



DELPHI
CLASSICS

Phillis Wheatley

Complete Works

DELPHI POETS SERIES

D E L P H I P O E T S S E R I E S

Phillis Wheatley

(c. 1753-1784)



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Phillis Wheatley (1918) by Benjamin Brawley

The Delphi Classics Catalogue

A handwritten signature of Phillis Wheatley in cursive script.

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Version 1

DELPHI POETS SERIES

Phillis Wheatley



By Delphi Classics, 2023

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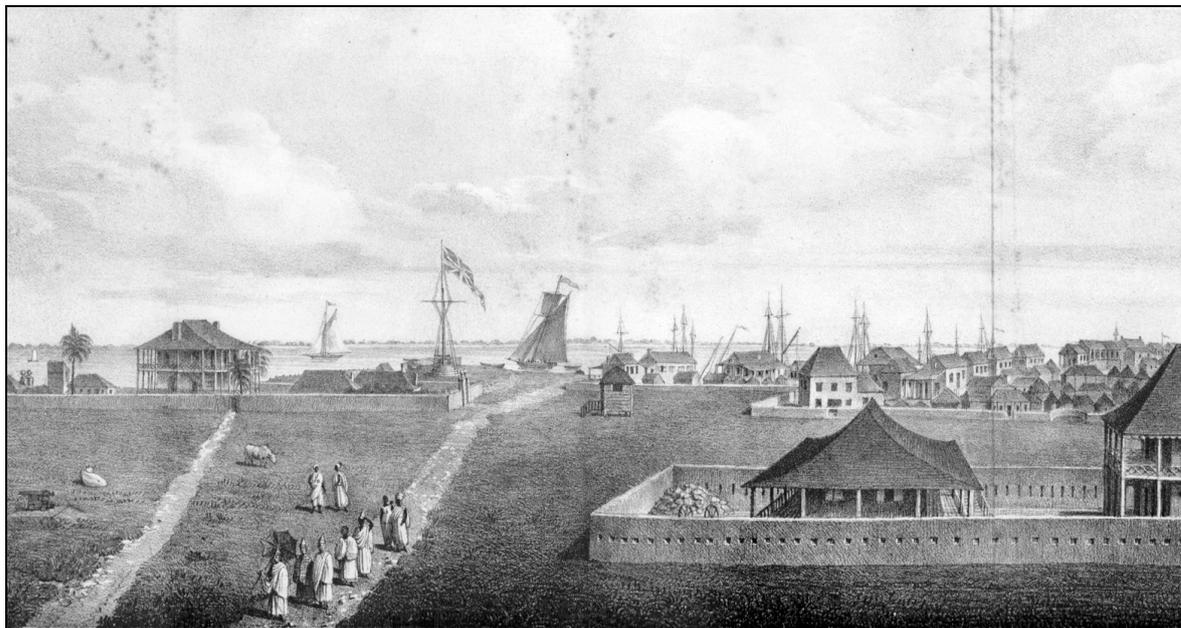
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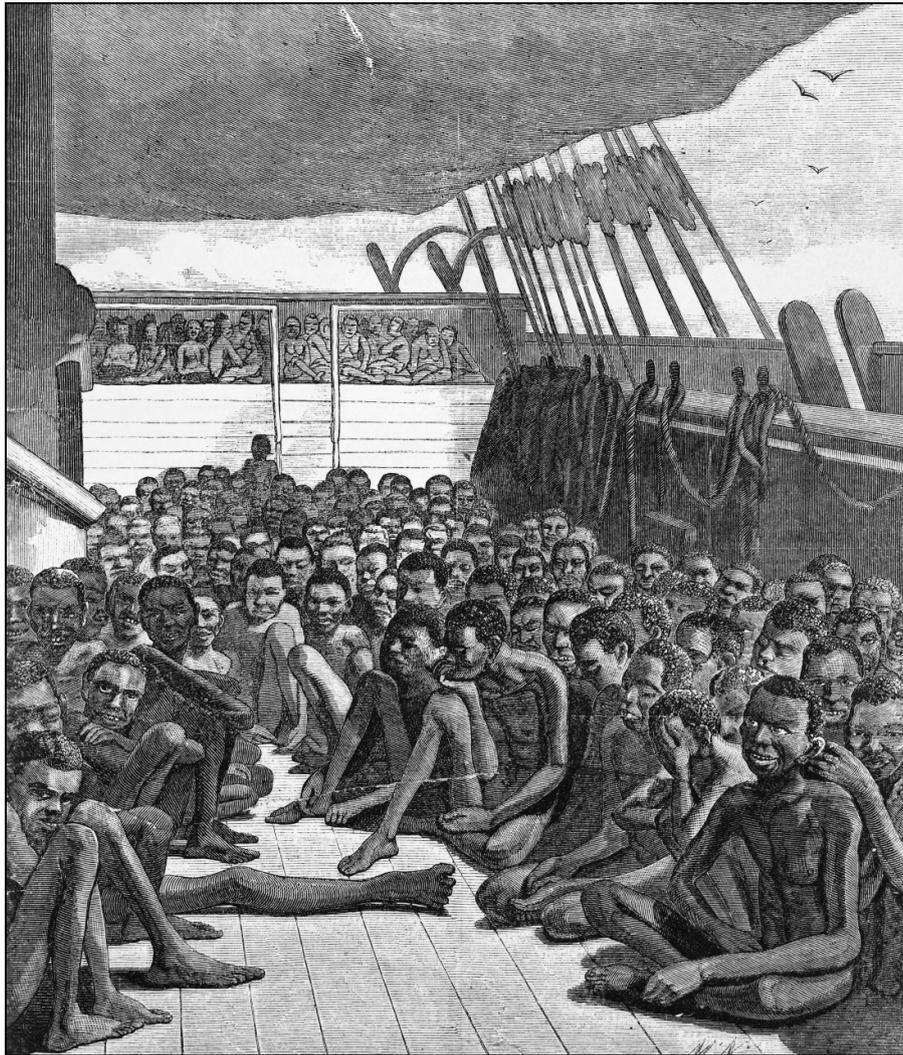


