

# The Age of Phillis



## The Transatlantic Progress of Sugar in the Eighteenth Century

I own I am shock'd at the purchase of slaves,  
And fear those who buy them and sell them are knaves...  
I pity them greatly, but I must be mum,  
For how could we do without sugar and rum?

*"Pity for Poor Africans," William Cowper, 1788*

oh  
peerless  
smell of cane  
cloud on triangular  
horizon whip trilling a red  
aria molasses the smelling hull  
& chained bones the practical sharks  
trailing hoping for fresh bodies overboard

(dark/  
dark/pale/  
dark/pale/dark/  
dark/exchange/fresh/  
exchange/flesh/exchange/  
fresh/blood/blood/blood/blood/

dark/dark/pale/dark/pale/dark/exchange  
flesh/exchange/fresh/exchange/flesh/blood)

&  
the sea  
taste blessed rape  
hollowed out burn & brand  
some girls mostly boys this holy  
trinity of godless dirty savages island  
patois rum down a throat lump in some tea  
the science of journey & the peerless smell of cane

### **I Cannot Recall *Phillis Wheatley* (Boston, Winter 1763)**

Celestial Nine! propitious to my pray'r.  
In vain my Eyes explore the wat'ry reign...

*"Ocean" by Phillis Wheatley, c.1779*

Yes, I *shall* be a good girl.  
See? I am practicing my lessons—  
today I am reading that Odysseus  
sailed the ocean like me,

that Muses hold me in their arms—  
they are ladies like my Ma.  
Mistress Susanna turns her head when I ask,  
when shall I see my Ma at last?

She says I am not bad if I cannot recall  
how Ma would say *cup* or *spoon* or *yam*  
in that other place.  
She says, Ma shall understand.

She says, once I learn a word  
I own it, even one from the Bible—  
but do not forget how great God is.  
He will scrub my dirty skin clean.

Over there—  
is it such a long journey to get back?  
I cannot recall how far I traveled,  
but I am stronger now.

I wish to show Ma  
that my teeth grew in and I am so big  
and I promise—I *promise*—not to get

sick if I ride on the ship again.

Today snow came down,  
though Ma does not have a word  
for that at our house.  
Someone outside is lying on the ground.

A sad soul has slipped and fallen on the ice—  
that's what that crying means.

### **Blues for Harpsichord (*Boston, Nearly Spring 1770*)**

... Samuel Gray, Samuel Maverick, James Caldwell, and Crispus Attucks, the unhappy Victims who fell in the bloody massacre of the Monday evening preceeding!

*Boston Post Boy, March 12, 1770*

The air is charged with grace and wealth, the tune  
of coins, a parlor box—some ladies' toy.  
The music of the rich, a myth in nearly spring—  
a tame, wet desert and men's bewigged dreams.  
The wives, rouged, play weak games and sway  
their panniers, bone-threaded waists—there's lace  
in this calm scene, when outside, a few steps  
away, the realness: stinking wharf; the ship  
disgorging tea and African stuffing;  
slick streets; and soon, the *saucy boys'* mad brawl  
with outmanned, well-gunned Redcoats—Crispus will  
not live to see black liberty: he's dead on this  
wild night despite the harpsichord's blank noise.  
A prelude, a fugue—a glittered affray.

### **The Art of Mastering #2 *Phillis Wheatley (Boston, October 28, 1772)***

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel?  
And why not every man?

*Traditional Negro Spiritual*

It didn't even happen (probably):  
the courthouse—  
Phillis climbing the steps,

her narrow back lifted, bone by bone,

her pretty face confronting  
the combined authority, the terror

of eighteen white men gathered  
to examine a slave girl's poetic  
capabilities, to see if she could read—

and what of her humanity?  
On that documented day,  
most of those eighteen

were someplace else (maybe)—  
across town at another meeting—  
but we like our fairy tales established.

We'd like (alright, I would)  
to think of Phillis as a Daniel in skirts,  
armed with God's fickle intentions.

A graceful African prophet versus  
the descendants of Puritans and slave traders.  
Would she have spoken in careful tongues,

subduing those men, her personal  
Holy Ghost filing down beasts' teeth?  
Would she—

an innocent unaware of the world—  
have pushed power aside  
or forced it to the knees?

That day, we don't know. (It's unclear.)

Another day, one wonders  
if she worked the word  
as hard as I imagine.

