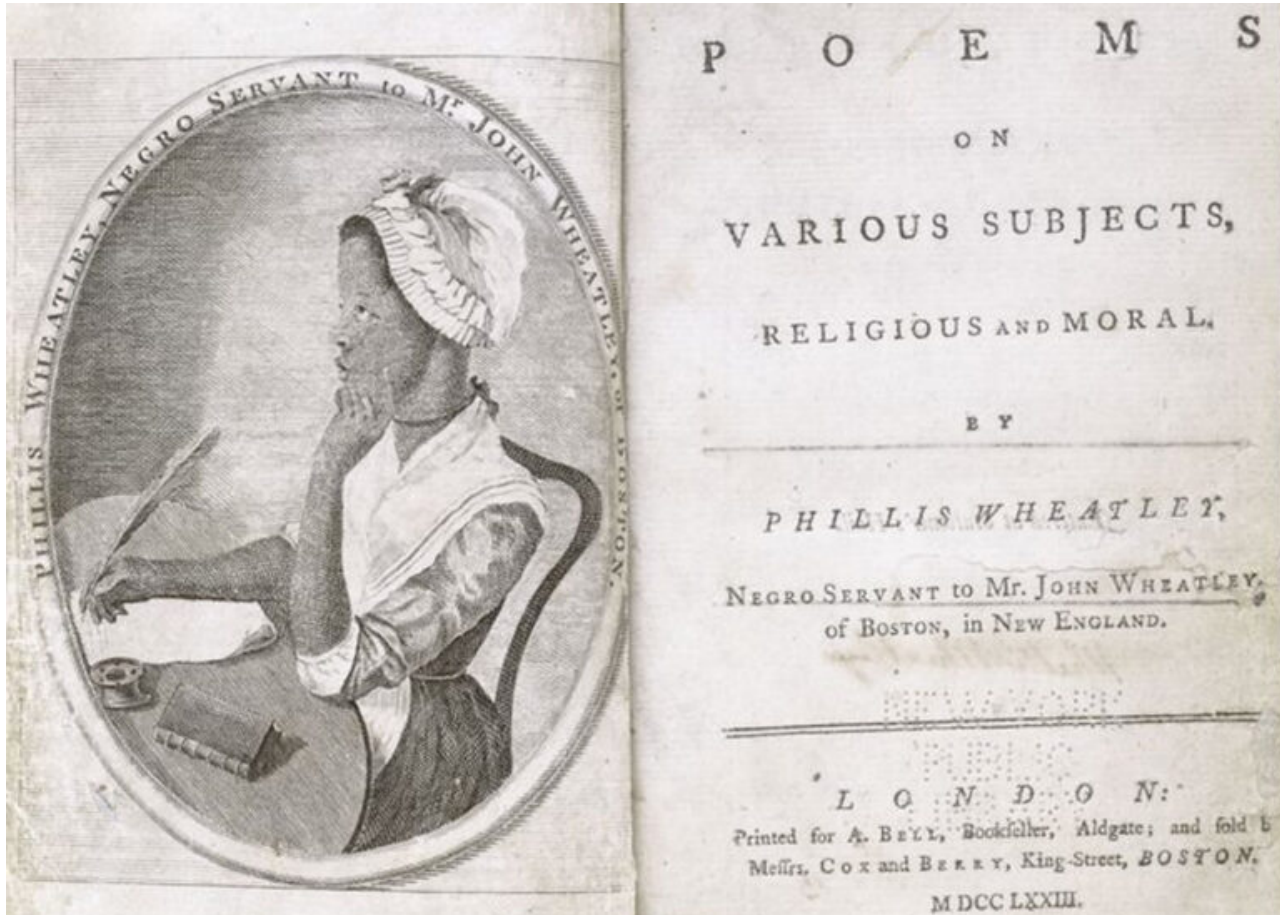


Phillis Wheatley's "Mrs. W-": Identifying the Woman Who Inspired "Ode to Neptune"



"Ode to Neptune" first appeared in Phillis Wheatley's 1773 collection *Poems on Various Subjects*, never having been printed in Boston newspapers or broadsides. Its subtitle, "On Mrs. W-'s Voyage to England," has attracted speculation: Who was that traveler? And what did she signify to the poet?

