“By her unveil’d each horrid crime appears”

Authorship, Text, and Subtext in Phillis Wheatley’s Variants Poems

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Abstract
In 1773, Phillis Wheatley’s Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral appeared in print. Ever since the publication of her book of neoclassic verse, the African-born poet has been a controversial figure in American History. At the center of the controversy is the question of whether or not the mother of the African American literary tradition criticized slavery. While some scholars have denounced Wheatley for not addressing the institution; others argue that her work represented a subtle critique. Ironically, missing in this discourse are the poet’s diacritical marks that underscores not only the power of words to mean, but also subversive readings—both of which are the focus of this essay.

May 8, 1773, the Boston schooner London pointed its sails eastward and started for London—not surprisingly the English metropolis after which it been named. Although the modest mercantile vessel had crisscrossed the Atlantic many times before, this particular voyage differed from all of the others. Because among the ship’s party of passengers were Nathaniel Wheatley whose father owned the London, and, probably more important, Phillis, the family’s bondservant, whose trip to the urban center marked the beginning of a literary tour that would result in the publication

1. Abridged versions of this paper were presented at The Society for Textual Scholarship’s Fourteenth Biennial International Interdisciplinary Conference on March 19, 2009, New York University, the National Association of African American Studies and Affiliates’ National conference on February 14, 2013, and the 1619: The Making of America conference at Hampton University on September 18, 2014. The author would thank the editor and the readers of Textual Cultures for their helpful suggestions and comments.

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of a volume of the slave-poet’s neo-classical songs. With letters of introduction sent in advance and a farewell poem included with a number of the public notices of her departure, Phillis Wheatley sailed aboard the family-owned boat into history and freedom.²

Ever since that mild September, the African-born poet has been a subject of controversy, particularly among her modern critics.³ At the center of that melee lies the question of whether or not she protested slavery. For critics like Angelene Jamison, Eleanor Smith and Merle A. Richmond, the institution lobotomized the African native and robbed her of her humanity, leaving only an empty shell of a person behind. Dim were her eyes; diminished were her genteel verses of poetry. Wheatley, Jamison explained, “wrote to Whites, for Whites and generally in the Euro-American tradition at the time”. She accepted the values of her captors and embraced the yoke of her unfortunate lot; she expressed nothing of the cruelties of slavery or anything of her African or Black self. J. Saunders Redding agreed. In his To Make A Poet Black, the literary scholar criticized Wheatley’s Poems as artificial in their inability to articulate protest against slavery: “Not once . . . [did] she express in either word or action a thought on the enslavement of her race: not once did she utter a straightforward word for the freedom of the Negro” (Jamison 1974, 408).⁴

James Levernier and Charles Scruggs, however, disagreed, noting in the poet’s work a subtle critique of slavery (Levernier 1981, 25–26; Scruggs 1981, 279–95). Similarly, Mukhtar Ali Isani, John C. Shields, and Babacar M’Baye observed in Wheatley’s writings an acknowledgment of Africa and

2. Robinson, 1984, 12. Shortly after her Poems appeared in print, Phillis Wheatley earned her freedom. In his recent biography of the slave-poet, Vincent Carretta argues that Wheatley used the trip to not only advertise the publication of her Poems, but also, in the wake of the Somerset decision in 1772, to negotiate the terms of her emancipation (Carretta 2011, 128–37). For the advertisements noting her departure, see Massachusetts Gazette and Boston Weekly News Letter (May 6, 1774), 2; Providence Gazette and Country Journal (May 8, 1773), 2; Boston Evening Post (May 10, 1773), 2; Massachusetts Gazette and Boston Post Boy and Advertiser (May 10, 1773), 3; Pennsylvania Packet and General Advertiser (May 13, 1773), 2; Connecticut Courant (May 25, 1773), 4; and, New York Gazette and Weekly Mercury (May 27, 1773), 2.

3. For a thorough account of Wheatley’s contemporary critics, see Robinson 1982. For more recent and revisionist critiques of the poet, see Shields and Lamore 2012.

4. See also Redding 1939, 10; Richmond 1974, 64–66 and Smith 1974, 401–07.
of her African heritage (Ali Isani 1979, 353–72; Shields 1982, 189–205; M’Baye 2009, 21–68). Sondra O’Neale and Lonnell E. Johnson found in her poems an appropriation of the Bible as a meta-text, one she employed to critique slavery and imagine freedom (O’Neale 1986, 144–63; Johnson 1986, 1–30, 55–73). Philip M. Richards and Robert L. Kendrix read her poetry as an expression of an Anglo-American literary idiom (Richards 1992, 163–91; Kendrix 1993, 222–51). In her occasional poems, such as An [sic] Hymn to the Evening and On Virtue, Russell Reising argued that the poet’s use of contrasting colors and metaphors underscored an ambivalence that demonstrated her ability to voice something of the austere life most slaves had no choice but to endure (Reising 1989, 231–61).

Despite her divided critics, all seem to agree on at least one thing. Though the property of another, the poet apparently enjoyed a considerable extent of control over how her writings appeared in print. Purportedly, before leaving, as William H. Robinson and Kirstin Wilcox’s studies have suggested, she revised several of her poems (Robinson 1984, 28–35; Wilcox 1999, 1–31). After the proposal for a Boston publication of her Poems proved unsuccessful, Wheatley made plans to widen her circle of readers. With the help of her mistress, she prepared her book for a London audience. During her stay in England, Wheatley not only promoted Poems, but also interrupted “the printing process” involved in the publication of her work. Before returning to Boston, she improved the printer’s proofs and edited the galley copy. Perhaps because of the novelty of her being a supposedly unlearned Ethiopian learning how to compose verse, Wheatley was able to articulate in manuscript and in print an unusual degree of authorial control (Robinson 1977, 54).

But considering that there is no extant proof copy or manuscript for Wheatley’s Poems on Various Subjects, such claims are problematic. Indeed, taking into account Mark Rose, David S. Shields and Margaret J. M. Ezell’s recent studies of authorship in the early English-speaking world, it seems at best ill-advised to suggest that Phillis Wheatley actually enjoyed such poetic license in the absence of supporting documentation. Thus, the question of her control over her texts is an unresolved matter and one for which this essay proposes as another context to explore Phillis Wheatley’s poetics.5

5. For a fuller account of authorship in the early Anglo-American world, see Rose 1995, Ezell 1999, Shields 2000.
As recent studies of Anglo-American literary culture have demonstrated, well before and even during the advent of modern copyright, specifically the notion of intellectual property in the early 1770s, only a select few authors (e.g. Alexander Pope) had control over what they wrote as printers rushed to print, many times without an author’s consent. Often the road to print was an uncertain one for writers. Early on, most were first manuscript authors who “published” their work by circulating handwritten copies among a small circle of readers. These early avenues of publication were not only commonplace but they also created useful belletristic coteries that could later become equally useful circles of benefactors, patrons and ultimately subscribers. “Possessing fair copies of a writing in an author’s handwriting”, David S. Shields explained, “advertised a personal connection between writer and reader” (Shields, 2000, 438). In both the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries, “scribal publication served the end of personal access to persons with talent, power, and place”. Within these scribal circles or social authorship as Margaret J. M. Ezell described them, an author’s writings were freely copied, edited and revised by others. Such had certainly been the case with authors like Elizabeth Brackley, Jane Cavendish and Anne Bradstreet.

