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The Odyssey of Phillis Wheatley

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[00:00:00] Jeffrey Rosen: The historian, David Waldstreicher, has published The Odyssey of Phillis Wheatley: A Poet's Journey Through American Slavery and Independence. It's a superb new biography, offering the fullest account to date of Phillis Wheatley's life and works. Seized in West Africa and forced into slavery as a child, Wheatley became a noted poet at a young age. She's considered the first African American author to publish a book of poetry, and had a lasting influence on the founding generation and generations to come.

[00:00:31] Jeffrey Rosen: Hello, friends. I'm Jeffrey Rosen, president and CEO of the National Constitution Center, and welcome to We the People, a weekly show of Constitutional debate. The National Constitution Center's a nonpartisan nonprofit, chartered by Congress to increase awareness and understanding of the Constitution among the American people.

[00:00:49] Jeffrey Rosen: In this episode, I'm joined by David Waldstreicher, and the historian, Nancy Isenberg. We'll discuss Wheatley's life, the development of her poetry, her influence on the Constitution, and much more.

[00:01:01] Jeffrey Rosen: David Waldstreicher is a distinguished professor of history, American studies, and Africana studies at the CUNY Graduate Center. In addition to his recent book, The Odyssey of Phillis Wheatley, he's the author of many other books and articles on slavery, the founders, and more.

[00:01:15] Jeffrey Rosen: David, it's an honor to welcome you to We the People.

[00:01:18] David Waldstreicher: Thank you. It's great to be here.

[00:01:20] Jeffrey Rosen: And Nancy Isenberg is T. Harry Williams Professor of American history at Louisiana State University. She's the author of several wonderful books, including The New York Times bestseller, White Trash: The

400-Year Untold History of Class in America, as well as wonderful biographies of the founders including Aaron Burr, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and John Quincy Adams. Her first book, Sex & Citizenship in Antebellum America, focused on the early women's rights movements.

[00:01:50] Jeffrey Rosen: Nancy, it's wonderful to welcome you back to We the People.

[00:01:53] Nancy Isenberg: Well, thanks for inviting me.

[00:01:56] Jeffrey Rosen: David, your book is pathbreaking. You cast such illuminating light on Wheatley's cultural, political, religious, and poetic significance. Let's begin by telling We the People listeners who Wheatley was and what her poetic legacy is.

[00:02:16] David Waldstreicher: Well, the first thing to know about Phillis Wheatley is how young she was when she was enslaved and came on a slave ship to Boston. She entered the family, was purchased by John Wheatley and Susanna Wheatley, and, within a few years, learned English, learned how to read, was writing poems that started to get attention from neighbors and people in Boston. And within a couple of years, she is writing occasional poetry and religious poetry that is making her quite well known around town. And then in 1770, when the evangelist George Whitfield dies, and she writes the most republished and most notable poem reprinted in London, about his death. And a couple of years later, in 1773, she publishes a book of poems, for which she's best known.

[00:03:22] David Waldstreicher: So, she becomes, in effect, the most famous person of African descent in North America and Europe at a time when the question of slavery, its rightness, its wrongness, who's to blame for it, how it might be changing or not changing, is newly controversial, and becomes inseparable from the controversy over the empire, and the place of the North American and Caribbean colonies in the British Empire. So she really is a poet of the Age of Revolution, and helps make the issues of slavery and the issues of liberty inseparable and mutually reinforcing in many different ways that I explore in tracking her life from the 1760s to her untimely death in 1784.

[00:04:23] Jeffrey Rosen: You explore them so powerfully, and you show how the debates about liberty and slavery, that trope that was invoked by the colonists to rebel against Britain, cut in very complicated ways. There were antislavery

arguments for and against among both Loyalists and Whigs, and the politics were constantly shifting in ways that were reflected in Wheatley's poetry.

[00:04:46] Jeffrey Rosen: Nancy Isenberg, maybe introduce us to that debate about liberty and slavery when it was indeed the slogan of the revolution. How did the colonists deal with the hypocrisy of the fact that many of them were enslavers at the same time that they were demanding liberty from Britain?

[00:05:07] Nancy Isenberg: Well, I think that what we forget is that the idea of liberty and slavery was a kind of rhetorical convention. But it, of course, took English critics [laughs] to point out that, you know, as they said, the slavers were yelping about their liberty at the same time that they were enslaving men and women and children. And that's the other thing that I think is kind of really striking about David's book, is he's writing about childhood, which is something we've kind of skipped over in biographies. And we tend to forget how much, even in Boston, the exploitation of children as laborers was commonplace. I mean, most of the indentured servants who went to New England were children. And then you have the story of Benjamin Franklin and his apprenticeship.

[00:05:58] Nancy Isenberg: So, this kind of idea of a child, and how integral that was to slavery because, as we know, the work of Kathy Brown has shown that slavery itself was defined in Virginia if you were a slave born of a slave woman, and that’s something that we tend to forget about in our past. We forget about how central childhood was to the institution of slavery. So that added to the larger debate about the revolution.

[00:06:28] Nancy Isenberg: And David does a good job of quoting Benjamin Rush, who's a very well known Pennsylvania [laughs] revolutionary, signer of the Declaration of Independence, promoter of female education. And he's one of the people who popularized Phillis, and David quotes how, basically, he ended up using her as a symbol of antislavery. He even referred to as an honor to her sex and to humanity at large. And then later, everyone discovers that she's not free yet. [laughs] And that's another thing that David kind of highlights that I think is really striking, because I think not only is it central to the revolution, but I was thinking after rereading David's book recently, I kept thinking about how American ingenious is not acknowledged until the English [laughs] crown you. That's true of Washington Irving. That's true of Frederick Douglass. That's true of Ida B. Wells.