If her Muses' songs were clean.  
I'm sure she smiled too readily  
to make pounds and shillings

to gain her freedom—  
she quickly wrote those elegies  
for grieving white ladies

but did she believe her way  
was wrong yet strolled along?  
Did she know that lies you tell

in your youth can't be smoothed over?

(I know  
but I smiled, too—

anyway.  
So I'd like to think survival.  
I'd like her to reach forward

and show me how to write  
the ironically righteous.  
I'd like us both to live

until we are darkly wrinkled,  
then lie down and die together,  
then rise up and be our own gods.

Reader, laugh right now  
at my curdling sentimentality—  
Phillis and I understand.)

**To Task *Susanna Wheatley (Boston, February 1774)***

I have lately met with a great trial in the death of my mistress,  
let us imagine the loss of a Parent, Sister or Brother the tenderness  
of all these were united, in her, —I was a poor little outcast &  
stranger when she took me in...

*"Letter from Phillis Wheatley to Obour Tanner," March 21, 1774*

Phillis,  
I must speak freely to you.  
The work of woman

is to withstand.  
To understand that death  
is at hand always.

Blood first—  
remember I said *freely*—  
then a bloodier travail

and if you are lucky  
you'll leave that bed  
with your life

and if you love the miracle,  
your child.  
Dead, death, dying—

in the beginning  
and at the end.  
I advise you never to marry

or bear children,  
never to task  
the breakable body

that has been chastised  
with childbirth since eviction  
from the Garden.

I ask you  
to remain with me,  
and help your mistress

end her days  
with your witty, dark  
face filling her gaze.

I know what you  
cannot undertake.  
Miss Susanna knows best.

Miss Susanna  
will tell you  
of gone babies:

*John Born 21 December 1746*

A Christmas gift,  
like Our Lord who tore  
his mother's soul to pieces.

The hopeful stroking  
of the pearl-side shell,  
the first seeking within,

then urgent quickness.  
An ache to be rubbed  
but not comforted.

*Susanna Born 15 May 1748*

What of some man's  
weightless love?  
Nothing to compare.

Nothing, but when  
the third child

stops breathing as well—

my girl, the softness so real  
upon a full breast—  
for Mother there shall be

no rest, no sleep,  
until Mother is buried—  
maybe.

*Here Lyes Sarah Who Died  
11 May 1752  
Aged 7 yrs 9 months and 18 days*

### **A (Small)Pox on You (Boston 1776)**

*Who lives in this House &  
what is the name of the Head*

A different season, even though  
the trees look the same—  
rarely a long life.  
Instead, the cheerful threat  
of death's bad timing,  
come to overtake  
you like a fool quick in love.

*How many Persons in this house  
have had the Small Pox  
both white and black*

Once suffered always immune—  
live or in the grave—but first,  
sick Patriots, sick British,  
sick Natives, sick slaves:  
invasion by familiars  
of New World kin.

*How many belonging to this family  
are now in the service*

The city battling the enemy,  
within and around, when any neighbor  
can bring horror to the air  
around your mouth—  
take your husband, take your faith,  
take your freedom, take your child,

take your wife, take your land—  
take your eyes before it's done.

*Is it Continental or Colonial*  
*Is it by Sea or Land*  
*If by sea*  
*in what vessel*

*How many of each have died*

## Notes to Poems

"The Art of Mastering #2": This poem was written after I read Joanna Brooks's essay, "Our Phillis, Ourselves" in *American Literature* 82.1 (March 2010). In the essay, Brooks refers to a well-known article written by Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Writing, 'Race' and the Difference It Makes," published in *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985). In response to Gates's discussion of the now-famous "examination" of Phillis Wheatley by the eighteen "notable citizens" of Boston, Brooks states, "But there is in fact no known record of such an event...nowhere does it state that the signatories had examined her themselves."

"To Task": Italicized portions of this poem come from *Boston City Records of Births and Deaths*, located on the New England Historic Genealogical Society database.

"A (Small)pox on You": Italicized portions in the poems are from *Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston*, Vol. 18 (1770-1777).