There were also those occasions where an author’s work appeared in print without consent. Richard Marriott and Henry Harringman, for example, stole the manuscript of Henry King’s Poems, Elegies and published it. In an ancillary letter they included in the book, they not only acknowledged the theft, but also offered justification for their transgression: “The best we can say of our selves is, that if we have injured you it is meerly [sic] in your own defense, preventing the present attempts of others, who to their theft would (by their false Copies of these Poems) have added violence, and some way have wounded your reputation” (Ezell 1999, 47). Marriott and Harringman’s disclaimer underscored two significant points. First, both clearly thought themselves members of Henry Kings’ select circle of readers. Second, as part of that coterie, both men freely revised and edited King’s scribal book; indeed to such an extent that they believed that they could discern a true copy from a false one.

Judging from her extant manuscript papers, Phillis Wheatley proved no exception. Like Henry King, her reputation also began by way of scribal or manuscript publication. Of the few Wheatley manuscript poems that

6. For studies about how Pope controlled how his texts appeared in print, see Foxon 1991 and Ezell 1999.
7. Also see Shields 1992, 412–16 and Ezell 1999, 21–60.
have survived, several are multiple copies of particular pieces that were popular among her coterie of readers. Two copies, for example, of the poet’s eulogy of Joseph Sewall have survived. One is at the American Antiquarian Society; the other in the Countess of Huntington Papers at Westminster College in Cambridge, England. Similarly, several manuscript copies of Wheatley’s eulogy to Charles Eliot have also survived.8

Like other authors of her day, Wheatley’s manuscripts also appear to have been freely copied, revised and edited by her admirers. At the Massachusetts Historical Society, for example, there are two copies of Wheatley’s poems, written in a hand other than that of the poet’s. One is a hand written copy of Wheatley’s elegy of Samuel Cooper. In that copy, her name is misspelled. The poem also includes the marginal line numbering used in the printed eight-page funerary pamphlet from which it was apparently copied. The other is a hand written copy of Wheatley’s elegy on the death of Mary Sanford, the second wife of Lieutenant-Governor Andrew Oliver (Mason 1989, 172–74 note 44). Though these are the only known Wheatley poems that has survived in another person’s hand, they nonetheless bolster both Ezell’s and Shield’s assessment of authorship in the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries. (Incidentally, Vincent Carretta has recently discovered in Reverend Jeremy Belknap’s diary a copy of an elegy that might represent the poet’s earliest known verse. Although only a few lines long, it too includes several diacritical marks, much like a number of Wheatley’s manuscript writings [Carretta 2011, 49–50].9)

Remarkable perhaps describes best Wheatley’s literary coterie. Her readers included some of the “most respectable Characters in Boston” (Wheatley 1773, vii). Among them: Thomas Hutchinson, the Governor of Massachusetts, Andrew Oliver, the Lieutenant-Governor and the Honorable Thomas Hubbard, John Erving, James Pitts, Harrison Gray and James Bowdoin. The slave-poet’s list of admirers did not end there. Reverends Charles Chauncy, Mather Bayles, Edward Pemberton, Andre Elliot, Samuel Cooper, Samuel Mather and John Moorhead also counted themselves as members of her literary circle. So did John Hancock, a prominent

8. Wheatley, Phillis, Poems, 1767; 1769. Mss Reserve. American Antiquarian Society. For a facsimile of the other Sewall manuscript, see Robinson 1984, 365–67.

9. If in fact the Thatcher elegy is the work of the slave-poet, it represents not only Wheatley’s earliest known poem, but also the earliest known example of how the poet used diacritical marks (i.e. punctuation, underlining, and brackets) to highlight the power of words to mean.
merchant in the Boston community, as well as a patriot of the budding revolutionary cause. Even the Countess of Huntingdon had been a member (Wheatley 1773, vii).

A distinguished literary figure in her own day, Wheatley may have also counted herself among that exceptional lot of authors who did in fact enjoy a significant degree of control over how their manuscripts were eventually rendered in print. Although the property of another, she was quite artful. Besides manipulating words, Carretta explained, Wheatley manipulated masterfully “people as well” (Carretta 2001, 137). In that respect, most compelling are her extant manuscript poems that included numerous diacritical marks, that is highlighted words, phrases, or symbols that were introduced to punctuate meaning. Of the thirty-eight poems printed in her 1773 book of neoclassic verse, six manuscript poems have survived; fourteen considering those that were omitted. A close reading of them clearly underscores Wheatley’s control over how those particular poems appeared in print, and possibly how Poems on Various Subject, Religious and Moral appeared in print as well.11

10. As both David S. Shield and Margaret Ezell make plan in their studies of authorship in the eighteenth-century, few authors truly enjoyed the degree of poetical license Wheatley possessed that is ironic considering that she represent literally a thing possessed. Wheatley notwithstanding, Alexander Pope, the eighteenth-century poet laureate and master of the heroic couplet, shaped the reception of his works by controlling how they appeared in print. Analyzing both Pope’s manuscripts and his printed works, David Foxon showed that Pope employed accidentals as a method of influencing readership (1991, 196–201). In addition to Pope, a close reading of the manuscript papers and of the printed poems of St. George Tucker illustrate that he too had been responsible for the diacritical marks that appear in the printed versions of his writings. See “Poems” in the Tucker-Coleman Papers held at the College of William and Mary and Tucker 1796, The Probationary Odes of Jonathan Pindar. Philadelphia: Benjamin Franklin Bache.

11. The poems concerned are “To the University of Cambridge” (at the American Antiquarian Society); “To the King’s Most Excellency Majesty, 1768; “The Decease of the Rev’d Dr. Sewell” (at the Huntington Papers at Cheshunt Foundation); “On the Death of the Rev’d Dr. Sewall, 1769 (Massachusetts Historical Society); “A Poems on the Death of Charles Eliot aged 12. Months (Massachusetts Historical Society); “A Poem on the death of Charles Eliot aged 12 mo. To Mr. S Eliot” (Houghton Library, Harvard University); “To the Right Hon. William Earl of Dartmouth, His Majesty’s Secretary of State for North America”
Consider, for instance, the two manuscripts Wheatley wrote to Samuel Eliot, eulogizing his son, Charles. Of the father we know a good deal. Not so of his son, whom we know only through the kind words of Phillis Wheatley. In 1765, to briefly recount the Eliot family’s tragic tale that inspired the poet to write, Samuel Eliot married Elizabeth Barrell, the daughter of Joseph Barrell, “a wealthy and noteworthy Boston citizen, who lived in a grand style” (Bell 1997, 1: 469). Five years later, the couple welcomed an addition to their family. Unfortunately, like many children in the eighteenth-century, Charles did not live to see his majority. He died that October, little over a year old. That September, Wheatley wrote two poems, eulogizing the infant’s death. One copy, she sent to Charles’ father. Shortly thereafter, she revised the piece and sent it to William Barrell by way of John Andrew, an admirer and close friend of the Barrell and Eliot families.