[00:07:24] Nancy Isenberg: So the fact that Phillis ends up having to make a trip to London and be received by... and it just seems ironic in the middle of the revolution, that this still carried weight, but it does. And I think that's another interesting feature when we try to think of childhood, is she a prodigy, is she a genius? How do we talk about that? And in democracies, we don't really like to talk about genius because that can be associated with an aristocracy. So it has this kinda negative connotations, like who do we allow to be geniuses is I think a question his book raises as it touches on gender, race, and class.

[00:07:58] Jeffrey Rosen: It's so true about that central role of genius and also the unique role of childhood. I was struck, David, by your noting that, during the time of Wheatley's enslavement, a full third of the captives from Senegambia were children according to their European buyer's definition.

[00:08:14] Jeffrey Rosen: Let's take up this question of the debate about liberty and slavery in Wheatley's poems. And you describe an evolution in her poem to the Earl of Dartmouth. You note that instead of political restrictions seeming akin to enslavement, instead of tyranny being like slavery, she reverses the equation and says slavery is wrong 'cause it's like the tyranny that participants in the debates of 1772 have been hearing much about. And then later on, on further reflection, she talks about slavery being a kind of enslavement to the passions and emotions and invokes classical moral philosophers to say the truly free person is he or she who's overcome his passions or emotions and that slavery is a matter of the freedom of the mind. Tell us about that debate and how it's reflected in Wheatley's poetry.

[00:09:04] David Waldstreicher: We tend to think that the question of whether slavery was right or wrong was a simple matter, that people either believed in human rights, believed that slavery is wrong, or they were old-fashioned, not modern, and didn't believe that, or they believed that it was okay for certain groups of people who were seen as inferior. And historians like Gordon Wood sometimes buy into or even further this simplicity because they don't want to deal with the complicated debates of the time, of the late 18th century, of the Revolutionary era, about what slavery was and what was happening, and what was... where it was, who was doing it. And it's almost as if there's a desire on the part—especially on the part of those who like to celebrate the founders—to see the issue as more simple than it was for them. And the fact is it's only for us that it's a morally simple issue. For them, it was a complicated issue. And it wasn't complicated just because there was a lot of economic interests in slavery. It was complicated because it

wasn't exactly clear what the hell slavery was, where and what it had been in the Bible, what it had been for the Greeks and Romans-

[00:10:19] Jeffrey Rosen: Mm-hmm.

[00:10:19] David Waldstreicher: ... what it was in other empires.

[00:10:22] David Waldstreicher: Nancy made a reference now to Kathy Brown's work, which so much underlined how much work it took to make sure that slavery was going to be hereditary through the mother in North America. It wasn't obvious that that's what the law would be and that reproduction would be the technology that would make slavery hereditary, which would mean, in the long run, that you didn't have to keep importing the same number of people from Africa or elsewhere every generation.

[00:10:51] David Waldstreicher: But in human history, slavery has not always been hereditary, and it's not always been one ethnic group or racially-defined group. And Wheatley, by both from her experience, I think, in West Africa, which we know so little about but we... but there's a good chance that she saw slave systems in more than one place in West Africa, and that she learned other things about the way it was working in the New World, and became a voracious reader of both neoclassical Greek and Roman literature, and the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, and the English literature spun out of that. She knows that slavery not only is the opposite of liberty in the abstract, she also knows that it's not at all clear what happens to slaves.

[00:11:36] David Waldstreicher: In Homer's Odyssey, good slaves become free. And Odysseus himself is at risk of being enslaved. And this is something that can happen to anybody. And so it isn't just the question of right or wrong. It's highly contingent and it depends. And so that's what she is dealing with. So, what you see in her, in the way she deals with slavery, directly and obliquely over the course of years, is you see her basically trying out religious, secular, literary, political ways of talking about this question whether, to start with, if you're a literary genius, does that mean, if you're a slave, you're going to... that you deserve to become free? Are you different than other slaves?

[00:12:21] David Waldstreicher: And one thing she realizes, I think quite early, is that racial justifications for slavery are on the rise precisely because Christians and people who are in favor of liberty are saying so many bad things about slavery

that advocates of slavery are on the defensive, and they are reaching for the racial justifications, more and more. And that's what Benjamin Rush is talking against when he says, "Well, she's a genius. And she proves that Africans aren't inferior."

[00:12:51] David Waldstreicher: And Wheatley is dealing with this rise of racial justifications. And so she attacks it from all these different angles in a range of ways, and quite conscious that even though she knows everyone is perceiving her racially, that sometimes it's a good idea to not talk about that directly and try to foment some doubt about whether she and people like her ought to be enslaved or simply will be enslaved permanently. And that's the major project that she's engaged in. And that's why she has a very subtle and complicated and changing relationship to all these cultural traditions and all these political debates that she's drawing on and engaging with.

[00:13:32] David Waldstreicher: And if you see what she does, when she does it, in response to whom, you start to see a pattern of deliberate engagement and careful engagement that hasn't always been apparent, because people are always looking for, "Oh, what's her attitude about Christianity? What's her attitude about race? What's her attitude about slavery?" It's much more, "What is she doing in this particular poem, at this moment, in response to what, in order to be seen, get attention, and perhaps free herself and others?"

[00:13:59] Jeffrey Rosen: Absolutely. You show that so powerfully. And of course, she's always responding to the politics of the moment, and is unable to be a strong loyalist or a strong patriot at a time when it's not obvious how the revolution's going to go. And all of that is reflected in her poems.

[00:14:15] Jeffrey Rosen: Nancy Isenberg, of course the most notorious racialized critic of Wheatley is Thomas Jefferson. And in his Notes on the State of Virginia, he infamously said, "Religion indeed has produced a Phillis Whatley [sic]," as he put it, "but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism." In insisting that Black people can't write good poetry because they're racially inferior, Jefferson shows a racism far more virulent than that of many of his contemporaries. You've written so powerfully about Jefferson. Tell us about what he says about Wheatley, and what that says about Jefferson.

