

**21 July, 1773**

**Disputation, Poetry, Slavery**

Peter Galison

**1. Reasoned and Spiritual Exercises**

On Wednesday, 21 July 1773, Eliphalet Pearson and Theodore Parsons, two graduating students from Harvard College, publicly disputed whether the enslavement of Africans was compatible with natural law. The political tension of the moment did not spare the college. In 1768–69, British troops stationed in King Street (now State Street) leveled their cannons at the State House door, no doubt concentrating the minds of the legislators (“we have a right to deliberate, consult, and determine” they protested)<sup>1</sup>, before the lawmakers decamped to Harvard, where they met several times in 1768–70. Matters deteriorated further after British soldiers killed five protesters in the Boston Massacre of 5 March 1770, while the two students in question were freshmen. In the heat of these events (July 1770), lieutenant governor Thomas Hutchinson, a known royalist, moved the legislature to Harvard’s venerated Philosophy Chamber, a room of learning then filled with art, minerals, plants, and scientific instruments. That same year a mob rose against loyalist Hutchinson’s sons, and boycott enforcers plastered his nephew’s house with urine and feces.

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It is an enormous pleasure to dedicate this essay to Arnold Davidson. For more than thirty years, we have spoken and thought about issues relating to the self, ethics, and Foucault. I have learned more than I can possibly say here from those conversations. On disputation history, no one has helped me more, or contributed more to the scholarship, than Ku-ming (Kevin) Chang. His published work, his advice, his insights have been invaluable. Without his work, and without my collaborative efforts with Henry Louis Gates over the last year, I never would have seen my way clear to joining the trajectory of Phillis Wheatley with those of Theodore Parsons and Eliphalet Pearson. Caroline A. Jones had analytic and encouraging comments all the way through. Add to these debts of mine that it was an enormous pleasure to work (on the film *No More, America*) with the enormously talented young actors Ashley LaLonde, Caleb Spiegel-Ostrom, and Connor Doyle; film editor Chyld King; music director Emily Dolan; researcher Kevin Burke; production assistant Nicole Terrien; and with the great theatrical collaboration, guidance, and comments from my colleagues at the American Repertory Theater, especially Diane Paulus, Diane Borger, Sammi Cannold, and Ryan McKittrick. Finally, may I thank the Harvard Art Museums, especially Ethan Lasser and Chris Molinski, for their support and for including the film in the 2017 Harvard Art Museums exhibit, “The Philosophy Chamber.”

<sup>1</sup> “The spirited Address of the house of Representatives of Boston to Governor Bernard, with their resolutions, May 31, 1769,” in the *Political Register and Impartial Review of New Books*, volume 5 (London 1769) p. 103.

When it came time for Governor Hutchinson to head to Harvard Yard to oversee the 1773 graduation, he—no doubt still reeling from such actions by colonial mobs—assembled an armed team of twelve to escort him from his refuge in Milton to Roxbury. There Hutchinson and his retinue formed up with a main force for the perilous ride to Cambridge.<sup>2</sup>

Three miles down the road in Boston, the enslaved poet Phillis Wheatley was about twenty-one years old—close to the age of Harvard’s graduating class. She too was keenly aware of the unrest; the Wheatley residence stood at King’s Street and Makerel Lane (present State and Kilby Streets), barely a hundred yards from those cannons that had aimed at the State House, and the Boston Massacre had unfolded under its balcony. Phillis Wheatley herself had already chronicled in verse both the killing of a 12-year old by a loyalist and the Boston Massacre that had followed a few days later.<sup>3</sup>

As for the two undergraduates Pearson and Parsons, for four years they had rigorously trained in the art and practice of disputations, though the structure and content of these verbal battles shifted with turbulent times. In 1768, Harvard students revolted against their tutors—the three younger classes threatening to resign en masse.<sup>4</sup> Now, on that day in July 1773, the graduating disputants stood before the illustrious crowd and had at it: “*Whether the slavery, to which Africans are in this province, by the permission of law, subjected, be agreeable to the law of nature?*”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See David Phips, letter to Colonel Jonathan Snelling regarding escort of Governor Hutchinson to Harvard Commencement, 12 Jul. 1773, Harvard University Archives, nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.ARCH:18915748. On the cannons and legislative retreat to Harvard, see Josiah Quincy, *History of Harvard University*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1840), 2:148–53, philosophy chamber on p. 153. On Hutchinson’s travails, see the wonderful book by Bernard Bailyn, *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), pp. 134–37.

<sup>3</sup> See Phillis Wheatley, “On the Death of Mr. Snider Murder’d by Richardson,” *Complete Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York, 2001), p. 77; hereafter abbreviated *PW*. Her lost poem is “On the Affray in King Street”; William H. Robinson, reprints twelve lines that he takes to be from “Affray” (Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings* [New York, 1984], p. 455) and while Bly judges it indisputable a fragment exists from this poem **AUTHOR: CAN YOU PLEASE PROVIDE A CITATION FOR BLY? --hmc(Bly, Antonio T. “Wheatley’s ‘On the Affray in King Street’.” *Explicator* 56 (1998) 177-80.)**, Vincent Carretta contends that attribution still remains to be shown; see Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (Athens, Ga., 2011), p. 213 n. 41.

<sup>4</sup> See Bailyn, *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson*, p. 137.

<sup>5</sup> Theodore Parsons and Eliphalet Pearson, *A Forensic Dispute on the Legality of Enslaving the Africans: Held at the Public Commencement in Cambridge, New England, July 21<sup>st</sup>, 1773* (Boston, 1773), pp. 3-4; hereafter abbreviated *FD*.

Phillis Wheatley, of course, was living that question. She too had appeared in front of Hutchinson, nine months earlier, though in very different circumstances. For years she had been writing poems (one of her first compositions, written at the age of fourteen, addressed the students of Harvard). But as her fame grew, so did the insidious charge that she, a young enslaved woman from Africa, could not possibly have written the poems herself. In response, an assembly of Boston leaders gathered sometime before 8 October 1772 to examine her, as a condition for the publication of her book even overseas. They attested:

WE whose Names are under-written, do assure the World, that the POEMS . . . were (as we verily believe) written by PHILLIS, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from *Africa*, and has ever since been, and now is, under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town. She has been examined by some of the best Judges, and is thought qualified to write them. [PW, p. 8]

Governor Hutchinson led those “best judges,” accompanied by the most powerful men in the colony, including five members of the governing council of Massachusetts, seven influential clergymen, and three gentlemen (including John Hancock); almost all knew her or her work well. The stakes were high, vastly higher than for the undergraduates on stage. By proving herself to be a poet and garnering their attestation, she could stand for herself and for all enslaved Africans, protesting slavery to a global audience.

In the last months of 1773, two books appeared as a result of these very different proceedings. Eliphalet and Theodore authored one, a record of their acclaimed disputation. (Of the hundreds of debates presented at Harvard over the previous decades, this was the only one I know of that made it into book form in full.) The other 1773 publication, Phillis Wheatley’s *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, displayed the attestation and became, with its London printing in September 1773, a decisive document in the history of Afro-American literature, American literature, and Anglo-American literature more generally.

What kind of training, what kind of exercises in self-formation, had to be in place for the three Bostonian twenty-one-year-olds to speak and write as they did? How did they use modern and classical idioms to address the immorality of slavery, each tacking between oral and written form—in the disputation and the poetic verse? The British Somerset ruling on 22 June 1772 had dealt slavery a blow in England and beyond: the judge, Lord Mansfield, determined that there

was no common law precedent for slavery in England or Wales. Would American revolutionary fervor embrace abolition, or were those colonial references to chains and masters just metaphors?

Though Massachusetts later became an antislavery center, the state and Harvard profited greatly in the eighteenth century from enslaved labor and the slave trade, as did all the colonies. Slavery at Harvard was anything but abstract. The census of 1750 assessed the enslaved fraction of Massachusetts at over 2 percent of the state's population (about four thousand out of 187,000), and just after the revolution at 5,235.<sup>6</sup> Roughly one thousand enslaved people toiled in mid-eighteenth-century Boston. The college itself was implicated—like so many other colonial universities, including Princeton University, Yale University, Columbia University, Dartmouth College, the College of William & Mary, Georgetown University, the University of Virginia, and Rutgers University.<sup>7</sup> Proceeds from the slave trade funded much in these eighteenth-century centers of learning, through endowment and investments in goods produced using forced labor. Enslaved workers also served in the operation of these venerable institutions. At Harvard, four presidents held slaves; at Princeton, the first nine presidents owned slaves at some point.<sup>8</sup>

With their 1773 clash, the two Harvard students struck a chord. Public disputations at graduation were many. Indeed, the centuries-old disputation stood as a centerpiece of the early

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<sup>6</sup> Slavery statistics by state; see “Statistics on Slavery,” [faculty.weber.edu/kmackay/statistics\\_on\\_slavery.htm](http://faculty.weber.edu/kmackay/statistics_on_slavery.htm). For the figure of 5,235 see Lorenzo Johnston Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England* (New York, 1968), p. 320.

