



## Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784)

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Poet.

Active 1773-1784 in United States

Phillis Wheatley's importance, as the first black American to publish a book in English, has never been in question. In her own time, the publication of her book of 38 poems cast doubt upon the belief that blacks were culturally inferior and mentally incapable of producing great literature. In the modern era, she is recognized for simultaneously beginning the African-American and the African-American women's literary traditions. However, since its publication, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London, 1773), Wheatley's sole book of poetry (written before she was twenty), has been controversial. While some critics have argued that the poetry is imitative and controlled by the white value system, other, more recent scholars have asserted that Wheatley's poetry in fact does have an original voice that takes a strong stand against slavery and racial discrimination.

Phillis (often misspelled Phyllis) Wheatley's birth place and date are uncertain, but recent scholars have speculated, based on information about eighteenth-century slave trade routes, that she was born in Senegal-Gambia in West Africa, along the Gambia River, and that she probably spoke the Wolof language. The first sure information about Wheatley is that she arrived in Boston Harbor on July 11th, 1761 aboard the slave ship *Phillis*. From *Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley, a Native African and Slave* (Boston, 1834) by Margaretta M. Odell, a descendant of the Wheatley family, we know that the Wheatley household at the time included John and Susanna and their twin children Mary and Nathaniel, 18 years old. The Wheatleys and several slaves lived on King Street in Boston, future site of the Boston Massacre. John, a merchant, owned a wholesale business, real estate, warehouses, and a three-masted schooner, the *London Packet*. Odell says that Susanna Wheatley wanted a personal attendant, so she and her husband chose the little girl that Susanna would name Phillis. Susanna presumed that the child, almost naked and so very ill that she came cheap, was seven or eight years old because she had lost her front teeth. Although malnutrition and illness could have caused the missing teeth, most scholars consider Wheatley's birth date to be 1753.

Both Susanna and her daughter Mary recognized and fostered Phillis's genius. Mary taught Phillis to read, starting her on a course of study equal to, or better than the education of most white women in Boston. Within 16 months, Wheatley had learned English well enough to read the Bible. In succeeding years, she also learned Latin and studied Horace, Virgil, Ovid, and Terence, as well as geography and history. Among her contemporaries, she read John Dryden, John Milton, and Alexander Pope, including his translation of Homer. All of these writers influenced Wheatley's style and content. Susanna encouraged Wheatley's writing by giving her light chores, allowing her to write whenever she desired, and supplying her with light and heat in her room

so she could continue her studies at night. The Wheatleys, members of the South Congregational Church and well respected in the community, often had Wheatley demonstrate her talents for prominent ministers and political activists they hosted in their home. Susanna also brought her to visit leading families, wrote letters supporting her poetry, sent information about Wheatley to newspapers and magazines, and financed publication of her work.

Because Wheatley was heavily influenced by the neoclassical tradition, she has often been read as a mere imitator of the eighteenth-century style without a distinctively African-American voice. Black critics of the 1960s, while acknowledging her importance to the development of African American literature, were dismayed by Wheatley's apparent assimilation to the white value system and her seeming acceptance of slavery. However, since the 1980s, when three major collections of her work appeared, critics have begun to see how original and syncretic Wheatley's poetry is. Scholars black and white, in reappraising Wheatley's poetry and prose, have discovered the subversiveness of her forms, the political edge of her content, and the private human being behind the public front.

Wheatley's first known writing was a letter (now lost) to Samson Occom, the Mohegan minister, when she was twelve. Two years later, Wheatley published her first poem: "On Messrs Hussey and Coffin," December 21th, 1767. The poem's head note says that she was inspired to write the poem while serving dinner, when she overheard Hussey and Coffin tell the story of their near drowning. The poem combines her knowledge of the Greek gods and her Christian piety to suggest that, though "Boreas" and "Eolus"—classical names for the wind—caused the shipwreck, the Christian God could have taken away the men's fear:

Did haughty Eolus with Contempt look down  
With Aspect windy, and a study'd Frown?  
Regard them not; —the Great Supreme, the Wise,  
Intends for something hidden from our Eyes.