[00:14:54] Nancy Isenberg: Well, Jefferson even goes to great [laughs] lengths to argue how Roman slavery was different, you know, the argument that David

mentioned, that somehow you could be free at the end, that slavery wasn't a permanent condition. Jefferson thinks of himself as an 18th century version of a scientist. So his theories predate, but very much are similar, to the kind of sociobiology and the racist theories that become even more prevalent in the 19th century about kind of measuring basic traits and sort of giving them race specific meaning. So, from Jefferson's point of view, even though he does strange things, like he imagined he could have his slaves learn how to be farmers on their own by having them live side by side imported German immigrants, [laughs] as if they were gonna teach them how to be independent and free.

[00:15:59] Nancy Isenberg: So, Jefferson's theories are, if you look at the Notes on the State of Virginia, he too is, like what David is saying, he's trying to kind of rationalize certain things, work out certain things, borrowing from certain prevalent theories. I mean, he bends over backwards to try to prove that the New World wasn't inferior, because the Old World assumed that our environment produced small animals and Native Americans were inferior. And then he had to bend over backwards to prove that that wasn't true. But he really is in the foreground of laying forth these arguments in defense of race. And he's... I mean, I actually believe he's dismissive of Phillis Wheatley also because she's a woman. It's the combination there because he has no real respect [laughs] for women's intellect. And he sort of was suspicious of that as well.

[00:16:53] Nancy Isenberg: And I think that's the thing, if we get back to the law, one of the big issues in the room is that under Blackstone's common law, was the idea that, in the household, there's a very clear hierarchy between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. This was the social order that would be preserved, and we, as Americans, adopt everything about the common law. So there's that need for stability and order. This is where conservatives' theory always is rested in.

[00:17:30] Nancy Isenberg: And I think another interesting thing about David's book is the way in which the revolution brought forward... you know, he has Phillis Wheatley's important line of her poetry, “Sometimes by Simile, a victory's won”, and there's all these metaphors about taking down the monarchy, challenging the family metaphors. But at the end, which family metaphors do we wanna maintain? And this is something that I think also raises questions. I mean, her identity is about race. It's about servitude. It's about slavery. It's about gender.

[00:18:06] Nancy Isenberg: And I think David's right. I mean, these ideas are in the air. And she's aware of these things. And she is kind of negotiating and trying to engage in these larger debates. And that's... I think David's earlier point is really important, is that we have to kind of understand people in the past in real time, and not assume that their ideas are set in stone from the moment they speak, [laughs] from their first treatise. And that's kind of what's interesting about reading of her development, her change, the way her arguments respond to what's going on at the moment.

[00:18:42] Nancy Isenberg: And that means you have to appreciate that 18th century people are not always like us. And they talk in a different way, and they think in a different way. And I think that's kind of what's fascinating, particularly when David spends a great deal of time looking at her words, the importance of words, you know, like the word stable. Why does she use that word? I mean, it's really... I think, it's certainly something important to poetry because they think about words, but I think that trying to figure out the words you choose is very much thinking about your audience and how you engage, get your audience to pay attention, and listen to you when you're talking about something controversial, which is what she was doing.

[00:19:25] Jeffrey Rosen: You're so right about how David brings out her meticulous choice of words and how often she's writing in a coded way based on the audiences and messages that she's able to express.

[00:19:37] Jeffrey Rosen: David, we've talked about how Rush hailed her as a genius, and Jefferson in a racist way dismissed her as inferior. You also talk about the general skepticism that she needed to overcome. Tell about the famous examination that Prof. Henry Louis Gates called The Trials of Phillis Wheatley where she was asked to prove that she wrote her own poetry. You showed that it wasn't actually a trial. And also the other instances where she was forced to show she could write her own stuff, like the moment when Thomas Woolridge, the British merchant, asked her to write a poem on the spot, and she was able to do that with dramatic effects. So, how did she prove her legitimacy in this racist and skeptical world?

[00:20:24] David Waldstreicher: So, probably the scene or the thing that many people find most vivid about Wheatley's life, and Henry Louis Gates made it the beginning of his Jefferson Lecture at the Library of Congress, which became his little book, The Trials of Phillis Wheatley, where trials is a metaphor for what she

experienced under white scrutiny as an artist and then, later on, at the hands of African American literary critics and artists especially in the 20th century, some of whom felt that she wasn't radical or race conscious enough. So that's what trials means for Gates.

[00:21:01] David Waldstreicher: And it's such a potent metaphor for what she experienced for Gates, that he inflates this story that had been told in a young adult novelized biography by Shirley Graham, which started out as a radio play, this story that she told, where all the dignitaries of Boston meet to decide whether or not Phillis Wheatley has actually written the poems that she says she has, and that the Wheatleys say she has. And so they grill her. They put her under an examination, and Gates makes it sound like it's a, really like a PhD oral examination. He actually makes that actual comparison, which is hilarious to us academics-

[00:21:42] Nancy Isenberg: [laughs]

[00:21:42] David Waldstreicher: ... That he would project in that manner.

[00:21:44] David Waldstreicher: So it's really literary license. That never happened. Why do we know it didn't happen? Well, not only is there no proof that these guys who later signed this attestation that appears at the beginning of her book that she actually wrote the poems, not only is there no proof that they actually gathered in a room, but she knew most of them. She had written poems about members of their family. They're signing a piece of paper that can travel to England to prove that she wrote the poems before she goes to England to get the poems published.

[00:22:18] David Waldstreicher: So, it's not an actual event. What it is, is it's a publishing strategy. It's basically promotional material that they have signed. So, I try to switch things up a little bit and said, "Okay. But actually, there is a dramatic scene where she has to perform that she wrote her poems." But it's something that happens earlier and sets the stage for her to go to England.

