

THE ANALYSIS OF RACISM TOWARD AFRICAN–AMERICAN AS SEEN IN SELECTED PHILLIS WHEATLEY’S POEMS

Dyny Wahyu Seputri

Universitas Gadjah Mada

Email: dyny.wahyu.seputri@mail.ugm.ac.id

Iffah Fikzia

Universitas Gadjah Mada

Email: iffahfikzia@mail.ugm.ac.id

Krisna Sujiwa

Universitas Gadjah Mada

Email: krisna.sujiwa@mail.ugm.ac.id

ABSTRACT

The issues of race, racism and discrimination always become the center of the study of the African-American community, for example in literature. An example of African-American Literature that described those things is written by Phillis Wheatley. In her poems that were influenced by the Neoclassicism era, entitled: “On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA” and “To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth”, she delivered the issues of race and racism. This paper aims to analyze racism toward African-America as described in Phillis Wheatley’s poems. The researcher employed a qualitative descriptive method in which the collected data were analyzed, interpreted, and described to answer the objective of the study. The primary data in this undergraduate thesis are two selected poems by Wheatley and the supporting data were taken from books, articles, journals, online sources, and other sources. The researcher applied African-American criticism to answer the objective of the research. The Researchers use three basic tenets of African-American criticism (Everyday Racism, The Social Construction of Race and Voice of color). The findings show Wheatley’s poems portray the life of an African American who experienced racism first-hand. The concept of racism in the two selected poems from Wheatley’s has correlation with 3 concepts of racism of African-American criticism, those are: *Everyday racism, The Social Construction of Race, Voice of color*.

Keywords: *African-American Criticism; Critical Race Theory; Phillis Wheatley; Race; Racism*

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INTRODUCTION

Phillis Wheatley, an important figure in Afro-American literature. Wheatley spent her whole life close to the revolutionary era. She was born around 1753 and came to America in 1761. In the middle of the eighteenth century, a young girl has brought by the traders and became a little girl who was sold as a slave. “She saw her mother in a small village, worshipping the sun at dawn. That was her only memory before the slave traders came, carrying casks of rum. How many casks to buy for a young girl? Not many at all.” (Keteer & Malaspina, 2010, p. 11). Then, the little girl was so young at that time covered by a dirty carpet and caught a woman in a good dress named Susanna Wheatley. Susanna gave her name Phillis after she brought her from the trades.

Although Wheatley spent her day as a slave at Susanna’s house, she got some special spaces that other slave may cannot has that opportunity. She could write in English and Susanna taught her not just English, but Latin, too. She loved every beautiful word and made her poems. “Phillis Wheatkey’s poems were about many things—heroes, hurricanes, God, the ocean, Africa, and freedom.” (Keteer & Malaspina, 2010, p. 16). Her writing is mostly about her experiences, her life, and all of the things she ever heard from the guests at Susanna’s house.

Her poems also describe the condition of the revolutionary period. One of the most popular writings by her is seen in her letter to General Washington. The book, written and illustrated by Keteer & Malaspina, told that Wheatley’s poem for General Washington had a bold impact on him. Not only for that

but the letter also led General Washington to reply and invite Wheatley to meet him. Wheatley was recorded as the first black American poet and writer. Her poems were well known throughout the city, not only because of her poems, but also her book. In 1773 Wheatley’s book entitled *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* was officially published in England. Then, in the same year, Mr. Wheatley set her free.

This paper analyzes two poems written by Phillis Wheatley entitled “On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA” and “To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth”. The first poem was published in London, in 1773 from her poetry collection entitled *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. It is the first collection of poems published by the first African American woman to describe the experiences when she was taken away from her home in Africa to America, to be sold as a slave to white American. Through her poems, she also describes her dreams as a black African American who wanted to be free from Slavery like white Americans who also wanted their freedom from the British.

Wheatley’s poem mostly comes in the era of Neo-Classicism. Neo-classicism refers to the art movement that was inspired by the classical art culture during the ancient Greek and Rome eras. Neoclassical literature emerged at the height of the Enlightenment, which manifested between the late 17th and 18th centuries in Europe (enlightenment era) and spread all over the world, especially in the early 19th century. This art movement also changed cultural, political, and social factors in the Western world.

