Fourth Edition

THROUGH WOMEN'S EYES

An American History
WITH DOCUMENTS

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Bedford/St. Martin's
A Macmillan Education Imprint

Boston • New York

PRIMARY SOURCES

Gendering Images of the Revolution

In addition to the representations of American women contained in the portraits of the late eighteenth century are a variety of other images specifically connected to the American Revolution. Many of these—whether paintings or cartoons—had propagandistic purposes. Few portray actual women and instead render females as abstractions, often as icons of "Liberty."

◆ Figure 3.6 **"A Society of Patriotic Ladies" (1774)**
Library of Congress LC-USZ62-12711.

Englishmen on both sides of the Atlantic often ridiculed women's interest in fashion and represented them as weak-minded and frivolous. These negative stereotypes about women took on propagandistic value in Figure 3.6, a British cartoon, "A Society of Patriotic Ladies," created as a response to the fifty-one women of Edenton, North Carolina, who signed a pledge in 1774 to uphold the boycotts against British goods. By depicting fashionable women neglecting their children (note the child on the floor being licked by a dog) and acting in unfeminine ways (note the grotesque woman with the gavel), the cartoon devalues the boycott and American women at the same time.

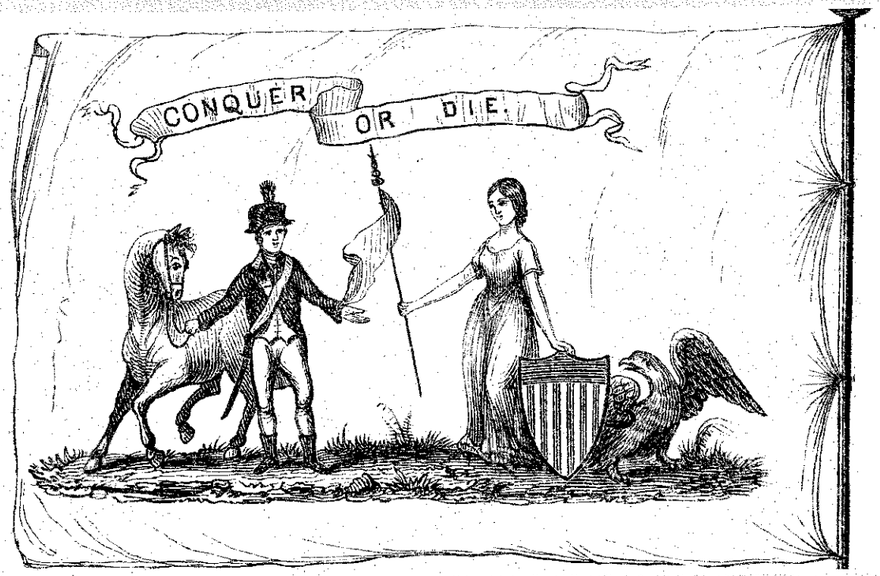
Consider the choices of the cartoonist. Why do you think he decided to include a black servant in his drawing? Why did he depict the woman in the center being fondled by a man?

A number of images of women holding muskets circulated during the revolutionary era. Scholars think that the 1770 drawing in Figure 3.7 was modeled after a 1750 woodcut of Hannah Snell, an Englishwoman who had joined the British navy in 1745. Though *Miss Fanny's Maid* predates the outbreak of fighting, it coincides with the disruptive atmosphere of Boston in the 1770s. The American illustration was probably not intended to refer to a specific woman bearing arms; the story of cross-dressing Deborah Sampson (see pp. 107–8) was not made public until 1781, for example. What do you think might have been the purpose of this image for revolutionary propagandists?

◆ Figure 3.7 ***Miss Fanny's Maid* (1770)**
American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts, USA/ Bridgeman Images.

The tendency to depict women as abstractions was most evident in the widespread popularity of images of "Liberty." The convention of using a stylized woman to represent political virtues such as liberty or justice was a long-standing one in Western European art, though, as one historian explains, "the female form [of liberty] does not refer to particular women, does not describe women as a group, and often does not even presume to evoke their natures."[52] Instead, this idealized image was intended to embody the principles for which men were fighting.

Figure 3.8, "Banner of Washington's Life Guard," was used to represent a group of military men attached to General Washington. How do we know that this image is not of a real



◆ **Figure 3.8 "Banner of Washington's Life Guard" (date unknown)**
The Granger Collection, New York.

woman but is rather a symbol? What other symbols of the Revolution can you identify?