In this poem, Wheatley's neoclassical style is already evident, with its heroic couplets, classical references, and strong Christian viewpoint. A second poem written the same year shows early evidence of another important ingredient in the mix of images and references that infuse her poetry. In "To the University of Cambridge, in New-England" she chastises the unruly students at Harvard for misusing their privileges: "Ye blooming plants of human race devine, / An *Ethiop* tells you, [sin] 'tis your greatest foe". This claim of her African heritage has become the focus of much recent critical attention, offsetting earlier criticism that Wheatley ignored her African origins.

Several of Wheatley's poems appeared as pamphlets and in contemporary newspapers and broadsides. Most famous of these was her poem on the death of the well-known English evangelical minister, George Whitefield, who had come to America to spread his revivalist ideas and whose work Susanna Wheatley had supported. "On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield 1770", was amazingly popular, both for its subject and for its author. That a black and a slave could write such an impassioned and accomplished poem gave fuel to the abolitionists' argument that Africans were human after all and the slave trade was wrong. The poem, too, is of great interest to recent critics. It is an elegy, Wheatley's most common form, but it employs elements not found in the standard elegiac tradition. Like the poem to Harvard students, it intermixes African traditions with the European form. At the end of the first stanza, Wheatley describes Whitefield metaphorically as the "setting sun". While this image can be seen as a pun on "sun/son", with Christian connotations, some critics suggest that such solar imagery, which recurs throughout her poetry, quite likely also reflects her early memories of sun-centred African religious rituals. The Odell memoir, in fact, describes Wheatley's clearest childhood

memory of Africa, an image of her mother pouring water at sunrise. Another unique element of Wheatley's elegies is giving a voice to the deceased. Whether or not this device comes from her African heritage is unclear, but it certainly gives Wheatley's elegies an originality earlier critics denied.

In 1772, Susanna Wheatley circulated a proposal for a book of Wheatley's poetry. Because not enough people subscribed, however, the book was not published in Boston, but in London in September 1773, under the auspices of the Countess of Huntingdon, Selina Hastings, to whom the book is dedicated. Wheatley travelled to London with Nathaniel Wheatley in the spring of 1773 to ease her respiratory problems and to sell her book. In London, she met men and women of renown, including the Earl of Dartmouth and America's own Benjamin Franklin, and toured the Tower of London and other famous sites. She received compliments and presents, such as a copy of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and enough money to buy Alexander Pope's works. She was scheduled to meet the Countess and perhaps King George, but news that Susanna Wheatley was seriously ill forced her to return to Boston before she could do so and before her book was published. Interestingly, the book proposed in Boston was different from the book published in London. For instance, a poem on the killing of an eleven-year-old boy in the patriot cause—"On the Death of Mr Snider Murder'd by Richardson" (1770)—was omitted, as was a poem describing the Boston Massacre, presumably because they might have offended a British audience in the political climate of the time.

One persistent question in Wheatley criticism concerns Wheatley's stand on racial discrimination and slavery. The most controversial poem in this regard is "On Being Brought from Africa to America" (1768; 1773). Its famous first line, "'Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land", seems to validate the claims of slaveholders that slavery was a benevolent institution. However, most critics now read the poem as an indirect assertion of the equality of blacks and whites. Wheatley acknowledges God's mercy for bringing her to the knowledge of Christ, but she admonishes white Christians to remember that "*Negros*, black as *Cain*, / May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train." Here, Wheatley uses indirection, a common rhetorical strategy of women and marginalized writers, to express arguments that white, proslavery readers would miss but a black or abolitionist audience would understand. In "To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth, His Majesty's Secretary Of State for North America" (1773), Wheatley writes more directly, creating images of iron chains to characterize tyranny and including the following vivid description of the effects of the slave trade:

Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,  
Wonder from whence my love of *Freedom* sprung,  
Whence flow these wishes for the common good,  
By feeling hearts alone best understood,  
I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate,  
Was snatch'd from *Afric's* fancy'd happy seat:  
What pangs excruciating must molest,  
What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?  
Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd  
That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd:  
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray  
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?

