



Poetry and the Constitution

Wednesday, December 8, 2021, 12 - 1 p.m.

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[00:00:00] Jeffrey Rosen: Hello friends and welcome to the National Constitution Center. I am Jeffrey Rosen. I'm the president and CEO of this wonderful institution. Friends, as you know, we're a nonprofit and we rely on your support to put on wonderful programs like this. And I'm thrilled to share that we are launching an exciting crowdsourcing campaign, thanks to our friends at the John Templeton Foundation.

[00:00:20] Every dollar that you give to support we the people and live at the NCC podcasts will be matched, uh, one to one up to a total of \$234,000 to celebrate the 234th anniversary of the ratification of the constitution. You can go to constitutioncenter.org/wethepeople and it would be wonder if you could give any amount, \$5, \$10 or more to signal your membership in this meaningful community of lifelong learners and your support for the programming that makes it possible.

[00:00:59] Tanaya Tauber: Welcome to Live at the National Constitution Center, the podcast sharing live constitutional conversations and debates hosted by the center in-person and online. I'm Tanaya Tauber, senior director of town hall programs. From John Milton to Mercy Otis Warren and Phillis Wheatley, poets have had a long lasting impact on America's constitutional ideals.

[00:01:19] How did these poets and poetry in general influence the U.S. constitution? Who are the poetic influences on the founders? And how are the founders themselves poets? And how is the constitution itself a poem? To discuss the intersection of poetry and the constitution, we convened a panel of experts.

[00:01:38] Our guests are Vincent Carretta editor of the Penguin Classics editions of the Complete Writings of Phillis Wheatley and professor emeritus of English at the University of Maryland, Eileen M. Hunt, professor of political science at the University of Notre Dame, an author of *Artificial Life After Frankenstein*.

[00:01:55] And Eric Slauter, associate professor and director of the Karla Scherer Center for the Study of American Culture at the University of Chicago, an author of *The State as a Work of Art: The Cultural Origins of the Constitution*. Jeffrey Rosen, president and CEO of the National Constitution Center moderates. This conversation was streamed live on December 8th, 2021. Here's Jeff to get the conversation started.

[00:02:20] Jeffrey Rosen: Wow. So looking forward to our conversation. Thank you so much for joining us. Vincent Carretta, Eileen Hunt and Eric Slauter, this is a dream team of scholars, uh, who can illuminate the important and often unexplored connections between poetry and the constitution. Professor Slauter, let's begin with you. You have that book with a wonderful title, *The State as a Work of Art: The Cultural Origins of the Constitution*.

[00:02:46] Um, we're here to discuss poetry and among the poets cited by the founders, according to Donald Lutz's article from a few years ago, the second most cited poet was Alexander Pope after Shakespeare. There was Shakespeare, Pope and then Milton. And many of the founders quoted Pope, including Abigail Adams, who regularly quoted or paraphrased, uh, Pope to substantiate admissions she made to her children.

[00:03:14] Um, she encouraged her young son, John Quincy Adams to be virtuous, uh, reminding him that an honest man is the noblest work of God. Uh, she regularly cited Pope's dictum That order is heaven's first law, and she was constantly invoking as so many of the founders did a distinction that Pope repeated often between reason and passion and the need to use our powers of reason to moderate or temper our ruling passion.

[00:03:39] Tell us about Alexander Pope and why he was among the most sighted poets of the founding era.

[00:03:44] Eric Slauter: Well, thank you so much for, for having me and for, um, uh, launching this discussion. I'm thrilled to talk about Pope, but just as a kind of, um, prologue or preamble, it strikes me that there are maybe three ways, uh, in way we could think about the constitution and poetry. I'll sort of work my way up to Pope.

[00:04:05] So the first way is to be thinking about the constitution considered as a poem, which is a, a kind of per durable strain in both the culture and in the scholarship around the constitution. There was a book not 10 years ago, um, by Garrett Epps called *American Epic*, which argued that, you know, the preamble itself was a kind of, of poem.

[00:04:29] It would not be difficult, I think, um, although it might not be so pleasurable to put together a small anthology of poems by important framers, almost every multi volume edition of the papers of the founding fathers. The first volume inevitably has, uh, one or two poems We could look at, say the committee on style and arrangement of the federal convention.

[00:04:51] And, you know, note that James Madison, uh, Alexander Hamilton, Gouverneur Morris, um, all, uh, produced verse, um, some of it doggerel. Uh, and Benjamin Franklin even went so far as to talk about in his autobiography, the effect of writing poetry on his verbal facility throughout his life.

[00:05:13] So we could talk about the constitution makers as poets, or we could even, um, talk about the constitutional interpreters as poets. And here we might invoke someone like, um, Joseph Story, one of the, one of the key early members of the court, who as a young man at the turn of the 19th century published a 260 page poem called *The Power of Solitude*.

[00:05:38] Um, the, the story is that later he was quite embarrassed by this and tried to suppress, buy up all the copies. Um, but certainly they, um, they circulated for a while. Uh, the second way we might think about this is about the Constitution's influence on poetry. And I think that's maybe one of the topics that my colleagues will be taking up.

