

"Mister Jefferson and
The Trials of Phillis Wheatley"

Tonight marks the thirtieth anniversary of the Jefferson Lectures, which began in April 1972 with Lionel Trilling's address on "Mind in the Modern World." As difficult as it is to believe, the Jefferson Lectures are more than a tenth as old as the nation they serve. I am honored and humbled to join a line of succession that includes Saul Bellow, Walker Percy, Toni Morrison, John Hope Franklin, and so many other scholars and writers whom I deeply admire, and I'd like to thank the NEH and the National Council on the Humanities for choosing me to deliver this year's lecture.

I stand here as a fellow countryman of Thomas Jefferson's, in several senses: as a citizen, like all of you, of the republic of letters; as an American who believes deeply in the soaring promise of the Declaration of Independence—housed so near to us in the National Archives; and as a native of Piedmont, West Virginia—two hours up the Potomac—and hence, in a broad sense, a fellow Virginian. Who knows? Judging from all the DNA disclosures of the last few years, I'm probably even related to Jefferson. (Actually, I am more interested in the Gates DNA connection...like maybe in Redmond, Washington.) For all of us, white and black alike, Jefferson remains an essential ancestor.

President Kennedy famously addressed a group of distinguished intellectuals by saying they were the greatest gathering of brilliant thinkers to visit the White House since Jefferson dined alone. It's a great line—but I don't think Jefferson ever did dine alone. Even when nobody was at the table with him, someone was cooking for him, someone was bringing him his food, and somebody was busy planning his next meal. And the

chances are good that some of those people were African Americans. Jefferson's relation to African Americans has received a great deal of attention of late, most notably in discussions about his putative paternity of Sally Hemings's children. This is not my subject this evening. Rather, I want to discuss with you one of the most dramatic contests over literacy, authenticity, and humanity in the history of race relations in this country, a contest in which Jefferson himself played a small role.

Bear with me as I try to recreate imaginatively a curious scenario indeed. The historical record is sparse; for our purpose, let us elaborate upon it with a tissue of conjecture. On October 8, 1772, a small, delicate African woman, about eighteen years of age, walks into a room, perhaps in Boston's Town Hall, the Old Colony House, to be interviewed by eighteen gentlemen so august that they could later allow themselves to be identified publicly "as the most respectable characters in Boston." No doubt the young woman would have been demure, soft-spoken, and frightened, for she was about to undergo one of the oddest oral examinations on record, one that would determine the course of her life and the fate and direction of her work, and one that, ultimately, would determine whether she remained a slave or would be set free. The stakes, in other words, were as high as they could get for an oral exam.

She would have been familiar with the names of the gentlemen assembled in this room. For there, perhaps gathered in a semicircle, would have sat an astonishingly influential group of the colony's citizens determined to satisfy for themselves, and thus put to rest, fundamental questions about the authenticity of this woman's literary achievements. Their interrogation of this witness, and her answers, would determine not only this *woman's* fate, but the subsequent direction of the antislavery movement, as well

as the birth of what a later commentator would call "a new species of literature," the literature written by slaves.

Who would this young woman have confronted that day in the early autumn of 1772? At the center no doubt would have sat His Excellency Thomas Hutchinson, governor of the colony. Hutchinson, a colonial historian and a royal official, who would end his life in England as a Loyalist refugee, was born in Boston into a wealthy family descended from merchants. (Anne Hutchinson was also an ancestor.) Young Thomas, Robert M. Calhoun tells us, preferred "reading history to playing with other children" and early on became an admirer of Charles I. So precocious was he that he entered Harvard College at the age of twelve, "where," Calhoun continues, "his social standing entitled him to be ranked third in his class." (Even in its first century, then, grade inflation had reared its ugly head on the banks of the Charles River.)

Hutchinson was the Massachusetts governor between 1769 and 1774. Following the Boston Tea party, Hutchinson went to London "for consultations...." His family joined him in exile; just four years following this examination, he would receive an honorary degree from the University of Oxford on, of all days, July 4, 1776. Hutchinson never returned to this beloved estate in Milton.

At Hutchinson's side in the makeshift seminar room would have sat Andrew Oliver, the colony's lieutenant governor and Hutchinson's brother-in-law, who took the A.B. and A.M. degrees from Harvard, in 1724 and 1727. Oliver became—along with his brother and business partner, Peter, and with Thomas Hutchinson—"leaders of the Hutchinson-Oliver faction, which dominated provincial Massachusetts politics until the eve of the American Revolution," as Calhoun tells us. Angry crowds ransacked the

homes of both Hutchinson and Oliver in response to the passage of the Stamp Act in 1765, uprooting Oliver's much admired garden. A year and a half after this meeting, Oliver would die of a stroke, not unrelated, it was assumed, to Boston's political climate on the eve of revolution.

The Reverend Mather Byles, still another Harvard graduate, was the first and only minister of the Hollis Street Congregational Church in Boston between 1732 and 1775. Byles was the grandson of Increase Mather; Cotton Mather was his uncle. Like Hutchinson and Oliver, Byles was a Tory Loyalist, and would lose his pulpit when Massachusetts finally rebelled.