Likewise, in the fall of 1773, right after her return from London and two weeks after her manumission, Wheatley wrote a now famous letter to Samson Occom in which she makes her most outright statement against slavery:

In every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance; and by the Leave of our modern Egyptians I will assert, that the same Principle lives in us.

She notes also

The strange Absurdity of their Conduct whose Words and actions are so diametrically opposite. How well the Cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the exercise of oppressive Power over others agree, —I humbly think it does not require the Penetration of a philosopher to determine.

In the last decade, critics have been re-evaluating Wheatley's use of biblical images and other metaphoric language as a subversive poetic technique that takes an abolitionist stance and argues for the equality of blacks under the cover of European forms and religious content.

Wheatley's use of indirection probably caused her poetry to be misunderstood in her own time, but if she had been less subtle, she likely would not have received the support of the eighteen leaders of Boston society, some of whom were slaveholders, who signed a letter of attestation that she was an African and indeed wrote the poems in her book. The list of signatures included such names as John Hancock, Mather Byles, Thomas Hutchinson, who was Lieutenant-Governor of Massachusetts; and Charles Chauncey, the renowned divine. This letter begins a tradition of whites vouching for African-American writers, because it was so difficult for Americans to believe that blacks, slave or free, could produce high art. Thomas Jefferson, for example, in his *Notes on Virginia* in 1784, acknowledged that Phillis Wheatley had written the poems, but denied that her poetry was anything other than poor imitation, an opinion that held sway for two centuries.

Approximately fifty-six of Wheatley's poems, with variants, are currently extant. Most are either elegies or occasional poems. However, many critics believe Wheatley's best work to be her translation from the Latin of Ovid's "Niobe in Distress for Her Children" (1773), a biblical epic called "Goliath of Gath" (1773), and a number of lyrical poems, such as "An Hymn to the Morning" (1773) and "On Imagination" (1773), which they consider precursors of romanticism. Other critics currently focus on Wheatley's political poetry, including her famous "To His Excellency General Washington", written in 1775, and sent with an introductory letter to Washington. Wheatley later met with Washington at his request. In addition to the poetry, approximately twenty-two of Wheatley's letters have survived, giving critics further insight into her poetics. In 1779, Wheatley advertised a proposal for a second book, never published, with a table of contents listing unpublished poems from the 1772 proposal and several new ones, evidence that Wheatley wrote many poems that remain unknown. The recent discovery of "Ocean" has given scholars hope that more of her work will be found.

Despite being known throughout America and Europe, Phillis Wheatley died alone and in poverty. After she was freed in 1773, she continued to live with the Wheatleys until John Wheatley died in 1778. Two weeks later, she married John Peters, a free black man about whom little is known. Wheatley's three children died young, the third buried with her. Despite her poverty and illness, Wheatley continued writing poetry until her death, on December 5, 1784. Some critics believe that one of her last poems, "An Elegy on Leaving –" (July, 1784), is Wheatley's personal farewell.

Once the most famous black writer in the English-speaking world, Phillis Wheatley became in the 1960s one of

the most reviled, only to have her reputation restored at the end of the twentieth century. Though it could be said that clear and true critical study of Wheatley has just begun, it is already well-established that Wheatley merged African literary and religious traditions with European forms to create a distinctively American poetry. The recent steady outpouring of articles on her life, thought, and poetic technique has discovered in her poetry depths of meaning—in politics, race, and religion—that represent a significant personal response to the major issues of her time and establish her as an important poet.

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