With respect to these two elegies, it is currently believed that Wheatley composed the manuscript at the Houghton Library at Harvard University first. In that copy, she underlined the title of the poem and coupled verses 35–37 with a bracket. She also capitalized the words “Universal”, “Phantom”, “Infant”, and “Glory” in verses 4, 45, 46, and 47. In the second manuscript, now at the Massachusetts Historical Society, Wheatley revised the poem, making several changes in punctuation and phrasing. In the MHS manuscript, she also underlined Charles Eliot’s name in the title of the verse and emphasis the word “GOD” in the second stanza and “Charles” in the third stanza by inscribing them in bold faced characters. As she had done before, she also connected the verses “The Son of bliss. — no with superior air,! Methinks he answers with a Smile severe,/ Thrones and Dominions cannot tempt me there!” together with a bracket.

(Earl of Dartmouth Papers); and, On the Death of Dr. Samuel Marshall (Connecticut Historical Society).

12. For a fuller account Samuel Eliot’s life, see Bell 1997, 469–76.
13. For much of the eighteenth-century, well over half of the children in colonial New England died before they reached adulthood; many died before they were two years old (Vinovskis 1972, 190–92; Wells 1992, 90–97).
14. See Wheatley’s “A Poem on the death of Charles Eliot aged 12 mo. To Mr. S Eliot” (in Robinson 1984, 383–84) and her “A Poem on the Death of Charles Eliot” (dated 1 September 1772 and in Special Collections, Massachusetts Historical Society).
15. Phillis Wheatley, “A Poem on the death of Charles Eliot aged 12 mo. To Mr. S Eliot” in Robinson 1984, 384; Mason 1989, 146–47 note 26.
16. “A Poem on the Death of Charles Eliot”, by Phillis Wheatley, 1 September 1772, Special Collections, Massachusetts Historical Society.
In print, most of these manuscript diacriticals are maintained. “Charles” is italicized in the second stanza and “Phantom” at the very end of the stanza. Verses 35–37 are also connected with a bracket. Not discounting other changes in punctuation, capitalization and phrasing, the manuscript copies differs little from the version printed in Poems. As a matter of fact, a close reading of the three poems suggest that Wheatley more than likely stressed the name of the deceased infant in both of the manuscripts and its printed variant. It is also likely that she was responsible for the other emphasized words and phrases that appeared in published version of the poem.17

Presumably, either before or during her stay in London, Wheatley revised the poem again, making slight changes to the words she wanted to stress, drawing probably on her earlier two manuscripts. That is certainly reasonable to assume if we were to consider seventeenth and eighteenth-century printing manuals that, as a matter of custom, if they were provided with a “Copy perfect”, set names of people and capitalized words in italic. As early as the 1680s, printers were beginning to acknowledge in print the author’s use of diacriticals that functioned as a type of signature, at least for those scribal readers who first enjoyed the author’s work.18

17. According to John Smith’s The Printer’s Grammar, printed in 1755, brackets and/or braces were “used chiefly in Tables of Accounts, and other such-like Matter that consists of a variety of Articles”. Judging from the manuscript of the Sewell verse, it is reasonable to assume that the poet’s use of brackets represents one of those “other such-like Matters” Smith mentioned (127).

18. According to Joseph Moxon’s 1683 manual for printers, a copy perfect is a manuscript submitted by an author that acknowledges the printer instructions with regards to emphasis. Similarly, in their manuals, John Smith and Paul Luckombe also include a set of instructions for authors. Both note that the italicization of names as a common practice, as well as setting an author’s capitalized words in italics (Moxon 1683 [reprint. 1962], 250–51). See also Smith 1755, 12–17 and Luckombe 1771, 234–38, 379. For instructions on setting capitalized words in italics, see Smith 1755, 52–55. There, Smith suggests that publishers often acknowledge those capitalized words in one of several ways. In either case, these accidental were neither import words nor a person’s name. Also, for more instructions to authors about the particulars of wording and punctuation, see Smith 1755, 168, 223, 272–78 and Luckombe 1771, 377–79, 393, 448. For other useful studies of how Wheatley used italics as a form of signature, see Levernier 1981, 25–26 and Scruggs 1995, 177–92. Also see my 1997, 205–08 and 1999, 10–13. Incidentally, on March 12, 1770, the unsigned poem below, elegizing the fallen compatriots of the Boston Massacre, appeared in the Boston Evening Post:
So did Phillis Wheatley review the manuscript copies of her poem before they were typeset? In all likely, she did.19 Had she been made aware of certain practices in the book trade, particularly those regarding authors? Plausible; it is also possible that the slave-poet used her celebrity to encode in her writings a practice she had learned before being brought to America. *Nsibidi*, as Robert Farris Thompson, Grey Gundaker, and others have explained, is a form of graphic system Africans used for communication (Thompson 1984, 227–29 and 244–68; Gundaker 1998, 42–44; 53).

With Fire enwapt, surcharg'd with sudden Death,
Lo, the pois'd Tube convolves its fatal breath!
The flying Ball with heaven-directed Force,
Rids the Spirit of the fallen corse.

Well sated Shades! let no unwomanly Tear
From Pity's Eye, disdain in your honour'd Bier;
Lost to their View, surviving Friends may mourn,
Yet on thy Pile shall Flames celestial burn;
Long as in Freedom's Cause the wise contend,
Dear to your unity shall Fame extend;
While to the World, the letter'd Stone shall tell,
How Caldwell, Attacks, Gray, and Mav'rick fell. (2)

In *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings*, Wheatley-biographer William H. Robinson observed that this anonymous poem resembles, in “style, sentiment, and vocabulary” the works of Phillis Wheatley (1984, 455). According to Robinson, those lines are part of a poem by Wheatley whose title, “On The Affray in King Street, On the Evening of the 5th of March”, appeared in her 1772 proposals for *Poems*. Unfortunately, that poem was not included in her volume of poetry. Considering its subject, it is obvious why the poem had been dropped from Wheatley’s *Poems* that were published in London, England.

I also argued that that unsigned verse is the work of Phillis Wheatley. After comparing the nameless lines to other works written by Wheatley, I observed that the poem is not only similar to Wheatley in its style and diction, but also in its use of diacriticals as a literary device to stress meaning. Moreover, I argued that the diacritics in both the anonymous verse printed in the *Evening Post* and other poems written by Wheatley function as an underlying signature that points to her as its author (Bly 1998, 177–80).