[00:22:41] David Waldstreicher: And that is when Thomas Woolridge, who is a merchant and a colonial official in West Florida, who's traveling around and he goes to see Wheatley and he later writes a letter to his patron, Lord Dartmouth, says, "I went to see this young woman who's so amazing, and I asked her to write a

poem. She said, 'Come back the next morning,' and she gives me this poem that's to Lord Dartmouth."

[00:23:05] David Waldstreicher: I argue that actually, she probably was working on this poem already because she knows very well that Lord Dartmouth has just been reappointed to the Secretary of State for the Colonies. He's a major British politician who's just come back into power. He's known as being relatively friendly to the colonists, at a time when the controversies over taxes are heating up once again. And he's also well known for being a pious Methodist, and religious. So, she's written celebratory poems about political figures, to the king thanking him for... and the repeal of the Stamp Act. She's all primed. She probably knows all about Lord Dartmouth. People in Boston are talking about, "Oh, this is great. Lord Dartmouth's on our side." She's ready to do this. She's been writing... she's been trying to set herself up to get her poems published. And when somebody comes along who's bragging about his relationship with Lord Dartmouth, she's ready for him.

[00:23:58] David Waldstreicher: So it's actually not a story about her…The story of her performances in Boston are not just about her under the white gaze or being put under this extreme stress. It's also about her seizing opportunities and projecting herself into a space where she's in conversation with colonial officials, and what could be more being part of the American Revolution than getting the attention of Lord Dartmouth, and then having an audience with him? She's not just famous. She's famous in a way as a colonial and talking to people who actually have power over the colonists and who are making decisions about these issues that may have implications for the future of slavery, such as can the colonies make their own laws about slavery, which Lord Mansfield in the Somerset case had just called into question. So to me, that's the real primacy.

[00:24:48] David Waldstreicher: Oh, and I'll just throw in one more thing which JL Bell discovered and which I elaborated on, which is that it's pretty clear that it's probably that she later writes a poem that's almost certainly to Thomas Wooldridge's wife, Susannah Kelly Wooldridge, whose family is American and has American ties. And so probably, she's the one who get... who is the connection that gets Wooldridge to come visit. He doesn't talked about her in his letter to Dartmouth and there's nothing unusual about that. "My wife said that I should do this." He's not gonna do that. He's saying, "I have this great idea to do something you would like," 'cause he's trying to get patronage. This is Woolridge.

[00:25:26] David Waldstreicher: But there's a woman, another woman. So many of Wheatley's opportunities get developed out of ties to white women in the colonies. And for example, Countess Huntingdon who is the patron of George Whitfield, and is also a close friend of Lord Dartmouth. So making opportunities out of relationships with women in Boston and elsewhere is central to her story and that can easily be erased when we stress how it ends up with her in the company of powerful men like Jefferson, Washington, and Lord Dartmouth, and Benjamin Franklin.

[00:26:00] Jeffrey Rosen: Just amazing scenes that you reconstruct all these opportunities from women, many of whom are called Susanna, as you'd described, and just a riveting description of seizing the moment. It's almost like Hamilton writing his famous letter on the hurricane. She had her poem to Dartmouth in her back pocket, was able to produce it on demand, and it made her.

[00:26:23] Jeffrey Rosen: And Nancy Isenberg, David Waldstreicher says that Phillis Wheatley was the only Black person to elicit personal responses from the likes of Lord Dartmouth, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, as well as Jefferson, and she became a political actor as well as an artist and a celebrity. George Washington was far more respectful in his perception of Phillis Wheatley, and paid tribute to her genius, although he timed his responses, David says, for the moment that was most likely to enlist the loyalty of Black troops. Can you characterize broadly how the very different reception of different Founding Fathers toward Wheatley shows the complexity of views about race at the time?

[00:27:03] Nancy Isenberg: Yeah. I think one of the things that David is very sensitive to is the idea of timing and the consciousness of the public audience that you're trying to reach and the awareness of... I mean, we have this fantasy about the founders you know, as being geniuses, and every other day they have something brilliant to say. But no, they're very... I mean, scholars have written about the Republic of Letters, the awareness of what your audience is, who you're trying to convince and persuade. We know very well that Jefferson wrote every letter. This is something that Andrew Burstein has written about. Every letter was written so it would be received by the individual he's writing to in a favorable fashion. So they are deeply aware of their audience and deeply aware. And this is what Washington is known as his mastery for is cultivating his imaage.

[00:28:01] Nancy Isenberg: And as we tend to forget, all this idea of playing the courtier, playing in a way that is appealing to the standards, the elite standards of

the time, we think of that, okay, okay, that's English, that's something, that's aristocratic. We've... we abandoned that. But no, this is something that Washington, that, you know, led to his... the reason behind him being president and him having this kind of international reputation and an awareness of that.

[00:28:28] Nancy Isenberg: And I think that this is... With Jefferson... you know, Jefferson had a very different identity. He really perceived himself as this intellectual. He wasn't very good speaking off the cuff, and he liked to kind of write careful treatises and arguments. He is the supreme letter writer, but I think that what David's showing us is that meaning is created, [laughs] you know. And that the founders are not these spontaneous individuals. They were very... even... because we think of it as being a more kind of primitive environment in the 18th century, but some of these ideas are very similar today. I mean 'cause one of the things I think is so fascinating about Phillis Wheatley is the whole culture of celebrity. Now, we think of that as a very modern phenomena, but it is not, [laughs] you know, the idea of the artists and yet every artist needs a patron. You can't kind of operate in this world. And this is something that even Jefferson understood. He took young men under his wing like James Monroe, William Wirt, cultivated and opened doors for them.