The Neoclassical style is based on order, symmetry, and simplicity. Neoclassicism embraced all art, including painting, sculpture, decorative arts, theatre, literature, music, and architecture. Styles generally include the use of straight lines, minimal use of color, and form. It can be identified by its simplicity and, of course, its adherence to classical values and techniques. Those things are the key concept of Neo-classical. In his book, entitled: "A History of Literary Criticism: From Plato to the Present (2005)" M. A. R. Habib wrote: "Most fundamentally, neoclassicism comprised a return to the classical models, literary styles, and values of ancient Greek and Roman authors. In this, the neo-classicists were to some extent heirs of the Renaissance humanists." Those Neo-classicists also rejected the dominant styles during the 18th century that were known as Baroque and Rococo. The latter, with its emphasis on asymmetry, bright colors, and ornamentation is typically considered to be "lavish" the direct opposite of simplicity in Neoclassical.

The life of black Americans in this era of literature which is in the neoclassical era especially in the year of Wheatley' life still struggling to fight racism. According to the paper written by Smethurst, over the past two decades studies by such historians as David Roediger, Matthew Jacobson, Theodore Allen, Noel Ignatiev, Eric Lott, and Karen Brodtkin have investigated the complex political, social, and cultural processes by which various groups of immigrants to the United States became "white" through complicated, and sometimes contradictory performances of "whiteness" and "blackness," constituting their class, racial, and national identities as "Americans." At the same time, much of the new scholarship

on slavery in the United States has emphasized the binary relationship of racial classification in which black slavery stood in linked opposition to white freedom – with both categories enabling each other. (Smethurst, 2010)

There, the researchers find that the condition of Black Americans and White has its gap. Not only for the social, political, even cultural but also for the equality for getting all of them were different. Black Americans did not get the same position and opportunities at that time. Hence, as seen from Wheatley' poems and her historical background the researchers find some data that correlated to African-Americans' condition around the late eighteen century.

Those poems were famous in the neoclassical era as quoted from Grey's book, It was with their help that her Poems appeared in 1773 in London, the first volume of poetry known to have been published by an African-American. The Colonial and Revolutionary Periods the neoclassical norms of the time. It also sometimes paints a less than flattering picture of Africa, the land from which Wheatley was snatched when she was still a child (Grey, 2011, p. 76).

Moreover, Wheatley was the first African-American succeeds to publish her literature. a research by MaryCatherine Loving (2015) entitled: "Uncovering Subversion in Phillis Wheatley's Signature Poem: "On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA". Loving analyzes Wheatley's poem by using rhetorics, semiotics, and grammar as reading strategies to find issues such as: slavery, and Christianity. The research above has similarities and differences with research topics. Both research will use selected Wheatley's poem, but the researchers would

like to analyze the influence of neoclassicism in selected Wheatley's poems and how racism toward African-America is described in Wheatley's poems. This research will examine the topic about racism toward African American that is portrayed in Wheatley's selected poem that can be seen in various definitions. The researchers will analyze Wheatley's selected poems using African-American Criticism. According to Tyson, there are six basic tenets of critical race theory. They are:

- *Everyday Racism*, Tyson described as “Many white Americans still think that the word *racism* applies only to very visible forms of racism, for example, physical or verbal attacks against people of colour;
- *Interest Convergence*, Tyson described this by using the definition of Derrick nell. He wrote: “Derrick Bell uses this term to explain that racism is common in our country because it often converges, or overlaps, with the interest—with something needed or desired—of a white individual or group (*Brown v. Board of Education* 20-29). For example, racism is in the financial interest of upper-class whites who exploit black laborers by paying them less than their white counterparts” (Tyson, 2006, p. 371)
- *The Social Construction of Race* defines race as a matter of physical features when the physical differences between light-skinned blacks and dark-skinned whites, race has always been a matter of definition constructed by society for example : during the slavery, people

believe the white race are superior to others. (Tyson, 2006, p. 372-374)

- *Differential Racialization*—Differential racialization refers to the fact that “the dominant society racializes [defines the racial characteristics of] different minority groups [in different ways] at different times, in response to [its] shifting needs. (Tyson, 2006, p. 375)
- *Intersectionality*—No one has a simple, uncomplicated identity based on race alone. Race *intersects* with class, sex, sexual orientation, political orientation, and personal history in forming each person's complex identity. “Everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances” (Tyson, 2006, p. 376)
- *Voice of Color*—Many critical race theorists believe that minority writers and thinkers are generally in a better position than white writers and thinkers to write and speak about race and racism because they experience racism directly. This positionality is called the *voice of color*. (Tyson, 2006, p.377).

Based on the statement above, researchers would like to analyze racism issues in Wheatley's selected poems by using three basic tenets of African-American criticism: *everyday racism, the social construction of race, and the voice of color*.

