

The Work of Phillis Wheatley and An Early African American Literary Tradition

Literary scholars typically locate the origins of African American literature in the mid-18th century when those of African descent emerged as writing subjects in British North America. Between 1745 and 1775, we can pinpoint several literary 'firsts.' For example, in 1746 Lucy Terry Prince penned what we might consider the first ballad, or poem, by a black woman in America, "The Bars Fight." It existed in oral form until 1855 when it was published in a history book of Massachusetts. In 1760, Briton Hammon helped to initiate a black life writing tradition with publication of his captivity narrative "Surprizing Deliverance," about his harrowing nearly 13-year ordeal of captivity in the Caribbean. A year later, Jupiter Hammon became the first person of African descent to publish poetry, when his poem "An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ, with Penitential Cries" appeared as a broadside in New York. Phillis Wheatley, we have determined, is significant as the first person of African descent in America to publish an entire book of poetry.

We can broaden the conversation about early African American literary milestones if we think beyond the paradigm of authorship to consider those early American texts that record black life experiences. Examples of such texts include Thomas Bluett's 1734 *Some Memoirs of the Life of Job, the Son of Solomon*. This as-told-to narrative relates the capture and enslavement of Ayuba Suleiman Diallo, a black Muslim man captured from his home in present-day Senegal and sold into slavery in Maryland. We might also consider "A Short Account of the Life of Elizabeth Colson," about a mixed-race woman executed for infanticide in 1727. Before her execution, Colson narrated a brief account of her life story to a fellow inmate. A Boston newspaper published the narrative a month later. These examples are in no way an exhaustive list of this kind of authorship.

The above examples offer but a glimpse of the ways in which black Africans long affected the literary and cultural landscape of early America. Phillis Wheatley perhaps is the most prominent of those examples. Wheatley was born in a region of West Africa we call Senegambia. She was born approximately in the year 1753 and sold into slavery when she was seven or eight years old. She arrived at a Boston harbor on July 11, 1761.

A Boston merchant named John Wheatley and his wife, Susanna, bought Wheatley and named her Phillis after the ship that brought her across the Atlantic. At a young age, Wheatley displayed a great deal of intellectual curiosity; her owners' daughter, Mary, taught her how to read English and Latin. She also read the Bible. She proved a quick study, mastering the English language in less than two years. Six years after her arrival in Boston, when she was about 14 years old, Wheatley published her first poem, "On Messrs. Huffey and Coffin," in a Newport, Rhode Island newspaper. The poem related the near-death experience of two sea merchants who barely escaped a shipwreck while heading to Boston.

In 1773, Wheatley published an entire volume of poetry, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. Published in London, the book is the first known volume of poetry published by a person of African descent in British North America. Wheatley's poetry largely is religious in content. She also celebrates the power of the poet and acknowledges her connections to those in her community, including other black Africans. On occasion, she references West African culture. She wrote in a neoclassical style. This means that she often evoked Greek and Roman imagery, gods, and muses. Writing in the neoclassical style was one way that Wheatley could prove to her readers

that she was a serious poet. The assumption of the time – and even today – was that only those with real talent and intellectual mettle could write like Homer and Virgil. Wheatley’s aesthetic choices no doubt were complicated by the Enlightenment Movement, which rationalized the dehumanization of black Africans. Enlightenment thinkers such as Immanuel Kant and Thomas Jefferson argued that black Africans lacked the intellectual capacity to reason or produce quality literature. In 1773 Wheatley traveled through London for nearly two months promoting her book of poetry and challenging the racist thinking of the day.

In addition to poetry, Wheatley was an avid letter-writer. She maintained correspondence with black Africans living in colonial New England, including another enslaved black woman living in Rhode Island named Obour Tanner. She also corresponded with the Mohegan minister Samson Occom and then-general George Washington, among other notable figures. In her letters, Wheatley expressed political views that condemned slavery and that celebrated the liberation movement of the American colonies. Particularly in her letters to Tanner, Wheatley also expressed her spiritual devotion.

Based on the success of her book of poetry and a resulting groundswell of support from abolitionists and others mostly in England, Wheatley’s owners freed her shortly after publication of the book. As an emancipated woman, Wheatley continued to write poetry and letters. In 1778 she married John Peters, a Boston shopkeeper. The next year, she published a proposal for a second book of poetry, which she planned to dedicate to Benjamin Franklin, who she had met during her travels in England. Wheatley never published that second volume. She published one of her last poems, “Liberty and Peace” in 1784. She died later that year in Boston.

Wheatley Peters was a literary pioneer, which is not to say she was a literary anomaly or outlier. Rather she was part of a body of early Black writers across the Atlantic whose literary efforts challenged the dehumanizing rhetoric that fueled racism and the transatlantic slave trade. Her contemporaries included Olaudah Equiano and Ignatius Sancho in England, Jupiter Hammon and John Marrant in America, and Boston King and Mary Perth in Sierra Leone.

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