Byles was highly regarded for his wit, but would become famous, too, for delivering eulogies at state funerals. As a student, he had corresponded with Alexander Pope and Isaac Watts, and in 1744, published his own book of poetry, *Poems on Several Occasions*. Byles was sentenced to banishment, later commuted to house arrest, for his Loyalist views. (Ever the wit, Mary Rhinelander McCarl tells us, Byles called the sentry stationed just outside of his home his "Observe-a-Tory.") He died in Boston, dependent upon the charity of his friends.

The Reverend Samuel Cooper received his A.B. and A.M. from Harvard in 1743 and 1746, respectively. He was the only minister of the Brattle Street Church between 1747 and his death in 1783. Known as "the silver-tongued preacher," Cooper was Minister to no less than "one-fourth of Boston's merchants and more than half of Boston's selectmen," as Frederick V. Mills tells us. Mills continues: "Cooper was at the center of an inner circle consisting of James Otis, John Hancock, James Bowdoin, Joseph Warren, and Samuel Adams, who showed outward respect for Governor Thomas Hutchinson at

the same time they kept agitation against British policy focused." So pivotal was Cooper's role during the Revolution in encouraging an American alliance with France that he would receive a stipend from Louis XVI until his death.

The august James Bowdoin was included in this circle of inquisition as well. Bowdoin was one of the principal American exemplars of the Enlightenment. A close friend of Franklin's, he was a student of electricity and astronomy, as well as a poet, publishing a volume entitled *A Paraphrase on Part of the Oeconomy of Human Life* in 1759 and four poems in the volume entitled "Harvard Verses" presented to George III in 1762 "in an attempt to gain royal patronage for the struggling college, as Gordon E. Kershaw notes. His remarkable library contained 1,200 volumes, ranging in subjects from science and math to philosophy, religion, poetry, and fiction. By the time of this interview, he had become a vocal opponent of Governor Hutchinson's policies. Bowdoin would become head of the new Massachusetts government in 1776. In addition to opposing the policies of the Royalists in the room, Bowdoin was also a steadfast foe of "his old political enemy," John Hancock, who preceded him as governor of the Commonwealth.

Hancock needs little introduction to this audience. Like Bowdoin, Hancock prepared for Harvard at Boston Latin, then graduated from Harvard in the class of 1754, the second youngest in a class of twenty, in which he ranked fifth, William Fowler notes, as "an indication of his family's prominence." Upon his Uncle's Thomas's death in 1764, John assumed the leadership of the House of Hancock, which grew rich by trafficking in whale oil and real estate. Hancock would go on to become the third president of the Continental Congress, and the first governor of the Commonwealth.

The Reverend Samuel Mather, son of Cotton Mather, graduated from Harvard College in 1723. He was Thomas Hutchinson's brother-in-law. Mather's career as a minister was quite controversial—he was charged with "improper conduct" in 1741, and though found innocent, was dismissed that same year from his pulpit at the Second Church in Boston. (Misbehavior among Boston clerics was regarded less leniently than would later be the case!) Mather is principally remembered for his library, which Mason I. Lowance describes as "one of the greatest in New England." But he is also remembered, Lowance concludes, as "the end of that dynasty" that had commenced with his great-grandfather Richard in 1630.

Three poets would have been present that morning: in addition to Samuel Cooper, and the Reverend Mather Byles, there was the Loyalist scribe Joseph Green. David Robinson calls Green "the foremost wit of his day," and he and Mather Byles often exchanged satiric poems and parodies. Once it was clear which way the wind was blowing, Green fled to London, in 1775; he died in exile five years later.

What an astounding collection of people were gathered in the room that morning—relations and rivals, friends, and foes. Here truly was a full plenum of talent and privilege, cultivation and power. There were six staunch loyalists, and several signal figures in the battle for independence. Of these eighteen gentlemen, nearly all were Harvard graduates and a majority were slaveholders: one, Thomas Hubbard had actually been a dealer in slaves. Another, the Reverend Charles Chauncy, in 1743 had attacked the Great Awakening because it allowed "women and girls; yea Negroes.... to do the business of preachers." In the hands of this group, a self-constituted judge and jury,

rested the fate of a teenage slave named Phillis Wheatley, and to a certain extent the destiny of the African American people, on that October day in 1772.

Why had this august tribunal been assembled by John Wheatley, Phillis's master? They had one simple charge: to determine whether Phillis Wheatley was truly the author of the poems she claimed to have written.

And to understand how fraught this moment was, we need to turn from the judges to the one they were judging.