"Ode to Neptune" offers a few clues to "Mrs. W-," starting of course with the facts that her last initial was W, she was almost certainly married, and she was preparing to sail to England. The first verse reveals the woman's first name:

While raging tempests shake the shore,
While Æ'lus' thunders round us roar,
And sweep impetuous o'er the plain
Be still, O tyrant of the main;
Nor let thy brow contracted frowns betray,
While my *Susannah* skims the wat'ry way.

Finally, the published poem carried the dateline "Boston, October 10, 1772."

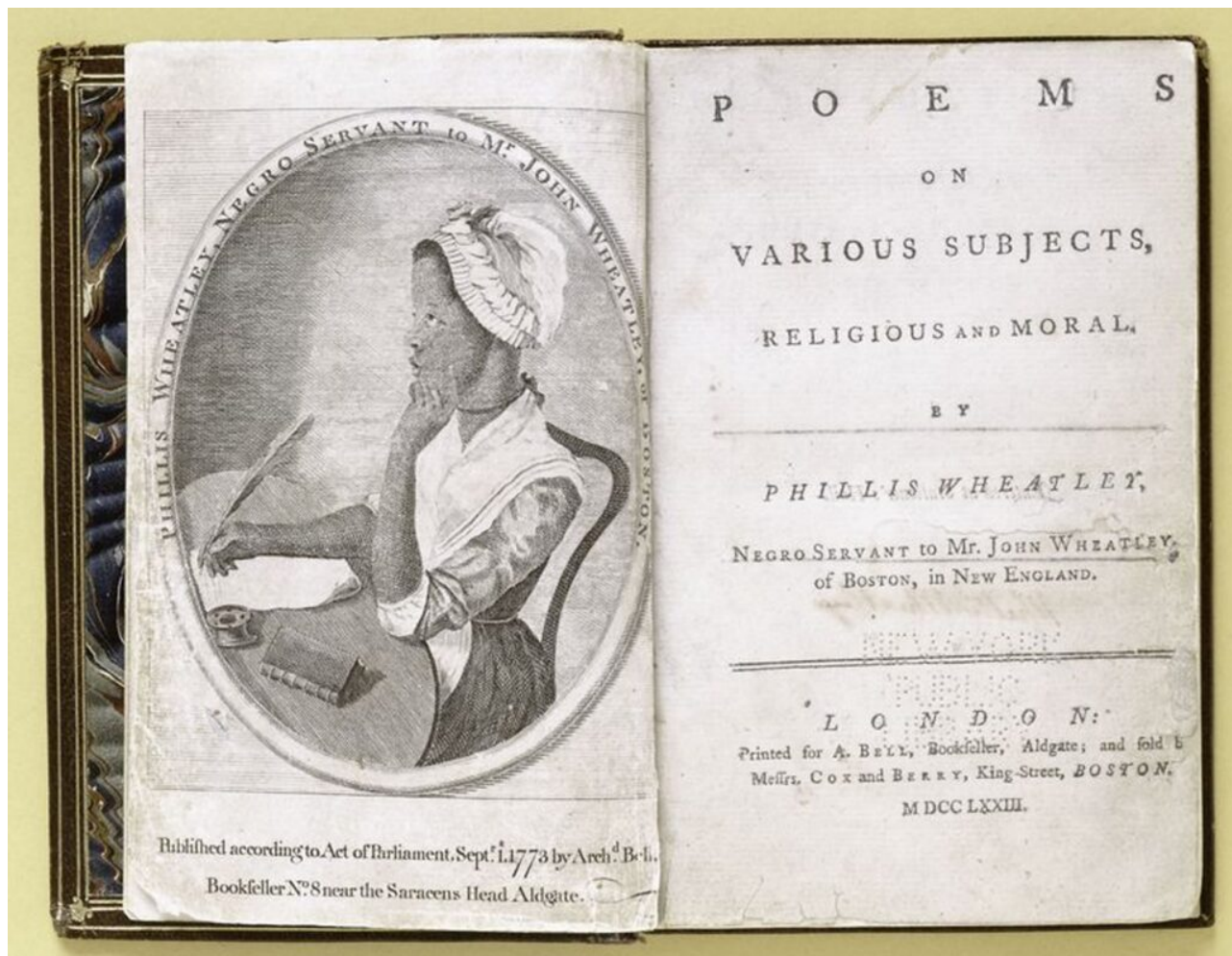


Figure 1: Frontispiece portrait and title page of Phillis Wheatley's 1773 collection of poetry. Public domain, scan by the New York Public Library, [Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division](#).

Many people have guessed that Wheatley wrote this ode for the woman who had raised her from childhood as a slave, Susannah Wheatley. Yet Susannah Wheatley never crossed the Atlantic. The poet addressed her mistress in another poem titled "A Farewel to America. To Mrs. S. W," but that was in May 1773 when Phillis was about to sail to London while Susannah stayed behind in Boston.

Other identifications of "Mrs. W-" are based on early notes in a copy of Wheatley's 1773 book at the American Antiquarian Society. Beside "A Farewel to America" someone penned, "Mrs. Susannah Wright," and then a different someone penciled, "eminent for her Wax Works etc." Since the "Farewel" poem is addressed to Susannah Wheatley, some scholars guessed that those notes were actually intended for "Ode to Neptune." However, no one has found a "Susannah Wright" who traveled to England in late 1772, and the eminent waxworks artist was named Patience Wright.

