

# Wheatley, Phillis

(c. 1753–1784),

John C. Shields

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writer of poetry and epistolary prose, was probably born along the Gambia River in 1753. Her mother and father were almost certainly of the Fulani peoples of West Africa and were members of the aristocracy. Wheatley indicates in her poems that she was well acquainted with animistic ancestor worship, solar worship, and Islam. Her emphasis on the importance of these three faiths recurs throughout her 18 extant elegies. This multiple religious consciousness the young girl of seven or eight brought with her to Boston, where she was, on 11 July 1761, sold on the block “for a trifle” and named by John and Susanna Wheatley “Phillis” after the slave ship *The Phillis*, which brought her. In that grotesque and insensitive act of naming, Wheatley would thereafter be forced to recall the horrific Middle Passage. With her already multiple religious consciousness, Wheatley soon blended New England congregationalism and ancient classicism. Her poetry is a manifestation of that cosmopolitan background and learning and her syncretized religious perspective.



Phillis Wheatley. American engraving, eighteenth century.

(Private Collection/The Bridgeman Art Library)

In her first poems, written at age 13 or 14, Wheatley seeks to demonstrate to her overwhelmingly white, Christian, New England audience that she had thoroughly acquired their culture. Her 1767 poems “An Address to the Atheist” and “An Address to the Deist” attest the enthusiasm of a recent convert who has learned her catechism well. Wheatley’s assertion, however, that one may “Make thy

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Elysium in the Shades below” may have struck her Christian mentors as disconcerting. It also suggests the young poet had syncretized the biblical Paradise with the classical Elysium in which Christian souls have become classical “shades” located below but not in the heights of heaven.

Such complexity foreshadows her second, more mature period following the rejection of her first proposal for a volume; this proposal was offered to the Boston crowd on 29 February 1772.

Significantly, this proposal does not include a version of her “On Recollection,” her most savage indictment of the horrific Middle Passage, which she had probably composed by then. Because many in Boston doubted Wheatley’s capacity to write such polished, learned verse, she sat for a tribunal of sorts in October 1772. It was this demeaning event which resulted in the letter of attestation “To the Publick,” signed by colonial Governor Thomas Hutchinson and other esteemed citizens who found her to be “qualified to write them.”

Unable to find enough subscribers from among the Bostonians to justify printing of the volume and smarting at the indignity of the tribunal, Wheatley reacted swiftly and decisively; all her poems constituting her personal lyric voice now turned inward, indicating a persona which struggles to be physically free while realizing a poetic opportunity to be free. In “To Maecenas,” for example, she charges her audience that Terence, the ancient, successful writer of comedies of manner who was, as Wheatley remarks in a footnote, “an *African* by birth,” was “happier” than she because the success of his pen brought about his freedom, while she was still a slave. Her pen, as had Terence’s, did nonetheless lead to her own manumission; she proudly announced her freedom in a letter of 18 October 1773 that “at the desire of my friends in England” her master, John Wheatley, has “given me my freedom” (Shields 1988, 170).

These “friends in England” Wheatley had met earlier, during the summer of 1773, when she was permitted to travel to England to see her 1773 *Poems* through the press. This book, the only volume of her work published in her lifetime, was the second volume published by an American woman and the first book written by an African American. When Wheatley’s first “proposal” failed to secure a Boston printing, she and her mistress, Susanna, sought another venue, this one in London, under the auspices of Selima Hastings, countess of Huntingdon. The connection to the countess had been accomplished at least by 1770 when Wheatley published an elegy, “On the Death of the Rev. George Whitefield.” Whitefield, the countess’s privy chaplain and a famous Christian evangelist, had made at least seven journeys to the American colonies and spent the night with the Wheatleys a week before he died in September 1770. Thus, Wheatley’s vivid elegy on Whitefield likely derived from her actual contact with him. It is certain that the elegy traveled with Whitefield’s body back to England, for it was an immediate sensation, published widely in broadsides throughout England, making Wheatley an international author overnight. That success encouraged the countess to publish Wheatley’s 1773 *Poems*. That collection included “Thoughts on the Works of Providence,” in which Wheatley writes “when action ceases [in sleep], and ideas range/Licentious and unbounded o’er the plain/Where *Fancy’s* queen in giddy triumph reigns” (Shields 1988, 47). She thus was the first writer to define an important aesthetic distinction between fancy and imagination, preceding Samuel Taylor Coleridge by four decades.