A more complex rendering of a female version of liberty appeared in the well-known painter Edward Savage's engraving "Liberty in the Form of the Goddess of Youth Giving Support to the Bald Eagle," created in 1796. In Figure 3.9, the youthful Liberty, clad in white with a garland of flowers, nourishes an eagle, who symbolizes the Republic. In the background is the flag of the union with a liberty cap. At the bottom right, lightning surrounds the British fleet in the Boston harbor. Crushed under Liberty's feet are symbols of the British monarchy: a key, a broken scepter, and the garter of a royal order. This version of Liberty was so popular that it was reproduced in many forms—including needlework—well into the nineteenth century. Why do you think Savage depicts Liberty as a "goddess of youth"? Why was the image so popular with Americans?

A somewhat unusual depiction of a female Liberty had more radical political meaning than most versions. Figure 3.10 suggests the way in which revolutionary ideology ignited questions about women's and slaves' freedom. *Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences,* by Samuel Jennings (1792), was initially suggested by the

◆ **Figure 3.9 Edward Savage, "Liberty in the Form of the Goddess of Youth Giving Support to the Bald Eagle" (1796)**
Library of Congress 3a17616.

◆ Figure 3.10 **Samuel Jennings, *Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences* (1792)**
The Granger Collection, New York.

artist himself to the Library Company of Philadelphia, an institution founded by Benjamin Franklin and others in 1731. The directors specifically asked Jennings to portray a tableau of "Liberty (with her Cap and proper Insignia) displaying the arts by some of the most striking Symbols of Painting, Architecture, Mechanics, Astronomy, &ca. whilst She appears in the attitude of placing on the top of a Pedestal, a pile of Books, lettered with, *Agriculture, Commerce, Philosophy & Catalogue of Philadelphia Library.*"[53] The directors, many of whom were active

antislavery advocates, also requested the inclusion of African Americans and the symbolic broken chains. In the image, Liberty is offering a book to the grateful African Americans.

Examine the images associated with Liberty. What do they suggest? What did the library directors hope to convey in combining a depiction of Liberty, books, and freed slaves?

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. How do these diverse images of women contribute to our understanding of how gender shaped the experience of the American Revolution?
2. The images presented here have propagandistic purposes. What do these images suggest about the role gender plays in conceptualizing both war aims and patriotic service?
3. How can historians analyze these propagandistic images in the effort to reconstruct the actual experiences of women in the revolutionary era?

PRIMARY SOURCES

Phillis Wheatley, Poet and Slave

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN WOMEN left behind far more written material than those in the seventeenth century; we have diaries, letters, essays, and books to help us flesh out the lives of many women, especially educated white women. The experiences of individual black women are far more obscure in the historical record, with the important exception of poet Phillis Wheatley (c. 1753–1784). At age seven or eight, Wheatley, who was probably from the Gambia area of the West Coast of Africa, was brought to Boston as a slave. Her owners, John and Susannah Wheatley, were immediately impressed with her precociousness. "Without any Assistance from School Education, and by only what she was taught in the Family, she, in sixteen Months Times from her Arrival, attained the English Language, to which she was an utter Stranger before, to such a Degree, as to read any, the most difficult Parts of the Sacred Writings, to be the great Astonishment of all who heard her."[54] The Wheatleys, especially Susannah and her daughter Mary, took pride in their slave's learning but also in her quick and deeply felt conversion to Protestantism. Their own evangelical beliefs made them open to the notion of blacks' spiritual equality and led them to encourage Wheatley's religious and intellectual gifts.

Wheatley began writing poetry as early as 1765 and apparently published her first poem in 1767. By 1772, she had attempted, with the help of Susannah Wheatley and other sponsors, to publish a book of collected works in Boston. When that venture failed, she found a publisher in London and had the opportunity to accompany the son of her owner to London, where she was able to complete the arrangements for *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773). At about the same time, her owners granted her freedom.

After the publication of her book, Wheatley continued to write, undeterred by her sadness at the deaths of her former owners, Susannah Wheatley in 1774 and John Wheatley in 1778, or by her own marriage in 1778 to a free black, John Peters. Her poems, such as one in honor of General George Washington, were published individually, but she failed to gain backing for her proposal, printed in the *Evening Post* and *General Advertiser* (1779), in which she described herself as a "female African" who sought subscriptions to print a second book of poems and letters to be dedicated to Benjamin Franklin. Other disappointments followed. Toward the end of her life, she worked as a scrubwoman in a boardinghouse. Two of her children died, and she and her third baby died of complications in childbirth on December 8, 1784.