[00:05:57] That's, you know, how did the constitution shape American poetry from the age of Phillis Wheatley and Mercy Otis Warren, um, up through the age of Amanda Gorman. The third way, and the way in which I think Pope is most relevant is to think about the poetic influence on the institution. And here we'd be interested not only in what framers wrote, but on what they read.

[00:06:22] Um, how did the reading of poetry prepare, uh, people? How does it now prepare people for careers in law? As, as an English professor at Chicago, one of my favorite quotations is by the late John Paul Stevens who came to this campus in 1979 and said, um, that the study of English literature, especially lyric poetry was the best preparation, uh, for the law, that there were certainly exportable or portable, um, soft skills that one could use.

[00:06:52] And, um, the ranking that you mentioned of who was most, uh, most prevalent reminds me of a study done sort of tongue in cheek, uh, around 2015 that ranked the current Supreme Court justices by the number of citations to literary texts. And here Justice Scalia was dominant, um, with something like 40 different citations to literary texts in something like 800 different opinions.

[00:07:19] But for me, what's most interesting is thinking about poetry as a vehicle for political thought in the 18th century. And here Pope's essay on man, uh, which appeared, it was perhaps the most reprinted, one of the most reprinted poems of the, of the century. It was written in 1735, but, uh, circulated quite widely, um, in the age of the American revolution.

[00:07:45] Something like 90 different, uh, printings of it appeared between 1750 and 1800, and greater number appeared in the United States, the early United States, late British, uh, colonial America, um, then appeared in, uh, England. And it was a extremely, I would say conservative poem, uh, written by a conservative poet in the 1730s.

[00:08:09] Um, someone who had lots of opposition to the Walpole, uh, uh, Whigs regime. It was dedicated and written to a Tory politician named Henry St. John Lord Bolingbroke. And it included all sorts of justifications of why the world was the way it was. So, you know, many of you will know some of its, um, famous lines, hopes brings eternal in the human breast, man never is but always to be blessed, know thyself.

[00:08:39] Um, I presume not God to scan, the proper study of mankind is man. Uh, whatever is is right. And it was, uh, one particular line in this poem for forms of government, let fools contest, whatever is best administered is best. This was in many ways, one of the most internalized, um, aphorisms of political thought of the 18th century, and it irritated an international audience.

[00:09:10] Um, David Hume denounced it in a essay on the idea that politics could be reduced to science. Immanuel Kant, um, dismissed it in his, uh, work on perpetual peace. Um, John Adams

denounced it in his thoughts on government. He said, "Pope flatters tyrants too much when he says, um, you know, for forms of government, let fools contest."

[00:09:31] Hamilton called it a political heresy in the federalist. Um, but it worked its magic those lines, the divide between political form and political administration and that any political form might be okay or acceptable as long as it was well administered. This was something that, um, many argued against.

[00:09:52] And in the time of the framing, particularly anti federalists, who, um, felt that they were being asked to, uh, accept a political form that was to them unthinkable, um, merely by being promised that it would be well administered. So we see, as you were saying, all of this, all of these citations of it.

[00:10:14] Um, Abigail Adams sights it, John Marshall transcribed the poem on, uh, on the Virginia Frontier in the early, in the early 1760s. Uh, Daniel Webster has said to have gotten a copy, probably a very small cheap printing like this one that was done at the end of the 18th century in, in the small town of Wrentham, Massachusetts, um, and, and to have committed it to memory.

[00:10:38] So there are many ways I think, in which, you know, um, thinking about poetry as a vehicle for political thought, both for accepting political thought in the case of those who took Pope, um, as axiomatic and as true dogma, um, and those who chose to argue against it. It was sort of an unavoidable aspect of late 18th century political culture that you would engage with this particular poem in some way.

[00:11:06] And I think, you know, that's maybe hard for us to, to resurrect, um, at this particular moment, but it was certainly, uh, I think something that had a controlling influence.

[00:11:18] Jeffrey Rosen: Thank you so much for that. Wonderful introduction to the topic. You've just whet all of our appetite for so much more learning, including about the verse of the members of the constitutional convention. And it was just an important reminder of how central the study of the humanities and a diverse was to the moral and political sensibility of the founding.

[00:11:42] Professor Hunt, let's turn now to, um, Phillis Wheatley. She was as Professor Henry Louis Gates, uh, put it the most famous African on the face of the earth, the Oprah Winfrey of her time. She was the first published African American poet, uh, brought in chains to America at the age of nine where she acquired a classical education and her poems were so famous in London that in 1772, a collection of Boston eminence including John Hancock held a trial to determine whether she'd in fact written her own poems.

[00:12:16] And after examining her in the classics, they concluded that she had indeed published them. And, uh, she went on to publish much more. Tell us about this great genius. How did she come to write these, uh, superb poems and what themes in her important poetry would you like to introduce our audience to.

[00:12:36] Eileen M. Hunt: Thank you to that wonderful introduction to Wheatley. And I agree that with, uh, the scholarship of Vincent Carretta, that she was in fact a genius in bondage. The way I became introduced to the work of Phillis Wheatley is through her peer in Boston, uh, Hannah Mather Crocker. Hannah Mather Crocker was born in 1752 just a year before Wheatley was born.