---

## **Statement of Poetic Research—"Phillis Wheatley's Word" by Honorée Fanonne Jeffers**

As a student at two historically African American colleges during the early 1980s, I was taught Phillis Wheatley's poetry, but my professors' implicit message was that black folks had the responsibility to read her because of her historical status as an African American "first." Not one of my professors ever mentioned we should read Wheatley because of her artistic merit as a poet. It was stressed to me that Wheatley was neither a political revolutionary nor a "real" poet with any recognizable talent. And frankly, I agreed; based upon my reading of Wheatley's most well-known poem, "On Being Brought from Africa to America," and its then-troubling first line—" 'Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land"—I dismissed her poetry for over twenty years.

But in 2003, I read an article by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in *The New Yorker* entitled "Phillis Wheatley on Trial," an excerpt from his full-length *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley*, which addresses Wheatley's early life and times and



the reception of her only book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773). Gates's point is that because of eighteenth-century Enlightenment ideas of race and Reason, it was difficult for some white New Englanders to imagine Wheatley as a person, much less someone capable of writing poetry. Thus, they focused on Wheatley's proving her literacy and her humanity and less, Gates implies, on her actual skills at writing poetry. Gates makes an intriguing social argument in his book, so intriguing that I bought the book (in expensive hardback), and once I finished it, I reread Wheatley's poems, collected in Vincent Carretta's *Phillis Wheatley: Complete Writings* (2001). I also reread Wheatley's *Poems* online—in a digital edition so that I could see the way the poems had looked on the page originally.

And then, I got hooked on Phillis Wheatley—even though I still wasn't sure whether I liked her poetry or not. That word "mercy" kept bothering me, with its bland happiness. I kept coming back to "mercy" because, by that time, I had a feeling Phillis Wheatley was trying to tell me something important, something I was missing but that I would get if I would only stop and pay attention to her.

I wondered if anyone else kept returning to "mercy" as well, so I started looking for other Wheatley secondary sources and encountered Katherine Clay Bassard's *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender, and Community in Early African American Women's Writing* (1999). I can say with complete confidence that if I had never read Bassard's book I would not have embarked on my current poetry project on Phillis Wheatley, for Bassard places Wheatley's work within a racially gendered perspective—not just black or woman, but both—something that male scholars, white or black, had not done. Bassard analyzes Wheatley's work in terms of Wheatley's acknowledgement, not dismissal, of her traumatic experience of the Middle Passage.

After I read Bassard's book, I started paying closer attention to Wheatley's poetry. For example, in "To The Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth" Wheatley writes, "I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate / Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat," while in "To the University of Cambridge, in New England," a poem addressed to the students at Harvard, she writes, "Father of mercy, 'twas thy gracious hand / Brought me in safety from those dark abodes." In the first poem, the word "snatch'd" is violent, while in the second poem, Wheatley presents the word "mercy" in a slightly different context than in her other, more well-known poem ("On Being Brought from Africa to America"). In "To the University of Cambridge," this particular "mercy" is not what *causes* Wheatley's kidnapping, but one that *allows* her survival in transit, a journey not just from Africa but the journey she survived in "safety." Thus, "dark abodes" seems to refer to the Middle Passage, and *not* Africa. Most striking in both poems is Wheatley's daring, her addressing white males and telling them about her slavery, her trauma. This claiming of voice is an act of incredible courage on the part of an eighteenth-century black woman who was still a slave at the time, and who had no literary forbears in her racially gendered context.

"You white men did this to me," Wheatley essentially says in these two poems. "You made me a slave when I was free. You took me away from the only home I ever knew, from my parents and my childhood. It hurt me and it still hurts. And not only am I going to raise my voice and talk about how it hurts, you're going to *listen* to me talk about how it hurts."

And suddenly—just like that—I saw the brilliance of Phillis Wheatley's poetry.

When my epiphany took place, I was a college professor and the author of my own three books of poetry. I decided to write a few poems about Wheatley, this woman who had made my own life as a black female poet possible, but I knew I needed to find out more about her. I was lucky enough to secure a 2009 Baron Artist Fellowship to the American Antiquarian Society in order to conduct research on Wheatley. When I arrived at the AAS, I was advised to start my research with William H. Robinson's germinal biography, *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings* (1984), out of print and not available at my own university library, as well as the *Black Biographical Dictionaries, 1790-1950* (1987), edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Randall K. Burkett, and Nancy Hall Burkett. I quickly discovered that all secondary Wheatley sources pointed to the nineteenth-century text *Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley, a Native African and a Slave* (1834) by Margaretta Matilda Odell, and all the secondary sources largely relied upon Odell's *Memoir* for the primary documentation about Wheatley's early life. Odell describes herself as a "collateral descendant" of Susanna Wheeler Wheatley, Phillis Wheatley's former mistress; however, I could not find a family link between Odell and Susanna Wheatley in any of my research. Although some of the later histories of Phillis Wheatley provide bits and pieces of documentation for Odell's claims about Wheatley's life in *Memoir*, there remain huge gaps in the research, and further, Odell's book was written fifty years after Wheatley's death, and every immediate adult member of Wheatley's "white family" (John, Susanna, Mary, and Nathaniel) had died even before Phillis Wheatley did.