<sup>7</sup> On slavery at colonial universities, key works include (and contain many further studies) Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities* (New York, 2013) and Randall Kennedy et al., *Blacks at Harvard: A Documentary History of African-American Experience at Harvard and Radcliffe*, ed. Werner Sollors, Caldwell Titcomb, and Thomas A. Underwood (New York, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Contemporary research on universities and slavery began in earnest during the last decade or two. The Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice, called into action by Ruth Simmons and chaired by James Campbell, produced a milestone 2006 report (see “Slavery and Justice: Report of the Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice,” [www.brown.edu/Research/Slavery\\_Justice/documents/SlaveryAndJustice.pdf](http://www.brown.edu/Research/Slavery_Justice/documents/SlaveryAndJustice.pdf)). At other universities, too, the last years have seen a remarkable outpouring of work on slavery in the colleges. Craig Wilder's 2013 *Ebony and Ivy* not only probes the history of slavery, but tracks the ways in which the memory of slavery itself has not simply fallen into forgetfulness but for more than a century was actively dismissed. Martha Sandweiss's team at Princeton helped illuminate that institution's long historical connection with slavery, as has the study led by Sven Beckert and Evelyn Higginbotham at Harvard. Yale created a multidisciplinary portal to link research across fields as diverse as law, music, art, medicine, cartography, and early American history. See, for example, Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy*; Martha A. Sandweiss and Craig Hollander, “Princeton and Slavery: Holding the Center,” Princeton and Slavery, [slavery.princeton.edu/stories/princeton-and-slavery-holding-the-center](http://slavery.princeton.edu/stories/princeton-and-slavery-holding-the-center); Sven Beckert et al., “Harvard and Slavery. Seeking a Forgotten History,” [www.harvardandslavery.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Harvard-Slavery-Book-111101.pdf](http://www.harvardandslavery.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Harvard-Slavery-Book-111101.pdf) (2011); and Antony Dugdale, J. J. Fueser, and J. Celso de Castro Alves, “Yale, Slavery, and Abolition,” [www.yaleslavery.org/YSA.pdf](http://www.yaleslavery.org/YSA.pdf) (2001).

modern college: not just a ceremony, it was also a test of knowledge and a means of publication. In all these ways the disputation was more central to knowledge making than the modern competitive collegiate debate. It should be kept in mind that Martin Luther's nailed theses were proposals for disputations: to test and publicize fundamental truths.<sup>9</sup> Though some secondary literature incorrectly misattributed their roles, it was Eliphalet Pearson who defended slavery as compatible with natural law—that is clear from his manuscript draft.<sup>10</sup> Theodore rejected the “natural” morality of slavery.

Eliphalet and Theodore both came from the town of Newbury, just north of Boston. Both prepared for college at Dummer Charity School (also in Newbury); both came to Harvard, where they were stars of their graduating class of thirty-five. Pearson grew into a bellicose figure: a classicist, an Old Calvinist, a disciplinarian. After graduating Harvard, he became the first headmaster of the then-new Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, where he was known for the intensity of his criticism and for his insistence on rote memorization. Josiah Quincy, at six years of age the youngest student at the school, found the whole “disheartening,” recalling “The Preceptor was distant and haughty in his manners. I have no recollection of his ever having shown any consideration for my childhood. . . . I cannot imagine a more discouraging course of education than that to which I was subjected.”<sup>11</sup> After Harvard booted Eliphalet's predecessor for intemperance, the college summoned Eliphalet, and he became the professor of Hebrew and Oriental Languages. Not a single person spoke well of him, “his temper and character . . . he was universally hated.”<sup>12</sup> Behind his back, students called him “elephant,” playing on his name and

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<sup>9</sup> On disputation in the early modern university, one would do well to begin with the work of Kuming (Kevin) Chang; see “From Oral Disputation to Written Text: The Transformation of the Dissertation in Early Modern Europe,” *History of Universities* 19 (2004): 129–87 (on Luther, p. 145). Chang underscores that the disputation was both a form of testing and publishing truth. See also William Clark, *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University* (Chicago, 2006), especially “The Lecture and the Disputation,” chap. 3, pp. 68–92, which contains many other references.

<sup>10</sup> Pearson, “Part of Forensic Dispute,” 1773, folder 3, box 1, Eliphalet Pearson papers, Phillips Academy Archive and Special Collections, Phillips Academy Andover, Andover, Mass.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Edmund Quincy, *Life of Josiah Quincy* (Boston, 1874), pp. 24–25.

<sup>12</sup> Timothy Pickering, quoted in Conrad Edick Wright and Edward W. Hanson, *Sibley's Harvard Graduates: Biographical Sketches of Those Who Attended Harvard College in the Classes of 1772–1774*, 18 vols. (Boston, 1999), 18:290; hereafter abbreviated *SH*.

gait (*SH*, 18:287). Colleagues dubbed him “Megalonyx” after the fossilized bones of a two-thousand-pound giant ground sloth found in Virginia and named by Thomas Jefferson in 1797.

Nonetheless, during the revolution, Eliphalet was a loyal patriot. He built a gunpowder factory, supplying explosives to colonists as he rose, in 1804, to become temporary president of the college (see *SH*, 18:285–86). For years he fiercely defended Old Calvinist orthodoxy against the ascendant Unitarians, a conflict that erupted in all-out battle over the appointment of the Hollis Professor of Divinity. To Pearson the “real state of the controversy” turned on those “who reject the religion of Jesus Christ and who support rational as opposed to evangelical religion, which was contrary to the religious sentiments of the University, its Founders, and Thomas Hollis.”<sup>13</sup> To Eliphalet’s horror, on 1 February 1805, Harvard chose “rational religion,” and in 1806 snubbed Pearson for president, choosing a Unitarian. Furious, Eliphalet quit Harvard and stormed back to Andover (see *SH*, 18:293–97).

Parsons’s opposition to Eliphalet Pearson’s defense of slavery that July day in 1773 was not a simple matter of family legacy. Theodore Parsons was a son of Reverend Moses Parsons, who owned three slaves, including Violet, who played an outsized role in Theodore’s and his siblings’ upbringing (*SH*, 18:273–75).<sup>14</sup> Acclaimed with prizes and honors by both faculty and classmates, Theodore, raised a Unitarian, was more scientific than his friend and opponent Eliphalet—and better liked. After graduation, Parsons trained to be a surgeon and signed onto the revolutionary warship, the *Bennington*, a privateer brig that left Gloucester in March 1779. Not long after sailing (his last letter was in May), the ship went down in the icy St. Lawrence river. All 120 hands vanished without a trace. Hoping against hope that Theodore had survived, his friends listed him as a 1780 cofounder of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, but he

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<sup>13</sup> Pearson, “Series II: Intended Publication relative to choice of Professor of Divinity,” 1805, in Records compiled by Eliphalet Pearson relating to the election of Henry Ware as Hollis Professor of Divinity, 1804–08 and undated, UAI 15.955, Harvard University Archives, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

<sup>14</sup> “Violet, the slave of the Rev. Moses Parsons of Byfield, but the real ruler of his household and his lively brood of boys” (“Massachusetts Slaves,” *The Youth’s Companion*, 19 Dec. 1907, p. 652). More completely, Theophilus Parsons (Theodore’s nephew), *Memoir of Theophilus Parsons: Chief Justice of the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts* (Cambridge, Mass., 1859), pp. 17–18.

would never return.<sup>15</sup> Because of his early death, there is no further information about Theodore's personal position on slavery.

## 2. The Disputation

The agonistic form of reasoning embodied in the disputation runs deep and long—from ancient Greeks to the modern Western world, truth has been celebrated as the outcome of confrontation. It was part of antiquity, as G. E. R. Lloyd long ago argued, and it has persisted—as Walter Ong has contended—in changing, often specifically gendered, form through the eighteenth century and beyond.<sup>16</sup> From early modern Harvard we have records of a vast number of the syllogistic disputations or at least of their topics. The titles of some 325 Masters disputations (along with the position of the respondent—who usually won) were translated in 1880; many topics were relitigated among undergraduates. They give us a map of the scientific, ethical, political, and theological concerns from 1655 to 1791. At graduation, two or three would be presented in Latin, with weaponized, ceaselessly inculcated logic (fig. 1). Did one's opponent assume what was to be shown (*petition principii*)? Did he address the wrong question (*ignorantia elenchi*)? Did he presuppose a spurious cause and reason from it (*non causâ, pro causâ*)?<sup>17</sup> Across the eighteenth century, the concerns shifted. In 1698 the topic “Is a monarchical government the best?” was affirmed; in 1725 and 1755, “Is agriculture the most honorable of all secular employments?” Contrast these with later ones: in 1766 “Are mechanics more useful to a commercial state than farmers?” was affirmed, and “Is it legal, under the British government, to collect taxes by military force?” was negated.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For a claim that the ship sank in the English Channel, see John Louis Ewell, *The Story of Byfield: A New England Parish* (Boston, 1904), pp. 323–24. On the inclusion of Theodore's name among the founders of the academy, see *SH*, p. 275. Moses Parsons was more orthodox than his children (see *SH*, p. 273).

