

Phillis Wheatley



The frontispiece from Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Several Occasions* (1773). This is the only portrait of Wheatley from

her own lifetime.

Phillis Wheatley (c 1753-1781) was the first African-American woman to publish a volume of her own poetry. She was born in west Africa and was brought by ship to Boston in July, 1761; she was believed to be seven or eight years old. The slave ship that carried her was called the *Phillis*, and she was given that name upon her arrival; there is no record of her African name and we do not know anything about how she was captured and enslaved. She was purchased by the Wheatleys, a well-off and prominent Boston family. John Wheatley was originally a tailor who branched out into a substantial business in wholesaling, shipping, and money-lending; his wife Susanna became an active supporter of Methodist and Presbyterian missionaries who came from England to preach in the colonies. When they purchased Phillis, the Wheatleys had eighteen-year-old twins, Nathaniel and Mary, and several other slaves working in their household.

The Wheatleys seem quickly to have recognized Phillis's precocious talents with language, and taught her to read English, almost certainly starting with the Bible. Before long, however, she was reading the works of English poets like Alexander Pope and John Milton, as well as English translations of classical poets like Homer, Virgil, and Ovid. John Wheatley testified that within sixteen months of her arrival, she was able to read even the most difficult parts of the Bible, which is extraordinary for any nine-year-old and pretty much unprecedented for African-American slaves in the eighteenth century, most of whom were never taught to read by their masters; white slave owners generally feared teaching their slaves how to read and write lest they use those tools to work against the system that enslaved them, and in many places it was illegal to teach slaves to read. Phillis began publishing poems in New England newspapers at the age of fourteen, and continued to publish occasional poetry (that is, poems on particular current occasions or events) in newspapers

over the next several years.

P R O P O S A L S

For Printing by SUBSCRIPTION,

A Collection of PO E M S, wrote

at several times, and upon various occasions, by PHILLIS, a Negro Girl, from the Strength of her own Genius, it being but a few Years since she came to this Town an uncultivated Barbarian from *Africa*. The Poems having been seen and read by the best Judges, who think them well worthy of the Publick View, and upon critical examination, they find that the declared Author was capable of writing them.

The Order in which they were penned, together with the Occasion, are as follows ;

—On the Death of the Rev. Dr. Sewall, when sick, 1765:—
On virtue, 166. — On two Friends, who were call away, do,
To the University of Cambridge, 1767. — An Address to
the Atheist, do. — An Address to the Deist, do. — On
America, 1768: — On the King, do. — On Friendship,
do. — Thoughts on being brought from Africa to America,
do. — On the Nuptials of Mr. Spence to Miss Hooper, do,
On the Hon. Commodore Hood, on his pardoning a Deserter,
1769. — On the Death of the Reverend Dr. Sewall, do. —
On the Death of Master Seider, who was killed by Ebenezer
Richardson, 1770. — On the Death of the Rev. George White-
field, do. — On the Death of a young Miss, aged 5 years, do.
On the Arrival of the Ships of War, and landing of the
Troops. — On the Affair in King-Street, on the Evening of
the 5th of March. — On the death of a young Gentleman,
To Samuel Quincy, Esq; a Panegyrick. — To a Lady on her
coming to America for her Health. — To Mrs. Leonard, on
the Death of her Husband. — To Mrs. Boylston and Chil-
dren, on the Death of her Son and their Brother. — To a
Gentleman and Lady on the Death of their Son, aged 9
Months. — To a Lady on her remarkable Deliverance in a
Hurricane: — To James Sullivan, Esq; and Lady on the
Death of her Brother and Sister, and a Child, Avis, aged 12
Months. — Goliath of Gath. — On the Death of Dr. Sa-
muel Marshall.

It is supposed they will make one small Octavo Volume,
and will contain about 200 Pages.

They will be printed on Demy Paper, and beautiful Types.

The Price to Subscribers, handsomely bound and lettered,
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The Work will be put to the Press as soon as three
Hundred Copies are subscribed for, and shall be pub-
lished with all Speed.

Subscriptions are taken in by El RUSSELL, in Marlborough
Street.

An advertisement placed in the Boston Censor for February 29, 1772, soliciting subscriptions for a Boston edition of Wheatley's poems. The solicitations seem to have fallen short of what was need to publish the volume, and the Wheatleys turned to the Countess of Huntington, a prominent supporter of the Methodist movement, to subsidize publication of the book in London.

She had a breakthrough of sorts when she published her elegaic poem "On the Death of George Whitefield" in October 1770. Whitefield, the most famous preacher of the day, had preached several times in August 1770 at the Old South Church in Boston (Wheatley may have heard him then; the Wheatley family certainly knew him personally), but died unexpectedly the next month in Newburyport, Massachussetts, about 35 miles north of Boston, and was buried there. Wheatley's poem was widely sold in New England, and then republished in London to great acclaim. The Wheatleys sought subscribers for a volume of her poetry to be published in Boston, but they do not seem to have attracted enough of them to make the venture financially viable (why they did not subsidize it themselves is unknown; they certainly could have afforded to). They turned Archibald Bell, a London publisher of religious texts, who was able to gain the patronage of Selina, the Countess of Huntington. She had been George Whitefield's patron and was a prominent supporter of Methodist causes in England. The Countess helped subsidize the publication of Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in 1773, which Wheatley in turn dedicated to her. Phillis Wheatley went to London (accompanied by Nathaniel Wheatley and traveling on the Wheatleys' own ship) to supervise the printing and publication of her book, and was treated as a celebrity, meeting aristocrats and prominent public figures (including Benjamin Franklin, then resident in London officially as an advocate for the colony of Pennsylvania, but serving in general as a voice for the cause of the American colonists), and being given tours of the Tower of London and the British Museum. She returned to Boston just

before the book was published, however; Susanna was ill (she died in early 1774), and Nathaniel may have prevailed upon her return to help take care of her. But, as Vincent Caretta suggests, Phillis may also have made a deal here, exchanging her willingness to return to Boston for the guarantee of her freedom. In any case, she was given her manumission in October 1773, and although she stayed a part of the Wheatley household until the death of John Wheatley in 1778, she was now a free woman.

After John Wheatley's death, Phillis married John Peters, a free black man. She solicited subscriptions for a second volume of poetry, but with little success, and although some of the poems that would have gone into the volume were later published in newspapers, a lot of them were lost. John Peters had financial troubles and spent much time in jail for debt. He was in jail, in fact, when Phillis died of unknown causes in December 1784.

Readers immediately recognized the great skill with which Wheatley adapted contemporary English poetic forms, such as the heroic couplet and iambic pentameter blank verse, and classical models to topics such as her own enslavement and the situation of the American colonies. It is not surprising to discover that many contemporary critics had a hard time disentangling her identity as a teen-aged African-American slave from their evaluation of the quality and significance of her verse. Her publisher Archibald Bell insisted, it seems, that John Wheatley have prominent Bostonians testify that the poems were indeed by Phillis and not written by someone else, and he did so; the testimony appears at the beginning of the published *Poems*. Other critics enlisted her in the nascent abolitionist cause, using her obvious gifts as evidence for the equality of Africans with Europeans, and proof that slavery was immoral. As scholars in recent decades have studied and recovered her poems and letters, Phillis Wheatley's place as one of the most important and originary

voices of American literature has become secure.

(Digital facsimile of the first edition of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, via HathiTrust)