
MISSION US: “For Crown or Colony?”
Part 3: March of the Apprentices (February 23-26, 1770)
Document-Based Activity

**Making Death Larger than Life: “On the death of Mr Snider Murder’d by
Richardson” by Phillis Wheatley**

A NOTE TO THE EDUCATOR:

This activity is best used following after students have been introduced to the murder and funeral of Christopher Seider, a young Boston apprentice who was killed by customs officer Ebenezer Richardson in the course of a political demonstration that turned violent.

Read through the poem below with your students. It is written in a difficult, and at times archaic, language, so stop frequently to check the sidenotes for additional information and to ensure general comprehension among your students.

**“On the death of Mr Snider Murder’d by Richardson”
by Phillis Wheatley**

<p>-British occupation troops</p> <p>-to make more acute or intense</p> <p>-a villain</p> <p>-the ancient Greek hero of the Trojan War, as recounted in Homer’s Iliad</p> <p>-wherever</p> <p>-a fierce or violent person</p> <p>-spears; a continuation of the Homeric metaphor</p> <p>-the ancient Greek Gods; again, a Homeric metaphor</p> <p>-Homeric combat was often waged between the two best fighters—or “champions” from each army.</p> <p>-military</p> <p>-appalled</p> <p>-despise</p> <p>-colonists loyal to the Crown</p> <p>-allow</p> <p>-a deplorable or despicable person, in this case Ebenezer Richardson (see below)</p> <p>-chased</p> <p>-a shameful reputation</p>	<p>In heavens eternal court it was decreed</p> <p>How the first martyr for the cause should bleed</p> <p>To clear the country of <u>the hated brood</u></p> <p>He <u>whet</u> his courage for the common good</p> <p>Long hid before, a vile <u>infernal</u> here</p> <p>Prevents <u>Achilles</u> in his mid career</p> <p><u>Where’er</u> this <u>fury</u> darts his Poisonous breath</p> <p>All are endanger’d to the <u>Shafts of death.</u></p> <p>The <u>generous Sires</u> beheld the fatal wound</p> <p>Saw their Young <u>champion</u> gasping on the ground</p> <p>They rais’d him up. but to each present ear</p> <p>What <u>martial</u> glories did his tongue declare</p> <p>The wretch <u>appal’d</u> no longer can <u>despise</u></p> <p>But from the Striking victim turns his eyes</p> <p>When this young martial genius did appear</p> <p>The <u>Tory</u> chiefs no longer could <u>forbear.</u></p> <p>Ripe for destruction, see the <u>wretches</u> doom</p> <p>He waits the curses of the age to come</p> <p>In vain he flies, by Justice Swiftly <u>chaced</u></p> <p>With unexpected <u>infamy</u> disgraced</p>
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<p>-Ebenezer Richardson, the Customs official who shot Seider</p> <p>-those who seize and hold power without legal right -excessively praised</p> <p>-The River Styx in classical mythology, which the dead crossed on their way to the underworld Hades.</p> <p>-Christopher Seider's last name was misspelled "Snider" in the poem.</p> <p>-attendants accompanying a person of importance</p> <p>-corpse</p>	<p>Be <u>Richardson</u> for ever banish'd here</p> <p>The grand <u>Usurpers</u> bravely <u>vaunted</u> Heir.</p> <p>We bring the body from the <u>wat'ry bower</u></p> <p>To lodge it where it shall remove no more</p> <p><u>Snider</u> behold with what Majestic Love</p> <p>The Illustrious <u>retinue</u> begins to move</p> <p>With Secret rage fair freedoms foes beneath</p> <p>See in thy <u>corse</u> ev'n Majesty in Death</p>
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“On the death of Mr Snider Murder’d by Richardson”
Discussion Questions

1. If you knew nothing of Christopher Seider except what you’d read in this poem, what kind of person would you assume he’s been?

Why? _____

Is this impression corroborated by the facts as we know them?

2. If you knew nothing of Ebenezer Richardson except what you’d read in this poem, what kind of person would you assume he’s been?

Why? _____

Is this impression corroborated by the facts as we know them?

3. At the time of Christopher Seider’s death in 1770, the Revolutionary War was still years away. Do you think Wheatley was attempting to help incite a full-scale military rebellion with this poem?

Why or why not? _____

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4. 18th century poetry was often very dramatic, with references to Greek mythology being especially popular, and a way to give current events a grander, more eternal meaning. Where and how has Phillis Wheatley used this approach in the poem?

5. Wheatley was writing for an audience that knew classical Greek mythology well, and was accustomed to melodrama, in which characters were “all good” or “all bad.” If you were writing a poem about this same incident today, how might you approach the subject differently?

6. Try writing a poem about Seider’s death in today’s language. This doesn’t have to be a line-by-line “translation” of Wheatley’s poem; the point is to try to inspire the same reaction in an audience of your peers as Wheatley sought to inspire in hers.