

Phillis Wheatley

c.1754 - 1784



Phillis Wheatley was the first African American, the first slave, and the third woman in the United States to publish a book of poems.

Kidnapped in West Africa and transported aboard the slave ship *Phillis* to Boston in 1761, she was purchased by John Wheatley as a servant for his wife. Young Phillis quickly learned to speak English and to read the Bible with amazing fluency.

Because of her poor health, obvious intelligence, and Susannah Wheatley's fondness for her, Phillis was never trained as a domestic; instead she was encouraged by the Wheatleys to study theology and the English, Latin and Greek classics. She published her first poem in 1767, and six years later, she published a book, *Poems on Various Subjects*. That same year, John Wheatley emancipated her.

Wheatley achieved international renown, traveling to London to promote her book and being called upon as well as received by noted social and political figures of the day -- including George Washington, to whom she wrote a poem of praise at the beginning of the war, and Voltaire, who referred to her "very good English verse."



Wheatley lived in poverty after her 1778 marriage to John Peters, a free black Bostonian. Although Wheatley advertised for subscriptions to a second volume of poems and letters, she died before she was able to secure a publisher. Her final manuscript was never found.

"People and Events: Phillis Wheatley." *Africans in America*. PBS Online. N.d. Web. 15 November 2015.

The 1773 publication of Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects* established her as a young prodigy and challenged the major justification for enslavement of Africans -- the European assumption of African inferiority.

In the 18th century, Europeans generally assumed that Africans were subhuman, lacking the intellectual capacity for such higher order pursuits as creative writing and mathematics; consequently, Wheatley's book was prefaced by testimonies to its authenticity from her master and from 16 of Boston's most respected citizens, thereby establishing a literary convention of sorts for works by African Americans in the 18th and 19th centuries. Despite such testimonials, Thomas Jefferson was among those who questioned Wheatley's authorship.

One of the best-known poems in the collection is dedicated "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth, His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for North-America, Etc." Wheatley was heartened by the appointment of Dartmouth, whom she had met in London and knew to be a friend of the abolitionist Countess of Huntingdon and of the late Reverend George Whitefield, who had helped launch the Great Awakening.

The poem opens with hopeful optimism that under Dartmouth's "blissful sway," the colonies will see "Freedom's charms unfold" and experience an end to the reign of "wanton Tyranny" that "meant t'enslave the land." Those lines provide a subtle yet powerful segue into the next verse, in which she proposes that her "love of Freedom" (and by implication, that of the black Patriots) springs from the anguish Africans have known as slaves.

"Historical Document: 'To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth'." *Africans in America*. PBS Online. N.d. Web. 15 November 2015.

To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth

BY PHILLIS WHEATLEY

Hail, happy day, when, smiling like the morn,
Fair Freedom rose New-England to adorn:
The northern clime beneath her genial ray,
Dartmouth, congratulates thy blissful sway:
Elate with hope her race no longer mourns,
Each soul expands, each grateful bosom burns,
While in thine hand with pleasure we behold
The silken reins, and Freedom's charms unfold.
Long lost to realms beneath the northern skies

She shines supreme, while hated faction dies:
Soon as appear'd the Goddess long desir'd,
Sick at the view, she languish'd and expir'd;
Thus from the splendors of the morning light
The owl in sadness seeks the caves of night.
No more, America, in mournful strain
Of wrongs, and grievance unredress'd complain,
No longer shalt thou dread the iron chain,
Which wanton Tyranny with lawless hand
Had made, and with it meant t' enslave the land.

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?

For favours past, great Sir, our thanks are due,
And thee we ask thy favours to renew,
Since in thy pow'r, as in thy will before,
To sooth the griefs, which thou did'st once deplore.
May heav'nly grace the sacred sanction give
To all thy works, and thou for ever live
Not only on the wings of fleeting Fame,
Though praise immortal crowns the patriot's name,
But to conduct to heav'ns refulgent fane,
May fiery coursers sweep th' ethereal plain,
And bear thee upwards to that blest abode,
Where, like the prophet, thou shalt find thy God.