The girl who came to be known as Phillis Wheatley came to town on July 11, 1761, on board a schooner, named the *Phillis*. The ship had recently returned from gathering slaves in Senegal, Sierra Leone, and the Isles de Los, off the coast of Guinea. Among its cargo was "a slender frail, female child," a Wheatley relative would write, "supposed to have been about seven years old, at this time, from the circumstances of shedding her front teeth." It's a fair guess that she would have been a native Wolof speaker from the Senegambian coast. Mrs. Susanna Wheatley, wife of the prosperous tailor and merchant, John Wheatley, in response to advertisements in the *Boston Evening Post* and the *Boston Gazette and Country Journal* in July and August, went to the schooner to purchase a house servant. Mrs. Wheatley acquired the child at the wharf on Beach Street "for a trifle," one of her descendants tells us, "as the captain had fears of her dropping off his hands, without emolument, by death." The child was "naked," covered only by "a quantity of dirty carpet about her like a fillibeg." The two boarded "the chaise of her mistress" and returned to the Wheatley mansion located on the corner of King Street and Mackerel Lane, just a few blocks from the Old State House. Both the Stamp Act riots of 1765 and the Boston Massacre of 1770 took place down the street from her

front door. Wheatley's loving biographer, William Robinson, estimates her purchase price as less than ten pounds. Susannah Wheatley named the child "Phillis," ironically enough, after the name of the schooner that had brought her from Africa.

According to Robinson, Phillis's Boston consisted of 15, 520 people in 1765, 1,000 of whom were black. Of this black population only eighteen, as of 1762, were free. Between Phillis's arrival in 1761 and her death in 1784, "no black children," Robinson continues, "could be counted among the more than 800 young scholars enrolled in the city's two grammar or Latin schools and the three vocational writing schools."

John and Susannah Wheatley had eighteen-year-old twins, Nathaniel and Mary, who were living at home when Phillis arrived. For reasons never explained, Mary, apparently with her mother's enthusiastic encouragement, began to teach the child slave to read. Phillis, by all accounts, was a keen and quick pupil. Mary tutored Phillis in English, Latin, and the Bible. William Robinson aptly calls her "rewardingly precocious." As her master would write in 1772 of her intellect and her progress in letters:

Without any Assistance from School Education, and by only what she was taught in the Family, she, in sixteen Months Time from her Arrival, attained the English Language, to which she was an utter Stranger before, to such a Degree, as to read any, the most difficult Parts of the Sacred Writings to the great Astonishment of all who heard her. As to her Writing, her own Curiosity led her to it; and this she learnt in so short a time, that in the Year 1765, she wrote a letter to the Reverend Mr. Ocom, the *Indian* Minister, while in *England*.

She has great Inclination to learn the Latin tongue, and has made some progress in it. This Relation is given by her Master who bought her, and with whom she now lives.

Recall that this seven-year-old slave spoke no English upon her arrival in 1761. By 1765, she had written her first poem; in 1767, at the age of thirteen or fourteen, she published her first poem; in 1770, at the age of sixteen or seventeen she immortalized the

Boston massacre in her poem, "On the Affray in King - Street, on the Evening of the 5th of March, 1770": It reads in part:

Long as in *Freedom's Cause* the wise contend,
Dear to your unity shall Fame extend;
While to the World, the letter's Stone shall tell,
How *Caldwell, Attucks, Gray, and Mav'rick* fell.

That same year, her elegy on the death of the Reverend George Whitfield would be published within weeks of his sudden death in Newburyport, Massachusetts, during a speaking tour. This exceptionally popular poem was published as a broadside in Boston in 1770, and then again in Newport, four more times in Boston, and a dozen times in New York, Philadelphia, and Newport. It was this poem that gained for Wheatley a wide readership both in England and the United States.

Delighted with her slave's dazzling abilities and her growing fame, Susannah Wheatley set out to have Phillis's work collected and published as a book. Advertised in the Tory paper the *Boston Censor* on February 29, March 14, and April 18, 1772, was a list of the titles of twenty-eight poems, which would make up Wheatley's first book, if enough subscribers—perhaps 300—could be found to underwrite the cost of publication. But the necessary number of subscribers could not be found, because not enough Bostonians could believe that an African slave possessed the requisite degree of reason and wit to write a poem by herself.

To understand why Wheatley's achievement prompted such incredulity, it helps to know something about the broader discourse of race and reason in the eighteenth century. To summarize a vast and complex body of literature, many philosophers of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment were vexed by the question of what kind of creatures Africans truly were -- that is, were they human beings, descended along with Europeans

from a common ancestor and fundamentally related to other human beings, or were they, as Hume put it in 1753, another "species of men," related more to apes than to

Europeans? I quote Hume:

I am apt to suspect the Negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufacturers amongst them, no arts, no sciences. Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, there are *Negro* slaves dispersed all over *Europe*, of which none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity; tho' low people, without education, will start up amongst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession. In *Jamaica* indeed they talk of one Negro as a man of parts and learning [Francis Williams]; but 'tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishment, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly.

Just ten years later, Kant, responding directly to Hume, expanded upon his observations:

The Negroes of Africa have, by nature, no feeling that rises above the trifling...So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color.... [if a] man [is] black from head to foot, [it is] a clear proof that what he said was stupid.