[00:12:59] Uh, and Hannah Mather Crocker, uh, lived a long life. Uh, she lived to the year 1829. And in the 1820s, she wrote a history of Boston in which she talked about her friendship with Phillis Wheatley. And it's quite touching the way that she records the life of Wheatley in her history of the city of Boston.

[00:13:18] Because as you point out Jeff, uh, Wheatley was an international celebrity. Uh, and what, what Crocker does in her history of Boston, which was unpublished at her death, but I believe she intended to publish it had she been able to do so, when she does in her history of Boston is to frame Wheatley as a hero for the city of Boston as well.

[00:13:37] And for the, for the, for the revolutionary era in which they both came of age. And so, uh, what, what Crocker says about Wheatley is that she was, she was not treated as a slave in, in her family's, in the Wheatley household in Boston. Uh, she was freed the very soon after being purchased and she was treated as a member of the family.

[00:13:59] She also says that she was very highly educated in the family. And she showed herself to be a prodigy in Crocker's language very early. And her poetry was encouraged by the family. Uh, Crocker's father, Samuel Mather was a, was a minister, um, the, the son of Cotton Mather, uh, the famous puritan theologian minister who was scandalized by the Salem witch trials.

[00:14:21] Uh, and Samuel Mather was involved in that trial of, of Wheatley where they were judging, whether she was in fact capable of producing this poetry herself. And he was one of the, uh, Boston patriarchs who signed on to say, to confirm that she was indeed this prodigy, uh, that her family believed her to be, and that his own daughter believed her to be.

[00:14:45] Uh, and in the history of Boston written by Hannah Mather Crocker as an elderly woman in the 1820s, uh, she recounts how Wheatley gave her copies of her poems. And, uh, she includes, uh, a snippet of Wheatley's poem on imagination which I believe dates to 1773, if I'm correct.

[00:15:06] If you're familiar with this poem, it's, it's, it's, it's a metaphysical poem about nature of the imagination and the, the, the liberating power of the imagination to sweep away, uh, the human mind from its present concerns. Uh, there's imagery of winter and, and how the imagination can be so powerful as to sweep us away from the, the weather itself.

[00:15:28] Uh, and she talks about how we can, um, leave the rolling universe behind, we can range the realms above. And, uh, there's been a lot of scholarship on this poem talking about how it's a metaphor for how people even slaves, even the enslaved or people who have previously been enslaved like Wheatley herself can use the imagination to liberate themselves internally and perhaps externally.

[00:15:54] Because what Wheatley's life story shows us is that in fact, a freed slave could liberate herself and rise to international intellectual stature. Um, later in her life, Wheatley went to London, I believe to promote her poetry. But, um, there's a, there's a, a sad part of the story of Wheatley's life that Hannah Mather Crocker recounts.

[00:16:15] And as, as Vincent has noted in his scholarship, Hannah Mather Crocker is the only eyewitness to this story. Uh, and so her *Reminiscences & Traditions of Boston* is a really important source for understanding Wheatley's life. Uh, but what, what Crocker records is that one reason why Wheatley died young at about age 30 may be that in Crocker's words, her husband did not treat her well.

[00:16:38] Uh, Vincent has recorded in his scholarship how, um, her husband was in jail for, for debt for, for some period of time, um, during the marriage. The marriage may have been troubled, uh, according to Crocker's account. We don't know exactly, um, what the nature of the abuse was, but Crocker suggests there was abuse. Uh, and I think that as a feminist historian, I take Crocker's word very seriously.

[00:17:02] Uh, and I think there's a poignancy to Crocker recording the *Imagination* poem in her history of Boston, because I think what Crocker's trying to say is that she hopes that her friend was ultimately able to liberate herself at least internally, um, from the suffering that she faced in her life as a black woman and a freed slave.

[00:17:22] Jeffrey Rosen: Wow. Thank you so much for that incredibly compelling introduction to the genius of Phillis Wheatley and to her poem, *Imagination*. Professor Carretta first of all, congratulations on the citation of the writings of Phillis Wheatley by the Modern Language Association.

[00:17:38] In recognizing its excellence, the MLA said that you persuasively present Wheatley as an important early American writer who links the politics of liberty in the American colonies to the issue of race and slavery. Professor Hunt has put on the table, her poem, *Imagination*. And I do wanna just take the privilege of reading just a bit of it, 'cause it's so meaningful to actually recite the primary text.

[00:18:03] This is Wheatley on the *Imagination*, such is thy power, nor are thine orders vain, O thou the leader of the mental train: In full perfection all thy works are wrought, and thine the sceptre o'er the realms of thought. Before thy throne the subject-passions bow, of subject-passions sovereign ruler thou; At thy command joy rushes on the heart, And through the glowing veins the spirits dart.

[00:18:28] Ugh, wonderful to read. Professor Carretta please, um, help put that and Phillis Wheatley's other poems in context and tell us how Phillis Wheatley in her poems explored the connection between liberty, slavery, virtue and the imagination.