<sup>16</sup> See G. E. R. Lloyd, *Polarity and Analogy: Two Types of Argumentation in Early Greek Thought* (Cambridge, 1966) and Walter J. Ong, *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness* (Ithaca, 1981), for example p. 122.

<sup>17</sup> See Isaac Watts, *Logic: or, the The Right Use of Reason in the Enquiry After Truth* (London, 1729); hereafter abbreviated *L*.

<sup>18</sup> *Subjects for Master's Degree in Harvard College, 1655–1791*, trans. and ed. Edward J. Young (Cambridge, Mass., 1880), pp. 8, 9, 11.

Reading through these tests of rhetorical-logical power that aimed to demonstrate a known truth, one senses a gradual shift in the disputations toward an increasingly engaged, less cloistered institution. But in that openness, there was danger: the very act of questioning vital truths raised questions. “Does God know everything, even contingent events?” “Is Christ eternal?” One critic furiously objected to such theological issues being argued as if they were merely over the status of the vacuum or imaginary space.<sup>19</sup> Objections mounted from the other side as well: syllogistic debates were cramped, formulaic, barren beyond logical dissection. Students made it clear that they found the study of classical logic stultifying, the forced use of Latin confining. Audiences grew restive.<sup>20</sup>

So it was that syllogistic scientific, ethical, and theological knowledge began yielding to a new form of disputation, one that brought the college some distance out of its seminarian shell. This English-language and therefore more accessibly public format was the *forensic disputation* that began to appear at the colonial colleges in force after the 1760s. In part, the drive to a more expansive form of rhetoric was driven by the shifting focus of the colonial universities. Between 1750 and 1778, Harvard students entered the ministry at twice the rate they went into law. From 1778 to 1800, that ratio flipped to 2:1 in *favor* of lawyers. For a new generation of counselors and politicians, training in a more expansive mode of presentation was a necessity.<sup>21</sup>

Etymologically, the term *forensic* drew from its Latin root *forum*, becoming, in the mid-seventeenth century, *forensic*, that is, in open court, in public. By the mid-eighteenth century, the British logician Isaac Watts could extol the forensic disputation as apt for courts, parliaments, synods, and senates, for all those places where people argued before a deciding body.<sup>22</sup> Unlike its

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<sup>19</sup> Ota Thomas, *The Theory and Practice of Disputation at Yale, Harvard, and Dartmouth, from 1750 to 1800* (PhD diss., State University of Iowa, 1941), pp. 27–30; hereafter abbreviated *TP*.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas, *The Theory and Practice of Disputation*, pp. 31–45. *TP*

<sup>21</sup> See David Potter, *Debating in the Colonial Chartered Colleges: An Historical Survey, 1642–1900* (New York, 1944), p. 33. For the shifting ratio of ministers to lawyers, Thomas, *The Theory and Practice of Disputation*, p. 49. *TP*

<sup>22</sup> See Isaac Watts, “Of Forensic Disputes,” chap. 12 of *The Improvement of the Mind: Or, a Supplement to the Art of Logick* (London, 1741), pp. 173–76.

sylogistic antecedent, this newer disputation drew more freely on all forms of argumentation, no longer straitjacketed by logic alone. Forensic disputations rose as syllogistic ones fell.<sup>23</sup>

The urgency of training young men to present to a wider audience left its mark on our two Harvard students. It is telling that Eliphalet debated in the *forensic* form whether knowledge of the syllogism improved reasoning.<sup>24</sup> Still, into the nineteenth century, disputation and rhetoric remained essential. Later, as acting president of Harvard, Eliphalet drafted conditions to be met by the recently established Boylston Professor of Rhetoric. The holder must, of course, be a believing Christian of best morals. Students would work to master Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, Cicero's *de Oratore*, and Longinus's *On the Sublime*.<sup>25</sup> Watts's intensively-used *Improvement of the Mind* (1741) celebrated disputation insofar as it generated new ideas, freed language, and defeated sophistry. But Watts warned that disputants could "grow impudent and audacious, proud and disdainful, talkative and impertinent," seeking to oppose everything, victims of ambition. Learning to dispute was to align inner and outer conduct so as not to allow oneself to "carr[y] away the mind from that calm and sedate Temper which is so necessary to contemplate *Truth*."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas, *The Theory and Practice of Disputation*, p. 17. **TP** According to Thomas (p. 57), in 1750 there were no forensic disputations presented at Harvard commencement, and the format began irregularly around 1767 with none in 1768. A forensic disputation at commencement was still a quite novel matter at the time of the slavery disputation of 1773. In 1766, just a few years before Pearson and Parsons arrived at Harvard, the Harvard Corporation insisted that there be initiated classes on Friday and Saturday mornings in "Elocution, Composition in English, Rhetoric, and other parts of the Belles Lettres" (Potter, *Debating in the Colonial Chartered Colleges*, p. 33).

<sup>24</sup> "Whether the Faculty of reasoning is improved by a Knowledge of syllogism," Eliphalet notes. What is the very definition of faculty of reasoning, Pearson asks? It is the power to convey and confirm the mind's own ideas to draw from the comparison of ideas to one another and the inference from them "just inferences." To reason, he asserted, was to assess the truth or falsehood of a proposition in light of already accepted truths (papers of Eliphalet Pearson, "[Forensic disputation on reasoning]," undated, folder 19, box 1 (HUM 79), Harvard University Archives, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., [nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.ARCH:11180505](https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.ARCH:11180505)).

<sup>25</sup> See "Draft of the Rules, Directions, and Statutes of the Boylston Professorship of Rhetoric and Oratory in Harvard College," circa 1804, Records relating to the founding of the Boylston Professorship of Rhetoric and Oratory, 1772–1809, folder 2, box 1, UAI 15.970, Harvard University Archives, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., [iif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:51525223\\$1i](https://iif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:51525223$1i)

<sup>26</sup> Watts, *The Improvement of the Mind*, pp. 184–85, emphasis added.

Long used at Harvard, Yale, Oxford and Cambridge, Isaac Watts's principal text, his 1724 *Logic*, contended reason would lead inexorably "into Truth in Matters within its Compass" were it not for our faults. Access to truth required the cultivation of a proper way of being: "it is our *Sloth, Precipitancy, Sense, Passion* . . . that lead our *Reason* astray in this degenerate and imperfect Estate" (*L*, p. 184). How to combat these obstacles, per Watts? It was not genius or "best natural Parts" that would prepare us to receive truth (*L*, p. 327). Instead, "*Custom and Practice* [in youth] must form and establish this habit [of reason and judgment]" (*L*, p. 327). Quieting the soul allows truth to emerge.

As the forensic disputation gained ground, students were allowed to invoke explicitly emotional as well as ethical arguments (ethical *topics* had long been a staple of syllogistic disputation). James Burgh's *Art of Speaking*, widely used in the 1760s and '70s at Harvard, taught disputation, including the physical manifestations that accompanied each emotion, so speakers could put them into disputation performance. "Fear, violent and sudden, opens very wide the eyes and mouth; shortens the nose; draws down the eyebrows; gives the countenance paleness; draws back the elbows parallel to the sides; lifts up the open hands."<sup>27</sup> Such bodily presentations should join text and voice, as Harvard students learned in 1754: "The voice should be fitted to the subject matter, the gestures to the voice, and the facial expression to the gestures." Mind and body must coincide (1759): "Action is the eloquence of the body and for that reason should agree with the thoughts of the mind; it ought to express the various passions which the orator wishes to excite in his listeners."<sup>28</sup> In very different ways, explored below, Phillis Wheatley, too, sought forms of rhetorical self-conduct that would guide others.