The question of the humanity of the Africans was essentially related to the possession of reason, in a tradition inaugurated by Descartes: but how were we to recognize that faculty of reason? Increasingly after Hume voiced his doubts about the African's capacity to create "arts and sciences," the question turned on whether or not Africans could write, that is, could create imaginative literature. If they could, this line of reasoning went, then they stood as members of the human family on the Great Chain of Being. If they could not, then the Africans were a species subhuman, more related to the

apes than to Europeans. Even Thomas Jefferson had associated Africans with apes: black males find white women more beautiful than black women, Jefferson had argued, "as uniformly as is the preference of the Oranootan for the black woman over his own species." As the Reverend Robert Nickol would put it in 1788, "I have not heard that an ourang outang has composed an ode." Not so, says Nickol, and poetry is the proof.

All of this helps us to understand why Phillis Wheatley's oral examination was so important. If she had indeed written her own poems, then this would demonstrate that Africans were human beings and should be liberated from slavery. If, on the other hand, she had not written, or could not write her poems, or if indeed she was like a parrot who speaks a few words plainly, then that would be another matter entirely. Essentially, she was auditioning for the humanity of the entire African people.

Some of the most skeptical had already conducted their own examinations of Phillis, one-on-one. Thomas Woolbridge, an emissary of the Earl of Dartmouth, was among those who visited the Wheatley mansion. Woolbridge wrote to Dartmouth about his encounter: "While in Boston, I heard of a very Extraordinary female Slave, who made some verses on our mutually dear deceased Friend [Whitfield]; I visited her mistress, and found by conversing with the African, that she was no Imposter; I asked if she could write on any Subject; she said Yes; we had just heard of your Lordships Appointment; I gave her your name, which she was well acquainted with. She, immediately, wrote a rough Copy of the inclosed Address & Letter, which I promised to convey or deliver. I was astonished, and could hardly believe my own Eyes. I was present when she wrote, and can attest that it is her own production; she shewd me her Letter to Lady Huntington

[sic], which, I dare say, Your Lordship has seen; I send you an Account signed by her master of her Importation, Education &c They are all wrote in her own hand."

Boston's reading public remained skeptical, however. As one of Phillis's supporters in Boston put it in a letter to his brother-in-law in Philadelphia, Wheatley's master "could not sell it by reason of their not crediting ye performances to be by a Negro."

And so the bold gambit in the Old Colony House—the decision to assemble some of the finest minds in all colonial America to question closely the African adolescent about the slender sheaf of twenty-eight poems that she and her master and mistress claimed that she had written by herself.

We have no transcript of the exchanges that occurred between Miss Wheatley and her eighteen examiners. But we can imagine that some of their questions would have been prompted on the classical allusions in Wheatley's poems. "Who was Apollo?" "What happened when Phaeton rode his father's chariot?" "How did Zeus give birth to Athena?" "Name the Nine Muses." Was she perhaps asked for an extemporaneous demonstration of her talent? What we do know is that she passed with flying colors. Indeed, five among the group—Bowdoin, Cooper, Hubbard, Moorhead, and Oliver—would be immortalized in verse by the young woman herself, either in elegies or in occasional verse. But after interrogating the poet, the tribunal of eighteen agreed to sign the following attestation:

We whose Names are under-written, do assure the World, that the Poems specified in the following Page, were (as we verily believe) written by Phillis, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from *Africa*, and has ever since been, and now is, under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town.

She has been examined by some of the best judges, and is thought qualified to write them.

That attestation was absolutely essential to the publication of Wheatley's book, and even with the attestation, the book would be published first not in Boston but in London, where it appeared in the fall of 1773. Five advertisements in *The London Morning Post and Advertiser* in August all point to this statement as proof that Phillis is the volume's "real Author." What's more, everyone knew that the publication of Wheatley's book was an historical event, greeted by something akin to the shock of cloning a sheep. As her printer, Archibald Bell bluntly put it in the same newspaper on September 13, 1773: "The book here proposed for publication displays perhaps one of the greatest instances of pure, unassisted genius, that the world ever produced." For, he continues, "the Author is a native of Africa, and left not the dark part of the habitable system, till she was eight years old."

And so, against the greatest odds, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, became the first book of poetry published by a person of African descent in the English language, marking the beginning of an African American literary tradition. Given the context of the Enlightenment conversation on race and reason, it should come as no surprise that the book was widely reviewed and discussed in Europe and America. Even Voltaire was moved, in 1774, to write to a correspondent that Phillis Wheatley had proven that blacks *could* write poetry. John Paul Jones, on the eve of sailing to France in June 1777, sent a note to a fellow officer, asking him to deliver a copy of some of his own enclosed writings to "the celebrated Phillis the African favorite of the Nine [Muses] and Apollo."

With the publication of her book, Phillis Wheatley, almost immediately, became the most famous African on the face of the earth, the Oprah Winfrey of her time. Phillis was the toast of London, where she had been sent with Nathaniel Wheatley in the summer to oversee the publication of her book. There she met the Earl of Dartmouth, Granville Sharp, and Brook Watson (who would three years later become the Lord Mayor of London), among many others. A planned visit with King George and the royal family had to be aborted because of the sudden illness of Susanna Wheatley. Before returning to Boston, however, she had an audience on July 7th with Benjamin Franklin. So taken with Franklin was she that Wheatley decided to dedicate her second volume of poetry in honor of Franklin himself. In 1774, her owners granted Phillis, this celebrated prodigy, her freedom.