19. While there presently are only nine manuscript poems in Wheatley’s hand, each of them registers by way of punctuation, diction, and emphasis the poet’s intent to invest in certain words and/or phrases at once explicit and implicit meanings.
Besides the Ejagham people and their Cross River neighbors, nsibidi reflects an intersection of orality and early African writing systems. To be certain, as David Dalby’s work on West African scripts demonstrate, the Wolof (the ethnic group to whom many scholars believe Wheatley belonged), Mende, Fula, Yoruba, Vai, Kpelle, Bassa, and other ethnic groups also employed types of nsibidi, well before the trans-Atlantic system brought millions of Africans to the Americas (1967, 1–51; 1968, 156–97; and 1969, 161–91).20

When darkly inscribed, these highlighted symbols or characters magnified even more the power of the word or characters to mean. In an African context, they connected the world of the living to the world of the dead. They transcended the physically boundaries, the secular trapping of the here and now. Considering the account left by Wheatley’s first biographer, Margaret Matilda Odell, one cannot help but wonder about the significance of the slave-poet’s use of such signs. Shortly after she arrived in New England, as the great grandniece of Wheatley’s mistress noted, the young African native “soon gave indications of uncommon intelligence, and was frequently seen endeavoring to make letters upon the wall with a piece of chalk or charcoal” (1834, 10). In those moments, perhaps Wheatley attempted to write something out in Arabic or perhaps she drew upon older traditions.

While we may never know for certain whether or not the poet understood fully eighteenth-century book practices or African customs with regarding to inscribing, one thing is certain. Wheatley’s diacritical marks warrant consideration. In light of her life story, they suggest something more than an obvious acknowledgement of emerging conventions in the art of printing. They also represented something more than an African custom in which highlighted marks and symbols signified text, meaning and status.21 That is to say, particularly when considering her unique African American experience, Wheatley’s nsibidi probably functioned as

20. Many of the indigenous West African scripts Dalby examined emerge in the early nineteenth-century. Older markings clearly preceded these systems hundreds of years.

21. Like most, if not all, colonial African peoples, among the Ibo (modern-day Nigeria) body marks conveyed to the community a sense of belonging and status. In that regard, Olaudah Equiano recalled in the first chapter of his autobiography published in 1789: “My father was one of those elders or chiefs I have spoken of, and was styled Embrench; a term, as I remember, importing the highest distinction, and signifying in our language a mark of grandeur. This mark is conferred on the person entitled to it, by cutting the skin across at the top of the forehead, and drawing it down to the eye-brows; and while it is in this situation applying a
a bridge between Africa and America: bricolage. Most likely they did not wholly reflect one view or the other, but rather both. Aesthetically, Wheatley’s diacritical marks documents one of many expressions of what I will characterize as sass which is an essential element of Afro-Atlantic culture.

A word of West African origin, sass communicates agency. According to Joanne Braxton, sass is associated with Eshu or Elegba, the trickster orisha of the Yoruba religion. Traditionally, in both the West and in Africa, it means talking back; it connotes a form of resistance. In an Afro-Atlantic context, however, sass signifies a great deal more. Although there are indeed similarities between European and African notions of sass, the cultural value of sass from an Afro-Atlantic perspective differs from the European and the African one in that its emphasis is not primarily negative in its connotation. Instead, sass signifies both. It is inherently dualistic, like the trickster Eshu or Brer Rabbit of nineteenth-century African American folklore. All at once, sass is cognitive, pastiche, parody, and dexterity. An overlooked and yet pivotal aesthetic of the Afro-Atlantic world, sass is the palimpsest text upon which Robert Farris Thompson’s aesthetic of the cool or \textit{itutu} is realized. It is the twin of the cool.\footnote{My conceptualization of sass is based in part on Thompson’s work, as well as that of Clifford Geertz’s regarding thin and thick descriptions and deep play. It differs from Braxton’s use of the term which is primarily oral in nature. In other words, although she recognizes the words’ African origins, Braxton’s explanation of the term sass is primarily as a verb: talking back. In my view however, sass is adjective; it is a cognitive aesthetic of pastiche, parody, and critique. Like Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s poem, “We wear the Mask”, sass is a veneer, it is a cover, a facade that “grins and lies” and whose mouth reveals a “myriad subtleties”. Like the hunter mask of the Dogon people of West Africa or Lewis Carroll’s Cheshire cat, sass is deliberately misleading without necessarily appearing cheeky, crude, or subversive. Instead, it is intentionally coded and illusive. Consequently, in Wheatley use of diacritical marks or, in an African sense, \textit{nsibidi}, the slave-poet puts on the mask, or the veil—a term she would deploy in her own work, but not so much as to express impertinence. Freedom or the ability to express herself without restraint is her intent (Thompson 2011; Braxton, 1989, chapter 1, esp. 30–31; and, Geertz 1977, 5–7).}

Before delving further into Wheatley’s use of sass and its underlining meaning, one must first return to the subject of the poet’s elegy about warm hand, and rubbing it until it shrinks up into a thick weal across the lower part of the forehead” (1837, 9, underline emphasis mine).
Charles Eliot and place the manuscript in context. In short, Wheatley’s elegies are written both in the Puritan tradition of the day and a convention of her own design. As Gregory Rigsby explained in his analysis of her elegies within the milieu of the New England elegiac tradition, the slave-poet’s elegies were not conventional. Quite the contrary, hers displayed elements that were more than likely informed both by her African past and her status as a slave.23 In Wheatley’s elegies, for instance, heaven was not the “traditional land of milk and honey, objective and fixed for all alike”. That was the New England mode. Instead, heaven was “the topmost rung of the hierarchical ladder—the seat of the ancestors”. Secondly, in Wheatley’s elegies, the deceased are depicted in flight, betwixt the temporal and the celestial planes rather than already being situated in the afterlife. After their arrival, the African-born poet’s beatific vision of heaven usually emphasized a montage in which music played a central role. In several of her elegies, the native of Gambia described her verses as songs, signifying thus African traditions in which music represented language. Traditionally, by Rigsby’s account, New England elegies stressed sight over sound. Breaking with tradition yet again, Wheatley’s elegies also focused on the celestial life over the temporal world. Considering her plight as a slave, one could argue that the slave-poet welcomed death as it brought an end to her daily labors and marked the beginning of her reunion with her lost loved ones (RIGSBY 1975, 248–57).

Several of these elements are present in both the manuscripts and the printed version of her elegy to Charles Eliot. In the beginning, for instance, the 12-month-old child is described as a winged figure in flight, caught between the earthy and the spiritual planes, or as she eloquently puts it in verses 1–3 of the MHS manuscript: “Thro’ airy realms, he wings his instant flight,/ To purer regions of celestial light;/ Unmov’d he sees unnumber’d systems roll”. Additionally, of the 47 verses that make up the poem; well over half of them involve a grand celestial scene in which the departed child assumes his respective place in the hereafter or as explained in verses 9–12 of the MHS manuscript:

23. Elsewhere, I considered the poet used the eighteenth-century Puritan elegy as a metaphor not only to bemoan the lost of her friends and associates, but to articulate the peculiar space she inhabited as a slave and poet. Like Rigsby, I argued that Wheatley used the elegy as a literacy device in which she imagines freedom. But at the center of my argument is a semantic reading of the poet’s accentuation of the deceased child’s name as a way to achieve two voices at once (BLY 1999, 10–13; 2015, 1–4).
The heav’nly legions, view, with joy unknown,
Press his soft hand, and seat him on the throne,
And smiling, thus: “To this divine abode,
“The seat of Saints, of Angels, and of GOD:

Moreover, after assuming his place in Heaven, Charles is greeted by a chorus of cherubs singing and clapping. Taken as a whole, these elements of Charles’ eulogy color the poet’s memory of definite African customs.

