



A CRITIC AT LARGE

PHILLIS WHEATLEY ON TRIAL

In 1772, a slave girl had to prove she was a poet. She's had to do so ever since.

BY HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.

It was the primal scene of African-American letters. Sometime before October 8, 1772, Phillis Wheatley, a slim African slave in her late teens who was a published poet, met with eighteen of the most influential thinkers and politicians of the Massachusetts Colony. The panel had been assembled to verify the authorship of her poems and to answer a much larger question: Was a Negro capable of producing literature? The details of the meeting have been lost to history, but I've often imagined how it all might have happened. Phillis walks into a room—perhaps in Boston's Town Hall, the Old Colony House—and stands before these New England illuminati with a manuscript consisting of twenty-odd poems that she claims to have written. She is on trial, and so is her race.

Wheatley's poems had been appearing in periodicals and newspapers in New England and Britain since she was fourteen. One of her adolescent works, "On Being Brought from Africa to America," displays her typical subject matter and the hallmarks of her early style—religious piety wrapped in heroic couplets. The eight-line poem has been widely anthologized in collections of African-American literature in this century, most recently in James G. Basker's "Amazing Grace: An Anthology of Poems About Slavery, 1660-1810" (Yale; \$45). It is a modest and not particularly sophisticated paean to her Christian education, and expresses a forgiving, even grateful attitude toward human trafficking:

'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.

She had arrived in Boston on July 11, 1761, on board the *Phillis*, a slaver that was returning from Senegal, Sierra Leone, and the Isles de Los, off the coast of Guinea. Most likely a native Wolof speaker from the Senegambian coast, she was "a slender, frail, female child," naked except for a kilt made from "a quantity of dirty carpet," as a descendant of her owners wrote in 1834. She had lost her front teeth, and so was thought to be about seven or eight years old. Susanna Wheatley, the wife of a prosperous tailor and merchant, John Wheatley, acquired her as a house servant, and named her after the slave ship.

John and Susanna Wheatley had teen-aged twins, Nathaniel and Mary, who were living at home when Phillis arrived. Phillis spoke no English, and Mary, apparently with her mother's encouragement, began to teach her to read, tutoring her in English, Latin, and the Bible. By 1765, Wheatley had written her first poem; in 1767, when she was thirteen or fourteen, the Newport *Mercury* published a poem that Susanna Wheatley submit-

ted on her behalf. In 1770, when she was about seventeen, an elegy she wrote on the death of the Reverend George Whitefield, a popular English preacher who was a leader of the evangelical movement in England and America, was published in newspapers in Boston, Newport, New York, and Philadelphia. Whitefield had been the personal chaplain of an English philanthropist, Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon. Wheatley shrewdly apostrophized the Countess in the Whitefield elegy and sent her a letter of condolence with the poem enclosed. With the poem's publication in London, in 1771, Wheatley suddenly had a wide readership on both sides of the Atlantic.

As her literary reputation grew, however, so did doubts about her authenticity, and the Wheatleys, attempting to publish her manuscript, were unable to elicit the number of book orders that printers in those days required. Eighteenth-century philosophers like David Hume believed that blacks were a different species, and there was widespread incredulity at the idea of a black litterateur. It was John Wheatley who assembled the illustrious group of interrogators, hoping that they would support Phillis's claim of authorship, and that the opinion of the general public would follow.

Picture the eighteen men gathered in a semicircle. At the center was, no doubt, His Excellency Thomas Hutchinson, the governor of Massachusetts. Hutchinson, a Colonial historian and a royal official, was born into a wealthy merchant family in Boston. He entered Harvard College at the age of twelve, where, because of his family's social position, he was ranked third in his class. (Even back then, grade inflation loomed on the Charles.) Following the Boston Tea Party, he went to London, "for consultations," and never returned.

Andrew Oliver, the colony's lieutenant governor, would have been seated on one side of Hutchinson. Oliver imprudently allowed himself to be publicly identified as a supporter of the Stamp Act of 1765, prompting angry crowds to ransack his house and uproot his garden. When, in 1774, Oliver had a stroke and died, commentators assumed that it was related to the political turmoil.

Quite a few men of the cloth were present. The Reverend Mather Byles was the minister of the Hollis Street Congregational Church, in Boston; he was

R. GREGORY CHRISTIE

the grandson of Increase Mather and the nephew of Cotton Mather. As a young man, he had corresponded with Alexander Pope and Isaac Watts, and in 1744 he had published a book of verse, "Poems on Several Occasions." Like Hutchinson and Oliver, Byles was a Tory loyalist, and he lost his pulpit when Massachusetts finally rebelled. He was sentenced to banishment, later commuted to house arrest, for his loyalist views. (Byles called the sentry stationed just outside the house his "Observe-a-Tory.")

