

To the University of Cambridge, in New England



A Prospect of the Colleges in Cambridge in New England

**While an intrinsic ardor prompts to write,
The muses promise to assist my pen;
'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.**

**Students, to you 'tis giv'n to scan the heights
Above, to traverse the ethereal space,
And mark the systems of revolving worlds.**

To the University of Cambridge (contd.)

Still more, ye sons of science ye receive
The blissful news by messengers from
heav'n,
How Jesus' blood for your redemption
flows.
See him with hands out-stretcht upon the
cross;
Immense compassion in his bosom glows;
He hears revilers, nor resents their scorn:
What matchless mercy in the Son of God!
When the whole human race by sin had
fall'n,
He deign'd to die that they might rise
again,
And share with him in the sublimest skies,
Life without death, and glory without end.

Improve your privileges while they stay,
Ye pupils, and each hour redeem, that
bears
Or good or bad report of you to heav'n.
Let sin, that baneful evil to the soul,
By you be shun'd, nor once remit your
guard;
Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg.
Ye blooming plants of human race
divine,
An Ethiop tells you 'tis your greatest foe;
Its transient sweetness turns to endless
pain,
And in immense perdition sinks the soul.



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- **A unique poem** in her poetry book: it adopts an irregular metrical scheme with rhymes to connect ideas such as “flow” and “glow” and alliteration “deign’d to die” for rhythm.
- **A poem of paradoxes and contrasts;** she acknowledges her “pagan” past but also points to Christians who enslave others with deep irony. Are they free of sin? and will they be redeemed?
- **A poem depicting tensions and possibilities:** she places her difference as an “Ethiop” and an “Afric” at the center of the poem and still claims the right to write poetry as an “intrinsic” talent.

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- **A poem about the value of knowledge & learning:** she asks students who have been given the opportunity to learn (at Harvard) and scan “the heights of knowledge,” to improve on their privilege and embrace divinity in ways that she cannot.
 - **A poem of courage:** she disagrees with the premise that the enslaved do not deserve mercy.
 - **Historical question:** should the enslaved who have embraced Christianity be free?

Context: “Somerset vs Stewart,” Court case in Great Britain, 1772

Primary Historical Document that can be paired with Wheatley Peters’ poems

- **Central Question of the case:** can enslaved persons (in this case James Somerset) on English soil be forcibly removed and sent back to their enslaver (Charles Stewart) and enslavement?
- The judge, **Lord Mansfield’s judgement** and decree by the English Court of King on 22 June 1772, stated categorically-NO “*The state of slavery is of such a nature that it is incapable of being introduced on any reasons, moral or political, but only by **positive law**, which preserves its force long after the reasons, occasions, and time itself from whence it was created, is erased from memory. It is so odious, that nothing can be suffered to support it, but positive law. Whatever inconveniences, therefore, may follow from the decision, I cannot say this case is allowed or approved by the law of England; and therefore the black must be discharged.*”
- **Wheatley Peters emphasizes the value of knowledge:** in this poem she writes about Christianity, redemption, enslavement, the authority to write, and to be considered a poet with great “pluck” & force.