Rigsby’s analysis, however, does not take into account Wheatley’s use of diacritical marks that may have afforded the poet an overlooked occasion to address slavery and her African past. In other words, by stressing Charles’s name, she at once recognizes book traditions and makes a subtle statement. Using the deceased boy as a symbolic veil, she achieved a bolder, second voice. In the middle of the elegiac song, for example, Charles (or should we say Wheatley) looked back and elected to describe the world that s/he left behind as a “rod for horrid crimes I knew”. Considering the fact that the subject of the elegy is a twelve month old child of a well-to-do family, verse 19 seems at best a curious one as it raises the questions of who is actually speaking and whose view of world is being described? The meaning of the verse is further complicated when we take into account that the author of the poem is a slave. In other words, although the reference in both manuscripts copies to the rod could be read as an allusion to the Old Testament, specifically Solomon’s injunction on rearing children, the “horrid crimes” reference is an altogether different matter. Because for Wheatley, the “rod” and “horrid crimes” references may actually represent an autobiographical allusion, albeit veiled, to the beating of Prince, the Wheatley’s domestic who incurred the wrath of his mistress one evening after she observed the saucy slave riding home alongside her beloved protégée after one of her visits with an admirer. This reading is further substantiated if we were to take into account the printed version of the verse that reads: “E’er yet the lash for horrid crimes I felt” (line 19). There, the quotation marks, the pronoun, and verb clearly insert within the verse confusion with respect to voice or at least a level of nuance and ambiguity with regards to whom is speaking. Though Wheatley’s subtle reference to Prince’s beating is not as explicit as that of Frederick Douglass watching his Aunt Hester being whipped or Booker T. Washington witnessing the callous correction of his uncle, it is no less powerful. Like Douglass and Washington, who wrote decades later, Wheatley’s “lash for horrid crimes” reference reveals a common aspect of slave life. Consequently, one can only imagine the pain she must have
“felt” personally, considering that she had caused, albeit unintentionally, Prince to be punished or as Margaret Matilda Odell characterized the matter: “a severe reprimand” (1834, 13).

In last two stanzas of the poem, the poet appears to have afforded herself yet another opportunity to say something about herself. Attempting to console Charles’ parents, she encouraged the couple to focus not on their deceased child’s life while he was alive but on his new life in the blissful hereafter or she as explains in verses 30–31 of the MHS manuscript: “A happier world, and nobler strains belong./ Say would you tear him from the realms above?” Particularly striking within that poetic montage is line forty-one where the poet recounts, in terms of time itself, the infant’s life on earth as being “Twelve moons revolv’d”. Bearing in mind that the source of Charles’ song is an African, this reference to time can in fact be read as an allusion to the poet’s memory of an African custom, specifically the way in which West Africans reckoned the passage of time. Indeed, as A. B. Ellis’ ethnographic studies have demonstrated, most Western Africans discerned time by moons and lunar months (1964, 142–51; 1890, 215–21).24 If not an African retention, Wheatley’s reference to time may reflect the influence of Islam in the western region of the African continent during the eighteenth-century.

Wheatley’s “On the Death of the Rev’d Dr. Sewall” provides us another illustration of how the poet may have not only achieved a less than deferential voice, but also asserted control over how her texts appeared in print: ssc. Joseph Sewall was the son of Samuel Sewall, the celebrated author of the 1700 anti-slavery pamphlet, *The Selling of Joseph*. Like many graduates of Harvard, Sewall became a minister and made a name for himself as an ardent Calvinist and a strong supporter of the patriot cause at the Old South Congregational Church and Meeting House in Boston. But, on 27 June 1769, he died at the rare age of eighty-one. As a member of that church, Phillis Wheatley probably knew Sewall and of his works.

In the manuscript of the Sewall poem, now in the Countess of Huntingdon’s papers in Cambridge, England, Wheatley did not use any accent marks, except for several capitalized words and phrases. But in a second manuscript, now at the American Antiquarian Society, she underlined the title of the poem. Verses 23–25 are connected with a bracket. In the fourth stanza of that manuscript, she set verse 31, “The rocks responsive to the voice, reply’d”, in parenthesis. Not surprisingly, in the AAS manuscript, 24. “A Poem on the Death of Charles Eliot”, by Phillis Wheatley. 1 September 1772, Special Collections, Massachusetts Historical Society.
she maintains many of the diacritical marks in the Huntington manuscript. Indeed, that manuscript also retained the capitalization the words “Saint”, “Spirit”, “God”, “Christ”, “Savior”, “Captive”, “Captivity”, and several others that also appeared in the earlier copy.25

In print, many of those manuscript diacritics were maintained. Sewall’s name, for example, is set in capital letters. A bracket is also inserted next to verses 23–25. Similarly, the words “Saint”, “Spirit”, “God”, “Christ”, “Savior” are either capitalized or set in italics. The verse “The rocks responsive to the voice, reply’d”, however, was dropped when the poem appeared in print. Still, the other diacritical marks suggest that the poet enjoyed a considerable degree control over how the poem appeared in print. What’s more, considering those diacritics, Wheatley appears to have invested within her song for Sewall multiple levels of meaning (Wheatley 1773, 19–21).

Like her song for Charles Eliot, Wheatley’s elegy for Dr. Sewall is an unconventional one, one informed nonetheless by her memory of African traditions. Rather than enumerated the particulars of her subject’s “Swift-pinioned Fame”—the custom of most Puritan elegies—the slave-poet turns her attention instead to otherworldly matters. Following in Wheatley’s elegiac style, Sewall’s journey begins not in heaven, but rapturous purgatory (although brief), or as she penned it in the sixth verse of the AAS manuscript: “The saint ascending to his native Skies”. After his arrival there, the deceased minster assumed his place in heaven among the numbered saints.26

Though Wheatley did not invoke a heavenly choir in her song for Sewall, she does nevertheless include other ambiguous references that all suggest both an awareness of her African past and her slave present. For example, while in Charles’ elegy, the twelve month-old infant takes flight, Sewall appears to have ascended and crossed over a body of water to arrive safely on the “immortal Shore”. Making an allowance for what we know about

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25. “The Decease of the Rev’d Dr. Sewell” in Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings, 365–67; Wheatley, Phillis, Poems, 1767; 1769. Mss Reserve. American Antiquarian Society. In his reading of the Sewall verses, Julian Mason observed that Wheatley was more than likely responsible for several diacritical marks that appear in her printed work. “The brackets”, he noted, “that she put into some of her manuscripts suggest that she also might have been responsible for the frequent use of such bracketing in her [published] book. Mason, however, did not explore the subject further” (1989, 129 note 13).