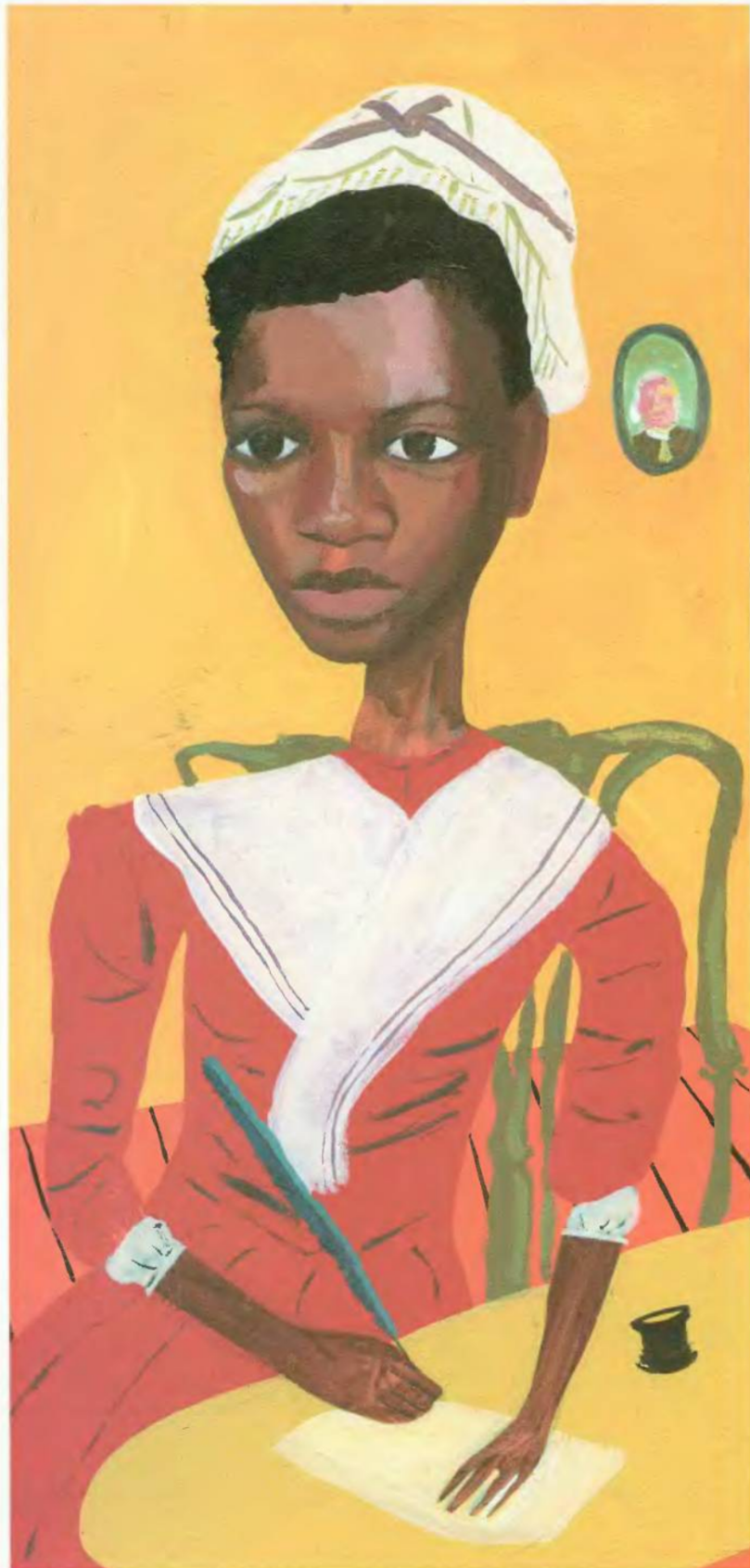
Others of the Wheatley witnesses, though, were to become prominent figures in the newly founded republic. Among them was John Hancock, the head of the House of Hancock, which had grown rich by trading in whale oil and real estate. Hancock was later the president of the Second Continental Congress and the first governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Nearly all the men present were Harvard graduates and a majority were slaveholders. One, Thomas Hubbard, had been a dealer in slaves; another, the Reverend Charles Chauncy, had attacked the Great Awakening, an evangelical movement that threatened the established religious order, because it allowed "women and girls; yea Negroes . . . to do the business of preachers." The group that Wheatley faced was not exactly an association for the advancement of colored people.