[00:18:46] Vincent Carretta: Thank you for inviting me. When I was first invited, uh, participate on this panel, my initial reaction was Phillis Wheatley and the constitution while she died in 1784 in years before the constitution. So what would be the connection? Then I thought about it and I looked, uh, again at the preamble, we the people.

[00:19:09] And I thought about how often Phillis Wheatley uses the first person plural in her poetry to construct yourself first as a kinda proto national American voice, and eventually as a proto poet laureate of the country in the making. And this starts really quite early in her career. Uh, certainly, uh, her poem to, uh, George III which she wrote in, uh, 1768.

[00:19:48] She shifts to the we as if she is representing all Americans in addressing him and thanking George for repealing the Stamp Act. And the poem that brought her of course, international fame, certainly transatlantic fame was in 1770 her eulogy on the death of the Reverend George Whitefield in which she addresses ye Africans.

[00:20:17] Initially she's talking about, she has a separation between white and African people and that Christ is available to both, but by the end of the poem she transitions when she addresses directly, uh, Whitefield's patron, the Countess of Huntington, she says, we Americans, again, as establishing this identity as, as the spokesperson for Americans.

[00:20:47] In 1772 when she writes to Dartmouth, she includes a passage that explained why she can speak about slavery as she does, because she makes a transition from the rhetorical use that the American rebels or so called patriots used to refer to themselves as a slave by the British government, especially the British ministry to talking about actual child slavery, the kind of slavery that Phillis Wheatley herself experienced.

[00:21:22] And she talks about how her being captured in Africa gives her the authority to speak about slavery and implicitly and, and to imply that there's a real slavery that her fellow Americans should recognize. And then in 1775, of course she addresses, she writes a poem, sends a letter to George Washington. And this is where I would say she's, she's making claim to being a kind of proto poet laureate for the America in, in the making.

[00:21:55] One thing we have to keep in mind with Phillis Wheatley is that she's evolving. First of all, it's absolutely crucial to remember that she's doubly disenfranchised throughout her life as being a woman and as being a person of African descent. And so when she addresses George, uh, George Washington... I was gonna conflate him with George III and you'll see why in a moment.

[00:22:21] She ends the poem by predicting that he's going to have a throne, a mansion, and a crown because her concept of a political organization is still one of, of monarchy. And so when we try to imagine her and the constitution, I think we need to think about the progress of this evolution that she may ultimately have evolved to take a position of what we would call a democratic position.

[00:22:57] But if we look at the constitution itself as, uh, the historian David Waldstreicher reminds us in, in his slave... the book *Slavery's Constitution* the constitution is, is fairly pro slavery. One can imagine how Phillis Wheatley would've reacted to the, the Three-Fifths Clause. For example, this makes me think of W. E. B. Du Bois. It may seem like a strange leap.

[00:23:24] But in his pretty well known essay on *The Negro and the Art Literature*, Du Bois refers to Phillis Wheatley as the pioneer in the establishment of what we now call African American literature. In a less known essay, *The Vision of Phillis the Blessed*, which he published

in almost 30 years after his, *The Negro and the Art Literature*, he then sees Phillis having a vision of who he is going to follow.

[00:23:59] And he's no longer thinking of her in literary terms, but in what we would call political theoretical terms, that he sees her as the founder of a political tradition that he refers to her, her as the thin flame that anticipates the red flame of David Walker. He says that she must have had a vision of David Walker coming.

[00:24:26] He even calls Paul Dunbar, the reincarnation of Phillis Wheatley. So Phillis Wheatley, if we follow her career into the afterlife, into her afterlife, uh, she becomes very much, uh, engaged with the constitution.

[00:24:46] Jeffrey Rosen: Well, that's just fascinating. And I'm still looking forward to your, your further thoughts and you're, uh, helping us understand the evolution of Phillis Wheatley from a concept in which the monarchy is to be exalted to becoming a poet of liberation and anticipating David Walker is absolutely fascinating.

[00:25:06] I wanna ask, uh, Professor Slauter, Professor Carretta just identified the shift from the, an essential conservatism of Phillis Wheatley writing about classical virtue to becoming a poet of liberation. And I wonder how other poets of the founding era manage that transition.

[00:25:24] We're gonna talk about Mercy Otis Warren, who John Adams called the poet political genius of the revolution, whose poems about virtue and reason became poems in favor of revolution. And you whetted our appetite by noting the other, the founders who wrote poetry as well. So to what degree was there a connection, if any, between the, the classical sensibility of these poets and their constitutional politics?

[00:25:49] Eric Slauter: Yeah, it's a, it's a great question and one we always ask about say, uh, John Adams, right, about how his classical, uh, education influenced his political thought. And I think it's really, it, it does behoove us to think more with someone like Wheatley, you know, just as a, as a pendant to my last, um, my last set of comments about Pope.

[00:26:11] One of the first books that, um, Wheatley purchases on her own in London is a set, a nine volume set of Pope's works, um, of which the essay on man would've been, I think, in the third or, or, or fourth volume.

[00:26:26] Um, so she's somebody who I think a lot of scholarship, um, early on sometimes dismissed, uh, as merely a servile imitator of the kind of poetic form of Alexander Pope without being able to, I think, fully appreciate some of the political aspects that, um, that, uh, Eileen and, and Vin are both pulling out.