[00:29:36] Nancy Isenberg: And as David's written about, Benjamin Franklin, when he was on his rise, we think, "Oh, the self-made man, he did it all on his own." No, he's on the search for patrons. So no one can act completely independent. And I think that the way Phillis Wheatley cultivates powerful women, and David is adding that to the debate, the way in which these personal networks, family networks, kinship... In Boston, they're obsessed with that, by the way. But the importance of connection as a means for creating the moment, creating the timing of when you can be seen as a publicly important figure.

[00:30:16] Nancy Isenberg: And what David's trying to show is that Phillis just wasn't the pawn, she's not just being manipulated by these people. She's a part of the process, a process that, you know, she's very young and doing this, but she's also... this is something young people grew up very quickly [laughs] in the 18th century. And I think that, that awareness, it forces us to think about how the founders existed in that environment as well. They're not just individuals. They have complex relationships, family relationships. These people can have power too. Private power matters. But they're also very aware of how... of shaping their public image, and celebrity I think is kind of really what's unique. And another interesting part of the story of Phillis Wheatley.

[00:31:06] Jeffrey Rosen: So true how many of the characters that David describes were acutely conscious of image drumming up publicity and how patronage was so central to all of their success.

[00:31:18] Jeffrey Rosen: David, of course, one of Phillis Wheatley's important patronesses was the Countess of Huntingdon. They were united by their devotion to George Whitfield, the preacher, and religious themes were central to Wheatley's early poetry, especially beginning with On Virtue. And so many of her early patrons were ministers. You note that seven of the people who attested to her genius in 1773 were preachers. Talk about the religious theme in her poetry, and how it was central to her reception.

[00:31:52] David Waldstreicher: Early on in some of Wheatley's first poems you can see her understanding something that women in New England had understood for a long time, which was that even though the role of minister in Congregationalism was unquestionably male, women, in various ways, could be powerful figures in religious life, and could guide their churches, could guide the fate of the minister in any one congregation. And their testimony about themselves and about others, religious testimony and religious words, was a place where they could exercise autonomy. Now, I'm not suggesting that there was any cynicism to this at all. I'm saying that this is the culture.

[00:32:46] David Waldstreicher: And if we think of Wheatley as someone who was coming from a West African culture in which women speaking, women praising men, praising authority figures, they had scholars of oral traditions and poetry and song in West Africa say this again and again, that women have distinct roles in praising authorities and in mourning. So then she gets to New England, and she gets to this culture where poets and women can play these roles. So, it helps explain why it is that, early on, she's writing these elegies for ministers and elegies when people die. And as Wendy Raphael Roberts has said so well in her fantastic book, Awakening Verse, there is a ministerial role that poets have which is expressed, for example, in the popularity of hymns and writers of hymns like Isaac Watts in the 18th century. And this is one of the roles that Wheatley was inhabiting. And you can see her playing... like being the arbiter of questions about what kind of mourning is appropriate. What does God really want us to do? How great was a certain person who died and why, and what are the implications for what we ought to do in the world to fulfill the legacy of that political or religious or patriarch, or matriarch, or child, who has passed away?

[00:34:11] David Waldstreicher: So it's sometimes been, and already some people have criticized me for not emphasized it. It's always... the thing about dealing with religion in early America is that there are always people who aren't interested in it, and there're always people who wanted it to be the whole story, who think it's a... Well, they were more religious back then and that's the only... the most important thing you need to know.

[00:34:29] David Waldstreicher: I think Wheatley's perspective on religion is that it's just one among many things. It's not the only thing that's going on. And the interesting thing is how she relates it to other things, so that when she starts to talk about hypocrisy of the Americans on slavery, which she does, for example, in a letter to her friend, Obour Tanner, in a way that's more overt and direct in early 1776 than most, than what she said in her poems, she makes it a religious critique. She does that partly because Obour is even more pious than she is, but she also does it because that is the way to make it stick. It's a universal argument that these modern Egyptians are hypocrites, and God works in mysterious ways, and who knows whether they may pay for their national sins.

[00:35:14] David Waldstreicher: So whose national sins is she talking about? She might be talking about the British national sins of oppressing the Americans. She might be talking about the American sins of oppressing the Africans, or both at the same time. So, religion is always there, but it's not an all or nothing thing. It's an idiom. It's a la- it's another language that she is working with. And it's... and the fact that she owns it so well makes her able to speak to people in ways that sometimes enabled them to hear what she has to say in ways that they otherwise might not. So, it's central and it's a grounding for her, but we can also see her branching out and combining it with other idioms, and that would be the sort of story about her artistic and personal development that I think is important.

[00:36:00] Jeffrey Rosen: The power of your book shows those different strains, the religious strain, the antislavery strain and the neoclassical strain, as all parts of her legacy. And you note that that letter to Obour Tanner that you mentioned where she so explicitly denounced slavery as a violation of natural rights hadn't been discovered until the late 20th century, which is one reason, as you note, that African American critics in the early 20th century described her as insufficiently race-conscious and said she had too much distance from the reality of slavery and the experience of most people. And even W. E. B. Du Bois found her verse trite and halting, although he changed his mind, as you note, by 1941.

[00:36:42] Jeffrey Rosen: Nancy Isenberg, describe the shifting reception of Phillis Wheatley and the fact that for much of the 20th century, until recently, she was insufficiently appreciated by African Americans as well as by white critics for that reason.

[00:36:59] Nancy Isenberg: Yeah. I think one of the problems that modern America has is with neoclassicalism. [laughs] We're not well-versed in Pope's poetry and that whole tradition. I mean, and part of it is this idea I mentioned before about the kind of the taint of elitism, the fact that getting into college was only for young boys, and you had to know Latin and Greek and that whole, you know... this is the thing that Thomas Jefferson and John Adams loved, you know, writing about their knowledge of Greek. But it does seem very unnatural to us to read neoclassical poetry. But it's a really misunderstanding of the 18th century because it's not like... And I think we've associated it with, like, cold statues, you know, something that's so formalism. It's formalism. And we've... we like to think of poetry today as something natural and spontaneous, and closer to the heart. And then, you know, it's like Jefferson's head heart, like neoclassicism is with the head.