There is no transcript of what took place in that room. Was Wheatley given scansion tests? Quizzed on the Latin subjunctive? Asked to recite the Psalms? We'll never know. Whatever the nature of the exam, she passed it, and earned the letter of support that she and her master had hoped for:

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.

Even after the validation of the esteemed Bostonians, no American publisher was willing to take on Wheatley's manuscript, and so Susanna Wheatley turned to English friends for



Wheatley's poems, Thomas Jefferson wrote, "are below the dignity of criticism."

help. The publishing climate in England was more receptive to black authors. The Countess of Huntingdon, though a slaveholder herself (she had inherited slaves in Georgia), had already, in 1772, shepherded into print one of the earliest slave narratives, by James Gronniosaw. Vincent Carretta, a leading scholar of eighteenth-century black transatlantic literature and an expert on Wheatley, has observed that the British market for black literature may have been indirectly created by a court ruling, in 1772, that made it illegal for slaves who had come to England to be forcibly returned to the colonies. Although the ruling stopped short of outlawing slavery in England, it encouraged an atmosphere of sympathy toward blacks.

Through the captain of the commercial ship that John Wheatley used for trade with England, Susanna engaged a London publisher, Archibald Bell, to bring out the manuscript. The Countess agreed to let Wheatley dedicate the book to her. An engraving of Wheatley appeared as the book's frontispiece, at the Countess's request.

"Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral, by Phillis Wheatley, Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley of Boston" was published in September, 1773. Five advertisements that ran in the London *Morning Post & Daily Advertiser* the month before pointed to the statement of the Boston panel as proof that Wheatley was the "real Author." The book's publication represented a significant moment in black literary achievement. Various black authors had published individual poems, but even these instances were rare. Jupiter Hammon, a slave from Long Island, had published the first of several poems in 1760. Francis Williams, a Jamaican who is said to have studied at Cambridge University, had caused a minor sensation when it was posthumously revealed that he had written an ode in Latin in 1759. Wheatley's book was widely reviewed and discussed in England and in America, where it became available in 1774. Voltaire wrote to a correspondent that Phillis Wheatley had proved blacks could write poetry.

While Phillis was in London, where she had been sent with Nathaniel Wheatley in the spring of 1773 to oversee the book's publication, she met the Earl of

SNOW MOON FLOWER

In this place of rice fields,
metrical mountains and little bubbling canals,
it was not the self against time
or the self blurred by flesh, it was the self
living without any palpable design.
Common egrets floated on broad bowed wings.
A rooster crowed at dawn and the body—
graceful, alert—slanted gently towards the sun.
In the night gloom, a ground spider jumped
around the shortwave radio,
on which a samisen played,
and fawn-like creatures ventured out of the pines,
observing in my windows a solitude
as pure as a bowl of milk.

But outside the gate of this place,
there was another mirror world,
connected only by a dark path of sticky stones,
where there were goat smells and little cries,
hooves pawing and flying beetles. No man could resist it.
No man could endure it. The long shadows
fell on the mind like nails in a plank,
taking one beyond the surface of things,
into the deepest places, not of man's griefs
but of man's truths, which cut deep,
if they did not tear us apart, like a field of thorn,
as the dark tops of the trees shone complacently
and a changing light filtered and breathed
against the lonely surface of everything.

—Henri Cole

Dartmouth, who gave her five guineas to buy the works of Alexander Pope; Granville Sharp, the scholar and anti-slavery activist, who took her to the Tower of London; and Brook Watson, a future Lord Mayor of London, who gave her a folio edition of "Paradise Lost." Benjamin Franklin paid her a visit, which he mentions in a letter to his nephew Jonathan Williams, Sr. "Upon your Recommendation I went to see the black Poetess and offer'd her any Services I could do her," he wrote. "And I have heard nothing since of her." On the strength of this seemingly perfunctory visit, Wheatley decided to dedicate her second volume of poetry to Franklin. Even an audience with King George was arranged, although she had to cancel it when Susanna Wheatley suddenly fell ill and needed her care.