[00:26:51] For me, what's so curious and interesting about Wheatley is that attestation by prominent whites that Eileen mentioned, you know, does allude to the fact that she seems to have some classical learning and, you know, in her 1773 book, there's a, a short translation, um, from avid- from [avidus 00:27:13] Latin of a, a poem about Niobe in Distress, um, which is a, you know, very interesting, um, a very interesting topic, uh, for an enslaved, um, person.

[00:27:27] But one of the things that, that I think the, the recent scholarship inspired by, by Vin and others has really brought out is the extent to which Wheatley is not just, um, a kind of anomaly who's sitting very high thinking you about imagination and producing, um, translations of Latin, uh, poems. But she has a kind of rhyme with unfree Africans in Boston at the time.

[00:27:55] Um, one of her most circulated pros pieces is a letter that she wrote to Samson Occum who was a Mohegan, uh, minister, um, who had, had, had achieved a kind of similar, um, celebrity, particularly in a tour of Great Britain designed to generate revenue for, um, the institution that would become, uh, Dartmouth.

[00:28:16] What she says there is, you know, thank you for your note and your vindication of the natural rights of the, of, of the unfree blacks. Um, you know, I think, uh, the tide is turning and people are starting to see Africa differently. Um, but, uh, there's still quite a lot of prejudice and, you know, our modern Egyptians may not want, um, freedom for, uh, for the enslaved.

[00:28:42] And our modern Egyptians is meant to who reference the, the sort of biblical exodus. Um, and, and in this case, you know, so many, uh, American revolutionaries portrayed themselves through the, the kind of Hebrew Bible in this particular way, even to the point of wanting the seal of the United States to show dividing of the red sea and, and the journey to the promise land.

[00:29:04] And Wheatley upends that, um, in a kind of important and crucial way. Um, and in doing so speaks in the language that a number of unfree blacks are beginning to speak as they make formal petitions to the Massachusetts state legislature, the late colonial legislature at first and then to the Massachusetts state legislature, asking for their own freedom by articulating claims about natural rights.

[00:29:34] Um, claims that are circulating as, um, Vin mentioned in very shrill ways, uh, among white colonists or, or white early nationals. You know, so John Dickinson, um, will say something like, you know, those who are taxed without their consent are slaves, we are taxed without our consent, we are therefore slaves, right. There was a kind of logic, um, to this form of, uh, political slavery.

[00:29:56] And Wheatley was, was really, um, crucial at reminding white readers, uh, um, through her poetry and through these occasional pieces such as the letter in the newspaper, which appeared in a half a dozen newspapers I think in early 1774, unfree Africans, uh, were the referent for the sort of symbolic language of liberty in the American revolution.

[00:30:18] So, uh, you know, I can't stress enough how important thinking again with, uh, the sort of political thought of a poet can be.

[00:30:27] **Jeffrey Rosen:** Professor Hunt, let's introduce our friends to the work of Mercy Otis Warren who was indeed a close friends of the Adams's. They fell out after Mercy Otis Warren wrote an attack on Adams presidency. Uh, she thought he'd betrayed principles of liberty and was more of an anti-federalist.

[00:30:47] They made up after a wonderful intervention and, and, um, Adams attested to her authorship of the brilliant works that he had encouraged her to write during the revolution. And among other things, she wrote a poem called Political Reverie in 1774. And, and once again, I'll just read just a little bit and then ask you to compare it to the work of Wheatley and sensibility and in other respects.

[00:31:12] Long she's forsook her Asiatic throne, and leaving Africa's barbarous burning zone, on the broad ruins of Rome's haughty power erected ramparts round fair Europe's shore. I could go on, but give us a sense of the genius of Mercy Otis Warren.

[00:31:29] **Eileen M. Hunt:** Yes. Her poem, A Political Reverie is extremely interesting for a number of reasons. It has an interesting publication history to begin with. Uh, it was published first by her in 1774 so just before the revolution, uh, and was published in a Boston newspaper. And so this made it a, you know, a public political intervention, you know, in the politics of the, of the nascent revolution.

[00:31:55] She republishes it in 1791 in her, uh, poems, Dramatic and Miscellaneous. And so in 1791, of course, this is the year of the bill of rights. Uh, and in 1788, she had published her observations on the new constitution, which is one of the most powerful anti-federalists critiques of the new U.S. constitution, um, that had been put in place in 1787 to '88.

[00:32:19] So, uh, Warren is a very important figure in the history of American political thought who is understudied, because she is really one of the first savage critics of the deep seated flaws in the design of the U.S. constitution by its male framers. And I, I read her as a pro-feminist and anti-federalists critic of the U.S. constitution.

[00:32:46] Um, and I think her Political Reverie, this poem that you quoted from is really interesting to read alongside her observations on the new constitution which was published in 1788. So I'll, I'll give some thoughts, uh, which may lead to more discussion by the other scholars on the panel.