[00:38:05] Nancy Isenberg: And I think this is one of those barriers. It's very hard to overcome because of our own perceptions of what we think poetry should be, like this natural expression versus the formalism. And I think that's what people have had problems. And I think this is what David's book overcomes, because you can't... by not putting her into one box, by seeing how these different discourses are connected to one another.

[00:38:29] Nancy Isenberg: And that poetry... I mean, I think it's... even recovering the poetic voice, poetry is something... I mean, when I was rereading your book, I kept thinking about today, a lot of our most famous modern poets aren't writing poetry. They're writing music lyrics. And, [laughs] and that's where we get... you know, again, we see them as geniuses, but that's where we get the power of poetry. And David mentioned hymn writing, which is a religious tradition. But if we think about poetry, it is something that has this long tradition in different cultures, the importance of music, the importance of rhyming verses. But I think that we have to... with, you know, recovering Phillis Wheatley, we have to not kind of see her work as cold and formal. And that's what, you know... and it feeds Thomas Jefferson's attack when he calls her just being imitating.

[00:39:27] Nancy Isenberg: Well, we all imitate. [laughs] I mean, it's like, nobody's purely original. You don't kind of like... you’re not like Venus where you

just kind of emerge and somehow you're original and everything you say is new. But it's about the combination, the more interesting combinations, and that's where I think David's book is really recovering that tradition.

[00:39:50] Nancy Isenberg: I mean, one of the things he mentioned in his book that I thought was so interesting is the sculptor Edmonia Lewis who did this statue of Phillis Wheatley for the... in the Chicago World's Fair, and it was part of the women's building. And her background is also really fascinating because she was Native American as well as being African American. But she was also very conscious of her image. She claimed that she grew up in the wilds, [laughs] and kind of flaunted this natural, unique... And it was all made up because she had... she like excelled in school and kind of had all the traditional successes. And she... her brother made a fortune in the gold rush. And she had wealth and privilege. But it's, again, that tension where... I mean, this is my critique of America. Americans often want the myth, [laughs] the overblown... the image that suits our needs at the moment rather than trying to really figure out that most people in... when we go back into history, have complicated lives. And they are interesting when you kind of accept the complexity instead of kind of trying to stick them into one box.

[00:41:04] Nancy Isenberg: And I think part of the reason for the 20th century is that when you have a symbol, you're trying to kind of... it's a political agenda to have a symbol, someone who represents your movement. And symbols change. And what people want out of symbols is not necessarily always what reflects the historical record. And that's where we kinda need to return and appreciate the historical context, and not lose sight of that in the case of Phillis Wheatley. And I think that's what David's book allows us to do.

[00:41:35] Jeffrey Rosen: He does indeed so powerfully.

[00:41:38] Jeffrey Rosen: David, talk about her legacy as a neoclassical poet, which is so central. And I'll share, if I may, my new book which will be out next year is on the pursuit of happiness, how classical writers on virtue influenced so many of the founders and defined America. And I was so struck by how many of them would read these classical writers on virtues, Seneca and Epictetus and Aurelius, and write sonnets of virtue. Hamilton, John Quincy Adams, Mercy Otis Warren, are among the founders who, like Phillis Wheatley, wrote classical sonnets of virtue after reading this literature. Oddly, I found myself doing the same thing. And before I knew that they had done this, I sort of summed up the wisdom in little sonnets as well. So there's something about the literature that lends itself to

this form, but it's central to Wheatley's legacy. Tell us about her significance as a neoclassical poet.

[00:42:35] David Waldstreicher: There are two things that aren't really sufficiently appreciated about poetry and neoclassical poetry in the 18th century and why... and it helped explain why she did what she did, the way she did it. One is that poetry is popular culture. It's almost as if you take all the popular music that we take for granted is at the center of popular culture today, move it over into print, move it over into what we consider poetry, and no longer read or find too formal because we prefer free verse now because we find it more expressive and easier to write and easier to read. Move all that rhyming stuff that we still like... and, you know, I can't tell you how many people in my lifetime, because I've always been interested in this question as a one time aspiring college poet, and my mother wrote poetry, and my mother wrote poetry that rhymed. And you know, people would say, "Oh, I hate that rhyming stuff that I had to memorize in school." The very same people love pop music, right? And they don't look down on the musicians who write songs that rhyme. They think it's catchy, they like it better, right?

[00:43:40] David Waldstreicher: So these things split, but they weren't split in the 18th century. Poetry was popular culture. It was newsy. It was occasional. But it was also religious. And it was also the highest art. And this is where the Greek and Romans come in with their aesthetic theories and with their... the best that has been taught and said, passed down all these years. And maybe you have to... maybe to really appreciate it, you have to learn Greek and Roman, but you don't because it's all been translated. And it's not just been translated in prose, it's been translated by the best English poets trying to do English equivalents. So that's what Alexander Pope is about. That's what makes him a bestseller and famous and kind of a rockstar is these English versions of the Odyssey and the Iliad. So, it doesn't matter whether Phillis Wheatley knew Greek or Latin. In fact, it's better that she didn't because it's really the translations that she's riffing on and modeling herself on.

[00:44:40] David Waldstreicher: So, when I started to realize this, and I started to try to read everything that she would have read and known about to try to get at what she was doing, at a certain point... and so Phillis Wheatley gave me my classical education I never had, even though I was an English major in college. At a certain point, in listening to books on tape of the Iliad and especially the Odyssey, I realized like, "Wait a minute, slavery is all over this literature. They

talk about it all the time, and especially the traffic in women." So, if Phillis Wheatley has an experience as a trafficked person, and nobody wants to hear about her experience, and her sorrows, and the loss of her parents, and what horrors she may have seen before and after the voyage at the bottom of a ship, or more likely not at the bottom of a ship because women and children were let on deck. But in any case, how can she get at a world with slaves and enslaved women and voyages?