There are some truths in Odell's *Memoir*. According to *Marriages in Boston, 1700-1809*, Phillis Wheatley did marry John Peters (on April 1, 1778); both are listed as "free negroes." Odell maintains that Peters was still alive after Wheatley died in 1784 and that he demanded his dead wife's papers from white friends who were in possession of them. In July 2009, when I visited the Northeast Division of the National Archives in Waltham, Massachusetts, I found a "John Peters" listed on the Boston, Massachusetts, 1790 census; this John Peters was a "free man of color" and there is no other African American John Peters anywhere in Boston in that census year. However, the documented truth in Odell's *Memoir* is mixed in with unproven statements. For example, there is no published record of Peters's selling his dead wife's papers to cover his debts or moving "South" after her death as Odell asserts; further, given the racial climate of the U.S. South during the late eighteenth century, to say nothing of the prevalence of slavery there, relocating to this area would have been an extremely strange move for a free black man. There are no primary birth, baptismal, or death records for any—let alone *three*—children born to Phillis

Wheatley and John Peters. In the notices published in New England newspapers that provide Wheatley's death date as on (or very close to) Sunday, December 5, 1784, no child is mentioned as dying with or being buried alongside her.

Given the lack of documentation for Odell's family link to the white Wheatleys and the lack of proof for most of her assertions about Wheatley's life, it is distressing that, in 176 years, scholars have not questioned Odell's right to speak for Phillis Wheatley. This blind trust continues the disturbing historical trend of African Americans, and black women in particular, needing white benefactors to justify their lives and history. In this case, Odell provides no documentation for her portrait of Phillis Wheatley's life, yet her unproven word has been reproduced by the most renowned Wheatley scholars in the world, including Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Vincent Carretta.

Within a few short days into my fellowship at the American Antiquarian Society and my encountering the issues surrounding Odell's *Memoir*, I was seized with self-doubt about my poetry project. Once I found out that I couldn't take what I thought I knew about Wheatley for granted, I wondered if I should continue; before arriving at the AAS, I had already written some poems about her, based upon Odell's book. Though mine wasn't a conventional history project, I wanted to take what was true and make some emotional leaps with those facts. Now, I realized, I didn't really know much. I was heartbroken and, frankly, very angry. Then, I decided to try to document all that I could find about Phillis Wheatley and was encouraged to do so by the librarians and researchers at the AAS (especially Caroline Sloat and Elizabeth Pope). Using Odell's *Memoir* as a guide, I started the tedious yet exhilarating work of primary documentation, so that I could write the poems I now wanted-needed-to write. I am still in the process of attempting full primary documentation.

A year later, my planned, short series of poems on Wheatley has become a book-length project-in-progress entitled *The Age of Phillis*, which not only imagines Wheatley's life and times, but also the era of the American Revolution in Massachusetts. After rereading Wheatley's poetry, what strikes me is her preoccupation with spirituality, motherhood, race, and her own contemporary politics. And although Wheatley's "voice" certainly adheres to the poetic constraints—and feminine *restraints*—of her time, it is not an overstatement to locate Wheatley as a literary ancestor of the contemporary black poet Lucille Clifton, who one would characterize as a feminist poet in full command of artistic agency. As scholar Joanna Brooks observes, Wheatley was "conscripted into emotional labor... She grew an audience, developed a network of supporters, published a remarkable first book, and engineered her own manumission." Thus, the overarching narrative that runs through *The Age of Phillis* is that of an unfree woman in search of her agency, one whose work is concerned with the actual death of children (prematurely torn from their mothers) as a means of mirroring her own figurative death and traumatic separation from her African mother/land. Framing this narrative is the political era of the American Revolution and the ironic colonial preoccupation with liberty from England in the midst of the horrific yet lucrative slave trade.

