

PHILLIS WHEATLEY, "On Being Brought from Africa to America"

1770

Phillis Wheatley (1753–1784) was born in Africa, transported as a girl to slavery in North America, and eventually bought by John Wheatley of Boston, who taught her to read and write. Wheatley was freed after her master's death in 1778. She was the first African American poet published in America. Most of her work is on religious topics.

'Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,
 Taught my benighted soul to understand
 That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too;
 Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
 Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
 "Their colour is a diabolic dye."
 Remember, *Christians*, negroes, black as *Cain*,
 May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (Denver, CO: W. H. Lawrence, 1887), 17.

PRACTICING Historical Thinking

Identify: According to Wheatley, what is God's role in this poem?

Analyze: As you may recall from Chapter 4, a writer's **attitude** is her attitude toward a subject. One word that often describes an attitude is **tone**, which usually is discerned through an analysis of the writer's language or **diction**. Is Wheatley's tone at the end of the poem hopeful or cynical? What might explain her tone?

Evaluate: Redemption, in this poem, means to be saved from sin and become Christian. Based on this poem, determine the extent to which God determines redemption.

THOMAS PAINE, *Common Sense*

1776

Thomas Paine (1737–1809) arrived in Philadelphia from England on the eve of the American Revolution. Paine wrote for Pennsylvania periodicals before anonymously publishing *Common Sense* (1776), a pamphlet that eventually sold 100,000 copies and helped solidify popular support for American independence.

But there is another and greater distinction, for which no truly natural or religious reason can be assigned, and that is, the distinction of men into **KINGS** and **SUBJECTS**.

Male and female are the distinctions of nature, good and bad, the distinction of heaven; but how a race of men came into the world so exalted above the rest, and distinguished like some new species, is worth enquiring into, and whether they are the means of happiness or of misery to mankind.

In the early ages of the world, according to the scripture chronology, there were no kings; the consequence of which was, there were no wars: it is the pride of kings which throws mankind into confusion. Holland without a king hath enjoyed more peace for this last century than any of the monarchical governments in Europe. . . .

Government by kings was first introduced into the world by the Heathens, from whom the children of Israel copied the custom. It was the most prosperous invention the Devil ever set on foot for the promotion of idolatry. The Heathens paid divine honors to their deceased kings, and the Christian world hath improved on the plan, by doing the same to their living ones. How impious is the title of *sacred majesty* applied to a worm who in the midst of his splendor is crumbling into dust!

Thomas Paine, *Common Sense: Addressed to the Inhabitants of America* (New York: Peter Eckler, 1918), 8–9.

PRACTICING Historical Thinking

Identify: What is the influence of the arrival of kings in history, according to Paine?

Analyze: What is the role of religion in Paine’s argument?

Evaluate: How does this document represent both the religious thinking of the First Great Awakening and the secular thinking of the Enlightenment?

DOCUMENT 5.5

ABIGAIL ADAMS, Letter to John Adams

1776

In this letter to her husband, John Adams, Abigail Adams expresses support for American independence but asks her husband to improve women’s traditionally subordinate role to men.

I long to hear that you have declared an independence. And by the way, in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands! Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could! If particular care and