DISCUSSION

1. Neoclassicism Analysis Toward Phillis Wheatley Poems

Through the poem “On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA”, it can be seen that it is a kind of neoclassicism category

where there are elements that influence the writing style of Wheatley's poetry in that period. First, this poem was written in 1773 when Neoclassicism emerged in America. Second, the characteristic of neoclassicism is depicted in a simple style where the poet clearly expresses her messages without using too much emotion. Third, neoclassicism emphasizes freedom and rejects the dominant theme. It is proven through this poem where Wheatley voices the freedom of blacks in carrying out their daily activities and opposing the existence of differences in the dominance of the white race over blacks. Hence, it can be concluded that the neoclassical period influenced the writing of Wheatley's poetry in voicing issues of resistance.

Moreover, Wheatley wrote her poem based on her historical background which spent her life as a black American and slave who lived with Bostonian white Americans. According to the book Masplain & Keteer, she was growing up slightly different from other slaves during her life. She had the opportunity to learn English, Latin and Greek from Sussana Wheatley. Not only for that but also, she read the poems written by Alexander Pope. There, her poems also slightly have the same stylistic characterization as Pope. (Keteer & Malaspina, 2010, p. 16).

Furthermore, according to the book *Introduction/What is Neoclassicism?* It stated that;

Neoclassicism was a revival of ancient forms and ideas that emerged in late 18th Century Europe and North America. Then, this literature period stood at the centre of humanistic learning, public symbolism, and revolutionary political thought. Also, the literary mostly is

telling about Americans that borrowed and reshaped Roman government and civics in their political self-interest, in the process creating a modern republic. Neoclassicism also is used to describe works of art that are influenced stylistically or thematically by Classical Greek and Roman sources. (Sewall, 2006)

There, neoclassicism has connected with mostly Wheatley's poems. She used her ability for making poems and letters to voice out her feelings and speaks up for her political thought. Moreover, Wheatley as a poet of the neoclassical era also made a poem entitled *To The Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth* for William Legge in October 1772. The poem told about her attention to the colonists that want to separate from the British, about freedom, and humanity. The poem was written by Wheatley and she chose the words wisely for William Legge. Then, quotes from Boren's journal said that

. . . On the surface, for example, what has become Wheatley's representative poem, "On Being Brought From Africa to America," appears to condemn a pagan Africa and does so in neoclassical (educated white) style. . .

Related to the statement, it is proved that Wheatley's literature into neoclassical literature. Then, seen from the letter that she wrote for General Washington, she was trying to create a modern republic and telling him through her poems that Black Americans must be free and get the same equality as white Americans. (Boren, 2004, p. 40).

As a Black writer, Wheatley made the poems to voice up her thoughts as a black America. There are not many African-American that can write, she uses her privilege to describe the condition of African Americans during that time. Hence, the

researchers would like to analyze those two poems written by Wheatley.

Racism toward African American as Seen in Phillis Wheatley's Poems

In this section, the issue of racism against African American can be seen in Wheatley's selected poems titled: "On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA" and "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth". According to Tyson:

Racism refers to the unequal power relations that grow from the socio-political domination of one race by another and that result in systematic discriminatory practices—one has to be in a position of power as a member of the politically dominant group, which in America usually means that one has to be white (Tyson, 2006, p. 360).

From that explanation, racism is an understanding that is here conveyed by justifying inequality against a group in which white race Americans are the exclusive dominant group and feel superior to the minority group of African Americans. Therefore, there are three basic tenets of African-American criticism which will be discussed below.

- **Everyday Racism**

Wheatley's poem appeared since she acknowledges that white Americans still did not consider black Africans as part of American society. In the 1700s, it was a time when Americans wanted to be independent of British rule, but they did not even recognize the freedom Africans and considered them to be "property" as slave because of their black skin. Deborah Kent (2004) even describes that,

In the early 1770s, many people on England and the British colonies had begun to argue that slavery was immoral. Those who favored slavery insisted that Africans were not equal to people of European heritage. They justified slavery by claiming that black people were less intelligent and less capable than whites (p. 24).

It means that everyday racism has become the 'rule' in most of the white American society since they acknowledge blacks are not equal with whites. This can be seen from lines 5 to 6 by saying, "Some view our sable race with scornful eye / Their colour is a diabolic die" (Wheatley, 1773, p. 18)

They looked down on the physique of Africans. White Americans showed their nobility and dignity by understating black Africans as *sable* that is a "small animal with black fur". It can be defined where the word "*sable*" means dark or black and the word choice is used by the poet as an emphasis that black people were considered as pets of white Americans at that time. Another common everyday racist behavior expressed by white people whenever they meet black by rolling their eyes or being *scornful* at blacks since people view blacks as negatively. Those words "*sable race*" and "*scornful eye*" really indicated how white people see African Americans as different or even not human. Those words in Wheatley's poem shows African-American slave as 'other' that rely on their white owner (white European) to live. It also indicated how superior those white people see themselves and often see other races scornful eyes.