Within a month of the book's publication and Phillis's return to America, the Wheatleys freed her. (English reviewers, using Wheatley's book as a point of departure, had condemned the hypocrisy of a colony that insisted on liberty and equality when it came to its relationship to England but did not extend those principles to its own population.) Freedom meant that she became fully responsible for her literary career, and for her finances. In mid-October, she wrote a letter to David Wooster, the customs collector in New Haven, alerting him that a shipment of her books would soon arrive from England, and urging him to canvass among his friends for orders. "Use your interest with Gentlemen & Ladies of your acquaintance to subscribe also, for the more subscribers there are, the more it will be for my advantage as I am to

have half the Sale of the Books." She continued, "This I am the more solicitous for, as I am now upon my own footing and whatever I get by this is entirely mine, & it is the Chief I have to depend upon. I must also request you would desire the Printers in New Haven, not to reprint that Book, as it will be a great hurt to me, preventing any further Benefit that I might receive from the Sale of my Copies from England."

In the spring of 1774, the British occupied Boston. Susanna Wheatley died the same year, and when John Wheatley fled the city Phillis moved to Providence, where John Wheatley's daughter, Mary, and her husband lived. With the outbreak of war, in April of 1775, Phillis's prospects dimmed considerably. A number of the people who had signed the attestation were dead, and the others who had earlier supported her, both Tories and Patriots, were more concerned with winning the war than with the African prodigy. But Wheatley lost no opportunity to cultivate powerful friends, and on October 26, 1775, she wrote to General George Washington at his headquarters in Cambridge, aligning herself with the Revolutionary cause:

SIR

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 obedient humble servant,

PHILLIS WHEATLEY

The accompanying poem was nothing if not flattering:

One century scarce perform'd its
destined round,
When Gallic powers Columbia's fury
found;
And so may you, whoever dares
disgrace
The land of freedom's heaven-defended
race! . . .

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.

On February 28, 1776, Washington responded:

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 for the 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 underserving 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 been so liberal and beneficent in her dispensations. I am, with great respect, your obedient humble servant.

GEORGE WASHINGTON

In the event, Washington overcame his fear of the imputation of vanity and, by means of an intermediary, secured publication of Wheatley's pentametric praise in the *Virginia Gazette*, in March of 1776.

By late 1776, Wheatley had moved back to Boston. In 1778, she married a black man named John Peters. Peters was a small-time grocer and a sometime lawyer about whom very little is known—only that he successfully applied for the right to sell spirits in his store, and that a Wheatley relative remembered him as someone who affected the airs of a gentleman. Meanwhile, the poet continued her efforts to publish a second volume. In 1779, she advertised six times in the Boston *Evening Post & General Advertiser*, mentioning that she intended to dedicate the book to Benjamin Franklin. The advertisements failed to generate the necessary number of subscribers, and the book was never published.

Wheatley's freedom had enslaved her to a life of hardship. Peters abandoned

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her soon after she gave birth to their third child (the first two died in infancy). She placed her last advertisement in the September, 1784, issue of *The Boston Magazine* and died in December, at the age of thirty, poor and alone. Her baby died with her. Peters is thought to have sold the only copy of the second manuscript. A few years ago, one of the poems surfaced at Christie's, and sold for nearly seventy thousand dollars, but the full manuscript has never been recovered.

To her black contemporaries, Wheatley was a heroine. Jupiter Hammon published a laudatory poem entitled "An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatley Ethiopian Poetess, in Boston," in 1778. Hammon's poem echoed and approved of the sentiments expressed in "On Being Brought from Africa to America": "Thou hast left the heathen shore, / Thro' mercy of the Lord, / Among the heathen live no more, / Come magnify thy God." Wheatley encouraged the work of other black artists, such as Hammon and Scipio Moorhead, a well-known painter to whom she dedicated a poem. In letters to her best friend, Obour Tanner, a black woman she had met in Providence, Wheatley argued for the inherent right of blacks to be free. She corresponded with the English philanthropist John Thornton, a wealthy merchant and a friend of the Countess of Huntingdon. She used her fame and her acquaintance with political figures to complain bitterly about the human costs of the slave trade, as in a famous poem called "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth":

I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
Was snatch'd from *Africa's* fancy'd
happy seat:
What pangs excruciating must molest,
What sorrows labour in my parent's
breast?
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 a letter Wheatley wrote about the evils of slavery to the Reverend Samson Ocom, a Mohegan Indian minister in the Countess's circle. The letter was published several months

after her manumission. It appeared in *The Connecticut Gazette* on March 11, 1774, and reads, in part:

In every human 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.

In the half century following her death, Wheatley remained something of an icon in the abolitionist movement, and was frequently cited as proof of Africans' innate intellectual equality with whites.