[00:33:04] First of all, in her Political Reverie, uh, she, she talks about the ways in which dreams, um, sportive dreams infest all ranks of men. So, uh, quite a, quite a long time before Freud, she theorizes that dreams are just part of the human condition. They're part of who we are. Uh, and she, she applies this to politics.

[00:33:23] She says that the statesman's dream, uh, in theory creates new perfect forms to govern broken states. And so politics itself is a kind of dream work for Warren. And, uh, the poem, uh, A Political Reverie is such a product of her dream work about what, what American politics ought to be.

[00:33:47] Uh, she has this dreamlike vision of a pacific Britannic Empire, uh, which, uh, in the, the quote you, you supplied has some of that ethereal imperial imagery, which is quite striking for Warren, given that we, we think of her as an anti-federalists. Uh, so a, uh, a fighter against the imperial power of the federal government, uh, that has been imposed upon the people by the U.S. constitution of 1787.

[00:34:15] But in this, this poem first, uh, published in 1774, she seems to be romanticizing the British empire, and kind of hoping a bit like Edmund Burke did in his 1775 speech on conciliation with the colonies that there might be some sort of conciliation possible. Uh, you know, that the British empire might be able to maintain a kind of peaceful relationship with this nascent republic of America.

[00:34:38] And in her 1791 comment on the poem, uh, she says that she wrote it previous to the civil war, the breaking out of the civil war. So she refers to the American revolution as a civil war in 1791, which I think is fascinating. Uh, but she seems to regret that, uh, the American revolution was not more peaceful.

[00:35:02] Um, and she seems to regret that the bonds between the British people and it's, it's rich republican culture, um, have been severed or have not been carried out in the way that she hoped they would be, um, in the [inaudible 00:35:19] United States. I think that she has, she uses this poem, A Political Reverie to give us a vision of a dystopian future, um, the civil war, um, that was the American revolution.

[00:35:30] Remember that she, she wrote this in 1774, uh, and it's also a lament of what is passed, you know, her hope for a kind of peaceful Britannic Empire that unites the Americans with their motherland. Um, and, uh, so it's a, it's a dream and yet it's also a dystopia.

[00:35:51] So, uh, in her critique of the constitution in 1788, she set fourth three, I think, powerful critiques of the U.S. constitution. I'll, I'll just quickly summarize them, uh, for future discussion. She said that the problem with the constitution, number one is that it provided no protection for freedom of conscience or the press.

[00:36:12] Uh, she said that as soon as tyranny took hold, um, there would be no space for even decent demonstrations against tyranny. Uh, number two, she said there were no well defined limits on the judiciary. They seemed to be a boundless ocean that is broken over at the chart of the supreme law giver.

[00:36:30] Um, this seems quite poignant today as we, we, we are beginning to debate [inaudible 00:36:35] as if it's a new Plessy and as if it could generate a new civil war. Number three, she said the executive and legislative powers are dangerously blended and lack real checks and balances or separations of power. So she's writing this in 1788, okay.

[00:36:51] And so by 1791, we have the bill of rights. So, so there... an answer to her first, first charge, there's no protection for freedom of conscience, there's no protection for freedom of the press. We get an answer for that written into the, the bill of rights, okay, in the first amendment.

[00:37:05] Okay. So there's been, there's been some rectification of the, the, the, the potential for tyranny within the U.S. constitution on her model. But it's not clear to me, um, her other charges were addressed, uh, and reformed to the U.S. constitution. And I think we still live with that legacy today.

[00:37:21] **Jeffrey Rosen:** Absolutely fascinating. I do wanna ask Professor Carretta, you mentioned that you thought that Wheatley would agree with future commentators on the

constitution. So I would love to get a sense of, of what, who those commentators were and what you thought they'd agree with, um, as well as some more reflections about the degree to which Wheatley used her poetry which anticipated the work of Walker as Du Bois said to argue for a fulfillment of the principles of the declaration, liberty and natural law.

[00:37:56] Vincent Carretta: She anticipates certainly the declaration of, uh, independence, though she never mentions it. And she, uh, repeatedly holds the white Americans up and, and, uh, criticizes the hypocrisy of calling for freedom, but not including people of African descent. For example, in one of her last poems that we have on the death of a General Wooster in which, uh, she sent to Wooster's widow.

[00:38:34] She then **[inaudible 00:38:38]** Wooster. She speaks in, in the dead Wooster's voice in the poem. And she, uh, castigates her fellow Americans for fighting for freedom from the British for themselves, but not fighting for freedom for people of African descent. So she repeatedly comes back to this notion of freedom should be for all of us.

[00:39:06] Again, this notion of the we and the, we the people that, people of African descent are as much a part of the we the people as people of European descent. And she also talks about the American revolution as a civil war, though she uses the phrase civil contest. Just a few months after she wrote that poem to George Washington, praising Washington, she wrote a letter to a fellow black woman, and she says, we are just witnesses.

[00:39:40] We are just on the outside looking in on this civil contest is the phrase she uses. And as Eric has pointed out that the most radical position she takes is probably expressed in that letter that was published in the newspapers, the letter to Samson Occom. In that letter, we see the transition from her earlier poetry she had placed the argument, based her argument for the equality of blacks and whites.