[00:45:40] David Waldstreicher: This literature is not foreign to her. It actually is talking about things. This Mediterranean world is like her Atlantic world. It's analogous. So she would've... she wouldn't have been repelled from it, it's foreign, it's too elite. She would have been drawn to it. And I think that the way that she incorporates it and is able to show off her knowledge and understanding of it and riff on it really needs to be seen in that light, that she could use this stuff to talk about things that she couldn't talk about directly. And I think that has to be the starting point, just as much as her conversion to Christianity and her discovery of forms, like the elegy, and talking to and about ministers. So that's how I see the importance of neoclassical poetry, which are basically like... you can't even separate the neoclassical from poetry for people in the 18th century.

[00:46:30] David Waldstreicher: And so back to reference what Nancy said earlier about words, it's very interesting that we are so concerned with what the word choices of the Founding Fathers were in their legal and philosophical writings that explain their attitudes and their political thought and their... the Constitution that we have to follow to the letter. But it's very interesting that the grounding, the figuring out of how to use words that so many of these men do, was shaped by their interactions with this poetry, so that when we talk about the founders and the classics, I think you're exactly right, we shouldn't just... we should... we... Well, yeah, Seneca, of course, fine. Aristotle, Plato, all the historians, Livy for John Adams, all those things, but also the poets. And that's part of why Wheatley was so threatening to Jefferson because I think he recognizes as like, "Oh, oh, wow, he really is... He's really there. He's really there. I can't just like brush this off. So I'll say she's a religious poet, so I don't have to admit that she's a classical one."

[00:47:32] Jeffrey Rosen: Oh completely, you so powerfully capture the excitement and pop culture significance of poetry at the time. You describe how the Earl of Dartmouth pays for Wheatley to buy 18 volumes of Pope's work, and she reads them on the ship. And that's just the most exciting thing that she could

read. And also, you just said so well that, through the neoclassical idiom, she was able to express messages that she couldn't otherwise express directly. And that the subtlety of that vehicle that allows her to take moral, political and religious positions that she can't openly at a time where the shifting politics are perilous, is one incredible contribution of your book.

[00:48:12] Jeffrey Rosen: Nancy, maybe some thoughts on that as we begin to wrap up this wonderful discussion about how Wheatley's poetry suggests how malleable the politics were between Loyalists and Patriots, between antislavery advocates and defenders of slavery, and how Wheatley had to navigate these shoals which she did so subtly through her remarkable poetry.

[00:48:35] Nancy Isenberg: This is, again, the story we often don't like to raise, but the fact that the British would end up liberating more slaves at the end of the war than any Americans would. [laughs] so it's also navigating that tension that, and not necessarily for higher and noble reasons, but it was also kind of considered a war strategy. David talks about Lord Dunmore, who kind of issued a Declaration of Virginia saying anyone who's an indentured servant or a slave wants to be free, if they come to the British side, they will essentially have their freedom which, you know, again, turn the Virginians patriots, you know basically... I think it's Henry Lee, who says, "Well, we better liberate them first before the, [laughs] the British do."

[00:49:19] Nancy Isenberg: So, it is I think the Loyalists always get a bad rap. They're always seen as the elitist, which they weren't any more elite. I mean, there was a whole range of different kinds of Loyalists which historians have begun to appreciate. They came from different ranks, class ranks. But there's... I think one of the things to think about, there were people who became Loyalists who were like, you know, essentially had the same critique of the British government and end up moving to Canada or going to Australia and taking their American ideas with them.

[00:50:00] Nancy Isenberg: So, Loyalists are a mixed bag. And I think there are a... You know, we draw this kind of rigid line between the two, but they do share... they share again the same kind of political heritage, their British heritage, and that's the other tension. The revolutionaries, yes, they're claiming to begin anew and invoking this American identity, but, in many ways, they remain very British, [laughs] not just with the common law. So, they can't quite escape the British models, whether it's the law, whether its culture. As I said, like, you know, the

English are still the ones who have taste, supposedly, and get to decide which American writers deserve to be recognized.

[00:50:46] Nancy Isenberg: But, yeah, I think we have to kind of avoid that tendency of thinking, that... first of all that the revolution was set. Like, you know, when we look back in time that somehow there were clear divisions between the Loyalists and the Patriots in terms of their culture, or we find one category, like we use class in a way to kind of imagine that they were completely different groups.

[00:51:11] Nancy Isenberg: And I think we also have to realize that Americans are drawing on this British culture, this British tradition, this neoclassical tradition in a way that continues to define things. And there are ways Americans wanna kinda break and show they're different. But in many ways, I mean, I keep thinking about John Adams' love of Cicero. I mean, he just can't get enough of [laughs] Cicero. And I think it comes back to that idea, when David was talking about how Phillis is living through the Odyssey, that whole idea of analogy. I think the reading process people could... when they were reading about these people, they had no sense… they didn't mind imitating or reliving, you know, like, the life of Cicero, where that was kind of considered noble. And I think it's not until the Romantic poets that we really get the emphasis on originality, and that everything has to be new. And it's not new, but the insistence [laughs] that it's new, that contributes to that, I think, misunderstanding of how important the classics, neoclassicism was to the founding generation, and for men and women, as David highlights, these translations.