Here is an instance of the dual nature of "conduct" that Arnold Davidson rightly identifies as a key turning point in Michel Foucault's thought. At one level, conduct designated one's own comportment, a category applicable to the self. But conduct was also transitive, a way of conducting the conduct of others. Oratory as underscored in mid- to late eighteenth-century colonial university disputation was precisely of this sort; one trained to think and act, to perform, in a way that one wanted others to think and act—a willful doubling of comportment of self and direction of others. Foucault, as Davidson et alia interpret him, moved from thinking that rhetoric

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas, *The Theory and Practice of Disputation*, p. 115. TP

<sup>28</sup> Both quotations from Thomas, *The Theory and Practice of Disputation*, p. 120. TP

was *always* a form of conducting others, to a more nuanced view distinguishing rhetoric as mere persuasion from rhetoric as “parresia,” ethically-grounded persuasion.<sup>29</sup>

In colonial colleges we see a transition in the mid- to late eighteenth century: a move away from older disputation style. Where stress on figures and tropes had previously dominated, emphasis turned to persuasion and ordered presentation. By 1772, ornateness seemed obsolete, even within syllogistic disputes: “However splendidly thoughts are clothed, they are not really elegant unless founded in truth.” Where the decorative had resided now stood simplicity of sentences, clarity of structure, minimization of metaphors. All aimed to facilitate access to truth through rigorous argument grounded in history, knowledge, proof, and empathy with the audience.<sup>30</sup> Exercises aimed at the ethical transformation of the speaker or writer *and* his or her listeners.<sup>31</sup> Academic, agonistic truth tools were different from those of the poet, as we will see.

Eliphalet’s unpublished undergraduate papers show his handwritten preparation for a forensic disputation on “thinking,” for example. “I shall endeavor to mention some of those considerations which induce me to think that ‘the Mind is *active* in *Thinking*.’” He allowed that ideas do, ultimately, originate in many of its perceptions: “outward Objects” impinge “upon the Senses.”<sup>32</sup> Another forensic disputation came hard on the conceptual heels of the last: Is thinking

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<sup>29</sup> On counter-conduct, see Arnold Davidson, “In Praise of Counter-Conduct,” *History of the Human Sciences* 24 (Oct. 2011): 25–41. On the distinction between rhetoric and parresia, drawn between earlier work in the Berkeley and Dartmouth lectures and the more fully developed *Hermeneutics of the Self*, see Laura Cremonesi et al., “Introduction” to Michel Foucault, *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Lectures at Dartmouth College, 1980*, trans. Graham Burchell (Chicago, 2016), pp. 1–17.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas, *The Theory and Practice of Disputation*, pp. 119-23, especially 122-23, cf. Thomas p. 64, citing Clarke, p. 86: “The forensick disputant, unconfined by moods and figures, is at liberty to express his thought clearly, concisely, and I may add, elegantly.” TP

<sup>31</sup> Sophomores, Pearson later wrote, would “improve their speaking” as the soon-to-be-hired Boylston Professor systematically commented on their “dialogues, speeches, and declamations.” Juniors would work through their textbook with them, alternating that task with compositions they would write every two weeks. By the time they were seniors, the students would be ready to “cultivat[e] a correct & refined taste in style” (Pearson, “Draft of the Rules, Directions, and Statutes of the Boylston Professorship of Rhetoric and Oratory in Harvard College”).

<sup>32</sup> True too, Eliphalet said, ideas might start in the mind “as if of their own accord” even when the originating object is no longer present. And yet, contrary to his antagonist, Eliphalet Pearson insisted that in some cases the mind has “such a Power over its ideas, as to be able by an Act of

*necessary* to the soul? Eliphalet says, surely we are capable of thinking during sleep; we witness sleep-talking. Yet even if those sleep-spoken thoughts cohere, it is often the case that we are not conscious of (and do not remember) the thoughts expressed.<sup>33</sup> Forgetting in waking life does not imply a fragmentation of personal identity; no more should it in sleep. Scribbled at the bottom of the last page of this draft is his note that he never performed this particular forensic disputation. Usually, he would.<sup>34</sup> These oft-corrected, crossed-out, emended drafts were, in effect, *scripts* that the disputants created to steer performance—planned, criticized, refined, rehearsed, and put to the test.

Truth, thought, identity, and reason verged on the metaphysical. In the new disputational regime, ethical and emotional arguments were front and center. “Gaming,” Eliphalet declaimed in another of his forensic disputations, “is an immorality, a sordid vice, the child of avarice.” Dice could send a nobleman skulking to his mansion, while the gamester, exulting, drove “his dice-gained gilt Chariot” to his pathetic abode. Here Eliphalet sounded like a confluence of minister, lawyer, and politician. “It would be easy to show, that perjury, drinking, whoring, murder, follow . . . & are the direct & distinct fruits of this one vice of gaming; A vice big with every evil, & which teems forth from its fruitful womb every enormity; or even of Hell-hounds, more fierce and fatal than those described by Milton, & which were begot by the Devil on sin.”<sup>35</sup> Perversely generative, gaming was but one among vices.<sup>36</sup>

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Volition it can cause an absent Idea to be present . . . without the repeated Operation of the Object upon the Organ of Sensation” (Pearson, “[Forensic disputation on thinking],” undated, papers of Eliphalet Pearson, folder 18, box 1, HUM 79, Harvard University Archives, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., [nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.ARCH:11180504](https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.ARCH:11180504))

<sup>33</sup> His antagonist countered that if the soul thinks about things of which the man is not conscious, then the soul and the man would constitute *two* persons. Not at all, says Eliphalet. That would follow only if consciousness was solely constitutive of “Personal Identity.” Young Pearson’s antagonist asked: but would it not be strange that the soul could be busy thinking one moment, and that the next someone could be completely unaware of it? To this Eliphalet replied that there are many ideas of which we have no memory—even in our waking state (Pearson, “[Forensic dispute on thinking and the soul],” papers of Eliphalet Pearson, undated, folder 13, box 1, HUM 79, Harvard University Archives, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., [nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.ARCH:11180499](https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.ARCH:11180499))

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Pearson, “[Forensic dispute on gaming],” undated, papers of Eliphalet Pearson, folder 16, box 1, HUM 79, Harvard University Archives, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., [nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.ARCH:11180502](https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.ARCH:11180502)

<sup>36</sup> Ethical stakes could rise above even the hell-hounds of dice, as when Eliphalet engaged the overarching topic of “Divine Rewards and Punishments.” Here he queried “Whether the future

Over and over, the Harvard students, like those at other colonial colleges, drilled arguments increasingly on matters of the day. These included intimate ones (the relation of men with women), alongside raging political issues, including the free press, the function of Congress, or the tenure of office holders. Students rehearsed such arguments before their tutors who sometimes corrected the texts, and presented the complete disputation before a presiding judge (*praeses*). For the lauded few disputing forensically at graduation (a practice since 1769), their combative deliveries would be heard by parents, professors, politicians—even, as in 1773, the governor of the state.<sup>37</sup>

Analytically, the forensic disputation over slavery divided over three axes. First: Was there a right to subordinate others without consent? Second: Did enslavement in the New World offer the possibility of Christian salvation that more than compensated for the manifest cruelty and suffering of enslavement? Third: Were Africans equals, as human? Eliphalet Pearson took on the first of these themes, the right of domination, explicitly, emphasizing the right of God, parent, and slaveowner to conduct the conduct of their charges:

**ELIPHALET:** That right of authority [to subordinate] others, independent of all voluntary contract on the part of the subordinate, is . . . universally acknowledged. Such is the right of the Governor of the universe to govern and direct the conduct of all finite existences, and such is the right of parents to govern and direct the conduct of their children. . . . [So too we must see] a right of some individuals among mankind to exercise any degrees of authority over others, [and] the exercise of such authority must be acknowledged just. [Slavery is] agreeable to the law of nature. [*FD*, pp. 11–12]

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good (Happiness) of the whole be the only Foundation of Merit & Demerit.” “Our ablest Politicians may mistake in some Points, & so their Schemes of Government prove defective in some respects—I shall [therefore] trace out the design of the Governor of the universe in distributing rewards & Punishments in his moral government of his Creatures, so far as it can be ascertained from the knowledge we have of his perfections & the common Dispensations of his Providence.” Each person (so says Eliphalet) will be rewarded and punished only according to the contribution to happiness as a whole (Pearson, “[Forensic disputation on divine rewards and punishments],” undated, papers of Eliphalet Pearson, folder 17, box 1, HUM 79, Harvard University Archives, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., [nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.ARCH:11180503](https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.ARCH:11180503))

<sup>37</sup> Thomas, *The Theory and Practice of Disputation*, pp. 183, 185. TP On rehearsing and submitting text, see Potter, *Debating in the Colonial Chartered Colleges*, pp. 42–43.

To this, Theodore Parsons replied that God and parents bear to humanity and children a relation of utter imbalance, manifestly more lopsided than that of one group of people to another:

**THEODORE:** [W]hen you have shewn me the man, or number of men, capable of infallibly directing the conduct of others, the[n this] exercise of authority [shall have] my approbation. And when you shall point out to me any classes of men, between whom there is such a comparative difference in point of ability for the proper direction of conduct, as between parents and children, and the *same* disposition in the superior towards the inferior, that the Author of nature has implanted in the hearts of parents towards their children, I will readily acknowledge the exercise of a like degree of authority justifiable by the law of nature. [*FD*, pp. 20–21]

By contrast, when Phillis Wheatley uses “conduct” (in either the sense of comportment or direction), she generally infuses it with sacred guidance by inspiration or example, *never* in the sense of compelling another to act. In one monody: “grace divine / Should with full lustre in their [the youth of America’s] conduct shine” (“On the Death of Rev. Mr. George Whitefield, 1770,” in *PW*, p. 15). Or in another: “our’s to copy conduct such as thine” (“An Elegy Sacred to the Memory of the Rev’d Samuel Cooper, D. D.,” in *PW*, p. 98).<sup>38</sup>

The second axis was through Christian salvation; the argument that the enslaved might suffer, but that suffering was overcome when set next to the possibility of conversion.