Because of the profoundly religious content of much of her work, Wheatley's poetry was warmly received by evangelical Protestants, both in England and in America. Apparently some slaveowners read Wheatley's poems to their slaves to encourage their conversion. Opponents of slavery also welcomed the poet's work, viewing her as proof of the humanity and capabilities of Africans.

LETTERS

TWENTY-TWO OF WHEATLEY'S LETTERS have survived. The first one, printed below, is to a black friend, Arbour Tanner, a servant to James Tanner in Newport, Rhode Island, who shared Wheatley's religious ardor. The letter refers to a frequent theme in the poet's work: the conversion of her fellow Africans. What is the purpose of Wheatley's letter to Tanner?

To Arbour Tanner

Boston May 19th 1772

Dear Sister

I rec'd your favour of February 6th for which I give you my sincere thanks, I greatly rejoice with you in that realizing view, and I hope experience, of the Saving change which you So emphatically describe. Happy were it for us if we could arrive to that evangelical Repentance, and the true holiness of heart which you mention. Inexpressibly happy Should we be could we have a due Sense of the Beauties and excellence of the Crucified Saviour. In his Crucifixion may be seen marvellous displays of Grace and Love, Sufficient to draw and invite us to the rich and endless treasures of his mercy, let us rejoice in and adore the wonders of God's infinite Love in bringing us from a land Semblant of darkness itself, and where the divine light of revelation (being obscur'd) is as darkness. Here, the knowledge of the true God and eternal life are made manifest; But there, profound ignorance overshadows the Land, Your observation is true, namely that there was nothing in us to recommend us to God. Many of our fellow creatures are pass'd by, when the bowels of divine love expanded towards us. May this goodness & long Suffering of God lead us to unfeign'd repentance.

It gives me very great pleasure to hear of so many of my Nation, Seeking with eagerness the way to true felicity, O may we all meet at length in that happy mansion. I hope the correspondence between us will continue, (my being much indispos'd this winter past was the reason of my not answering yours before now) which correspondence I hope may have the happy effect of improving our mutual friendship. Till we meet in the regions of consummate blessedness, let us endeavor by the assistance of divine grace, to live the life, and we Shall die the death of the Righteous. May this be our happy case and of those who are travelling to the region of Felicity is the earnest request of your affectionate

Friend & hum. Sert. Phillis Wheatley

SOURCE: Julian D. Mason Jr., ed., *The Poems of Phillis Wheatley* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1989), 190.

THE FOLLOWING LETTER, to Rev. Samson Occom, a Mohegan Indian and Presbyterian minister, was published in the *Connecticut Gazette; and the Universal Intelligencer* on March 11, 1774, and widely reprinted. Written after Wheatley had gained freedom, it is her most critical statement about slavery. What is the essence of her criticism?

To Rev. Samson Occom

Rev'd and honor'd Sir,
I have this Day received your obliging kind Epistle, and am greatly satisfied with your Reasons respecting the Negroes, and think highly reasonable what you offer in Vindication of their natural Rights: Those that invade them cannot be insensible that the divine Light is chasing away the thick Darkness which broods over the Land of Africa; and the Chaos which has reign'd long, is converting into beautiful Order, and [r]eveals more and more clearly the glorious Dispensation of civil and religious Liberty, which are so insep[a]rably united, that there is little or no Enjoyment of one without the other. Otherwise, perhaps, the Israelites had been less solicitous for their Freedom from Egyptian slavery; I do not say they would have been contented without it, by no means, for in every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression and pants for Deliverance; and by the Leave of our modern Egyptians I will assert, that the same Principle lives in us. God grant Deliverance in his own Way and Time and get him honour upon all those whose Avarice impels them to countenance and help forward the Calamities of their fellow Creatures. This desire not for their Hurt, but to convince them of the strange Absurdity of their Conduct whose Words and Actions are so diametrically opposite. How well the Cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the exercise of oppressive Power over others agree, — I humbly think it does not require the Penetration of a Philosopher to determine.

SOURCE: Mason, *Poems of Phillis Wheatley*, 203–4.

POEMS

OVER FIFTY OF WHEATLEY'S POEMS have survived. They encompass a wide range of topics, from elegies to thoughts "On Virtue," from religious commentaries to a patriotic ode to George Washington. Her references to Africa, Africans, and slavery are particularly interesting for the ways in which her poetry insists on the humanity of Africans and makes criticisms — sometimes veiled — of slavery.