[00:40:11] Um, it's basically a theologically based argument. In that letter she talks about, uh, civil and religious liberties that she's moving towards a natural rights argument, that she increasingly embraces in her later poetry. Now from other poets after Wheatley, well, I'm not **[inaudible 00:40:38]** black poets writing about, uh, the constitution, but, uh, Thomas Green Fessenden, for example, writes a satiric poem in 1805, in which he's, he's attacking Thomas Jefferson.

[00:40:54] And he's attacking Jefferson for his involvement with Sally Hemings, but he also explicitly brings up the Three-Fifths Clause and says that Jefferson has supported the Three-Fifths clause because it empowers people slave owners like him. In 1846, James Russell Lowell has another satiric poem in which he talks about John C. Calhoun.

[00:41:23] He has John C. Calhoun speaking and saying, uh, that his position, his pro, very pro-slavery position is based on the constitution. When, uh, some of these later poets do pick up the kind of criticism, uh, that Eileen was talking about of the constitution, what has been left out, then after you have the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments which outlawed slavery and allowed voting, et cetera, for people of African descent, or at least men of African descent.

[00:41:59] Paul Dunbar has a piece on race in Alabama. This is a pros though, even though Dunbar's mainly known as a poet, in which he says that the constitution is not being obeyed, that the constitution is being trashed. He's complaining about the economic system that he, he sees as the second sla- slavery system, the, the peonage of black workers in Alabama, that they're down by debt to the white owners.

[00:42:34] So it's as much an enslavement as there had been before. So the constitution is it's... the Constitution's not being criticized directly. The Constitution's being held up as what these white enslave- well, Neo-enslavers are [inaudible 00:42:53]. So the constitution keeps coming up with both white and black writers, especially the poets in, in the later period.

[00:43:04] **Jeffrey Rosen:** Thank you very much for that, for those citations to Fessenden and Lowell, uh, Dunbar and others who believe that, uh, the system of slavery was [inaudible 00:43:14] the constitution. Thanks for reminding us about Jefferson too.

[00:43:17] And it may be worth noting here that after, as, as all of you have, uh, written, um, after the city of Boston recognized Wheatley as the author of her own poems, Jefferson wrote in his notes on the state of Virginia that she couldn't have been a good poet because black people couldn't be as good poets as white people.

[00:43:36] The, the virulence of his racism was really brought out by that remarkable exchange. Professor Slauter you, there was a third category of how did the reading of poetry prepare the framers of the constitution and members of the founding generation to champion liberty, which keys into a question from Bonnie [inaudible 00:43:55], how do you see current legislators considering poetry or the humanities in general as germane to their work?

[00:44:00] I know you've written about the famous letter that, uh, Thomas Jefferson wrote to Robert Skipwith where he recommends a reading list which has extensive quotations from books in what he calls the fine arts ranging from, uh, [inaudible 00:44:14] and, um, [inaudible 00:44:15] to, uh, the works of Laurence Sterne which he considered the greatest lesson on morality ever written, the author of Tristram Shandy.

[00:44:23] So what kind of poetry did the founding generation read and why did they think it was important to read poetry in the humanities as preparation for statesmanship?

[00:44:33] **Eric Slauter:** It's a great question. And, you know, I mean, I think this session, if it's, if it's done, um, it's done a lot of things, but one of the things that it seems to have done extremely well is just underline how key, um, voices like Phillis Wheatley's and, uh, and Mercy Otis Warren's were, um, in this period and just what an audience they had and what an effect they had.

[00:44:57] Um, you know, we, we tend to think of someone like, um, John Adams as not having an idea that was never captured on paper, um, and then printed and sent to somebody. He reads a pamphlet about, you know, that criticizes the early state constitutions and writes the three volume treatise in response. Um, but Abigail Adams never published a word during this period.

[00:45:19] So looking at someone like Wheatley or, or Otis, um, and certainly Otis was a correspondent of, um, Abigail Adams when Abigail wrote to John that he should remember the ladies and he laughed it off. She wrote a very upset letter, um, directly to Mercy Otis Warren to appraise her. And, uh, so I, I do think, um, underlining this is, is really great.

[00:45:42] The other thing that, that struck me is highlighting the anti federal nature of this, you know, not just for Massachusetts which I think, you know, the, the numbers there were something like 186 to 167, uh, 187 to 168 in terms of the ratification. So maybe 43 perc- 47%, um, didn't ratify the question.

[00:46:05] I mean, as a, as somebody in humanities, it certainly warms my heart to have a panel like this, uh, uh, in which we're pointing people to important, um, humanistic texts. I think, you know, there's still a space for legislators, politicians, um, who care deeply about the arts and about, um, politics and who have been bred up through the liberal arts.

[00:46:29] Um, but that hasn't always been the case. It's a rather alarming thing to register that it's only been Democrats, for instance, who have done inaugural poems as if that was a, a genre that only had a kind of party, um, association starting with, with, um, Kennedy, uh, and going through, um, through president Biden.

[00:46:50] But I, I do think, um, there's a, there's a, an important, uh, civic space for the arts. Uh, and my hope is that this... a session like this will inspire people, uh, to follow out the links and to read some of these documents.

