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## A DIFFERENT LOOK AT THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVERY: PHILLIS WHEATLEY: AN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY SLAVE POET

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### ABSTRACT

A slave of Senegalese or Gambian origin was the first black poet of the eighteenth century to write poetry in a language other than her own. It should be noted that long before Europeans arrived in Africa, the Songhai people of the Middle Ages wrote whatever they wanted in the Songhai language using Arabic script. Deported to the United States in 1761 at the approximate age of seven (07) or eight (08), this slave was sold to the Wheatley couple who named her Phillis after the name of the ship from which she disembarked. Phillis learnt how to speak the English language in record time. She also learnt how to read and write English from her boss' children. Very intelligent, gifted and moreover very precocious, she wrote her first poem at the age of fourteen. She died thirty years after arriving in the United States, the University of California at Berkeley in 1909 compiled about forty of her poems in one volume for posterity. Through a multidisciplinary approach, this paper examines the psychology of children so as to apprehend the phenomenon of Phillis' precocity, then a typological analysis of her poems will be carried out and at last some of her outstanding poems will be scrutinized. As finding, it is revealed that Phillis suffered a subtle acculturation like the entire black race in general.

Keywords: First generation African slave poet, transatlantic slavery, Africa, America

### Introduction

The existence of this collection of poems first raises the problem of black people's humanity and then that of their intelligence. Are Blacks intelligent, can they carry out abstract analysis; are they full human beings as Westerners are? Here are sample of questions that Westerners ask themselves. The edition of the book written by Phillis Wheatley (c. 1753-1784) entitled: *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral by Phillis Wheatley Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley, of Boston in New England* (1773) published in the mid-eighteenth century answered these series of questions in the affirmative. While it is true that a single swallow does not make spring, it is just as true that we cannot hide the genius of this young girl straight out of her native Africa. It should be noted that the original title of her work has been changed by scholars at the University of Berkeley into: *The Poems of Phillis Wheatley* (Wheatley, 1909). What intrigues more than one person is how quickly she learns, innovates and makes herself a name.

One wonders how many Phillis have been lost in the cane or cotton fields of The United States of America for lack of the emotional and intellectual guidance that the Wheatley slave benefited from. History does not record it anywhere and therefore no one can know. It would then be necessary to pay homage to the couple formed by Susanna and John Wheatley, to their children, the twins whose names are Mary and Nathaniel. Indeed, Phillis had to be helped by this family before becoming the first Black-American poet (<https://www.fembio.org>) and the second American poet, after Anne Bradstreet Dudley (1612-1672), a naturalized English-American ([https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne\\_Bradstreet](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne_Bradstreet)). It was a century after the latter's death of that a collection of poetry written in English was published by another American woman this time of black descent. She was not only of African descent, but also a slave of the first generation. I would like to explain Phillis Wheatley's phenomenon with the tools of psychology, I would do a typological study of poems contained in the edition published by the University of California at Berkeley, and then I would analyze some poems.

#### **A- Phillis Wheatley: Early and / or gifted child**

According to Sarah K. Horsley her age is estimated to be between seven and eight because she already began to lose her baby teeth before arriving in Boston (Horsley, n.d.). As the first teeth of the human species are usually lost during this age gap, the Wheatleys are quick to attribute this age range to her. They made her a servant in the house and the kitchen she was therefore free from the fields work and she lived in close contact with the Wheatley family comprising John the father, Susanna the mother, and their twin children, Mary and Nathaniel.

The young slave speaks the language spoken in her new environment very quickly in less than a year. The french pediatrician Jean-Paul Blanc theorizes that: « l'un des signes annonciateurs d'une précocité intellectuelle réside dans le langage. Un enfant précoce emploie très vite un vocabulaire riche, précis et des phrases bien construites, à la syntaxe déjà élaborée pour son âge » (Blanc, in <https://www.mpedia.fr/art-enfant-precoce-les-signes>) (One of the warning signs of intellectual precocity resides in language. A precocious child very quickly uses a rich, precise vocabulary and well-constructed sentences, with a syntax already developed for his age).

This hypothesis could easily be applied to the little girl, Phillis who acquires mastery of a foreign language in record time. Indeed, as far as Phillis is concerned, English language meets the three identification criteria that the linguist Jean-Pierre Cuq assigns to any foreign language whatsoever. The latter stipulates that: « Toute langue non maternelle est une langue étrangère. On peut alors distinguer trois degrés de xénité (ou d'étrangeté) : la distance matérielle ou géographique, [...]; la distance culturelle, [...] et la distance linguistique » (Cuq, 2003,150.) (Any non-mother tongue is a foreign language. We can then distinguish three degrees of xenity (or strangeness): material or geographical distance, [...]; cultural distance, [...] and linguistic distance).

