



Voices from the Gaps

Phillis Wheatley

“

*Not you, my friend, these plaintive strains become,
Not you, whose bosom is the Muses home;
When they from tow’ring Helicon retire,
They fan in you the bright immortal fire,
But I less happy, cannot raise the song,
The fault’ring music dies upon my tongue. The
happier Terence all the choir inspir’d,
His soul replenish’d, and his bosom fir’d;
But say, ye Muses, why this partial grace,
To one alone of Afric’s sable race;
From age to age transmitting thus his name
With the first glory in the rolls of fame?*

— To Maecenas

”



Quick Facts

- * 1753-1784
- * Born in Africa, sold as a slave to a Bostonian family
- * Author of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*

Biography

Born in Africa in the early 1750’s, the child who would be known as Phillis Wheatley was brought to Boston in 1761 to be sold on the slave market. The child was purchased by the Wheatleys, a prominent Boston family. Early on, Phillis showed signs of remarkable intelligence. The Wheatley’s noticed this intelligence and encouraged it by making Mary Wheatley her personal tutor. Phillis began writing poems as a young woman and gradually began to see poetry as her avenue of expression in literate white culture. Her first published poem, “On Messrs. Hussey and Coffin.” appeared in the Newport Mercury in 1767. The poem demonstrates remarkable literary maturity and a profound Christian spirituality.

This page was researched and submitted by: Aaren Hanson and Steve Yernberg on 11/25/96. It was updated by Maria Zavialova on 9/20/2004



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Biography continued

In the following years, a number of poems appeared in various publications in and around Boston. “On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield, 1770” was published in at least ten separate editions in cities such as Boston, Newport, and Philadelphia. In 1770, the poem appeared in London and served to cement her international reputation as a talented poet.

In 1773, the frigid New England winters aggravated Phillis’s frail asthmatic condition. Hoping to improve her health, the Wheatleys organized a trip to London where Phillis recuperated and promoted her first and only published volume, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, published in 1773 by Arch Bell, Aldgate.

Bad fortune awaited Phillis’ return. In the five following years, both Mr. and Mrs Wheatley passed away, leaving Phillis to struggle to support herself as a poet and seamstress. In the Spring of 1778, Phillis married John Peters, an African American. The burdens of the racist white world proved too much for Phillis, Peters, and their three children. Peters put Phillis and the children into a negro boarding house where foul conditions resulted in the children’s deaths and a drastic decline in Phillis’ health.

Despite the tragedy and poverty, Phillis continued to write poetry. In 1779, she advertised in the “Boston Evening Post” and “General Advertiser,” in hopes of finding a publisher for a volume of thirty three poems and thirteen letters. Sadly, due mostly to the struggling post-revolutionary economy, this volume was never published. In 1784, several poems celebrating the end of the Revolution and “To Mr. and Mrs. ----, on the Death of Their Infant Son,” a poem from the proposed volume, were published under the name Phillis Peters.

On December 5, 1784, Phillis Wheatley Peters died in Boston. After Phillis’ death, John Peters went to a woman who had provided temporary shelter for Phillis and the children and demanded the manuscripts of the proposed second volume. Tragically, these manuscripts disappeared with Peters and have never been recovered.



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