The key to identifying "Mrs. W—" lies in its connection to three other texts linked to Wheatley and also dated October 10, 1772. Those are her poem "To the Earl of Dartmouth," the secretary of state overseeing the North American colonies; her letter to that peer; and a short biography of her, all transmitted to Lord Dartmouth by a British merchant and officeholder named Thomas Wooldridge. In a November 24 letter Wooldridge described his interaction with the young poet:

While in Boston, I heard of a very extraordinary female slave, who had made some verses on our mutually dear deceased Friend [Rev. [George Whitefield](#)]; I visited her mistress, and found by conversing with the African, that she was no Impostor: I asked if she could write on any Subject; she said Yes; we had just heard of your Lordship's appointment; I gave her your name, which she was acquainted with. She immediately wrote a rough Copy of the inclosed Address & Letter, which I promised to convey or deliver.

I was astonish'd, and could hardly believe my own Eyes. I was present while she wrote and can attest that it is her own production; she shew'd me her Letter to [Lady Huntingdon](#), which I daresay, Your Lordship has seen; I send you an account signed by her master of her Importation, Education &c. they are all wrote in her own hand.

He was at one period regarded as a mouth-piece to the City, and if he had possessed capacity equal to his effrontery, it is probable he would have made a considerable figure. Impudence made him, and caused him to be unmade, an Alderman; but he had no talents beyond those that commonly fall to the lot of Aldermen.

JOHN

Figure 2: Catty description of Alderman Thomas Wooldridge from *City Biography, Containing Anecdotes and Memoirs of the Rise, Progress, Situation, & Character, of the Alderman and Other Conspicuous Personages of the Corporation and City of London*, second edition (London: Printed for the Author, 1800), 115, digital image, [Google Books](#), via HathiTrust, Princeton University.

