

## The Poetics of Formal Subsumption: On Phillis Wheatley and Bathos as Style

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This manuscript will be part of a dissertation chapter on bathos, labor, and the commercialization of cultural production in eighteenth-century Britain. Having shown, via Alexander Pope, that bathos as an aesthetic judgment concerns not only an artist's comic failure to achieve the sublime, but the obtrusive legibility of lower-value labor in an aesthetic object, I here turn to how this judgment interfaces with the racialized division of labor, focusing in particular on the reception of Phillis Wheatley's poetry. The racist imperative for Wheatley to prove her capacity to produce poetry generates a formal problem within her verse whereby making this capacity legible also risks eliciting a judgment of bathos. In this section, I argue that Wheatley not only confronts this imperative via authenticating paratexts but also confronts the resultant formal problem within her verse by strategically yet unironically embracing bathos as a style. I first situate this claim within previous scholarship, noting how an intuition of Wheatley's bathos persists across the two main tendencies of her twentieth-century reception, Black nationalism and Black feminism, while critiquing more recent scholarship's inability to account for this aspect of Wheatley's poetics. I then pursue a close reading of June Jordan's 1986 poem, "Something like A Sonnet for Phillis Miracle Wheatley," suggesting that it constitutes both a critical account and a stylized performance of Wheatley's bathos. Finally, I offer an extended close reading of Wheatley's first published poem, "On Messrs Hussey and Coffin" (1767), showing how it ultimately deflates its own satirical dimension by embracing bathos on the model of Jordan's critical account.