Franklin was just one of the four Founding Fathers who would cross Wheatley's path in one form or another. On October 26, 1775, Wheatley sent a letter and a poem she had written in his honor, to General George Washington at his headquarters in Cambridge. The letter reads as follows:

Sir [George Washington]
I have taken the freedom to address your Excellency in the enclosed poem, and entreat your acceptance, though I am not insensible of its inaccuracies. Your being appointed by the Grand Continental Congress to be Generalissimo of the armies of North America, together with the fame of your virtues, excite sensations not easy to suppress. Your generosity, therefore, I presume will pardon the attempt. Wishing your Excellency all possible success in the great cause you are so generously engaged in, I am,
Your Excellency's most humble servant,
Phillis Wheatley [October 26, 1775]

On February 28, 1776, Washington responded, acknowledging the gift of the poem and inviting Wheatley to visit him at his headquarters in Cambridge:

Miss Phillis,

Your favor of the 26th of October did not reach my hands, till the middle of December. Time enough, you will say, to have given an answer ere this. Granted. But a variety of important occurrences, continually interposing to distract the mind and withdraw the attention, I hope will apologize delay, and plead my excuse for the seeming but not real neglect. I thank you most sincerely for your polite notice of me, in the elegant lines you enclosed; and however undeserving I may be of such encomium and panegyric, the style and manner exhibit a striking proof of your poetical talents; in honor of which, and as a tribute justly due to you, I would have published the poem, had I not been apprehensive, that, while I only meant to give the world this new instance of your genius, I might have incurred the imputation of vanity. This, and nothing else, determined me not to give it place in the public prints.

If you should ever come to Cambridge, or near headquarters, I shall be happy to see a person so favored by the Muses, and to whom nature has so liberal and beneficent in her dispensations. I am, with great respect, your obedient humble servant.

According to Benson J. Lossing, "Washington invited her to visit him at Cambridge, which she did a few days before the British evacuated Boston.... She passed half an hour with the commander-in-chief, from whom and his officers she received marked attention." Thomas Paine published this poem in his *Pennsylvania Magazine* in April 1776, along with Wheatley's letter to the general. The poem is noteworthy in several ways, but especially for its description of Washington as "first in peace" and in its often repeated final couplet:

Proceed, great chief, with virtue on thy side,
Thy ev'ry action let the goddess guide.
A crown, a mansion, and a throne that shine,
With gold unfading, WASHINGTON! Be thine.

But no encounter with a Founding Father would prove to more lasting in its impact than that with Thomas Jefferson, whom she never met. (I should say that when we discuss the blind spots of giants like Jefferson, we must do so with the humility of

knowing that, in future decades, others shall condescendingly be discussing our own blindspots, if they bother discussing us at all.)

Jefferson's criticism of Phillis Wheatley was occasioned by the inquiries of a French diplomat and his regular correspondent, the Marquis Marbois. On August 28, 1779, in a journal entry subsequently sent to his fiancée in Paris, Marbois captured the sense of wonder that Phillis's accomplishment elicited.

...I shall tell you instead [of his political associations with the Adamses, General Horatio Gates, and General John Hancock] about Phyllis, one of the strangest creatures in the country and perhaps the whole world... at the age of seventeen, [she] published a number of poems in which there is imagination, poetry, and zeal, though no correctness nor order nor interest. I read them with some surprise.

Jefferson acknowledges that it was Marbois for whom he wrote his *Notes on Virginia*, in response to several letters sent to him in 1781, among them one inspired by Wheatley's poems.

In Query XIV of the *Notes*, Jefferson set out his views on the mental capacity of the "varieties in race of man," including Indians and blacks. "In general, their existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection," Jefferson writes about blacks; he continues:

Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me that in memory they are equal to whites, in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous.

Echoing Hume and Kant, he argues that blacks are exposed daily to "countries where the arts and sciences are cultivated to a considerable degree," yet they have absorbed little or

nothing from this exposure. On the other hand, Jefferson has qualified praise for the African's musical propensities.

In music they are more generally gifted than the whites with accurate ears for tune and time, and they have been found capable of imagining a small catch.... Whether they will be equal to the composition of a more extensive run of melody, or of complicated harmony, is yet to be proved.

Jefferson's criticism of Phillis Wheatley seems aimed at the antislavery writers who since 1773 had cited her so frequently as proof positive of the equality of the African, and therefore as a reason to abolish slavery. Jefferson's critique of Phillis is unusually harsh:

Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but not poetry. Love is the peculiar oestrus of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion, indeed, has produced a Phillis Wheatley; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism.

Phillis is, for Jefferson, an example of a product of religion, of mindless repetition and imitation, without being the product of intellect, of reflection. True art requires a sublime combination of feeling and reflection.

