

Letter

to the
Rev. Samson Occom

Phillis Wheatley



An engraving of Phillis Wheatley. Reproduced from the collections of the Library of Congress.

Reverend and honored Sir,

"I have this day received your obliging kind epistle,¹ and am greatly satisfied with your reasons respecting the negroes, and think highly reasonable what you offer in vindication of their natural rights:

Those that invade them cannot be insensible² that the divine light is chasing away the thick darkness which broods over the land of Africa;³ and the chaos which has reigned so long, is converting into beautiful order, and reveals more and more clearly the glorious

1. epistle: letter.

2. insensible: unaware.

3. divine light . . . Africa: Wheatley is referring to the spread of Christianity to areas of Africa where it had not been practiced.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

vindication (vĪn'dĪ-kā'shən) *n.* the defense or justification of something, such as one's rights

For in every human breast God has implanted a principle, which we call love of freedom.

dispensation of civil and religious liberty, which are so inseparably united, that there is little or no enjoyment of one without the other: Otherwise, perhaps, the Israelites had been less solicitous for their freedom from Egyptian slavery;⁴ I do not say they would have been contented without it, by no means; for in every human breast God has implanted a principle, which we call love of freedom; it is impatient of oppression, and pants for deliverance; and by the leave of our modern Egyptians⁵ I will assert, that the same principle lives in us. God grant deliverance in his own way and time, and get him honor upon all those whose avarice impels them to countenance and help forward the calamities of their fellow creatures. This I desire not for their hurt, but to convince them of the strange absurdity of their conduct, whose words and actions are so diametrically opposite. How well the cry for liberty, and the reverse disposition for the exercise of oppressive power over others agree—I humbly think it does not require the penetration⁶ of a philosopher to determine.”—

Phillis Wheatley

4. Israelites . . . Egyptian slavery: a biblical allusion to the enslaved Jews who were led out of Egypt by Moses sometime between 1300 and 1200 B.C.
5. modern Egyptians: this comparison refers to the owners of enslaved Africans.
6. penetration: understanding; insight.

FROM PERSONAL RESPONSE TO CRITICAL ANALYSIS

- REFLECT** 1. What single word would you use to describe Wheatley's letter? Share this word with your classmates.
- RETHINK** 2. Paraphrase the last sentence of this letter, which begins, "How well the cry. . . ." You could begin such a paraphrase with "It doesn't take a rocket scientist. . . ."
3. In your own words, explain the case that Wheatley makes against slavery.

Consider

- what she says is happening in Africa
- what relationship she sees between civil and religious liberty
- what she claims God has done and what she hopes he will do

WORDS TO KNOW **dispensation** (dɪsˈpən-səˈʃən) *n.* distribution; giving out
solicitous (sə-ˈlɪs-ɪ-təs) *adj.* full of desire; eager
countenance (kounˈte-nəns) *v.* to give or express approval; support