Another description of Wooldridge's meeting with Wheatley appeared in the June 3, 1773, *New-York Journal*, clearly either based on a conversation with the merchant or written by him:

A Gentleman who had seen several of the Pieces ascribed to her, thought them so much superior to her Situation, and Opportunities of Knowledge, that he doubted their being genuine—And in order to be satisfied, went to her Master's House, told his Doubts, and to remove them, desired that she would write something before him. She told him she was then busy and engaged for the Day, but if he would propose a Subject, and call in the Morning, she would endeavour to satisfy him. Accordingly, he gave for a Subject, *The Earl of Dartmouth*, and calling the next Morning, she wrote in his Presence, as follows . . .

The newspaper then printed Wheatley's October 10, 1772, letter to Lord Dartmouth, followed by her poem for him.



Figure 3: William Legge, second Earl of Dartmouth and Secretary of State for the Colonies from 1772 to 1775. Public domain, scan by the New York Public Library, [Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs](#).

Thomas Wooldridge's wife was named Susanna. On July 12, 1773, the *New-York Gazette* reported that "Thomas Woolridge, Esq; and his Lady" had embarked for England, just as the poem's "Mrs. W—" had been preparing to do. We can therefore conclude that Susanna Wooldridge was the inspiration for "Ode to Neptune." It is not clear whether Mrs. Wooldridge was present in Boston. Wheatley may well have written this poem for a lady she had never met as a unique souvenir for her husband to bring home from his Massachusetts trip.

In October 1772, the Wooldridges had been married a little over a year. Susanna, Thomas's second wife, was a daughter of the merchant William Kelly, then living in the newly fashionable London neighborhood of Crutched Friars. Kelly did a lot of business back in New York as a landowner and mercantile partner of Abraham Lott, treasurer of the colony. In his will, Kelly promised his new son-in-law "£3,000 in lands in the Provinces of New York and New Jersey" while setting aside £2,000 for his daughter "free from the debts and control of her husband."

Thomas Wooldridge was rising through British government ranks by attaching himself to men of influence, particularly the Earl of Dartmouth. At the time of his marriage he held multiple posts in the colonial administration—"Provost Marshal General, and Receiver General of his Majesty's province of East-Florida, also Fort Adjutant and Barrack-master of Fort St. Marks"—and was involved in multiple disputes with his colleagues. Those appointments gave him the prestige to win a London heiress's hand and fortune. After that wedding Wooldridge returned to America, currying further favor with Lord Dartmouth by sending back letters on what he saw in various ports.

