more shall Paine a listening world engage:
 From Reason's source, a bold reform he brings,
 In raising up *mankind*, he pulls down *kings*,
 Who, source of discord, patrons of all wrong, 15
 On blood and murder have been fed too long:
 Hid from the world, and tutored to be base,
 The curse, the scourge, the ruin of our race,
 Theirs was the task, a dull designing few,
 To shackle beings that they scarcely knew, 20
 Who made this globe the residence of slaves,
 And built their thrones on systems formed by knaves
 —Advance, bright years, to work their final fall,
 And haste the period that shall crush them all.
 Who, that has read and scanned the historic page 25
 But glows, at every line, with kindling rage,
 To see by them the rights of men aspersed,
 Freedom restrained, and Nature's law reversed,

2. In Greek mythology, Charon ferries the souls of the dead over the river Styx to Hades.

3. Every slave ship from West Africa.

4. Hellish; in Roman mythology, Pluto was the god of the underworld.

5. The mountains northward of the kingdom [Freneau's note].

6. Alluding to the *Independent* negroes in the blue mountains, who, for a stipulated reward, deliver up every fugitive that falls into their hands, to the English Government [Freneau's

note].

1. The original title was "To a Republican with Mr. Paine's Rights of Man." Thomas Paine (see his headnote, above) read the British statesman Edmund Burke's "Reflections on the French Revolution" (1790), a defense of monarchy and an attack on revolution, when he was living in England. In *The Rights of Man* (1791–92), Paine argued for the overthrow of monarchy and the right of the people to govern themselves.

2. One pretending to be a physician.

Men, ranked with beasts, by monarchs willed away,
 And bound young fools, or madmen to obey;
 Now driven to wars, and now oppressed at home,
 Compelled in crowds o'er distant seas to roam,
 From India's climes the plundered prize to bring
 To glad the strumpet, or to glut the king.

Columbia,³ hail! immortal be thy reign:
 Without a king, we till the smiling plain;
 Without a king, we trace the unbounded sea,
 And traffic round the globe, through each degree;
 Each foreign clime our honored flag reveres,
 Which asks no monarch, to support the stars:
 Without a *king*, the laws maintain their sway,
 While honor bids each generous heart obey.
 Be ours the task the ambitious to restrain,
 And this great lesson teach—that kings are vain;
 That warring realms to certain ruin haste,
 That kings subsist by war, and wars are waste:
 So shall our nation, formed on Virtue's plan,
 Remain the guardian of the Rights of Man,
 A vast republic, famed through every clime,
 Without a king, to see the end of time.

30
35
40
45
50
1795

On the Religion of Nature

The power, that gives with liberal hand
 The blessings man enjoys, while here,
 And scatters through a smiling land
 Abundant products of the year;
 That power of nature, ever blessed,
 Bestowed religion with the rest.

Born with ourselves, her early sway
 Inclines the tender mind to take
 The path of right, fair virtue's way
 Its own felicity to make.
 This universally extends
 And leads to no mysterious ends.

Religion, such as nature taught,
 With all divine perfection suits;
 Had all mankind this system sought
 Sophists would cease their vain¹ disputes,
 And from this source would nations know
 All that can make their heaven below.

5
10
15

3. The personification of America (from Christopher Columbus).

1. Pointless. "Sophists": teachers of philosophy.

This deals not curses on mankind,
 Or dooms them to perpetual grief, 20
 If from its aid no joys they find,
 It damns them not for unbelief;
 Upon a more exalted plan
 Creatress nature dealt with man—

Joy to the day, when all agree 25
 On such grand systems to proceed,
 From fraud, design, and error free,
 And which to truth and goodness lead:
 Then persecution will retreat
 And man's religion be complete. 30

1815

PHILLIS WHEATLEY

c. 1753–1784

Phillis Wheatley was either nineteen or twenty years old in September 1773, when her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* was published in London. At the time of the volume's publication, she was the object of considerable public attention because, in addition to being a child prodigy, Wheatley was an enslaved person. Her books included a testimonial from eighteen prominent citizens—including the governor of Massachusetts and the merchant and statesman John Hancock—who bore witness that “under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town,” Wheatley “had been examined and thought qualified to write them.” While the circumstances and nature of the examination remain unclear, the need for such a testimonial indicates the obstacles that Wheatley faced in pursuing her literary art.

Born in Africa (probably in present-day Senegal or Gambia), she was captured by slavers and brought to Boston in 1761. A wealthy tailor, John Wheatley, purchased her as a companion for his wife, Susanna, and she was named after the vessel that carried her to America. Wheatley was fortunate in her surroundings, for Susanna Wheatley was sympathetic toward this frail and remarkably intelligent child. At a time when even few white women were given an education, Wheatley was taught to read and write, and before long she began to read Latin writers. She came to know the Bible well, and three English poets—John Milton, Alexander Pope, and Thomas Gray—strongly influenced her verse. The Wheatleys moved in a circle of enlightened Boston Christians, and Phillis was introduced to a community that was coming to view the keeping of slaves as incompatible with Christian life.

Wheatley became internationally famous after the publication of her poetic eulogy celebrating George Whitefield, the great English evangelist who made several visits