26. Wheatley, Phillis, Poems, 1767; 1769. Mss Reserve. American Antiquarian Society.
Wheatley’s life before she had been brought from Africa to America, such a reference, particularly her emphasis on the word “Shore” in verse three, might in fact represent a real and/or symbolic return home.²⁷ It may also represent an overlooked characteristic of the slave-poet’s elegiac style. For in many of her elegies, Wheatley often depicted death and spiritual ascension in metaphorical terms in which the winged souls of the deceased journeyed over, across or through water that appears to separate the land of the living from that of the dead. In “To a Gentleman and Lady on the Death of the Lady’s Brother and Sister, and a Child of the Name Avis, Aged One Year”, for example, “Avis”, the only person Wheatley mentions directly by name, takes flight from the “mortal shore” where “Death reigns tyrant”. In “To His Honour the Lieutenant-Governor, On the Death of His Lady”, “Death” carries Mary Sanford Oliver to “th’ immortal coast”. In “To the Honourable T.H. Esq; On the Death of His Daughter”, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Hubbards watch their daughter, “[Thankfull Hubbard] Leonard” ascend to the skies, leaving behind the “earth’s dusky shore”. In “On the Death of a Young Lady of Five Years of Age”, Wheatley consoles “Nancy[s]” bereft parents, reminding them that one day after “sail[ing] through life’s tempestuous sea” they too will join their “happy babe… on the blissful shore”. Equally telling, in her famous elegiac poem to George Whitefield, Wheatley imagines the Reverend “Whitefield… sail[ing] to Zion, through [the] vast seas of day”. In each of these elegies, Sewall’s song notwithstanding, the allusion to crossing over water could be read as a reference to the poet’s education in the classical literature. Just as easily, however, it can also be read as an allusion to her own Middle Passage experience. By highlighting the names of the departed whom she elegizes, their journey becomes hers both spiritually and physically; their familial separation becomes her familial reunification.²⁸

The water reference can also be read as an allusion to her African past. Before being brought to America, she probably learned from her parents the significance of water in their indigenous religious culture. Like most Africans of the Senegambia region, Wheatley probably believed that a body of water divided the land of the living from the land of the dead. The Wolof, as David P. Gamble explained, believed that the spirit (jine) of their ancestors lived either under the sea or in the earth, presumably underneath

²⁷. Wheatley, 1767; 1769.
²⁸. For an insightful account of Phillis Wheatley’s actual Middle Passage, see Carrettà, 2–20.
the sea that lay under the earth (Gamble 1967, 71). Other West Africans also held a similar, if not identical, belief. Either way, considering her background, Wheatley’s water reference does not fit easily within the New England elegiac tradition she wrote in.29

Incidentally, the theme of crossing over water in Wheatley elegies preceded nineteenth-century slave spirituals. Much like the African-born poet’s concealed flight under the veil of the elegiac mode, the slave spirituals demonstrated that antebellum slaves also imagined themselves crossing over water in order to reach Christ and freedom.30 In “Hold Your Light”, they sang of “Canaan’s shore”, while in “O Brother, Don’t Get Weary”, they “landed on Canaan’s shore”. In “Sail, O Believer”, slaves “Sail, Sail, over yonder, And view de promised land” (Allen, et al. 1867, 10, 95, and 24). On other occasions, they described Jesus as a captain of a ship who ferried them over the river, in most cases the Jordan River, to the Promised Land. In “The Old Ship of Zion”, for instance, they sang,

1. What ship is that you’re enlisted upon?
   O glory hallelujah!

29. Incidentally, other West Africans, like the Bambara people of Senegambia, the Tshi or Twi speaking peoples (i.e., Ashanti, Gaman, Akim, Assin, Fanti, Wassaw, Ahanta, Akan, etc.) of the Gold Coast, the Ewe-speaking peoples (i.e., Mahi, Dahomey, Awuna, and the Whydah) of the Slave Coast, and the Edo-speaking peoples (i.e., Itsekiri, Igbo, Igala, Odah, Uhobo, and the Isoko) of the Bight of Biafra, also expressed similar beliefs. So too did the people of Angola who view the world as “two mountains opposed at their bases and separated by the ocean” (Hall 1992, 45–50; Ellis 1970, 150–57 and 1890, 105–108; Bradbury 1964, 53; and Janzen and MacGaffey 1974, 34). Significantly, in the manuscript of her elegy to “General Wooster”, at the Massachusetts Historical Society in the Hugh Upham Clark Papers, Wheatley acknowledged “Gambia” as her home. Taking into account both the poet’s acknowledgement of Gambia and the extant historical record, John C. Shields and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. have postulated that Wheatley more than likely belonged to either the Fulani or the Wolof people (Shields 1978, 43; Gates 2003, 17). For a fuller discussion of water as a symbolic divide between the celestial and temporal planes in the black Diaspora, see Farris 1983, 160; Sobel 1987, 214–25; Gundaker 1998, 44–46; and Bolster 1997, 62–63.

30. Significantly, I am not the first to comment on the similarities between Wheatley’s poems and the nineteen slave spirituals with respect to crossing over water. Although a passing reference at best, R. Lynn Matson made a similar observation (1972, 227).
'Tis the old ship of Zion, hallelujah!
'Tis the old ship of Zion, hallelujah!

2. And who is the Captain of the ship that you’re on?
O glory, etc.
My Saviour is the Captain, hallelujah!

3. Don’t you see that ship a sail-in’,
a sail-in’, a sail-in’,
Don’t you see that ship sail-in’,
Gwine over to the Promised Land. (Allen, et. al. 1867, 102–03)

Like Wheatley’s elegies, nineteen-century allusions toward crossing over water also referenced memories of Africa and reuniting with lost love ones.

Returning to the poet’s song for Sewall, her lament that “we shall hear thy warning voice no more” might represent yet another veiled reference. Although Sewall had garnered something of a reputation for himself as a deeply pious man who preached repentance, he toiled nonetheless in the shadow of his larger-than-life father whose pamphlet, The Selling of Joseph, denounced the institution of slavery and, in so doing, stirred the passions of a divided public. Indeed, throughout Boston, Sewall’s booklet inspired intense debate, as it challenged then popular rationales for the enslavement of Africans. “These Ethiopians”, he exclaimed in print, “as black as they are; seeing they are the Sons and Daughters of the First Adam, the Brethren and Sisters of the Last ADAM, and the Offspring of GOD; They ought to be treated with a Respect agreeable” (Sewell 1700, 3). In his mind, for men “to persist in holding their Neighbours [sic] and Brethren under the Rigor of perpetual Bondage, seems to be no proper way of gaining Assurance that God ha’s [sic] given them Spiritual Freedom”. At once concise and bold, Sewall’s leaflet stirred a rigorous debate about slavery. It seems unlikely that African-born poet did not know of Sewall’s public lament on behalf of African Americans. As a result, her “warning voice no more” reference may in fact pay homage to both the father and the son at the same time. In verses 23–30, she embellishes the matter even further when she observes in the AAS manuscript:

“Sewall is dead”. Swift pinion’d fame thus cry’d
Is Sewall dead? my trembling heart reply’d.
O what a blessing in thy flight deny’d
But when our Jesus had ascended high,
With Captive bands he led Captivity;
And gifts receiv’d for such as knew not God
Lord! Send a Pastor, for thy Church’s [good]
O ruin’d world! bereft of thee, we cry’d,

There Wheatley reference to Sewall’s “Swift pinion’d fame” may actually speak more of the renown of the father than the son. Furthermore, considering the father’s work on behalf of the enslaved, one can better understand why the poet’s heart trembled at the thought of his death.31

Wheatley’s poem to the Earl of Dartmouth may also demonstrate her ability to control her texts and voice. Ironically, the poem was written to dissuade a critic who questioned her assertion of authorship. After reading several poems ascribed to Phillis Wheatley, Thomas Wooldridge, an English functionary and representative of the Earl of Dartmouth, went to her master’s house and requested a verse of the slave-poet — that his doubts may be removed. That day however Wheatley was unable to receive guests. At the time engaged, she suggested to Wooldridge a meeting for that following morning. As proof of her talent, she proposed that he select a subject for a verse. Being an official of the Earl, Wooldridge chose understandably the Earl of Dartmouth. The following day, in his presence, Wheatley wrote “To the Right Hon. William, Earl of Dartmouth” (Wheatley, 1773h).