When reading poetry on an eReader, it is recommended to use a small font size and landscape mode, which will allow the lines of poetry to display correctly.

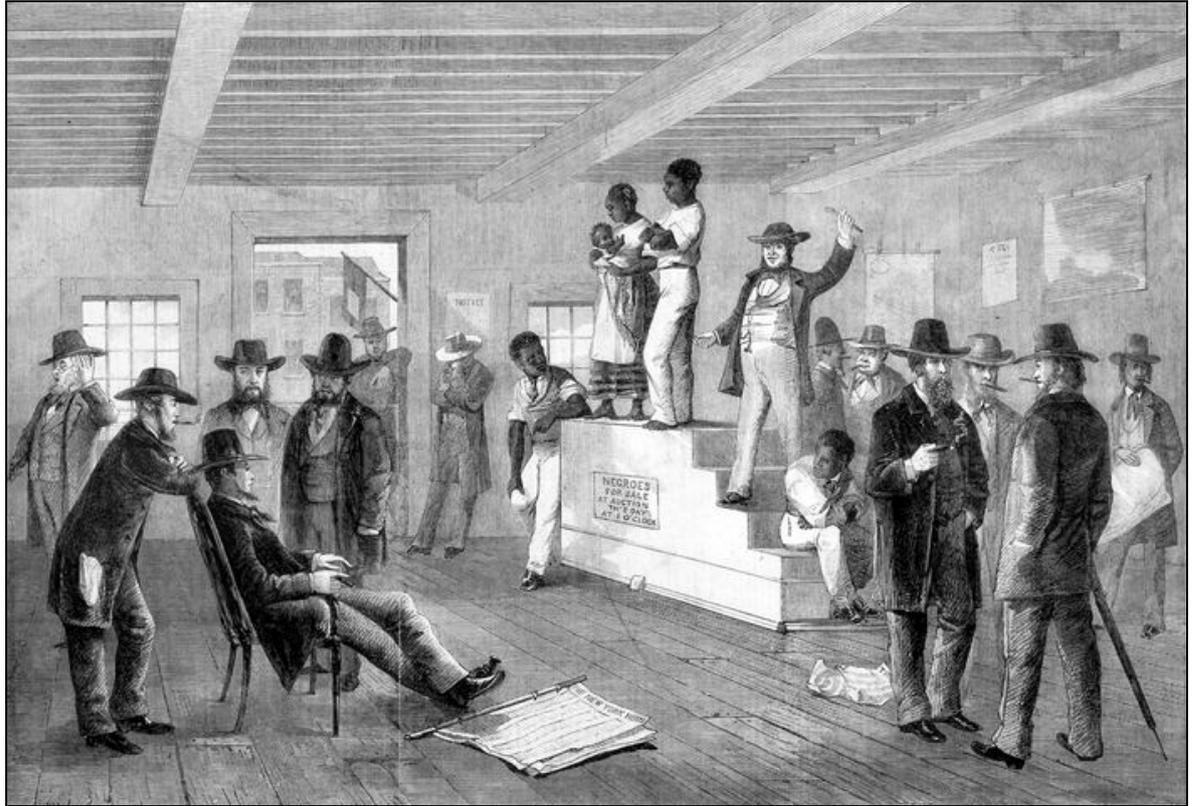
The Life and Poetry of Phillis Wheatley



A sketch of the town of Bathurst, The Gambia, 1824 — Phillis Wheatley was born in 1753 in West Africa, most likely in present-day Gambia or Senegal.



Early nineteenth century depiction of life on a slave ship. It is estimated that 2.5 million Africans were kidnapped and forced on to slave ships for the journey to the West Indies and the American colonies.



A slave auction in Virginia, 1861

Brief Introduction: Phillis Wheatley



One of the best known poets of pre-nineteenth century America, Phillis Wheatley was seized from Senegal or Gambia in West Africa when she was about seven years old. She was transported to the Boston docks with a shipment of slaves, who due to their age or physical frailty were unsuited for rigorous labor in the colonies, the first ports of call after the Atlantic crossing. In August 1761 Susanna Wheatley, the wife of prominent Boston tailor John Wheatley, purchased “a slender, frail female child... for a trifle”, as the captain of the slave ship believed that she was terminally ill and was eager to gain some profit before she died.

The newcomer soon proved to be a precocious child and the Wheatleys taught her to read and write, though she still had to complete some domestic duties. She was immersed in the Bible, astronomy, geography, history, British literature (showing a preference for John Milton and Alexander Pope) and the Greek and Latin classics. Scholars generally believe that *An Elegiac Poem, on the Death of that Celebrated Divine, and Eminent Servant of Jesus Christ, the Reverend and Learned George Whitefield* (1770) was Wheatley’s first published poem and it brought her national renown. Published as a broadside and a pamphlet in Boston, Newport and Philadelphia, the poem was published with Ebenezer Pemberton’s funeral sermon for Whitefield in London the following year, bringing her international acclaim.