Jefferson compares the slaves in America to those of ancient Rome and Greece, who lived under even greater duress. "Epictetus, Terrence, and Phaedrus, were slaves. But they were of the race of whites." No, slavery is not to blame: "It is not the Blacks condition then, but nature, which has produced the distinction."

"I advance it, therefore, as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind." And he reaches these conclusions, in some part,

from his reading of Phillis Wheatley's poetry. Yes, he cedes, she may very well have written these works, but they are derivative, imitative, devoid of that marriage of reason and transport that is, in his view, the peculiar oestrum of the poet. By shifting the terms of authenticity—from the very *possibility* of her authorship to the *quality* of her authorship—Jefferson indicted her for a failure of a higher form of authenticity. Having survived the tribunal of eighteen in 1772, Wheatley now finds her genuineness impugned by a larger authority, subjected to a higher test of originality and invention. And the complex rhetoric of authenticity would have a long, long afterlife.

To be sure, Jefferson's opinions generated scores of rebuttals: "reactions to Jefferson were immediate and they quickly proliferated," Robinson says. "Indeed, much of the early Wheatley criticism is essentially rebuttal of Jeffersonian disdain." If Phillis Wheatley was the Mother of African American literature, there's a sense in which Thomas Jefferson can be thought of as its midwife. Indeed, we could analyze, had we the time this evening, scores of commentators who sought to refute Jefferson's arguments in Query XIV, from the 1780s through the twentieth century. Moreover, Jefferson's comments about the role of their literature in any meaningful assessment of the African American's civil rights, became the strongest motivation for blacks to create a body of literature that would implicitly prove Jefferson wrong. This is Wheatley's, and Jefferson's, curious legacy in American literature.

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But what's important, for our purposes, is that even black authors accepted the premise that a group, a "race," had to *demonstrate* its equality through the creation of literature. When the historian David Levering Lewis aptly calls the Harlem Renaissance

of the 1920s "art as civil rights," it is Jefferson who stands as the subtext for this formulation. Or listen to these words from James Weldon Johnson, written in 1922:

A people may become great through many means, but there is only one measure by which its greatness is recognized and acknowledged. The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced. . . . No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior.

In their efforts to prove Jefferson wrong, in other words, black writers created a body of literature, one with a prime political motive: to demonstrate black equality. Surely this is one of the oddest origins of a belletristic tradition in the history of world literature. Indeed, when Wole Soyinka received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986, a press release on behalf of the Nigerian government declared that—because of this prize—no longer could the world see Africans as distinctly inferior. The specter of Thomas Jefferson haunts even there, in Africa in 1986, as does the shadow of Phillis Wheatley.

Now, given all of the praise and attention that Wheatley received, given her unprecedented popularity and fame, one might be forgiven for thinking that Wheatley's career took off with the publication of her poems in 1773, and that she lived happily ever after. She did not: she died in 1784 in abject poverty, preceded in death by her three children, surrounded by filth, and abandoned, apparently, by her husband, John Peters, a fast-talking small businessman who affected the airs and dress of a gentleman and who would later sell off Phillis's proposed second volume of poetry—the one to have been dedicated to Franklin—which has never been recovered. Am I the only scholar who dreams of finding this lost manuscript?

And what happens to her literary legacy after she dies? Interwoven through Phillis Wheatley's intriguing and troubling afterlife is a larger parable about the politics

of authenticity. For, as I've said, those rituals of validation scarcely died with Phillis Wheatley; on the contrary, they would become a central theme in the abolitionist era, where the publication of the slave narratives by and large also depended on letters of authentication that testified to the veracity and capacities of the ex-slave author who had written this work "by himself" or "by herself."

One might be forgiven, too, for imagining that Phillis Wheatley would be among the most venerated names among black Americans today, as celebrated as Frederick Douglass, Rosa Parks, or Dr. King. It was probably true that, as one writer claimed several years ago, "historically throughout black America, more YMCAs, schools, dormitories and libraries have been named for Phillis Wheatley than for any other black woman." And, indeed, I can testify to the presence before 1955 of Phillis Wheatley Elementary School in Ridgeley, West Virginia, a couple of hours up the Potomac, near Piedmont, where I grew up—though it took until college for me to learn just who Miss Wheatley was.

That Phillis Wheatley is not a houseword within the black community is owing largely to one poem that she wrote an eight-line poem entitled "On Being Brought from Africa to America." The poem was written in 1768, just seven years after Phillis was purchased by Susanna Wheatley. Phillis was about fourteen years old.

The eight-line poem reads as follows:

"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.

This, it can be safely said, has been the most reviled poem in African American literature. To speak in such glowing terms about the "mercy" manifested by the slave trade was not exactly going to endear Miss Wheatley to black power advocates in the 1960s. No Angela Davis she! But as scholars such as Robinson, Julian Mason, and John Shields point out, her political detractors ignore the fact that Wheatley elsewhere in her poems complained bitterly about the human costs of the slave trade, as in this example from her famous poem, "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth."

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 breasts
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?