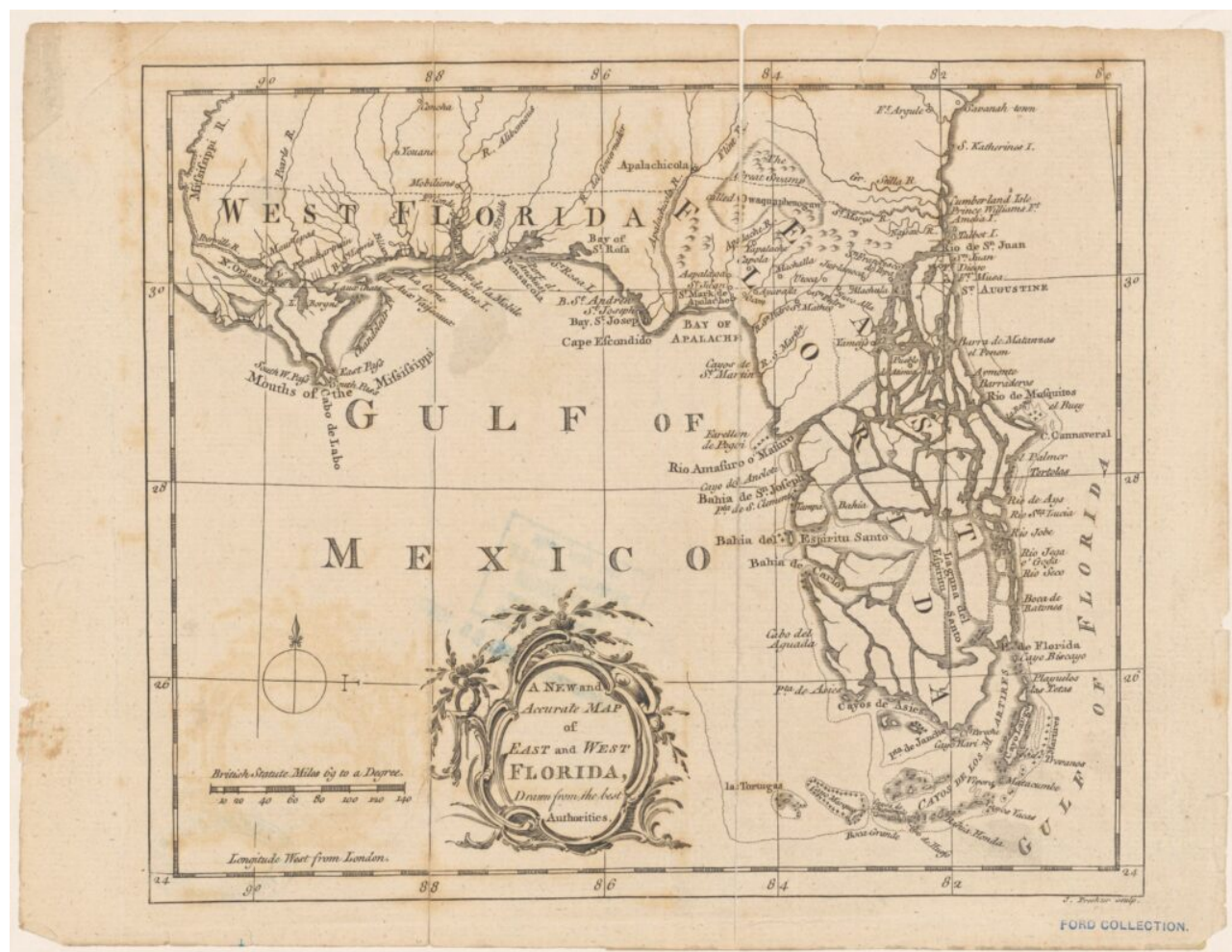


Figure 4: A British view of the colonies of East and West Florida, as engraved by J. Prockter in the early 1770s. Public domain, scan by the New York Public Library, [Lionel Pincus and Princess Firyal Map Division](#).

Wooldridge's efforts paid off in August 1772 when Dartmouth became secretary of state for North America. The merchant continued to send reports to the earl, adding such fawning phrases as "your precious time may be very ill bestowed in reading my scrawls." As part of that campaign for favor, Wooldridge sought out the celebrated Phillis Wheatley at the house of "her mistress" in Boston and challenged her to compose a poem about his patron, which he "promised to convey or deliver." The merchant probably also arranged for the letter and poem Wheatley then wrote to be printed in the *New-York Journal*, calculating that publication would both promote and please the secretary of state.

ENGRAVED FOR THE SENATOR.



William Earl of Dartmouth.

*Drawn and Engraved by C. Warren, and Published according to
Act of Parliament, by C. Cooke, N^o 7, Paternoster row, Mar. 3, 1791.*

Figure 5: Charles Turner Warren, William Legge, second Earl of Dartmouth, 1792. [National Galleries of Scotland](#), Mrs. A.G. Macqueen Ferguson Gift 1950. CC-BY-NC. 3.0.

“Ode to Neptune” was thus not Phillis Wheatley’s private plea for smooth sailing for her beloved mistress or for an artistic colleague. She wrote it while contributing to Thomas Wooldridge’s effort to impress the Earl of Dartmouth, who she knew had become one of the highest-ranking officials in the British Empire. Providing this visitor with an extra poem for his wife was a way to win Wooldridge’s favor, just as he was angling for Dartmouth’s favor.

“Ode to Neptune” also demonstrated Wheatley’s range, as it was a Horatian ode with four metrical feet in most lines rather than her usual rhymed pentameter.