Emotionally stressed from trying to cope with being the everyday target of racism, Phillis emphasizes her feelings for whites who give them evil looks by putting quotes

in her lines of poetry. The next stanza in line 6 “*Their colour is a diabolic die,*” indicates the mean look often gets on their skin tone. Although black is just a color, it is also often associated with an evil color in *diabolic* meaning. Also, it refers to ugliness and death as it can be represented in the word “die”. Therefore, through this poem mostly white Americans understand the black race as evil. These stereotypes, definitions, and description toward African-Americans is really common during the slavery era. Racism is one of the reasons why slavery exists at that time.

The Social Construction of Race

Talking about the social construction of race, as Tyson (2006) states:

...the dominant culture claims that “races” are fixed categories. Throughout our history, moreover, many Americans have belonged to more than one race (p. 372-373)

proves most white Americans justify in their mind about the black racial inferiority and the only one who can be a part of American society is the whites. Moreover, Don McLeese (2005) asserted, “*Slaves had to work without being paid and did whatever their white owners told them to do*” (p. 4) means it is explained that there is a social structure by classifying Americans according to race that the white race is more dominant than the black race at that time.

Hence, Wheatley showed that issue through her poem by presenting from the beginning of the first poem that she employs capitalization in the title by writing “*AFRICA to AMERICA*” emphasizing that Africans and Americans should be equal as part of the American society. Moreover, it can be identified that Wheatley acknowledges the

idea of America's superiority over the American black race. However, she rejects the idea of racial categorization by describing it in this poem by capitalizing on AFRICA and AMERICA. The first line of her poem also indicated the same things, Wheatley wrote, “*TWAS mercy brought me from my Pagan land, /Taught my benighted soul to understand*”.

The usage of the words “pagan land” really indicated how racism during colonialism perspective is being constructed and used toward the African Americans during the slavery era. The words “Pagan” according to *Anglican and Episcopal History* is “...by the fact that African people were variously called Pagans, heathens, and savages” (White, 1999, p. 398). Based on that, “pagan” is used to describe African-Americans as a community that is uncivilized and amoral, because they are not Christian. From European or white people's perspective, their religion is seen as the only justified religion. On the other hand, those African-American are described as other or sinner. This perspective is strengthened by the next line, where Wheatley wrote “*Taught my benighted soul to understand*”. This indicated how those white Christian people saw African Americans during that time as sinners whom they needed to convert to Christianity and guided them to the “right path” as they are “other and uncivilized people”.

Voice of Color

Voice of color according to Tyson is the minority writers who can express the issue of racism more clearly by improving their ability to speak and write about racism as they experience racism more directly (Tyson,

2006, p. 377). Also, McLeese (2005) said that most African whether men or women rarely went to school during the period of the revolutionary war. Thus, at that time blacks were considered less intelligent people. As previously explained Wheatley is a slave who gets the opportunity to study, read, and even read the Bible. Even though she gets some special treatment and “privilege” as a slave, she is still part of a black slave who has a white master.

Therefore, she tries to give the color voice of her to tell others about their racial issues which also influences based on her experience as a slave and the understanding she gains while studying. Through her works, she portrays the life of an African American who experienced racism first-hand. It is proven from lines 7 to 8, “Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain / May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train” (Wheatley, 1773, p. 18).

At that time, mostly white masters who owned slaves were American Christians. Since she knows about the dogma of the Christian religion, she emphasizes in the poem the existence of contradictory behaviors between Christian principles and Christian practice. According to the Bible, the first murder was committed by Cain when he killed his brother Abel. After Cain was punished by God for this sin, God showed mercy by giving Cain protection. God placed a “sign” on Cain to warn others who might have motives to harm Cain. By creating an allusion “black as Cain”. Wheatley, drawing a comparison between Africans and Cain, she suggests that Africans deserve the same mercy and forgiveness as what God gave to the first murderer (Spacey, 2020). Because in most white Christian

during that time, they see black people as someone that their sin is unforgivable because they are uncivilized, and even they are converting to Christianity they are still being described as other, especially during the slavery period.