**ELIPHALET:** [I]t is evident beyond all controversy, that the removal of the *Africans*, from the state of brutality, wretchedness, and misery, in which they are at home so deeply involved, to this land of light, humanity, and christian knowledge, is to them so great a blessing; however faulty any individuals may have been in point of unnecessary cruelty. . . . [T]he general state of subordination here [is] agreeable to the law of nature. . . . [This can no] longer remain a question. [*FD*, p. 31]

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<sup>38</sup> In consolation, Wheatley speaks of spiritual guidance—“He leads the *virtuous* to the realms of peace; / His to conduct to the immortal plains” (“To His Honour The Lieutenant Governor on the Death of His Lady. March 24, 1773,” in *PW*, p. 61)—or appreciates a this-worldly oversight after her safe return from London—“the goodness of God in safely conducting my passage over the mighty waters” (Wheatley, letter to John Thornton, in *PW*, p. 149).

**THEODORE:** It is also alledged, that “in their own country [Africans] are unnecessarily ignorant of the principles of our holy religion.” This indeed . . . is confessedly a melancholy truth. . . . [But] before an argument can be hence derived in favor of their removal to this country, it must be shewn that the advantages they here enjoy are greater. But if we examine the religious advantages of slaves in this country, I fear we shall find, to the dishonor of our [faith], that they are not greatly superior to those of their brethren in *Africa*, at least the excess will fall far short of an equivalent for the excess of their misery. [*FD*, pp. 43–44]

Theodore damningly crystallized Eliphalet’s argument: Anyone considering that slavery could be “productive of the happiness of mankind, must, I think, allow, that the direct way to encrease their happiness is by every possible means to encrease their misery” (*FD*, p. 48).

Third, Eliphalet contended that Africans lacked “philosophy.” Without religion, the African could not envision salvation. The absence of philosophy was not at all akin to a person in the twenty-first century accusing some group of not having fully taken on board the writings of meta-ethicists or logical empiricists. Instead, as Henry Louis Gates has insisted, the charge of absence of philosophy was an accusation of the absence of reason itself. The insult of “no philosophy” made possible Eliphalet’s calumny of the Africans’ “stupid brutality,” “savage barbarity,” “the condition of a creature in human shape, (for in such a state of degradation one can hardly call him a man)” only to be remedied by transport, if in chains, to “this country.” A people without philosophy was a people without higher, demonstrative reason, therefore not fully human. This was certainly the repellent view of David Hume, which Gates signals must be confronted in the history of racism. Hume says,

I am apt to suspect the negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. . . . Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction between these breeds of men.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> David Hume, “Of National Characters,” in *Essays Moral, Political, Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis, 1987), [www.econlib.org/library/LFBooks/Hume/hmMPL21.html](http://www.econlib.org/library/LFBooks/Hume/hmMPL21.html). On animal and human reasoning in Hume, see Deborah Boyle, “Hume on Animal Reason,” *Hume Studies* 29 (Apr. 2003): 3–28. I thank Eraldo Souza dos Santos for pointing out this reference and his comment about human capacity (as seen by Hume).

Immanuel Kant continued Hume's dismissal of "the Negroes of Africa," saying not one had contributed to "art or science or any other praiseworthy quality" because of a "fundamental . . . difference between these two races of man."<sup>40</sup> Backed by Hume and Kant, the notion that the Africans were "without philosophy" became an eighteenth-century tenet. Eliphalet would have surprised no one when he put "no philosophy" alongside "no religion" as African demerits:

**Eliphalet:** Consider his [the African's] situation as a candidate for an eternal existence; view him as necessarily ignorant of every principle of that religion, through the happy influence of which alone the degenerate race of Adam can rationally form the most distant expectation of future felicity. View him moreover in a state of the most abject slavery, a slavery of the worst kind, a slavery of all others most destructive of human happiness,—an entire subjection to the tyrannizing power of lust and passion,—wholly devoted to the governing influence of those irregular propensities, which are the genuine offspring of depraved nature, when unassisted by philosophy or religion. [*FP*, pp. 25–26]

"Unassisted by philosophy or religion": this double charge dismissed both the redeemable soul and human mind of the African, the enslaved cast from the community of humanity.

Theodore Parsons hit back: "[I]t is matter of painful astonishment, that in this enlightened age and land, where the principles of natural and civil Liberty, and consequently the natural rights of mankind are so generally understood, the case of these unhappy *Africans* should gain no more attention" (*FP*, p. 4). How can it be, Theodore continued, "that those, who are so readily disposed to urge the principles of natural equality in defence of their own Liberties, should, with so little reluctance, continue to exert a power, by the operation of which they are so flagrantly contradicted . . . multitudes of our fellow-men, descendants, my friend from the same common parent with you and me, and between whom and us nature has made no distinction, save what arises from the stronger influence of the sun in [their] climate" (*FD*, pp. 4–5; attributing skin color to climate was a common Enlightenment argument against slavery). Theodore berated Eliphalet: Nothing can deliver their "desponding souls" from this oppression (*FD*, p. 5). Nothing but death.

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<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers* (New York, 2003), p. 25.

Changing disputation forms, shifting student aspirations, and heightening political tension over revolution and slavery combined in this 1773 forensic disputation. Performed in front of the lightning-rod loyalist governor and a restive assembly of faculty, students, and colonial public, the slavery disputation brought front and center to the college what had long been hidden in plain sight: the raw tension between American liberty and enslaved Africans.

### **3. “No More, America”**

Confrontational and public as the Pearson-Parson exchange was, it remained sealed, pitting the wrongs of enslavement against that of salvation, stacking the effects of the sun against a demeaning characterization of intrinsic African-ness. Yet the argument never quite escaped the airlessness of a debate by two white students about Africans who were right before their eyes, at Harvard and throughout Massachusetts. It was one thing for Parsons to reply with arguments of climate and compassion to Pearson’s defense of slavery with religion, philosophy, and cultural caricature. It is quite another for a person to stand present in their humanness, to speak through religion and reason while enslaved.

A step back. Prompted by an exhibit in planning for the Harvard Art Museums (“The Philosophy Chamber”), I began thinking about bringing the 1773 disputation to film, a medium that might capture the performance of this quintessentially early (and pre-) modern form of speaking, writing, testing, and spreading knowledge. After all, these disputations were pronounced in public; that was the very point of the disputation more generally, amplified by the forensic format’s vernacular and broader argumentative form. It might be worth reflecting a bit about the path to this film to raise questions about disputation, performance, and analysis.

First, despite having a fully printed version of the disputation, one that matches, generally, the handwritten preparation in Eliphalet’s papers, we do not know how the disputation flowed. In Pearson’s notes for this and indeed all of his forensic disputation positions, the case is made in one go, as if the argument in public went “opposition to slavery”, then “defense of slavery”: A then B, so to speak. By contrast, the printed version starts with Theodore’s antislavery first argument, passes to Eliphalet’s defense of slavery, reverts to Theodore and finishes with Eliphalet: ABAB. Indeed, in these early days of the forensic disputations, the format was not absolutely fixed at Yale, Harvard, or Dartmouth. Speakers, according to Harvard

rules, were urged to alternate in their interventions, not perform them sequentially, and one side of the argument should not have more representatives than the other.<sup>41</sup>

Second, disputations typically had a *praeses*, that is, a presiding figure who would moderate. At Harvard, this could have been the president of the college, occasionally supplemented, for the final choice of the winner, by the audience itself. In this 1773 case we know nothing about that final verdict: was the morality of slavery affirmed, denied, or left open-ended? (I found no trace in Samuel Locke's Harvard presidential papers, nor any clues in the papers of Pearson or Parsons.) According to Watts, in forensic disputes the *praeses* hews the disputants to order, often leaving final judgment to the assembly, which decided by "the weight of reason."<sup>42</sup>

Third, the disputation occurred in the midst of slavery—at Harvard, in Boston, throughout Massachusetts—and an appallingly prosperous slave trade throughout New England. To carry the disputation over slavery into film without the voice of any enslaved person would be its own kind of distortion, at least as unfaithful to the historical moment as bringing an enslaved person into the field of the disputation. Worse, isolating the disputation, putting it just between the two Newbury scholars, risked repeating what a generation of scholars and activists have worked so hard to avoid: the rendering invisible of actual slavery.