On the surface, this 1772 poem seems to adopt white Christians' condescension toward pagan Africans, but what does the final line suggest?

On Being Brought from Africa to America

'Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, *Christians*, Negroes, black as Cain,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

SOURCE: Mason, *Poems of Phillis Wheatley*, 53.

THE FOLLOWING POEM, addressed to the British secretary of state for North America, was written in a period when tensions had eased — temporarily — between the colonies and the mother country, hence Wheatley's statement in the second stanza about grievances being addressed. The poem reveals not only her sensitivity to the political turmoil of the period but also her understanding of the parallels between the colonists' desire to resist British "enslavement" and her own people's experience of slavery. What does she seem to be asking Lord Dartmouth for in the final stanza?

To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth, His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for North America

HAIL, happy day when, smiling like the morn,
Fair *Freedom* rose *New-England* to adorn:
The northern clime beneath her genial ray,
Dartmouth, congratulates thy blissful sway:
Elate with hope her race no longer mourns,
Each soul expands, each grateful bosom burns,
While in thine hand with pleasure we behold
The silken reins, and *Freedom's* charms unfold.
Long lost to realms beneath the northern skies

She shines supreme, while hated *faction* dies:
Soon as appear'd the *Goddess* long desir'd,
Sick at the view, she languish'd and expir'd;
Thus from the splendors of the morning light
The owl in sadness seeks the caves of night.

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

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

For favours past, great Sir, our thanks are due,
And thee we ask thy favours to renew,

SOURCE: Mason, *Poems of Phillis Wheatley*, 82–83.

Since in thy pow'r, as in thy will before,
To sooth the griefs, which thou did'st once
deplore.
May heav'nly grace the sacred sanction give
To all thy works, and thou for ever live
Not only on the wings of fleeting *Fame,*
Though praise immortal crowns the patriot's
name,
But to conduct to heav'ns refulgent fane,
May fiery coursers sweep th' ethereal plain,
And bear thee upwards to that blest abode,
Where, like the prophet, thou shalt find thy God.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. What do these selections of Wheatley's poems and letters reveal about the importance and role of religion in her life?
2. What are the grounds for her criticism of slavery?
3. How might opponents of slavery have used her poetry to criticize the institution?

PRIMARY SOURCES

Education and Republican Motherhood

FOR MUCH OF THE COLONIAL PERIOD, women's opportunities for education were quite limited. A small number of slave women were instructed by benevolent owners, and some Native American women had access to missionary schools where the emphasis was on assimilation rather than education. White women had little formal schooling, and their training usually emphasized domestic skills with a smattering of reading and sums. By the time of the Revolution in New England, 90 percent of white men could write, while fewer than half of white women could.

The Revolution and its aftermath ushered in significant changes. Outside the South, where public schools were rare, primary public education for white women and men became more common. Women's opportunities for higher education—while not universally endorsed—also expanded. While some of the most famous schools, like Philadelphia's Young Ladies Academy, were in urban areas, educational entrepreneurs also established them in small towns such as Litchfield, Connecticut, where Sarah Pierce's school attracted young women from throughout the region, as well as from other states. The Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, Moravian Seminary had special appeal for parents eager to give their daughters a rigorous education; in addition to academic subjects, the school encouraged its students' industry and moral development. While the new schools still offered ornamental skills such as needlework and dancing, they emphasized academic subjects such as history, grammar, geography, logic, and philosophy.

The post-Revolution improvement in white women's education was in part a product of the efforts of reformers, who eagerly promoted the idea that in a republic, all citizens needed education to contribute to the general public good. In keeping with the ideas associated with Republican Motherhood (see pp. 121–22), supporters of women's education argued that mothers needed to be well educated to prepare their children, especially their sons, for their duties as citizens. Advocates also emphasized the importance of women's influence on their husbands. While a number of people participated in the call for expanded opportunities, including Mercy Otis Warren and Sarah Pierce, two of the most significant, whose writings are reproduced here, were Dr. Benjamin Rush and Judith Sargent Murray.

"A PECULIAR MODE OF EDUCATION"

BENJAMIN RUSH SIGNED the Declaration of Independence and was the preeminent physician and medical teacher of the revolutionary era. His essay *Thoughts upon Female Education* reflects both increased expectations as well as the limits to new