And there is Wheatley's letter to the Reverend Sampson Occom, "a converted Mohegan Indian Christian Minister" who was the eighteenth century's most distinguished graduate from Moor's Charity Indian School of Lebanon, Connecticut, which would relocate in 1770 to Hanover, New Hampshire, where it would be renamed after the Earl of Dartmouth (and its student body broadened, against many protests, to include white students). Wheatley's letter about the evils of slavery was printed in *The Massachusetts Spy* on March 24, 1774; it reads in part:

In every Breast, God has implanted a Principle which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance; and by the Leave of our modern Egyptians I will assert, that the same Principle lives in us.

God grant Deliverance in his own Way and Time, and get him honour upon all those whose Avarice impels them to countenance and help the Calamities of their fellow Creatures. This I desire not for their Hurt, but to convince them of the strange Absurdity of their Conduct whose Words and actions are so diametrically opposite. How well the Cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the exercise of oppressive Power over others agree, - I humbly think it does not require the Penetration of a Philosopher to determine."

Despite sentiments such as these, the fact that Wheatley's short poem has been so widely anthologized in this century has made her something of a pariah in black political and critical circles, especially in the militant 1960s, where critics had a field day mocking her life and her works (most of which they had not read).

We can trace this tendency to the late nineteenth century, when Edward Wilmot Blyden, one of the fathers of black nationalism, wrote contemptuously of her. A few decades later, James Weldon Johnson, writing in 1922, complained that "one looks in vain for some outburst or even complaint against the bondage of her people, for some agonizing cry about her native land," finding instead a "smug contentment at her escape therefrom."

But what really laid her low was ultimately a *cultural* critique of her work—less what she said than the way we said it.

Wallace Thurman, writing in 1928, calls her "a third-rate imitation" of Alexander Pope: "Phillis in her day was a museum figure who would have caused more of a sensation if some contemporary Barnum had exploited her."

Vernon Loggins, in his masterful history of Negro literature, published in 1930, echoes Jefferson when he says that Wheatley's poetry reflects "her instinct for hearing the music of words" rather than understanding their meaning, "an instinct," he concludes,

"which is racial." She lacks the capacity to reflect, to think. For Loggins, as E. Lynn Matson puts it, Wheatley is "a clever imitator, nothing more."

By the mid-sixties, criticism of Wheatley rose to a high pitch of disdain. Seymour Gross, writing in 1966 in *Images of the Negro in American Literature*, argued that "this Negro poetess so well fits the Uncle Tom syndrome.... She is pious, grateful, retiring, and civil...."

Amiri Baraka, father of the Black Arts movement, in his seminal collection of essays entitled *Home* (1966), says that Wheatley's "pleasant imitations of 18th century English poetry are far, and finally, ludicrous departures from the huge black voices that splintered southern nights with their *hollers, chants, arwhoolies, and ballits*." For him, of course, these chants represent the authentic spirit of black creativity.

Stephen Henderson, writing in *The Militant Black Writer*, (1969), argues that "it is no wonder that many black people have...rejected Phillis Wheatley," because her work reflects "the old self-hatred that one hears in the Dozens and in the blues. It is, frankly," he concludes, "the *nigger* component of the Black Experience." Dudley Randall wrote in that same year that "whatever references she made to her African heritage were derogatory, reflecting her status as a favored house slave and a curiosity."

Addison Gayle, a major black aesthetic critic, wrote in *The Way of the World* (1975) that Wheatley was the first black writer "to accept the images and symbols of degradation passed down from the South's most intellectual lights and the first to speak from a sensibility finely tuned by close approximation to their oppressors." Wheatley, in sum, "had surrendered the right to self-definition to others."

And the assaults continued, the critical arrows arriving in waves. This once most revered figure in black letters would, in the sixties, become the most reviled figure. Angelene Jamison argued in 1974 that Wheatley and her poetry were "too white," a sentiment that Ezekiel Mphahlele echoed two years later when he indicted her for having "a white mind," and said he felt "too embarrassed even to mention her in passing" in a study of black literature. Similarly, Eleanor Smith maintained that Wheatley was "taught by whites to think," thus she had "a white mind" and "white orientations." Here we're given Phillis Wheatley as Uncle Tom's mother.

And examples could be multiplied. But it's clear enough what we're witnessing. The Jeffersonian critique has been recuperated and recycled by successive generations of black writers and critics. Precisely the sort of mastery of the literary craft and themes that led to her vindication before the Boston town-hall tribunal, was now summoned as proof that she was, *culturally*, an impostor. Phillis Wheatley, having been painstakingly authenticated in her own time now stands as a symbol of falsity, artificiality, of spiritless and rote convention. As new cultural vanguards sought to police and patrol the boundaries of black art, Wheatley's glorious carriage would become a tumbril.

Meet Phillis Wheatley, race traitor.

I am not the only scholar who has wished the teenage poet had found a more veiled way to express her gratitude to Susannah Wheatley for saving her from a worse form of slavery and for expressing her genuine joy at her full embrace of Christianity. But it's striking that Jefferson and Amiri Baraka, two figures in American letters, who would agree on little else, could agree on the terms of their indictment of Phillis Wheatley.