Since the evolution of the remaining documents (from archive to book) moved from AB to ABAB, I took it as an open possibility to extend that dialogue. After all, we do not know how the patterns of speech and listening registered almost two hundred fifty years ago. Could people listen in 1773 to a back and forth of twenty minutes on each side, tracking with each intervention the reference to many subordinate points? The printed version is 8300 words—eighty minutes to read, at least, with even a moderate number of pauses. We know (just to give a film instance) that average shot length has changed dramatically even over the history of sound film from over ten seconds to under three; people in the twenty-first century often feel uncomfortable staying with the longer soliloquies of film from earlier times.<sup>43</sup> I cut back and forth, making ABAB into

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<sup>41</sup> See Thomas, *The Theory and Practice of Disputation*, pp. 18-19, on p. 19 cites Josiah Quincy, *History of Harvard University*, vol. 2 (1840), pp. 126-27. TP

<sup>42</sup> See Watts, *The Improvement of the Mind*, p. 179-80.

<sup>43</sup> See James E. Cutting, "Perception, Attention, and the Structure of Hollywood Film," Current Research, [people.psych.cornell.edu/~jec7/currerearch.htm](http://people.psych.cornell.edu/~jec7/currerearch.htm)

the more frequently varied string ABABAB and so on, while keeping as much of the language of the original text intact as possible. This made the disputation more viewable today than it would have been spoken as AB or ABAB.

That left the second and third questions unresolved. Perhaps they could be taken on together, that is: might the *praeses* speak from the position of enslavement? But who? A fictional stand-in? A silent witness, a present-day or historical figure built on one of the men and women enslaved at Harvard in the 1700s but of whom we know so little? It was in this context that it seemed Phillis Wheatley's words could open the otherwise sealed-off narrative. In July 1773, she was living just a few miles from Harvard Yard, had already begun publishing important poems, had addressed the morality of slavery, and had a book in press.

Kidnapped from an area around (present-day) Senegal/Gambia in 1761 at around the age of seven or eight, a young African girl came to the ship owner and slave trader Timothy Fitch, who trafficked her to Boston. There John Wheatley, a wealthy merchant, bought her and named the sick and weak girl after the slave ship *Phillis*. Within sixteen months, she had mastered English sufficiently to read "the most difficult Parts of the Sacred Writings" (quoted in *PW*, p. xiii), and by 1767 she had penned an homage and a warning to "Ye pupils," the Harvard students, in "the University of CAMBRIDGE, in NEW-ENGLAND" (*PW*, pp. 12, 11). The poem was important enough for her to have revised it for her 1773 book. At Harvard, "systems of revolving worlds," exemplified learning for her, the astronomical theories of Nicolaus Copernicus, Galileo Galilei, and Isaac Newton:

Students, to you 'tis giv'n to scan the heights  
 Above, to traverse the ethereal space,  
 And mark the systems of revolving worlds. . . .  
 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 shunn'd, nor once remit your guard.  
 [*PW*, pp. 11–12]

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Young Phillis saw Harvard as few fourteen-year-olds have, even if Harvard did not see her. But she seized the moral high ground, alerting the students that their privileges “while they stay” were finite, that sin—the “deadly serpent in its egg”—threatened: “Ye blooming plants of human race divine / An *Ethiop* tells you ’tis your greatest foe” (*PW*, p. 12). Astronomy and morality joined in blank verse.

Phillis lived but an hour’s walk from Harvard Yard, but it might seem infinite. Or was it so far? True, she was doubly excluded from the college, as a woman and as an African-born slave. The academic cultivation of self, the training, rehearsing, and drilling that Eliphalet and Theodore received in Harvard Yard seem utterly removed from the young poet’s training. One should be careful. Objects in the mirror may be closer than they appear.

Wheatley biographer Vincent Carretta has shown how strong an education Susanna Wheatley and her daughter Mary gave to Phillis, including classical literature but also geography, history, politics, and English literature.<sup>44</sup> John C. Shields has made a persuasive argument for Phillis Wheatley’s instruction by Mather Byles, a graduate of Harvard (and nephew of Cotton Mather) and by the Rev. Samuel Cooper, who baptized her. Byles lived just across the street from the Wheatleys and had a long record of guiding young poets. Wheatley had access both to Byles’s *Poems on Several Occasions* and to his library of several thousand books. Like Byles, Cooper graduated from Harvard; he too continued as a mentor to her. Indeed, not only they but many of Phillis’s allies whose names show up on the attestation were Harvard graduates. Some lent her books they knew from their college training. Harvard was nearer than it might appear.<sup>45</sup> Wheatley’s virtuosity with classical literature offered her “access to Colonial elites . . . the power to critique Colonial civilization, and [a means to] secure her freedom.”<sup>46</sup>

Through Cooper and Mary Wheatley (John and Susanna’s daughter), among others, Wheatley also tapped into modern poetry. Clearly this included the works of Alexander Pope,

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<sup>44</sup> See Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*, p. 40.

<sup>45</sup>On Byles, see John Shields, *Phillis Wheatley’s Poetics of Liberation: Backgrounds and Contexts* (Knoxville, Tenn., 2008), p. 82 and Paula Loscocco, *Phillis Wheatley’s Miltonic Poetics* (New York, 2014), p. 11.

<sup>46</sup> Eric Ashley Hairston, “The Trojan Horse: Classics, Memory, Transformation, and Afric Ambition in *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*,” in *New Essays On Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Shields and Eric D. Lamore (Knoxville, Tenn., 2011), p. 89. Wheatley’s circumstances surely complicate—if we didn’t know that already—Foucault’s categorical statement that slavery is so constraining one could not speak of power at all (Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” *Critical Inquiry* 8 (Summer 1982): 790.

whose translation of the *Illiad* and *Odyssey* into heroic couplets was crucial both for the form (which Wheatley took for much of her work) and for the substance of Homeric episodes.<sup>47</sup> It included, too, John Milton as a prototype, both for his poetry and for the place of poetry and the poet in the world. Paula Loscocco argues that Wheatley patterned the episodic structure of her book on Milton, structuring her *Poems* in a five-part arc: starting with ministerial authority inflected by trauma; passing through the imaginative and fanciful sublime; rising into historical-geographical experience; synthesizing poetry and experience; and gesturing in a final set of poems to “Brittania,” an idealized Anglo-American future. But Wheatley’s fashioning and self-fashioning went deeper even than metapoetic structure. Milton had joined theology to a classically grounded, revolutionary commonwealth. In 1773, Wheatley was carving a parallel authorial space (theologically, politically, poetically), as “a kind of American Milton.”<sup>48</sup>

Poetry, through heroic couplets, myth, consolation, and elegy, gave Wheatley an outward-facing place in the world, an authorial position from which to evaluate, console, and exhort. Simultaneously, poetry offered an *inward*-directed medium of self-formation, a spiritual exercise patterned directly on Augustinian meditation. As Shields notes, Augustine’s *de trinitate* was a required text at Harvard in this period, one that Reverend Cooper and Mather Byles would have known and seen as important for young Wheatley’s theological formation.<sup>49</sup> *De trinitate* teaches how to find, through meditation, the triune image of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the human faculties of memory, understanding, and volitional love. Wheatley engages and alters these ideas. “On IMAGINATION” (1773) transforms the meditation, elevating, not denigrating (as Augustine had) the faculty of imagination (see *PW*, pp. 36–37). But it is her “Thoughts on the WORKS of PROVIDENCE” (1773) that explicitly seeks to find God in us: “Among the mental pow’rs a question rose, / ‘What most the image of th’ Eternal shows?’” (*PW*, p. 28). Wheatley followed the Augustinian spiritual practice in her rendition of an interior, human trinity: “*Recollection*,” “*Reason*,” and “*Love*,” stand as the fundamental resources of humanity, even as

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<sup>47</sup> On Wheatley’s use of classical sources, see for example Hairston, “The Trojan Horse.”

<sup>48</sup> Loscocco, *Phillis Wheatley’s Miltonic Poetics*, p. 9. Also, importantly on Wheatley and Milton, see Reginald A. Wilburn, *Preaching the Gospel of Black Revolt: Appropriating Milton in Early African American Literature* (Pittsburgh, 2014), esp. chap. 2.

<sup>49</sup> See Shields, *Phillis Wheatley and the Romantics* (Knoxville, Tenn., 2010), pp. 7–10.

she vests her world in the “*Nature*” that figured in her time, the time of Romanticism, not Augustine’s (*PW*, p. 29).<sup>50</sup>

Phillis Wheatley worked on herself in a way that also pushed against the dehumanizing status of slavery. She did that through her rising reputation as a poet, and through her address to prominent figures and on religious and classical themes. In her *poetic* meditations—as spiritual exercise—she established herself and others together in the image of God. Against the claim that Africans were a people without religion, she cultivated a wider, inclusive, spiritual humanity. More generally, taking up what she learned from Byles, Cooper, Mary Wheatley, and others, she gained a formation linked to Harvard. But her education obviously differed from that allowed by four years at a residential college with five hundred years of (British) university structure and two millennia of classical teachings behind it. Unlike Eliphalet or Theodore, Phillis had to assemble her formation, including theology, beyond scholarly texts.