By the age of eighteen, she had gathered a collection of 28 poems for which she, under the guidance of Mrs. Wheatley, ran advertisements for subscribers in the Boston newspapers in February 1772. As the colonists were unwilling to support literature by an African, she and the Wheatleys turned in frustration to London for a publisher. The poet had forwarded the Whitefield poem to Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, to whom Whitefield had served as chaplain. A wealthy supporter of evangelical and abolitionist causes, the countess instructed the bookseller Archibald Bell to correspond with Wheatley in preparation for publication of the planned volume of verses.

Wheatley had always been a frail child, suffering from a chronic asthma condition, so she left for London accompanied by the Wheatley’s son Nathaniel on 8 May 1771. Her reputation as a celebrated poetess had preceded her and she was welcomed by several dignitaries, including Benjamin Franklin, the poet and activist Baron George Lyttleton, Sir Brook Watson (the imminent Lord Mayor of London) and the philanthropist John Thornton. Her time in London was cut short by news of Mrs. Wheatley’s becoming seriously ill. Still, by the time she was recrossing the Atlantic, the publishing house Bell was circulating the first edition of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773).

The first published volume of poetry by an African American, the collection reveals Wheatley’s favorite poetic form to be the couplet, both iambic pentameter and heroic. More than a third of Wheatley’s extant poems are elegies — that is, poems written to commemorate the death of renowned figures, friends or even strangers, whose loved ones had commissioned the poet. Some of her most accomplished verses, which are often questioned by detractors, are those that employ classical themes as well as techniques. In the *epyllion* (a narrative poem written in dactylic hexameters), *Niobe in Distress for Her Children Slain by Apollo*, inspired by Book VI of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Wheatley adds her own beautiful lines to extend the dramatic

imagery, while in *To Maecenas* she elevates Horace's famous ode into a modern day celebration of Christ.