Following the appearance of the 1773 *Poems*, Wheatley’s need to be subversive falls away. Now her poetic idiom is almost always direct as she praises George Washington as the hope of the country in “To His Excellency General Washington” (26 October 1775) and calls the newly formed United States “new-born *Rome*” which now “shall give *Britannia Law*” (Shields 1988, 154). In her prose, she defines

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the urge to be free as a universal principle among all peoples: “in a very human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is Impatient of Oppression and pants for Deliverance.” She continues by insisting “by leave of our Modern Egyptians [slave owners] I will assert, that the same Principle lives in us [her black brothers and sisters]” (Shields 1988, 177). This letter to Samson Occum, a Mohegan graduate of Dartmouth College, was printed a dozen times in Boston newspapers.

Wheatley’s primary subject in her work is the quest for freedom, an issue of much import in revolutionary-era America. Clearly, Wheatley is a thinker of no small dimension. Her “On Imagination” enacts the poetic creation of two heterocosms (alternative worlds), the first celebrating a “new world,” which reveals a soul “unbounded,” a world of “gay scenes” that “breaks” the “iron bands” of reality and slavery, and the second nodding to her mother, often referred to in her poems as “Aurora” (recalling her mother’s honoring of the dawn). It is in these alternate worlds that, prior to Wheatley’s manumission, the poet seeks a kind of absolute freedom from oppression. The art of writing poetry at times became for her a means of survival.

Even after her own freedom was granted, she still continued to seek freedom for all, particularly for African American slaves. She was for many intellectuals of the day a symbol of freedom. While in London, the English abolitionist Granville Sharp and the American writer and inventor Benjamin Franklin called upon her. Voltaire, French *philosophe* and satirist, was also an admirer of her work. During the Revolutionary War, John Paul Jones, founder of the American Navy, sent Wheatley a few of his own verses for her approval.

Having married John Peters, a free black, on 1 April 1778, Wheatley was no longer able to depend on her former master’s largesse. Her proposal for a second volume, which would include her letters to the earl of Dartmouth, Benjamin Rush, and the countess of Huntingdon, failed to elicit enough subscriptions to secure publication. It was to have been dedicated to Benjamin Franklin.

Phillis Wheatley died alone in a shack near Boston on 5 December 1784. The cause was probably an infection, after giving birth to her third child, who was born dead. The child was preceded in death by two other children. Although virtually forgotten by her contemporaries, her reputation would soon be resurrected by British abolitionist Thomas Clarkson in *On the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African* (1786), which quoted her poetry. Clarkson’s text was very popular among British Romantic poets, notably Wordsworth and Coleridge, and even extended to Germany, where Johann Blumenbach singled out Wheatley as an accomplished poet and even asserted that he owned a copy of Wheatley’s 1773 *Poems*. Indeed, those poems, often reprinted in Britain during the developing Romantic age, played a definite and influential role toward defining our understanding of the all-important faculty of imagination.

Wheatley served as an inspiring example to nineteenth-century African American writers such as Ann Plato, Frances E. W. Harper, Jarena Lee, and Alice Dunbar Nelson. In the view of scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Wheatley is the mother of African American letters. Wheatley was a polyglot who knew English, Fulani, possibly some Arabic (she was observed soon after her purchase to be making strange, though indecipherable markings on a wall), and Latin. From West Africa to New England to England, she negotiated with considerable success the mixture of white cultures and languages which encircled the Atlantic. She was thus a fine example of what historians such as Ira Berlin, Linda Heywood, and John Thornton have classified as Atlantic Creoles.

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