Take the staggeringly influential itinerant evangelical minister George Whitefield. His emotional, urgent speech gave power to the *spoken* word: he delivered some eighteen thousand sermons to an estimated ten million listeners. Whitefield’s Boston appearance in 1770 drew vast crowds, Phillis Wheatley no doubt among them; he addressed her church, Old South, three times.<sup>51</sup> His idiosyncratic Calvinism split from the Old Calvinism and Unitarianism that divided Harvard faculty; *nothing* about Whitefield appealed to the Harvard authorities. In 1740, in the midst of the Great Awakening, Harvard’s president and faculty lambasted Whitefield for his “Destruction” of churches, for his itinerant ways, and for slander against men of God. Even worse, said the Cantabrigians, was his turn toward *enthusiasm* and away from “instruct[ion of] the mind.”<sup>52</sup> Whitefield relied on *his* dreams, *his* inspired direction.

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<sup>50</sup> On *De Trinitate* see for example Mary T. Clark, “*De Trinitate*,” chap. 7 of *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (New York, 2001), pp. 91–102.

<sup>51</sup> See Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*, pp. 33–34. On Whitefield, see “George Whitefield: Sensational Evangelist of Britain and America,” *Christianity Today*, [www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/evangelistsandapologists/george-whitefield.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/evangelistsandapologists/george-whitefield.html)

<sup>52</sup> *THE TESTIMONY of the President, Professors, Tutors and Hebrew Instructor of HARVARD COLLEGE in Cambridge, against the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield, and his Conduct* (BOSTON, 1744), p. 3.

On slavery, Whitefield had lobbied *for* slavery in Georgia, but also included Africans among his audiences and spoke out against excesses of cruelty.<sup>53</sup> Shortly after Whitefield preached to Boston, he died. Wheatley elegized the “music of thy tongue,” that would “[i]nflame the soul” as he bolstered America (“When his AMERICANS were burden’d sore, / When streets were crimson’d with their guiltless gore!”) and included Africans in his invitation to convert,

Take HIM ye *Africans*, he longs for you;  
Impartial SAVIOUR, is his title due;  
If you will chuse to walk in grace’s road,  
You shall be sons, and kings, and priests to GOD. [*PW*, pp. 113, 114]

Choices for Wheatley were never to be had one by one—in Whitefield’s musical eloquence, in his invitation to a soul-inflaming faith, she sought to secure a place for herself and for all Africans.

In addressing this late eighteenth-century world mixing writing and speech, film could complement print with voiced poetry and disputation. Not because dissertations or verse must be only oral, but rather because both these forms oscillated back and forth. Film could make manifest historical relationships: Phillis would *see* and warn her scholar-contemporaries of sin, while in their absorption, Eliphalet and Theodore would not see her. Finally, film could capture, in sound, the interruption of prose by poetry.

In the film, Phillis Wheatley would not appear as a *praeses*, but as a moral poet-judge nevertheless, testifying to and even assessing the Harvard students. When Eliphalet protested that the African has no philosophy, there stands a perfect reply in a letter Wheatley wrote in her long-running correspondence with the Mohegan Presbyterian minister the Reverend Samson Occom on 11 February 1774. Speaking of “our modern Egyptians,” that is, contemporary slave owners replicating the sins of biblical Pharaohs: “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 Egyptians I will assert, that the same principle lives in us. . . . How well the Cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the exercise of oppressive Power over others

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<sup>53</sup> See Jessica M. Parr, *Inventing George Whitefield: Race, Revivalism, and the Making of a Religious Icon* (Jackson, Miss., 2015), p. 67.

agree,—I humbly think it does not require the Penetration of a Philosopher to determine” (*PW*, p. 153).<sup>54</sup>

Accused of being a people without philosophy by no less an authority than Hume and Kant (or proximately, Eliphalet), Wheatley flipped the charge: No philosopher was needed to adjudicate the horror of slavery. No philosopher would be required to weigh liberty against oppressive power. Similarly, critics were many who claimed Africans could not have true religion, proper moral sentiments, or original poetry. Wheatley’s life and work embodied a refutation. *Poems on Various Subjects: Religious and Moral* put poetry, God, and morality in the very title. From this “religious and moral,” she sought to create an opening to truth not through the application of practiced logic, but instead through revealed and practiced faith. So while sharing a great deal of instructional text and poetry with the Harvard youths, when Phillis Wheatley wrote about truth it was not the outcome of logical or ethical debate but instead, almost always, the truth of revelation. Writing to an atheist when she was fourteen (1767), Wheatley referred to “the mighty God”; “His is bright truth without a dark disguise” (*PW*, p. 69). Consoling a “Lady” after the death of a young child, “Her soul enlarg’d to heav’nly pleasure springs, / She feeds on truth and uncreated things” (*PW*, p. 45). Remembering Reverend Samuel Cooper, she marked his devotion: “Bright Truth thy guide without disguise” (*PW*, p. 97).

Wheatley’s distant warning in 1767 to the Harvard students would open the film; the graduating students dispute until we arrive at Eliphalet’s denunciation (“no religion, no philosophy”) against which Wheatley hits back (no philosopher needed). The Harvard disputation then continues, ending with a verse from her remarkable poem, “To the Right Honorable WILLIAM, Earl of DARTMOUTH.” This was a full-on plea for liberty, sent to William Legge, “His Majesty’s Principal Secretary of State for North-America,” on 10 October 1772.

Wheatley begins with British chains on America, and ends with American ones on Africans:

No more, *America*, in mournful strain  
Of wrongs, and grievance unredress’d complain,  
No longer shall thou dread the iron chain,

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<sup>54</sup> These lines come from Wheatley’s “Letter to Reverend Samson Occom, 11 February 1774.” Samson Occom addressed the natural rights and suffering of the enslaved; see *The Collected Writings of Samson Occom, Mohegan: Leadership and Literature in Eighteenth-Century Native America*, ed. Joanna Brooks (New York, 2006).

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? [*PW*, p. 39–40]

Britain's tyranny *enslaves* America with iron chains, and *tyranny* seizes *her* into slavery. By putting the chains and slavery on the nation, and tyranny imposed over both her and America, Wheatley elliptically joins freedom from Britain and from slavery. While Wheatley reached into evangelical, classical, and poetic currents to bolster freedom, Parsons had argued with his academic mix of logic, classicism, and Enlightenment politics.<sup>55</sup> *Both* drew together freedom from British domination and freedom from slavery: tyranny is tyranny.

Henry Louis Gates, having written on Wheatley's "trials," agreed to codirect "No More, America."<sup>56</sup> As a framework, the aim was for each character to traverse an arc—an affective-conceptual movement. Theodore stands as an Enlightenment figure, keeping emotion in check but gaining force. Eliphalet begins "calm and sedate," but loses that equanimity when Theodore asks, incredulously, if Eliphalet would increase the slaves' happiness by increasing their misery.

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<sup>55</sup> For her merging of classical and modern poetry, her use of and engagement with contemporary sources and themes, see the excellent introduction to the essays collected in *New Essays on Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Shields and Lamore. Whatever their politics, critics responded to her classical virtuosity. One anonymous critic for *London Magazine* wrote, "We are the more surprised too, as we find her verses interspersed with the poetical names of the ancients, which she has in every instance used with strict propriety" (quoted in Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*, p. 108).

<sup>56</sup> See Peter Galison, *No More, America*, dir. Peter Galison and Henry Louis Gates (2017).

At that turning point Eliphalet becomes bellicose, rigid. As for Phillis Wheatley, she starts on a second-floor landing, looking upward, hesitant, her fourteen-year old self offering the students admiration and warning. Returning at the middle of the film, at the half-floor landing, she resumes with more confidence, concluding on the same level as the boys, facing them, though they do not see her. She begins this final bit urgently, “No More, America, In mournful strain / Of wrongs, and grievance unredress’d complain, / No longer shall thou dread the iron chain.” And with this final judgment, the thirteen-minute film concludes, giving a third term to the privileged disputation.

On 8 May 1773, Phillis Wheatley sailed to London with the Wheatley son Nathaniel. Greeting her as a celebrity, her London admirers included Benjamin Franklin and native British dignitaries—and she succeeded in securing publication of her book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, which appeared on 1 September 1773, just six weeks after the Harvard disputation. Wheatley arrived back to Boston on 13 September, having negotiated her freedom in London, building on the new legal landscape (post-Somerset) to negotiate her liberation. By 18 October 1773, she had her manumission, her star ascending. Voltaire admired the poetry.<sup>57</sup> In 1776, she composed a poem honoring George Washington, identifying him with Augustus via Virgil; the Commander reciprocated with an invitation to his wartime headquarters in Cambridge.