The distance between Senegal or Gambia and the United States of America is very great; it requires crossing the Atlantic Ocean from east to west, as for culture or language the difference is like day and night. And yet this little girl was fluent in a foreign language from an early age to the point of learning how to read and to write. She loved to read the Bible, her master also taught her Greek and Latin so much so that her poems are full of allusions to the Holy Scriptures and to Greek and Latin mythology. Investigation journalist Esther Buitekant after her research on precocious or gifted children came to the conclusion that: « l'enfant va parler très tôt. Il va rapidement pouvoir mener des discussions et étonnera par ses capacités de raisonnement et la structuration de sa pensée » (Buitekant, <https://www.journaldesfemmes.fr/maman/guide-des-parents>). (The child will speak very early. He will quickly be able to lead discussions and will surprise people with his reasoning skills and the structuring of his thought.)

This is precisely the slave Phillis Wheatley's case to the point that she had to prove the authorship of her collection of poems in front of an assembly made up by eighteen (18) personalities from Boston including the Governor of the city and her teacher and owner, John Wheatley. A certificate which appears on page 06 of her publication was issued to her at the end of the verification exercise. (Wheatley: 1909, 6).

It should be noted that a terminological dispute has arisen over the name to be given to children who quickly retain what they are taught. Are they precocious or gifted? For Arielle Adda. « les enfants précoce ne sont pas tout à fait des enfants comme les autres mais comme les autres ce sont des enfants » (Adda, in Blog <http://les-tribulations-dun-petit-zebre.com/2020/03/13>) (precocious children are not quite children like the others, but like the others, they are children). The Larousse dictionary defines a precocious child as "un enfant dont la maturité, le développement intellectuel correspondent ordinairement à un âge supérieur au sien" (<http://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/français/précoce/63360>) (a child whose maturity and intellectual development usually correspond to that of an age superior to his own). Phillis Wheatley quickly learned how to speak the English language. This allowed her to quickly learn how to read and to write.

As Arielle Adda, quoted by Esther Buitekant, explains the gifted child works differently: « Il comprend plus vite, possède un champ d'action intellectuel plus large et son esprit va englober plus de notions en même temps » (Buitekant, <https://www.journaldesfemmes.fr/maman/guide-des-parents>) (She/he understands very quickly, acquires a wider intellectual field of action and his mind will encompass a lot of concepts at the same time.) Another notable feature is: speed. To illustrate her point, the specialist uses a very telling metaphor. Thanks to faster transmission from neuron to neuron in the brain, the precocious child is like a subway launched at full speed that would only stop at connections. She/he is also endowed with a highly developed critical mind. So much so that twelve years after her arrival in Boston in the United States, Phillis is the author of some forty poems dealing with very varied subjects, even if the Christian religion is her dominant subject, it also addresses Greco-Latin mythology and abstract subjects such as: virtue; humanity; imagination.

#### **B- Structure of the collection of poems**

The work of Phillis Wheatley I have chosen to study, is a collection of thirty-nine (39) poems that I have subdivided into five (05) articulations. Fourteen (14) funeral orations, ten (10) dedications, seven (07) poems explaining various concepts, five (05) praises to nature and to oneself, three (03) poems about the Bible and Greek mythology. Here is my five (05) split of the poems by Phillis Wheatley first published in 1773 in London and republished in 1909 at the University of California, Berkeley, by Richard R. Wright Jr. and Charlotte Crogman Wright. I will deal with the 1909 publication while quoting the poems.

1. Funeral Prayers : fourteen (14) poems
  - On the death of Rev. Dr. Sewell 1769
  - On the death of Rev. Mr. George Whitefield 1770
  - On the Death of a young Lady of five Years of Age
  - On the Death of a young Gentleman
  - To a Lady on the Death of her Husband
  - To a Lady on the Death of three Relations
  - To a Clergyman on the Death of his Lady
  - A Funeral Poem on the Death of C.E. an Infant aged twelve Months.
  - To a Lady and her children, on the death of her son and their brother
  - To a gentleman and a Lady on the Death of the Lady's Brother and Sister, and a Child of the Name of Avis, aged one Year
  - On the Death of Dr. Samuel Marshall, 1771
  - On the Death of J. C. an Infant
  - To the Hon. T. H. Esq; on the Death of his Daughter
  - To his Honor the Lieutenant-Governor, on the Death of his Lady March 24 177

**2. Dedications: ten (10) poems**

- To Maecenas
- To the University of Cambridge, in New England
- To the King's Most Excellent Majesty, 1768
- To Captain H. D. of the 65th Regiment
- To the Right Hon. William, Earl of Dartmouth, his majesty's secretary of state for north America, etc.
- To a Lady on her coming to North America with her Son, for the Recovery of her Health
- To a Lady on her remarkable Preservation in a Hurricane in North-Carolina
- To a Gentleman on his Voyage to Great-Britain, for the Recovery of his Health
- To the Rev. Dr. Thomas Amory on reading his Sermons on Daily Devotion, in which that Duty is recommended and assisted
- To S. M. a young African Painter, on seeing his Works.