Months later, not long after she had left for her London tour, the New York Journal published the poem. Appended to the piece is an explanatory note, describing the impromptu nature in which the poem had been composed. A close reading of the original manuscript, now in the Dartmouth papers at the Staffordshire Records Office in Stafford, England, and its variant published in the New York Journal, again underscores the poet’s command over how her works appeared in print. In the manuscript, Wheatley incorporated several diacritical marks. Throughout the poem, she capitalized of the words “Freedom”, “Faction”, “Tyranny”, “Speech”, and “Race”. She also placed the verse “Immortal Honours [sic] grace the Patriot’s names” in parenthesis. Most of these were maintained in the version of the poem that appeared in New York Journal, not to mention she included several new ones. “Freedom”, for example, is italicized in verses two and eight, “Faction” in verse ten, and “Liberty” in verse sixteen. “That” is italicized in verse thirty-three. “GOD” is set in capitalized letters in the forty-eighth verse of the poem, and, equally significant, verse forty-four,

31. Wheatley, Phillis, Poems, 1767; 1769. Mss Reserve. American Antiquarian Society.
“Immortal Honours [sic] Grace the Patriot’s Names”, is set in parenthesis (Wheatley, 1773h).

But most notably in the Dartmouth manuscript, Wheatley capitalized the words “Freedom”, “Tyranny”, and “Faction”. As a matter of custom, printers were already beginning to maintain those diacritical marks in print. Then, such marks represented not only signs of authorship, but also creativity and nuance. On other occasions, however, publishers also set those emphatic words in italic. Taken in this context, one can argue that was the case with the printed variant of Wheatley’s manuscript. In the poem printed in the New York Journal, those words are indeed set in italic. In Poems on Various Subjects, those same words are again set in italic as both printers probably assumed (and understandably so) that the emphasis belonged to the author.

On one level, “Freedom”, “Tyranny”, and “faction” can be read as an accent of Wheatley’s perception, albeit misplaced in retrospect, of the Earl of Dartmouth, as an emissary of colonial freedom. On another level, those same diacritics can be read as saying something, however subtle, of the burgeoning Revolution, its ideas of natural rights and liberty, and possibly even something with regards to the paradox many slave-holding colonists found themselves. In other words, by stressing “Freedom”, “Tyranny”, and “faction”, the poet makes a definite comment on the precarious nature of being not only a slave and a poet, occupations that appears on the surface antithetical to one another, but also a bondservant at a time when slave-holders were equating (hypocritically one might add) themselves to slaves of the King (Wheatley, 1773h).32

The manuscript of Wheatley’s Cambridge poem, now at the American Antiquarian Society, also suggests that the poet shaped how her text appeared in print. “To the University of Cambridge, Wrote in 1767” is an artful scolding of the overexcited students of Harvard College who in 1766 “generated a publicized commotion over being served bad butter in their commons”. An “intricate collage of contrasting ideas and metaphors”, the poem includes a number of diacritics that demonstrate not only the poet’s control over the text, but also multiple levels of meaning (Robinson 1984, 354; Bly 1997, 205). In the first stanza, for example, Wheatley’s capitalization of the phrases “native Shore”, “sable Land”, and “Powerfull hand” in verses three, four, and six paints a portrait of a gratified slave whose tragic

32. For a fuller account of colonial Americans’ symbolic appropriation of slavery during the American Revolution, see Okoye 1980.
past offers her a unique moment to admonish Boston’s “Bright youths”.33 Those diacritical marks also paints a different portrait, a cold, heartless one in which the “Powerfull hand” of the Transatlantic slave trade ripped the slave-poet from her family, her parents, her “native Shore”. In the third stanza, her shrewd reprimand builds. Amidst their studies of “the ethereal Space” and “glorious Systems of revolving worlds”, Wheatley advises, almost in mocking fashion, “ye Sons of Science” to remember Christ’s sacrifice that in her view made possible their studies at the College. For that reason, she capitalizes the phrases “Savior’s blood”, “Redemption flows”, “S[ee] Him”, “the Cross”, “Condescention in the Son of God”, and “deign’d to Die” in verses fourteen, fifteen, eighteen, and twenty. Here, the poet’s emphasis can be read in multiple ways. On one level, they function as a mild rebuke. On another level, however, such diacritics serve as a shrewd contrast, one of which makes the young men’s actions appear small and self-serving. In its ability to rebuke without necessarily appearing rebuking, Wheatley’s verse documents an articulation of the aesthetic of sass (Wheatley, 1767, 1769).

Her lecture to the boisterous boys reaches its climax in the fourth and final stanza where she not only instructs them to “Suppress the sable monster in its growth”, but also reminds the privileged lot that “An Ethiop tells you, tis your greatest foe”. On literal level, Wheatley reaffirms her didactic stance by using her race as a symbolic shield against potential criticism. On a symbolic level, however, Wheatley’s “sable monster” reference coupled with her earlier reference to the “Powerfull hand” and verse seven underscore a rather stinging condemnation of the institution of slavery which “Brought [her] in Safety from the dark abode” (Wheatley, 1767, 1769). Perhaps reflecting on her own passage from Africa to America, Wheatley’s stress of the word “Safely” in verse seven demonstrates that her passage was far from being a safe one. As the subtext of her poem to the Harvard students, Wheatley’s sable reference cast the young men in perhaps the worse light. That is to say, in a world where slaves and indentured servitudes made up well over half of the population, and many of that unfortunate lot found themselves ill-used by their masters, the students of the College can find nothing better to do with their time than to complain about butter.34

33. “To the University of Cambridge, Wrote in 1767”, American Antiquarian Society, Stanza 8, Verse 8.
34. For a useful study of slavery and unfreedom or indentured servitude in early America, see Fogleman 1998. Also see the “Introduction” to Bly and Haygood 2014 for an account of the abuses of servants.
Possibly anticipating her critics, Wheatley revised the poem. Like the Dartmouth verse, she changed almost every line. Compared to the Cambridge poem printed in her Poems on Various Subjects, that manuscript contains over two dozen changes in capitalization and over a dozen changes in punctuation. In the printed version of the poem, one verse was omitted from the first stanza. Another was excluded from the second.