When Wooldridge visited Wheatley, the young poet was starting to seek patronage in Britain instead of relying on local support. In February 1772 she and the Boston printer Ezekiel Russell had tried to collect enough subscriptions to publish a collection of her poetry, but by May the orders had proved disappointing. Wheatley had already sent her tribute to Whitefield to that minister’s patron, the Countess of Huntingdon. In 1772 the wealthy countess sponsored the publication of *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince*, one of the first memoirs from someone enslaved within the British Empire. The countess also wrote to the New England merchant Richard Cary for information about Boston’s enslaved young poet, and word of that inquiry almost certainly reached the Wheatley household. Thus, Lady Huntingdon came to seem like a promising source of funds for Wheatley’s collection.



Figure 6: Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, an important patron of religious writers and speakers. Public domain, scan by the National Library of

Wales via Wikimedia. R. Page, public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Wooldridge wrote that Wheatley “shew’d me her Letter to [Lady Huntingdon](#),” suggesting she thought that would impress him. And he was impressed. As the merchant’s letter noted, Lord Dartmouth and the countess were close, part of the same aristocratic evangelical circle. Thus, in meeting with Wooldridge, demonstrating her writing ability, and giving him poems addressed to his patron and his wife, Wheatley made the most of an unexpected chance to win over potential supporters in the top ranks of British society.

In November 1772, the month after she met Wooldridge, Wheatley sent her manuscript, the selection of verses retailored for a British audience, to London. The printer Archibald Bell “waited upon the Countess of Huntingdon with the Poems” and gained her conditional support for publishing the book. Money and praise from a wealthy British aristocrat thus secured for Wheatley what crowdfunding in her hometown of Boston could not.

Both Wheatley and Wooldridge sailed from America to Britain in mid-1773. In fact, Wheatley embarked two months before the Wooldridges left New York, even though they had been thinking of that voyage back in October. It is possible their paths crossed again in London, but there is no record of a second meeting. Wheatley’s *Poems on Various Subjects* was printed in London that fall, dedicated to the Countess of Huntingdon. It included both her lines to the Earl of Dartmouth and “Ode to Neptune.”

ODE TO NEPTUNE.

On Mrs. W—'s Voyage to England.

I.

WHILE raging tempests shake the shore,
 While *A'lus'* thunders round us roar,
 And sweep impetuous o'er the plain
 Be still, O tyrant of the main;
 Nor let thy brow contracted frowns betray, 5
 While my *Susannah* skims the wat'ry way.

II.

The *Pow'r* propitious hears the lay,
 The blue-ey'd daughters of the sea
 With sweeter cadence glide along,
 And *Thames* responsive joins the song. 10
 Pleas'd with their notes *Sol* sheds benign his ray,
 And double radiance decks the face of day.

III. To

III.

To court thee to *Britannia's* arms
Serene the climes and mild the sky,
Her region boasts unnumber'd charms, 15
Thy welcome smiles in ev'ry eye.
Thy promise, *Neptune* keep, record my pray'r,
Nor give my wishes to the empty air.

Boston, October 10, 1772

To

Figures 7a and 7b: Phillis Wheatley's "Ode to Neptune" as originally published in 1773. Public domain, scans [via Wikimedia](#) and [via Wikimedia](#).

After that, Wheatley and Wooldridge's lives followed surprisingly parallel courses. Both experienced a rise in status, boosted by aristocratic patrons within British imperial society, only to suffer from the disruption of the American Revolution. Wheatley became a published author, gained her freedom, married John Peters, and had children, but could not finance a second collection of poetry in the straitened economy of wartime America. Phillis Peters died young in 1784.

As for Thomas Wooldridge, after his father-in-law William Kelly died in 1774, he became the business partner of Susanna's brother Henry and assumed her father's role as a leader among the London merchants doing business in America. Wooldridge met with such prominent advocates for the colonies as Edmund Burke and Josiah Quincy Jr. and testified to Parliament about shipping losses. In November 1775 the Earl of Dartmouth was replaced as Secretary of State, but Wooldridge no longer needed his patronage. London property-owners elected him as an alderman in 1776, and then he was chosen sheriff of London and Middlesex.