At the same time, her popularity among the abolitionists brought her some formidable detractors. In "Notes on the State of Virginia," which was published in America in 1787, Thomas Jefferson dismissed Wheatley's poetry as undeserving of the name:

Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. Love is the peculiar oestrum 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 composed under her name are below the dignity of criticism.

Phillis had plenty of experience—"misery enough"—and, thanks to the Wheatleys, training in spelling and composition. What she lacked, Jefferson wrote, was an animating intellect. "Epictetus, Terence, and Phaedrus, were slaves. But they were of the race of whites. It is not [the blacks'] condition then, but nature, which has produced the distinction." The authentication of Wheatley's authorship in 1772 missed the point, in Jefferson's view. The issue wasn't whether she was the genuine author but whether what she produced was genuine poetry.

The emergence, in the mid-eighteenth-century, of fugitive-slave authors, such as Frederick Douglass, rendered Wheatley's stylized rhymes passé. Under the leadership of William Lloyd Garrison, the abolitionist movement was assuming an urgency and a stridency consonant with the angry realism of Douglass's voice. Wheatley disappeared from view, and when she reappeared, in the late nineteenth century, it was as a version

of what Jefferson had made of her—a symbol of artificiality, of spiritless and rote convention. Unlike Douglass, who was embraced by the black literary community, she was a pariah, reviled for “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” even though the poem belongs among her juvenilia. In 1887, Edward Wilmot Blyden, one of the fathers of black nationalism, wrote about her contemptuously, and the tone was set for the century to come.

“One looks in vain for some outburst or even complaint against the bondage of her people, for some agonizing cry about her native land,” James Weldon Johnson wrote about “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” in 1922. Instead, one finds a “smug contentment at her own escape therefrom.” Wallace Thurman, in 1928, called 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.” Another black critic described her as “a clever imitator, nothing more.”

By the nineteen-sixties, criticism of Wheatley had risen to a high pitch of disdain. Amiri Baraka, a founder of the Black Arts Movement, wrote in 1962 that Wheatley’s “pleasant imitations of eighteenth-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*.” In “Images of the Negro in American Literature” (1966), Seymour Gross wrote, “This Negro poetess so well fits the Uncle Tom syndrome. . . . She is pious, grateful, retiring, and civil.” A few years later, the critic Addison Gayle, Jr., issued his own bill of indictment: Wheatley, he wrote, was the first among black writers “to accept the images and symbols of degradation passed down from the South’s most intellectual lights and the first to speak with a sensibility finely tuned by close approximation to [her] oppressors.” She



had, in sum, “surrendered the right to self-definition to others.” Phillis Wheatley, who had once been cast as the great paragon of Negro achievement, was now given a new role: race traitor.

The examples could be multiplied, as versions of the Jeffersonian critique have been taken up by successive generations of black writers and critics. Too black to be taken seriously by white critics in the eighteenth century, Wheatley was now considered too white to interest black critics in the twentieth. She was an impostor, a fraud, an avatar of inauthenticity. It’s striking that Jefferson and Amiri Baraka, two figures in American letters who agreed on little else, could concur in the terms of their condemnation of Phillis Wheatley.

For Wheatley’s critics, her sacrifices, her courage, her humiliations, her trials could never be enough. And so things came full circle: the sorts of racist suspicions and anxieties that first greeted Wheatley’s writing were now directed at forms of black expression that failed the new test of cultural affirmation. The critics of the Black Arts Movement and after were convening their own interrogators, and they were a rather more hostile group than met that day in 1772. We can almost imagine Wheatley being frog-marched through another hall in the nineteen-sixties or seventies, surrounded by dashiki-clad figures of “the Revolution”: “What is Ogun’s relation to Esu?” “What are the seven principles of Kwanzaa?” “Santeria is derived from which African culture?” And, finally, “Where you gonna be when the revolution comes, *sista*?”

If Wheatley stood for anything, of course, it was the creed that culture did, or could, belong equally to everyone. That’s an ideal that has been arraigned, interrogated, and prosecuted with unremitting zeal, but it remains worth defending. The republic of letters that Wheatley so yearned to join—one that might embrace the writing of both Jefferson and his African-American descendants—was based on common expression, not common experience. What would happen, then, if we ceased to stereotype Wheatley, to cast her in this role or that, but, instead, *read* her, with all the resourcefulness that she herself brought to her craft? That’s the only way to let Phillis Wheatley take the stand. ♦

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