Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784): A Brief Biography

Phillis Wheatley was born in Gambia, Africa. She was a slave child of seven or eight and sold to John and Susanna Wheatley in Boston on July 11, 1761. Her first name was apparently derived from the ship that carried her to America, The Phillis.

During her life, while it was not common for American women to be published, it was especially uncommon for children of slaves to be educated at all. Her gift of writing poetry was encouraged by her owners and their daughter, Mary; they taught Phillis to read and write, with her first poem, “On Messrs. Hussey and Coffin,” being published at the age of twelve. The countess of Huntingdon, Selina Hastings, was a friend of the Wheatley’s who greatly encouraged and financed the publication of her book of poetry, Poems. Obour Tanner, a former slave who made the journey through the middle passage with Phillis also was one of the chief influences and supporters of Phillis’s craft.

She was especially fond of writing in the elegiac poetry style, perhaps mirroring the genre of oration taught to her through the women in her African American tribal group. Her elegy on a popular evangelical Methodist minister, George Whitefield, brought her instant success upon his death. She was also well versed in Latin, which allowed her to write in the epyllion (short epic) style with the publication of “Niobe in Distress.”

Phillis’s popularity as a poet both in the United States and England ultimately brought her freedom from slavery on October 18, 1773. She even appeared before General Washington in March, 1776 for her poetry and was a strong supporter of independence during the Revolutionary War. She felt slavery to be the issue which separated whites from true heroism: whites cannot “hope to find/Deivine acceptance with th’ Almighty mind” when “they disgrace/And hold in bondage Afric’s blameless race.”

Phillis is remembered for many first time accomplishments:

- First African American to publish a book
- An accomplished African American woman of letters
- First African American woman to earn a living from her writing
- First woman writer encouraged and financed by a group of women (Mrs. Wheatley, Mary Wheatley, and Selina Hastings)

Annotate and discuss each poem. As a group, choose one poem and fill in the following sentence. Provide evidence for your claim.

In [name of poem], Wheatley uses [literary device] to convey [theme or message].

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On Being Brought from Africa to America

**By Phillis Wheatley**

'Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain,*
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

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On Virtue

**By Phillis Wheatley**

O thou bright jewel in my aim I strive
To comprehend thee. Thine own words declare
Wisdom is higher than a fool can reach.
I cease to wonder, and no more attempt
Thine height t'explore, or fathom thy profound.
But, O my soul, sink not into despair,
*Virtue* is near thee, and with gentle hand
Would now embrace thee, hovers o'er thine head.
Fain would the heaven-born soul with her converse,
Then seek, then court her for her promised bliss.

Auspicious queen, thine heavenly pinions spread,
And lead celestial *Chastity* along:
Lo! now her sacred retinue descends,
Arrayed in glory from the orbs above.
Attend me, *Virtue*, thro' my youthful years!
O leave me not to the false joys of time!
But guide my steps to endless life and bliss.
*Greatness*, or *Goodness*, say what I shall call thee,
To give an higher appellation still,
Teach me a better strain, a nobler lay,
O Thou, enthroned with Cherubs in the realms of day!