By that time, however, the war with America and the death of Henry Kelly in 1776 had forced the firm of Wooldridge and Kelly into bankruptcy. Wooldridge kept his seat as an alderman and the sympathy of the London press through the war—evidently people accepted that the business failure was not his fault. But peace brought an end to that stasis. Citizens now complained that the alderman was corruptly squeezing money from his office. Wooldridge was locked in debtors' prison in 1783 and had to declare bankruptcy again, this time to a much less understanding response. The other aldermen took the unprecedented step of stripping Wooldridge of his seat. A 1799 publication looked back on him and declared: "Impudence made him, and caused him to be unmade, an Alderman." Nonetheless, the city continued to provide Susanna Wooldridge with substantial sums, "independent of her husband, for the support of herself and her children." This pension helped support her through the lawsuits over the Wooldridge and Kelly debts, which lasted for years on both sides of the Atlantic.

Financially broken, Thomas Wooldridge made his way back to America alone. In January 1794, at the age of fifty-four, he died in Boston, ten years after Phillis Wheatley had died in the same town.

Further Reading

Vincent Carretta wrote the first thorough biography of Phillis Wheatley, published in 2011 under the title *Phillis Wheatley* and republished with new material as [*Phillis Wheatley Peters: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*](#) (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2023). David Waldstreicher's [*The Odyssey of Phillis Wheatley: A Poet's Journeys Through American Slavery and Independence*](#) (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2023) analyzes her poetry in the context of specific moments in her life, including a detailed discussion of her response

to Wooldridge's challenge in 1772.

Carretta also edited Wheatley's *Complete Writings* for Penguin Classics (2001), building on John Shields's *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley* (1988). However, possible new poems continue to be identified, most recently by [Waldstreicher](#) ("[Anonymous Wheatley and the Archive in Plain Sight: A Tentative Attribution of Nine Published Poems, 1773-1775](#)," *Early American Literature* 57, no. 3 (2022): 873-910) and Wendy Raphael Roberts ("'"On the Death of Love Rotch,' a New Poem Attributed to Phillis Wheatley (Peters): And a Speculative Attribution," *Early American Literature* 58, no. 1 (2023): 155-84.

There are many interesting literary studies of Wheatley's poetry and explorations of her significance in African American culture. Some discussions of Wheatley are based on myths or misunderstandings, however, and analyses of "Ode to Neptune" based on identifying its "Mrs. W—" as Susannah Wheatley or Patience Wright are among them. James Rawley explored the importance of Wheatley's entry into the evangelical circle of the Countess of Huntingdon and the Earl of Dartmouth in James A. Rawley, "The World of Phillis Wheatley," [New England Quarterly](#) 50, no. 4 (Dec. 1977): 666-67.

Thomas Wooldridge's upward career can be tracked through his correspondence in *The Manuscripts of the Earl of Dartmouth*, vol. 2: *American Papers* (London: H. M. Stationery Office, 1895); Charles Loch Mowat, *East Florida as a British Province, 1763-1784* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1943); and "Debates of a Political Society" in the *London Magazine and Monthly Intelligencer*, vol. 44 (1775), 333-41. His downward career is evident in *The Swindler Detected: or Cautions to the Public* (London: G. Kearsly, M. Follingsby, J. Stockdale, 1781); *City Biography, Containing Anecdotes and Memoirs of the Rise, Progress, Situation, & Character, of the Aldermen and Other Conspicuous Personages of the Corporation and City of London* (London: W. West and C. Chapple, 1799); and a death notice in the *Boston Columbian Centinel*, January 4, 1794. Ben Saunders has collected material for "[The Thomas Wooldridge Biography Project](#)."

This article originally appeared in May 2023.

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