Wheatley also utilised biblical symbolism to evangelise and comment upon the subject of slavery. In her most famous poem, *On Being Brought from Africa to America*, she reproaches the Great Awakening audience to remember that Africans must be included in the Christian stream. The majority of her themes can be judged as celebrations of America. She was the first to applaud the nation as glorious "Columbia" in a letter to the first president, George Washington, with whom she had corresponded and whom she later met. Her love of America and her feelings of religious fervour are themes that permeate much of her work.

The poet was manumitted three months before Mrs. Wheatley died on 3 March 1774. Although many British editorials criticised the Wheatleys for keeping her in slavery while presenting her to London as the African genius, the family had provided a haven for the poet, though the exact benevolent nature of her upbringing remains unknown. She was kept in a servant's place, at a respectable arm's length from the Wheatleys' genteel circles, but she had experienced neither slavery's treacherous demands nor the harsh economic exclusions pervasive in a free-black existence.

In April 1778, in spite of the doubts and disapproval of her closest friends, Wheatley married John Peters, whom she had known for five years and took his name. He was a free but impoverished black grocer, who aspired to entrepreneurial greatness. He is mentioned in various historical records to have called himself Dr. Peters, to have practiced law (perhaps as a free-lance advocate for hapless blacks), kept a grocery in Court Street, exchanged trade as a baker and a barber, and he also applied for a liquor license for a bar. Reports describe him as a handsome man of gentle manners, who wore a wig, carried a cane and liked to act the "gentleman". Like many others that were scattered throughout the Northeast to avoid the fighting during the Revolutionary War, Peters and his new wife moved temporarily from Boston to Wilmington, Massachusetts, shortly after their marriage. The economic conditions in the colonies during and after the war were harsh, particularly for free blacks, who were unprepared to compete with whites in a rigorous job market. Between 1779 and 1783, the couple may have had children, though this is disputed by some. Peters drifted further into penury, often leaving his wife to fend for herself by working as a charwoman, while he dodged creditors and sought endlessly for employment.

During the first six weeks after their return to Boston, Wheatley lived with one of her nieces in a bombed-out mansion that was converted to a day school after the war. Peters then moved them into an apartment in a derelict section of Boston, where other Wheatley relatives soon found the poet sick and destitute. In a filthy apartment, in an obscure part of the city, the precocious poet that had been honoured and respected was now spending the last days of her life in a state of abject misery.

Yet despite these very difficult times, Wheatley continued to write and publish her poems and to maintain, though on a much more limited scale, an international correspondence. She hoped that in spite of their poor economy, her American audience and her evangelical friends would support a second volume of poetry. Between October and December 1779, she ran six advertisements, soliciting subscribers for "300 pages in Octavo," a volume "Dedicated to the Right Hon. Benjamin Franklin, Esq.: One of the Ambassadors of the United States at the Court of France," that would include 33 poems and 13 letters. As with *Poems on Various Subjects*, however, the American populace were reluctant to support one of its most noted poets.

In her final year in 1784, Wheatley published under the name Phillis Peters a much-celebrated 64-line poem in a pamphlet entitled *Liberty and Peace*. It hails America as “Columbia” victorious over “Britannia Law”, revealing her pride for the nation’s intense struggle for freedom and eternal spiritual greatness. Then she published *An Elegy, Sacred to the Memory of that Great Divine, The Reverend and Learned Dr. Samuel Cooper*, a few days after the death of the Brattle Street church’s pastor. In the September issue of *The Boston Magazine*, she also published *To Mr. and Mrs. —, on the Death of their Infant Son*, which many believe is a lamentation for the death of one of her own children and which foreshadows the poet’s death three months later. She passed away uncared for and alone, while her husband was incarcerated for debt. Their last surviving child died in time to be buried with his mother.

With the publication of *Poems on Various Subjects* (1773), Wheatley had become the most famous African on the face of the earth. Voltaire stated in a letter to a friend that Wheatley had “proved that black people could write poetry”. John Paul Jones asked a fellow officer to deliver some of his personal writings to “Phillis the African favorite of the Nine (muses) and Apollo.” She was honoured by many of America’s founding fathers, including George Washington and Benjamin Franklin. In 1892 a Phyllis Wheatley Circle was formed in Greenville, Mississippi. She is commemorated on the Boston Women’s Heritage Trail and several prominent schools and awards are named after her. Today, critics consider her work fundamental to the genre of African-American literature, and she is honoured as the first African-American woman to publish a book of poetry and the first to make a living from her writing.