Phillis married a free black man, John Peters, with whom she had three children, but fortune cascaded against them. Two died young while Peters struggled to run his grocery store, landing in jail for debts in 1784. On 31 December 1784, at the age of 31, Phillis died in Boston, soon followed by her third child. Though several later poems made it to publication, her second volume did not. Sold, then lost after her death, Wheatley’s manuscript has never been found.

#### **4. July 21, 1773: Knowledge, Poetry, Slavery**

Out of the vast corpus of Michel Foucault’s writing, Arnold Davidson draws our attention to two concepts of great use in understanding this early 1770s moment in which slavery, liberty, and natural law entwine. The first is the notion of philosophical exercises: these aim to cultivate

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<sup>57</sup> See, for example, Gates, *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley*, p. 33. The outer limit date of liberation is given by her letter to Colonel David Worcester, 18 October 1773 (*PW*, pp. 146-47). And see Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*, on the voyage to London (p. 95) and on Voltaire (p. 165).

what counts as a candidate for true or false. In the nineteenth century, for example, claims about earth history became open to confirmation or refutation through the location of fossils in strata. The second, spiritual exercises, are designed to put someone in a position to gain access to truth—modifying the self as a means of opening up to truth. Such self-shaping procedures or technologies might advocate, at different times and places, self-mastery, purity, power, or deprivation. Each aimed to cultivate a self such that truth could emerge.<sup>58</sup> The centuries-old syllogistic disputations carried demands on the self, more on the side of a spiritual than of a purely philosophical exercise, aiming as they did by the early 1700s at the production of a restrained minister defending biblical truth. Because it involved so much more of the person—reaching beyond controlled logic into ethical and pathetic argumentative conduct, the forensic disputation falls even farther into the realm of spiritual exercise. Ideally, it also issued in a persona: an ethically cultivated lawyer-politician fit to shape events.<sup>59</sup> Disputation training increasingly brought the body in line with logical, emotional, and ethical argument; students rehearsed to modulate voice, simplify sentences, reduce metaphors, configure the body, and suppress excess. If one takes the philosophical and spiritual exercises (as I would urge) to form a scale, not a binary, both forms of the disputation are spiritual exercises, with the forensic more so as it conditions a greater part of the self to access truth.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> See Arnold Davidson, "In Praise of Counter-Conduct." Importantly, for Foucault, as he emphasizes in his discussion with the philosophy department at Berkeley, the self (as he understands it) is not a pre-existing *thing* that is then given this or that complexion; instead, it exists precisely in the back and forth of the techniques and practices that cultivate it. See Daniele Lorenzini and Arnold I. Davidson, introduction to Michel Foucault, *Qu'est-ce que la critique? Suivi de La Culture de soi*, ed. Henri-Paul Fruchaud and Lorenzini (Paris, 1978), pp. 11–30.

<sup>59</sup> It may well be that John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and others bolstered their ability to lead in part through their own disputation training. Indeed, twenty-five signers of the Declaration of Independence were lawyers, as were thirty-two framers of the Constitution. See "How Many of the Founding Fathers Were Lawyers?" State Bar of Michigan Blog, 4 July 2011, [sbmblog.typepad.com/sbm-blog/2011/07/how-many-of-the-founding-fathers-were-lawyers.html](http://sbmblog.typepad.com/sbm-blog/2011/07/how-many-of-the-founding-fathers-were-lawyers.html). On Madison, Jefferson, and Adams, see Thomas, *The Theory and Practice of Disputation*, p. 54 citing Meriweather, pp. 285–86. TP

<sup>60</sup> Arnold Davidson, "Foucault, le perfectionnisme et la tradition des exercices spirituels," trans. Solange Chavel, in *La voix et la vertu: Variétés du perfectionnisme moral*, ed. Sandra Laugier (Paris, 2010), pp. 449–67. In a clear formulation of the Foucauldian position, he distinguishes 1) philosophy as the activity designed to set out the conditions by which the true is separated from the false from 2) spirituality, which is the work on oneself in order to make oneself better

The forensic disputation in the third quarter of the eighteenth century, through rehearsal and performance, worked *both* on the speaker *and* on the listener, configuring both to better access truth—often about contemporary civil issues; here, of course, about slavery. Right conduct helped to conduct rightly or, put another way, passed from ethics to politics. Phillis Wheatley’s was a cultivation of a self through the writing of poetry, a form of meditative reflection on her own reading, experience, imagination, and faith. But her life in poetry demonstrated (not only claimed) resistance. In the face of slavery, reason-through-poetry undid the claim against the African of possessing “no philosophy” or higher reason. Against “no religion,” Wheatley’s neo-Augustinian, poetic spiritual exercises bound humanity, including hers, to the divine. Her myriad ethical reflections rebutted the charge of “no morals”; and her poetry, so often spoken through classicism, confuted the assault of “no culture.” Here was a politics at once explicit and implicit: one’s own conduct as a means to conduct others.

In the summer of 1773, Eliphalet and Theodore arrived as the most privileged of young New Englanders, Phillis as enslaved but on the verge of world-spanning fame. All three swam in turbulent political and theological currents. Unitarians and Calvinists split over whether to ground the search for religious truth in the primacy of a reasoned self or a self of passionate revelation. In the disputation of 1773, Parsons, raised as a Unitarian, defended Enlightenment. Pearson, a disciplined Old Calvinist, focused on salvation in the slavery disputation and over the years increasingly urged a religion of the heart grounded in text—rejecting both Unitarian liberalism and populist evangelism. But times were fluid and positions contradictory. It was Parson’s family, not Pearson’s, that held slaves. Theodore’s father baptized both the Calvinist Eliphalet *and* the Unitarian who bested him to become president of Harvard. Wheatley identified

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prepared to get access to the truth, work that might be renunciation, ascetics, conversions of the gaze, transformation of the self. Foucault claimed that in antiquity these two projects were not separate, but as Davidson interprets Foucault, philosophy enters the modern when access to truth no longer depends on anything *other* than philosophy—that is, when the nature of the cultivated self is no longer essential to being receptive to truth (p. 460). I am utterly sympathetic to the analytic separation of the 1) and 2), and clearly agree they are merged in antiquity. I am not persuaded that the spiritual exercise vaporizes in the modern period—think, for example, of the Vienna circle and their efforts to cultivate a new, “modern” man (in a transformation of the self) for whom a philosophy, an aesthetics, and a politics of the time were all of a piece (see Peter Galison, “Aufbau/Bauhaus: Logical Positivism and Architectural Modernism,” *Critical Inquiry* 16 [Summer 1990]: 709–752).

in part with Whitefield's evangelism, finding it embraced Africans, while maintaining close ties to Presbyterian Minister Occom and Congregationalist Minister Byles.

Both graduating students and enslaved poet re-formed antique tropes and more recent forms into vivid if conflicted politics. Pearson and Parsons created a signal event and document against slavery from inside the long-standing system of disputation. Wheatley produced—and was produced by—a body of work at once American, British, African, classical, Christian, and abolitionist. Of course, focusing on these three twenty-one-year-olds cannot possibly provide typicality, and it offers but a glimpse into prerevolutionary slavery. The task of making visible the history and legacy of university slavery (and slavery in general) is vast. Surely it will involve the multiplication of collective and interdisciplinary historical work and the re-examination of institutions, laws, and practices. Film might be one way to complement writing as we grapple with the critical persuasive force once occupied by public disputation or spoken poetry.

As an intervention in the battle over slavery, the July 1773 disputation was both a resounding success and a total failure. It was a success insofar as it insistently brought into the university, and to the public, a considered battle over the morality of slavery. It was a failure insofar as these arguments about Enlightenment principles and slavery barely dented the newly-forming nation's larger slave economy. Of course, we know the sequel: this particular pair of 1773 books was rapidly overshadowed by events. In the end, slavery was driven from Massachusetts in the 1780s not by politicians or scholars, but by enslaved men and women who fought in court. We know too the massive, larger struggle that failed to destroy slavery for almost a century, and only then through the devastations of civil war. But in this long history, it is still worth bringing to mind these young thinkers who, with voices and pens, in a struggle to form themselves, addressed slavery on the eve of a still—two hundred and fifty years later— incomplete revolution.

**FIGURES**

FIGURE 1. Disputation, Illustrious School (later, University of Amsterdam). Note the judge (*praeses*) at the center, on a higher podium; the speaker stands below the *praeses*. Wikimedia.

**Figure 2. (From left)** Eliphalet Pearson (Connor Doyle), Phillis Wheatley (Ashley Lalonde), and Theodore Parsons (Caleb Spiegel-Ostrom), in “No More, America,” directed by Peter Galison and Henry Louis Gates, HD, 14 mins., 2017.