



To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth

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Wheatley, a slave, had met William Legge, the earl of Dartmouth, when she was in England for the publication of her collected poems. She knew him to be a friend of the countess of Huntingdon, a supporter of Wheatley's work. Because the countess also supported the abolishment of slavery, Wheatley's hopes were that the earl would share these abolitionist sensibilities. Putting her faith in this hope, she makes a frank personal appeal to him in this poem.

Because the earl had opposed the Stamp Act, he was considered a friend of the colonists, and the poem opens with a picture of New England's joy at his new political appointment. The reins of authority will be, in his hands, "silken," suggesting relief from the tyranny colonists had experienced at the hands of England's monarch. Wheatley expresses her—and America's—confidence that past wrongs will be made right.

The second stanza moves from the perspective of all New England to a personal one. The poet suggests that Dartmouth may wonder about the source of her love of freedom. Her answer is uncharacteristically outspoken. She refers to the "cruel fate" of being kidnapped from her African homeland and of the anguish this would have caused her parents in losing their "babe belov'd." As a slave, she truly knows the value of liberty. Having suffered so much, she wants to spare others the pain she has known in her loss of freedom; thus her hopes are that New England will be spared further tyranny. The emotional restraint of most neoclassical poetry is set aside in this poem, and Wheatley speaks from the heart. The decision to express her feelings about her bondage was a risky one.

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