Portrait of Phillis Wheatley, attributed by some scholars to Scipio Moorhead, 1773

P O E M S

O N

VARIOUS SUBJECTS,

RELIGIOUS AND MORAL.

B Y

PHILLIS WHEATLEY,

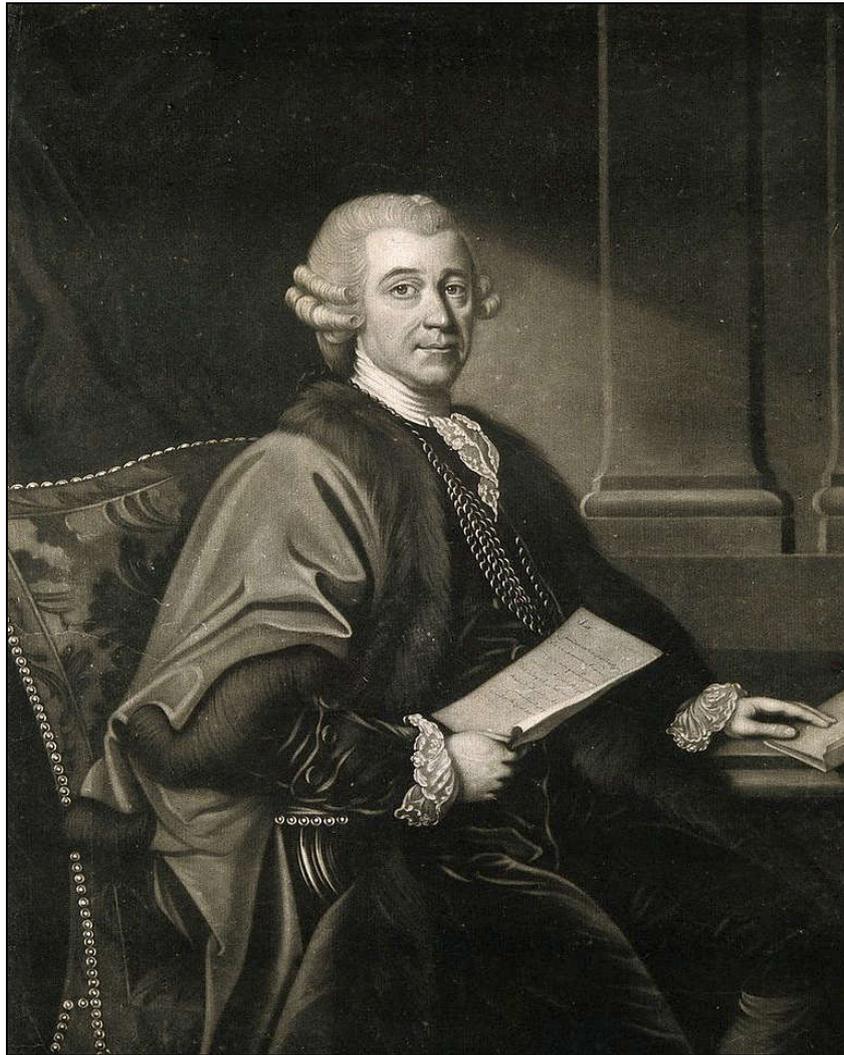
NEGRO SERVANT TO Mr. JOHN WHEATLEY,
of BOSTON, in NEW ENGLAND.

L O N D O N:

Printed for A. BELL, Bookfeller, Aldgate; and sold by
Messrs. COX and BERRY, King-Street, BOSTON.

M DCC LXXIII.

'Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral', 1773



Frederick Bull, 1781 — Wheatley had an audience with Frederick Bull, who was the Lord Mayor of London, and other prominent members of British society.



Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, National Portrait Gallery, 1770



Portrait of Phillis Wheatley in 'Revue des colonies', 1837

Complete Poetical Works of Phillis Wheatley



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TO THE RIGHT HONOURABLE THE
COUNTESS OF HUNTINGDON,
THE FOLLOWING
P O E M S
ARE MOST RESPECTFULLY INSCRIBED.

BY HER MUCH OBLIGED,
VERY HUMBLE
AND DEVOTED SERVANT.

PHILLIS WHEATLEY.

Boston, June 12, 1771.

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End of Sample