But perhaps the most striking revision can be found in the twenty-eighth verse of the third stanza of the Cambridge manuscript. There, the poet cautioned the Harvard students to guard against the debauching character of sin, instructing them to “Suppress the sable monster in its growth”. In print, Wheatley would rewrite the verse, advising them instead to “Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg”. Revised, the metaphor of the “deadly serpent” represented an allusion to the biblical story of Adam and Eve and their fall from Eden. On a literal level, the Cambridge verse can be read as a type of jeremiad that admonishes the students for their boisterous reputation. By revising the verse, she transforms the piece into a type of parable (Wheatley 1767, 1769; 1773, 15–16).

R. Lynn Matson however, offered a different explanation for her revision. In “Phillis Wheatley—Soul Sister”, he argued that the manuscript’s metaphor of the steadily growing “sable monster”, as opposed to the “deadly serpent” that appears in Poems, represented too blatant a reference to slavery to be maintained in print. By changing “sable monster” to “deadly serpent”, Matson argued that the poet substituted the defiant spirit of the manuscript with a theological milieu (Matson 1972, 229). In a similar vein, Kirstin Wilcox also held that in an effort to market Poems to a broader audience, Wheatley, at the behest of her mistress and her transatlantic circle of supporters, omitted those poems that stressed or directly dealt with the issues of race and slavery (Wilcox 1999, 16–26).

Other poems she simply revised. While the race-conscious and unapologetic authority Wheatley assumed as an “Ethiopian” in “An Address to the Deist” and “An Address to the Atheist” more than likely lead to those poems being dropped from her book altogether, the diminutive “Ethiop” persona the poet assumed in the printed Cambridge poem used race as a means to authenticate her didactic stance toward the Harvard students. There, the “sable monster” reference is rewritten as the “deadly serpent” in print to de-emphasis race and the authoritative tone of the original manuscript. Either way, judging from the AAS manuscript and the version of the Cambridge poem printed in her book, it is nonetheless reasonable to assume that Phillis Wheatley not only revised the manuscript, but also included the italics in print as a literary strategy to accentuate her position.
as an “Ethiop” whose “race” blessed her with the tragic vision of “sin”, or as she eloquently puts it in the first stanza of the poem:

’Twas not long since I left my native shore
The land of errors, and Egyptian gloom:
Father of mercy, ’twas thy gracious hand
Brought me in safety from those dark abodes.

In this context, the revision of the Cambridge poem registered a moment in which Wheatley determined how her work would appear in print—possibly to placate the fancies of her trans-Atlantic public and thus ensure for herself a wider audience. In the printed version of the poem, she elected to remove the capital letters from phrases like “Land of Errors”, “Sons of Science”, “Redemption flow”, and several others to downplay the stinging tone of the original manuscript (Balkun 2002, 121–35; Wheatley, 1767; 1769).

However, using italics, the poet also appears to have retained something of the defiant tone of the original manuscript. In the above stanza, for example, Wheatley’s emphasis of the phrase “Egyptian gloom” might actually suggest otherwise of her native land. Furthermore, her italicization of “Jesus” in the second stanza of the printed poem and “Ethiop” in the last stanza reveals a haughty, perhaps self-righteous, moment on the part of the poet who had to have known of Simon of Cyrene, an African, who carried the cross part of the way for Jesus. Consequently, considering her education in classical authors, “Ethiop” simply meant black, as it was a popular name for Africans in general.

Significantly, those manuscripts dropped from Phillis Wheatley’s Poems on Various Subjects offer even stronger evidence that the poet’s control over her text. In the “Address to the Atheist”, now at the Massachusetts Historical Society, she underscored the words “greatest” and “minutest” in verse eight, the phrase “Corner stone” in verse twenty-six, and correspondingly the names of the Greek gods “Apollo”, “Minerva”, “Pluto”, and “Cupid” in verses forty-two, forty-four, forty-five, and forty-seven. There, Wheatley’s accentuation of the names of these deities represented yet another point in which the poet’s expression of creativity intersected the emerging conventions of eighteenth-century print culture. Again, as a general rule in print, printers often typeset unfamiliar, foreign, and import words in italic (Smith 1755, 213; Luckombe 1771, 386). One could argue, however, that Wheatley’s manuscript, in particular her diacritical marks,
warrants multiple, perhaps subversive, readings of the poem. These marks clearly demonstrate that she wanted to stress those words in print, complicating thus tradition: sss. Similarly, in her “An Address to the Deist”, also at the Massachusetts Historical Society, she underscored the words “Eternal” in verse seven and “Day” in verse twenty-two. Had these poems been revised and included as a part of Poems, it is likely they would have in italicized in print.35

Ultimately, the diacritical or nsibidi marks that appear in her extant manuscripts and their published variants clearly demonstrate that Phillis Wheatley did in all likelihood enjoy a considerable degree of control over how those particular texts appeared in print. Under the sable veil of the elegiac mode, for example, the slave-poet achieved at once two different voices and revealed two distinctly different stories when she took up her pen to remember and honor the dead. The first of course pertained to the deceased subject at hand who as fate would have it would inspire her to write. The second story however was her very own. In short, Wheatley’s use of emphasis documents in print articulations of the aesthetic of sss where she managed simultaneously to critique without necessarily being overtly criticizing or damning. Like an African mask, her use of emphasis grinned and smiled, concealing all a while a pen of myriad subtleties. Considering her writings, however, Wheatley probably preferred the use of a veil as a more proper metaphor.36

Either way, death was a constant reminder to the poet of the life she had lost, a life lost by no fault of her own choosing. Arguably death was an obsession of hers. She wrote about it all the time. It haunted her. It followed her across the Atlantic. According Margaret Matilda Odell, death reminded the poet of the gentle and loving countenance of her mother. “She does not seem to have preserved any remembrance of the place of her nativity”, she explained in her memoir of the poet, “or of her parents,

35. Phillis Wheatley, “An Address to the Atheist,” Robie-Sewall Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society; Wheatley, An Address to the Deist,” Robie-Sewall Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.
36. Long before W.E.B. DuBois would invoke the veil as a metaphor to characterize the African American experience in the United States, Wheatley’s use of the term registers perhaps the earliest example of the concept of double consciousness.
excepting the simple circumstance that her mother *poured out water before the sun at his rising*—in reference, no doubt, to an ancient African custom”. (Odell 1834, 10; Bly 1999, 10).

The subject of death probably offered Wheatley some solace in what must have been an otherwise lonely life. Of the thirty-nine poems in her historic volume of poetry, nearly half of them are elegies. Contrary to the claims of some of the poet’s critics, Phillis Wheatley remembered Africa; she remembered her African homeland; she remembered them all the time and all too well as the Puritan elegiac mode and her use of diacritical marks gave her numerous opportunities to reflect. Whatever their meanings, explicit and otherwise, Wheatley’s *nsibidi*, those connecting symbols, enclosing signs, and slanted characters all emphasize the word’s power to mean, for meaning is implicit in their very design or as D. F. McKenzie observed: “form affects meaning”. As such, therein is the new challenge to the poet’s modern critics: the challenge of explicating “each horrid crime” she used to “unveil” otherwise unspeakable things artful spoken. (McKenzie 1999, 13; Wheatley, 1773, 90).

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37. Odell’s comment undoubtedly references libation and ancestral worship.
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