For Wheatley's critics, her sacrifices, her courage, her humiliations, her trials would never be enough. And so we have come full circle: the sort of racist suspicions and anxieties that attended Wheatley's writing are now directed at forms of black expression that seem to fail of a new sort of authenticity, as determined by a yardstick of cultural affirmation. Today the question has become "Who is black enough?" The critics I have cited were convening their own interrogation squad, as surely as Thomas Hutchinson did on that October day in 1772. We can almost imagine Wheatley being frogmarched through another hall in the sixties or seventies, surrounded by dashiki-clad, flowering figures of "the Revolution": "What is Ogun's relation to Esu?" "Who are the sixteen principal deities in the Yoruba pantheon of Gods?" "Santeria derived from which African culture?" And finally: "Where you gonna be when the revolution comes, *sista*?"

And this has not merely turned out to be a sixties phenomenon. Those haunting questions of identity linger with us still, much to the devastation of inner-city youth. I read with dismay the results of a poll published a few years ago. The charge of "acting white" was applied to speaking standard English, getting straight A's, or even visiting the Smithsonian! Think about it: we have moved from a situation where Phillis Wheatley's acts of literacy could be used to demonstrate our people's inherent humanity and their inalienable right to freedom, to a situation where acts of literacy are stigmatized somehow as acts of racial betrayal. Phillis Wheatley, so proud to the end of her hard-won attainments, would weep. So would Douglass; so would Du Bois. In reviving the ideology of "authenticity"—especially in a Hip Hop world where too many of our children think it's easier to become Michael Jordan than Vernon Jordan—we have ourselves reformed the manacles of an earlier, admittedly racist era.

And, even now, so the imperative remains to cast aside the mine-and-thine rhetoric of cultural ownership. For cultures can no more be owned than people can. As W.E.B. Du Bois put it so poignantly:

I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm and arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what sole I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the veil.

This is the vision that we must embrace, as full and equal citizens of the republic of letters, a republic whose citizenry must always embrace both Phillis Wheatley and Thomas Jefferson.

Frederick Douglass recognized this clearly; in a speech delivered in 1863, at the height of the Civil War, Douglass argued that his contemporaries in the Confederacy selectively cited Jefferson's proslavery writings when convenient, ignoring the rest. For Douglass, black Americans were the true patriots, because they fully embraced Jeffersonian democracy; they were the most Jeffersonian Americans of all, allowing us to witness a new way to appreciate the miracle that is America. Here was Jefferson, whom Douglass called "the sage of the Old Dominion," cast as the patron saint of the black freedom struggle.

If Frederick Douglass could recuperate and champion Thomas Jefferson, during the Civil War of all times, is it possible for us to do the same for a modest young poet named Phillis Wheatley? What's required is only that we recognize that there are no "white minds" or "black minds": there are only minds, and yes, they are, as that slogan has it, a terrible thing to waste. What would happen if we ceased to stereotype Wheatley

but, instead, *read* her, read her with all the resourcefulness that she herself brought to her craft? I can already hear the skeptics: that's all well and good, they'll say, but how is it possible to read Wheatley's "On Being Brought From Africa to America?" But, of course, there are few things that cannot be redeemed by those of charitable inclination. And just a few days after a recent Fourth of July, I received a fax from a man named Walter Grigo, sent from a public fax machine in Madison, Connecticut.

Mr. Grigo—a freelance writer—had evidently become fascinated with anagrams, and wished to alert me to quite a stunning anagram indeed. "On Being Brought from Africa to America," this eight line poem, was, in its entirety, an anagram, he pointed out. If you simply rearranged the letters, you got the following plea:

Hail, Brethren in Christ! Have ye
Forgotten God's word? Scriptures teach
Us that bondage is wrong. His own greedy
Kin sold Joseph into slavery. "Is there
No balm in Gilead?" God made us all.
Aren't African men born to be free? So
Am I. Ye commit so brute a crime
On us. But we can change thy attitude.
America, manumit our race. I thank the
Lord.

It's indeed the case that every letter in Wheatley's poem can be rearranged to produce an entirely new work, one with the *reverse* meaning of the apologetic and infamous original. "Could it be that Phillis Wheatley was this devious?" Mr. Grigo asked me. And it's fun to think that the most scorned poem in the tradition, all this time, was a secret, coded love letter to freedom, hiding before our very eyes. I don't claim that this stratagem was the result of design, but we're free to find significance, intended or no, where we uncover it. And so we're reminded of our task, as readers: to learn to read Wheatley anew, unblinkered by the anxieties of her time and ours. The challenge isn't to

read white, or read black; it is *to read*. If Phillis Wheatley stood for anything, it was the creed that culture was, could be, the equal possession of all humanity. It was a lesson she was swift to teach, and that we have been slow to learn. But the learning has begun. Almost two and a half centuries after a schooner brought this African child to our shores, we can finally say: Welcome home, Phillis; welcome home.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.