[00:52:26] Nancy Isenberg: I mean, I always love the fact that John and Abigail are constantly quoting Shakespeare to one another. And they don't even have to cite it. I mean, they know it backwards and forwards. And they know, you know, they... if you read their letters, they're... you know, we think of letters as someone saying exactly what they think at that moment but they are very much filtering it through their books and what they've read, and storylines and quotes that are like a stepping stone to the bigger theme, the emotional theme or the political theme that they wanna get at. So, it is just kind of hidden language to us today, but it wasn't hidden to them in the 18th century.

[00:53:08] Jeffrey Rosen: The love of the founders for the classics, so palpable. You're so right about Adams and Cicero. And in fact, I was so struck by the fact that Jefferson, Franklin, John Adams, and John Quincy Adams all cited a single book of Cicero as the source of their understanding of the pursuit of happiness,

namely, the Tusculan Disputations. I can't wait to hear what both of you think about the pursuit of happiness book and would love to have you back to discuss it when it's out.

[00:53:33] Jeffrey Rosen: David, last word in this great discussion to you, I trust that We the People listeners are excited enough by our conversation to read your superb book, but why don't we just send them out with just a few closing thoughts on your part, maybe I'll ask the obvious question, what did you learn about Phillis Wheatley at the end of this amazing project that you hadn't known at the beginning?

[00:53:54] David Waldstreicher: Oh, so much. I think I'll emphasize something that touches on the last question about the Loyalists and about the revolutionary conflict, which is that Wheatley is, for all her singularity and distinctiveness as a celebrity and as a famous enslaved person, she is actually typical in many ways of the Black experience of the American Revolution in the way that she hedges her bets, keeps lines of communication open, with Tories and Patriots, with people on the other side of the water and people in Boston. And in doing so, even though Patriots kept her at arm's length and didn't wanna... she couldn't get her book published in Boston so she has to go to England. But out of that back and forth, and that dance she has with Franklin and Washington who neither quite want to embrace her but can't be seen publicly to be dissing her either, because she's already famous, and she's in their spheres, so they engage her but like, kind of hedge their bets about what she means, and so that they don't have to have it mean something about what... about the future of slavery.

[00:55:18] David Waldstreicher: She does that with leading Patriots. She does it with the British over in England, and the result is that in hedging her bets, it... that is a part of the process by which she gets emancipated because her being a slave is embarrassing to her owners. Her friends in England throw it in their faces, Benjamin Rush's surprised to find out that she's still enslaved. And it's ambiguous exactly how it happens. And I think she keeps it quiet, and she says different things about it to different people precisely because she's playing different people against each other. And the result is she becomes free.

[00:55:56] David Waldstreicher: But like a lot of African Americans who become free as a result of the war, or as a result of how some people are starting to think slavery is wrong, or as a result of their own efforts to find a way to become free, whether running away or negotiating or getting liberated by British forces,

what that means for the future is unclear. She doesn't know what's going to happen, what the results are going to be. In her case, she's one of many for whom freedom turns out to be the loss of patronage, and very difficult to establish a life in freedom.

[00:56:31] David Waldstreicher: We don't know whether her young death has more to do with what seems to have been a chronic illness, which there're earlier references to, or the fact that her husband was in debtor's prison, and that she had several young children, and the economy is in a shambles in Boston in 1783 and '84. All these probably are all factors in what happened to her. But there's a... I try to leave it as open as I can because I don't have a clear answer of whether we should see her, the end of her life, how important is the fact that she comes to a tragic end? Is she just another early romantic poet who dies in a garret because there are no careers for poets? Poetry is popular but that doesn't mean that like there are gonna be royalties for her even if she's famous. But she's not the only one. She's actually typical in that regard, too.

[00:57:17] David Waldstreicher: So it's, she's actually... even though she's very unusual, she's a great example of the open-endedness of the American Revolution, the way it's going in both antislavery and proslavery directions. And that has a tremendous impact on all African Americans in that time. And it's also maybe a useful way for us, given the debate we now have on whether the revolution itself was proslavery or antislavery or liberatory or more of a colonizing and racist juggernaut. Maybe the open-endedness and the way that things are going in multiple directions at the same time that we see with her, maybe provide us a way out of what is maybe becoming a stale or too stark debate between everything being good or everything being bad in how we think about the founding.

[00:58:11] Jeffrey Rosen: The open-endedness is indeed a liberation from those stale categories, and that is one of the many contributions of your pathbreaking book, The Odyssey of Phillis Wheatley.

[00:58:23] Jeffrey Rosen: Thank you so much, David Waldstreicher, for joining us. Thank you, Nancy Isenberg, for being such a great interlocutor. And thanks to We the People listeners for tuning in.

[00:58:33] Jeffrey Rosen: Please check out David's book. It's marvelous.

[00:58:36] Jeffrey Rosen: David, Nancy, thank you so much.

[00:58:39] Nancy Isenberg: Thank you.

[00:58:40] David Waldstreicher: Thank you.

[00:58:47] Jeffrey Rosen: Today's episode was produced by Lana Ulrich, Bill Pollock, and Samson Mostashari. It was engineered by Bill Pollock. Research was provided by Yara Daraiseh, Lana Ulrich, Samson Mostashari, Tomas Vallejo, Connor Rust, and Rosemary Li.

[00:59:03] Jeffrey Rosen: Please recommend the show to friends, colleagues or anyone anywhere who's eager for a weekly dose of Constitutional debate. Sign up for the newsletter at constitutioncenter.org/connect. And always remember, whether you wake or whether you sleep, that the National Constitution Center is a private nonprofit. We rely on the generosity, the passion, the engagement, the devotion to lifelong learning about the Constitution of people like you who are inspired by our nonpartisan mission. Support it by becoming a member at constitutioncenter.org/membership or give a donation of any amount, $5, $10, or more, to support our work, including the podcast at constitutioncenter.org/donate.

[00:59:41] Jeffrey Rosen: On behalf of the National Constitution Center, I'm Jeffrey Rosen.