[00:47:04] **Jeffrey Rosen:** Absolutely. That is the crucial, uh, injunction friends who are watching. You must read the primary text. They're so inspiring. Uh, you quote from them and learn from them. And we've given you lots of links to follow up on. Professor Hunt, your final thoughts. You have introduced us to the important work of Crocker. And, um, you called our attention to a song that she wrote, um, which has a explicitly feminist argument.

[00:47:33] I'm just, I'm having so much fun reading from it. I'm gonna do that and then turn it over to you. But then we'll be as Masons free to think and speak with reason. We'll act our part with skill and art bounded by sense and not by treason. Uh, final thoughts.

[00:47:45] **Eileen M. Hunt:** Wonderful. This is the poem she published in a Boston newspaper in 1784. Um, and it was her first published work. Uh, and, uh, in the scholarship, there's been this tradition of understanding Crocker as someone who didn't write until she was much older until the 1810s when she published the first work by an American, um, in, uh, the form of a philosophical treatise on women's rights, um, the Observations on the Real Rights of Women published in Boston in 1818.

[00:48:11] But it's not true, Crocker was publishing all along. She started publishing her poems in 1784 in Boston newspapers. And so, but she didn't always, she didn't attach her name. She used pseudonyms like, like the federalist, uh, as was the case for, for a lot of controversial political writing in the period, whether you're a woman or a man often published anonymously or [inaudible 00:48:31], and she did that.

[00:48:32] Um, she also published a satire of, um, Shay's rebellion in poetic form in 1786, but this poem, you quote, the song is really important. And I think it, it links to our constitution and it's the enduring need to think about what reforms are necessary to make any constitution truly free and equal for everyone who is bounded by its rules.

[00:48:56] So in this case, this poem celebrates the founding of the first women's free masonry lodge in America by Hannah Mather Crocker. Uh, and she, she's celebrating the women's ability to liberate themselves through education within the context of this all female led community. Um, and, uh, but she's also suggesting that there's been antagonism towards this constitutional endeavor, um, and it's been by the men in the community.

[00:49:23] And they've, and the word treason at the end suggests that some of the men in the free masonry community thought what they were doing was treasonous, um, and, uh, either to free masonry or maybe to, um, American ideals themselves. And Crocker says no. Uh, and she preserved multiple copies of this, um, this poem in her manuscript so we are able to identify it in the Boston newspaper she published it in anonymously in 1784.

[00:49:48] So I think Crocker and these other women poets, uh, Mercy Otis Warren and Phillis Wheatley call us to think about issues of gender and racial, um, inequality as we address constitutional issues today, especially in the wake over our public debate over [inaudible 00:50:03].

[00:50:04] **Jeffrey Rosen:** Professor Carretta last word is to you, if you could leave us with final thoughts and, and maybe some final poems of Wheatley that you'd like to suggest that our friends read.

[00:50:12] **Vincent Carretta:** It's also important to keep in mind the times and the context in which these people that we've been talking about were writing. Again, if I go back to Wheatley in the evolution of Wheatley, the, that radical letter that was published in the newspapers was published just a few months after she gained her freedom.

[00:50:35] So we need to look at, consider what she was writing when she was unfree and what she was able to write when she was free, how her voice has changed. If I was gonna pick one poem that, uh, by her, why not pick the last poem, published poem or the pen ultimate published poem by her, uh, Liberty and Peace, which was on the, uh, Success of the American revolution.

[00:51:05] It was written at the occasion of, it was the signing of peace treaty of Paris in which she anticipates the glory that's to come to America.

[00:51:15] **Jeffrey Rosen:** Wow, beautiful. I've just already called it up. And I'm, instead of reading it, uh, friends who are, uh, watching, I'm gonna give you the treat of reading Liberty and Peace, a perfect and inspiring ending to a panel which has spread so much light. It's just encouraged us all to dig in deep, to grow in learning and wisdom by reading, uh, the poetry that inspired the founding generations and subsequent generations.

[00:51:42] Uh, seeing how moved they were to express themselves in verse, and perhaps even writing verse ourselves to explore the connections between liberty and freedom and equality and

virtue that were so important for the framers. Thank you so much to our wonderful scholars, Eric Slauter, Eileen Hunt, and Vincent Carretta for, uh, marvelous discussion.

[00:52:05] Thank you friends for taking an hour out of your day to learn and grow, uh, in wisdom and we'll much look forward to seeing you perhaps next week on bill of rights day to explore equality and the constitution. Uh, thanks again, and, uh, see you soon. Bye.

[00:52:24] Tanaya Tauber: This episode was produced by Melody Rowell, Lana Ulrich, John Guerra, and me Tanaya Tauber. It was engineered by David Stotz of the National Constitution Center's wonderful AV team. Visit constitutioncenter.org/debate to see a list of resources mentioned throughout this episode. Find the full lineup of our upcoming shows and register to join us virtually.

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[00:53:02] If you like this show, you can help us out by rating and reviewing us on Apple podcast or by following us on Spotify. Find us back here next week. On behalf of the National Constitution Center, I'm Tanaya Tauber.