Surely, Wheatley's work is "young"—what first book of poetry *isn't* young, with its flaws and missteps? If one were to unearth early versions of the poems of Wheatley's white contemporaries, I'm sure we could find similar flaws and missteps. While I don't believe that Wheatley should be given a pass with her poetry, neither do I feel as if she should be held to a higher artistic standard than other poets who happen to be white and/or male. And I would strongly dispute anyone who argues that Wheatley's work is essentially juvenilia. By finishing this project imagining the life and times of this brilliant and complex woman, I hope to make it impossible for anyone approaching the work of Phillis Wheatley to ever again dismiss her courageous artistry.

## Further reading

Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London, 1773) is her only book of poetry; however, see *Phillis Wheatley: Complete Writings* edited by Vincent Carretta (New York, 2001) for the latest collection of all extant Wheatley writings; also, see *The Poems of Phillis Wheatley* (Revised and Enlarged Edition) edited by Julian Mason (Chapel Hill, 1989); and see *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley* edited by John C. Shields (New York, 1988).

John Wheatley's statement in Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* recounts her earliest biography; see also Margaretta Matilda Odell's *Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley, a Native African and a Slave. Dedicated to the Friends of the Africans* (Boston, 1834). William H. Robinson's *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings* (New York, 1984) provides a bio-bibliography of Phillis Wheatley. See *Marriages in Boston, 1700-1809* (<http://www.AmericanAncestors.org>) for information about Phillis Wheatley's 1778 marriage to John Peters. See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Randall K. Burkett, and Nancy Hall Burkett, *Black Biographical Dictionaries, 1790-1950* (Alexandria, Virginia, 1987) for historical context on late eighteenth-century African American women.

Marcus Rediker's *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York, 2004) provides an excellent and comprehensive history of the Transatlantic slave trade and an exploration of Middle Passage trauma. See Vincent Carretta's "Introduction" in *Phillis Wheatley: Complete Writings* (New York, 2001) for a discussion of slavery themes in Wheatley's poetry; also see Will Harris, "Phillis Wheatley, Diasporic Subjectivity, and the African American Canon," *MELUS* 33.3 (2008): 27-43. For an examination of Wheatley's poetry and her racially gendered identity as an unfree person, see June Jordan's "The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America or Something Like a Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley," *Massachusetts Review* 27.2 (Summer 1986): 252-262. For a discussion of Phillis Wheatley's Middle Passage trauma and its connection to spiritual utterance in her poetry, see Katherine Clay Bassard, *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender, and Community in Early African American Women's Writing* (Princeton, N.J., 1999). See Joanna Brooks's *American Lazarus: Religion and the Rise of African American and Native American Literatures* (New York, 2003) for a

discussion of Christian themes in Wheatley's poetry.

For a discussion of Phillis Wheatley's elegies and their connection to literary patronage of her work, see Joanna Brooks, "Our Phillis, Ourselves," *American Literature* 82.1 (March 2010): 1-28. Frances Smith Foster's *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1993) provides a discussion of eighteenth-century African American women writers and their literary context. For critical reception of Wheatley's poetry over two centuries see John C. Shields's *Phillis Wheatley's Poetics of Liberation, Backgrounds and Contexts* (Knoxville, 2008). For eighteenth-century Enlightenment theory and its connection to critical reception of Wheatley's poetry see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Phillis Wheatley on Trial," *The New Yorker* (January 20, 2003): 82; also see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley* (New York, 2003); and see Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781). For Enlightenment theory and its ordering of the races, see David Hume, "Of National Characters" in *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* (London, 1753); also see Immanuel Kant, "Of National Characteristics, So Far As They Depend Upon the Distinct Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime" in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, translated by John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley, 1981). For a multidisciplinary discussion of the development of race theory, see C. Loring Brace, *Race is a Four-Letter Word: The Genesis of the Concept* (New York, 2005).

---

This article originally appeared in issue 11.1 (October, 2010).

Honorée Fanonne Jeffers is the author of three books of poetry, most recently, *Red Clay Suite* (Southern Illinois University, 2007). In 2009, she was a Robert and Charlotte Baron Fellow at the American Antiquarian Society. She is Associate Professor of English at the University of Oklahoma where she teaches creative writing.