Also, Kent (2004) said that whites justified slavery was the right thing as they even quoted from the Bible to affirm their idea. It could be seen “*black as cain*” emphasizing that Christian slave owners do not acknowledge the remission of sins from the black race even though they have been baptized and still treat the blacks as filled with evil or sin regarding their skin color. Also, the power of baptism to remove sin in “*may be refin’d and join th’ angelic train*” stresses the Christian dogma that blacks and whites in Christianity have equal values in the sight of God. Thus, all Christians should be having the right to live free from slavery and join heaven in “*th’ angelic train*” regardless of skin color and race. As explained in the previous section, the forms of racism against African Americans depicted in the previous poem are racist behavior expressed by white people whenever they meet blacks by giving them an evil look, not considering blacks as part of American society, and describing them as sinners.

In this part, this racism against African Americans can also be found through the poem “*To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth*”. It is known that this poem was written by Wheatley to the Secretary of State of the colony, William Earl of Dartmouth to assist African Americans in achieving their freedom. Hence, the writers would like to analyze

racism issues by using two basic tenets of critical race theory.

Everyday Racism

First, as can be seen from racism theory in the part of *everyday racism*. It may be said that racism has become the 'rule' in most white American societies. It is proven from the first verse that Americans dream of independence from Britain but turn a blind eye since they are blacks to the fact that African Americans also dream of freedom from slavery.

"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: (Wheatley, 1773, p. 73).

From lines 1 and 2 in the first verse, Americans believe the idea of freedom in "*freedom rose in New-England*". Also, lines 2 and line 4 indicate that Americans celebrate Dartmouth as the newly appointed in America since they acknowledge that Dartmouth was a British statesman who defended America. At that time, Americans lived in unrest under British rule from the words "*long lost to realms*", but the arrival of Dartmouth brought a glimmer of hope to liberate themselves from Britain's rule in "*freedom's charms unfold*" as pointed in the first verse, line 8 to 9: "The silken reins, and Freedom's charms unfold. / Long lost to realms beneath the northern skies" (Wheatley, 1773, p. 73). Then, this Wheatley's poem alludes to the fact that although white Americans acknowledge the freedom idea, they still decline the idea of black African American freedom. It is proven from the second verse, lines 15 to 17.

"No more, America, in mournful strain / Of wrongs, and grievance unredress'd

complain, / No longer shalt thou dread the iron chain, (Wheatley, 1773, p. 74).

She states that America will no longer be in the situation of mourning "*strain*" since freedom will be on America's side. Also, America will be freed from the iron chain in line 17 that bound them because of British rule. However, ironically, "*the iron chain*" is still in the life of American society at that time, especially black Americans as slaves to white Americans. Hence, these explanations identify that black people experienced racism at that time through the view that black Americans were not considered part of American society and had no right to their freedom.

The Social Construction of Race

Second, from the racism theory of *the social construction of race*, it is explained that there is a social structure by classifying Americans according to race that the white race is more dominant than the black race. It is presented from the third verse Wheatley lines 20 to 21, "Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song, / Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung (Wheatley, 1773, p. 74)

"*My lord*" is addressed to William Earl of Dartmouth as a white man who has the power to hear her voice in the words of my song. Phillis Wheatley, who represents her nation as part of the black African American race also wants the same freedom as the whites, whose hope is that William can fulfill her dream since he has a position of power. Yet, it emphasizes that the position of the black race in the eyes of white Americans is inferior and unequal to whites and she realizes that William as white will be effective to give freedom to blacks. Hence,

racism can be seen in this second poem where she shows the white American ideal of freedom must also apply to everyone, not just to white Americans.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, through selected Wheatley's Poem entitled "On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA" and "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth", those poem arises because of freedom discrimination where white American want freedom from British rule but they do not consider black Americans as part of the American nation so they behave racist against blacks during that period. It can be seen in various ways. First, Wheatley describes white Americans as considering black with a bad attitude since their skin tone is often associated with an evil color. Whites create a social construction by marginalizing the black skin of African-American no more than as a tool to elevate the image of the white American as a dignified community. Second, whites do not consider black Americans as part of American society for most white Americans are justifying in their mind about black racial inferiority and the only one who can be a part of American society is the whites.

In addition, the issue of racism against African-American as outlined in Wheatley's poetry is still manifested in various ways to this day. This can be found in some popular culture products that increasingly lead one to be clueless that racism is still manifested in white American society. As illustrations, Hollywood movies often pair black actors as thieves or lower-class crime. However, once whites are used as criminal actors, they will be positioned in international crime that

requires a high-level strategy. This shows that racism is still manifested in a refined way which will create society's thought that the whites are still superior and have sharper thinking ability than the less educated blacks.

APPENDIX

On Being Brought from Africa to America

Phillis Wheatley

*'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.*

To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth

Phillis Wheatley

*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,
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 forever live
Not only on the wings of fleeting Fame,
Though praise immortal crowns the patriot's name,
But to conduct to heav'n's 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.*

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