**3. Hymns Odes Leisure: seven (07) poems**

- A Hymn to the Morning
- A Hymn to the Evening
- Ode to Neptune
- A Hymn to Humanity
- A Farewell to America
- A Rebus by I.B
- An Answer to I.B., by Phillis Wheatley

**4. Poems about concepts: five (05) poems**

- On Virtue
- On being brought from Africa
- Thoughts on the Works of Providence
- On Recollection
- On Imagination.

**5. Biblical Books and Mythology: three (03) poems**

- Goliath of Gath
- On Isaiah Ixiii. 1–8
- Niobe in Distress for her Children slain by Apollo, from Ovid's Metamorphoses, Book VI, and from a View of the Painting of Mr. Richard Wilson

When one realizes that Phillis first heard of the Bible or of Christendom when on American soil, one can see how acculturated she has become in record time. She adopted Christians' religion which she made her own. In her native Gambia or native Senegal her ancestors' religion was either the Muslim religion or the animist religion however, Phillis makes no allusion to his ancestors' belief in her poetic work. So she adopted her masters' faith and made it her own. I will try to prove this acculturation of the slave by her masters through the study of a few selected pieces of her poems.

### C- Analysis of the contents of some poems

One should have noticed that more than half of her book is devoted to funeral orations and dedications; we can read this attitude as a spirit of self-effacement, of humility. Nevertheless, a clarification is needed: out of the thirty-nine (39) poems, Phillis has written only thirty-eight. The poem entitled "A Rebus by J. B". (Wheatley: 1909, 86-87) was written by James Bowdoin, (<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view>). James Bowdoin is one of the eighteen (18) notables who verified whether Phillis was the author of her poetry or not. As its title suggests "a rebus" means a riddle in the English language, in fact this poem is a series of six riddles that the notable Bowdoin brings to Phillis' attention. The latter provides with ease the keys to James Bowdoin's enigmas in the poem entitled: "An answer to the rebus, by the author of these poems" (Wheatley, 1909, 87-88).

From the outset, James Bowdoin alludes to three codes in the first stanza of his poem, which are:

- A bird, delicious to the taste,
- On which an army once did feast
- Sent by an [sic] hand unseen;
- A creature of the horned race
- Which *Britain's* royal standard grace;
- A gem of vivid green; (Wheatley: 1909, 86, line 1-6)

Before decoding his first three riddles, Phillis, in a brief introduction of two lines, pays homage to the poet and identifies herself with a childish muse. In her reply she specifies that the bird to which James Bowdoin refers is a „*quail*” on which the Israelites fed during the crossing from Egypt to the Promised Land (Exodus 16. 13). As for "*A creature of the horned race*" it is a unicorn that appears in the coat of arms of Great Britain. ([https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armoiries\\_royales\\_du\\_Royaume-Uni](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armoiries_royales_du_Royaume-Uni)). The gemstone of green color is nothing other than "*Emerald*". Let us listen to her:

- The poet asks and *Phillis* can't refuse
- To show th' obedience of the Infant muse.
- She knows the *Quail* of most inviting taste
- Fed *Israel's* army in the dreary waste;
- And what's on *Britain's* royal standard borne,
- But the tall, graceful, rampant *Unicorn*?
- The *Emerald* with a vivid verdue glows
- Among the gems which regal crows compose; (Wheatley: 1909, 87-88 (line 1-8)

The second stanza of James Bowdoin's poem hides two secrets:

- A town of gaiety and sport
- Where beauteous nymphs resort
- And gallantry doth reign
- A *Dardan* hero famed of old
- For youth and beauty, as we're told.
- And by a monarch slain; (Wheatley: 1909, 87, line 7-12)

The first answer given by Phillis is the city of Boston which corresponds to all the characteristics suggested by the poet's rebus, for example "gaiety and sport" in line 7.

- *Boston's a town, polite and debonair"*
- *To which beaux and beauteous nymphs repair, (Wheatley: 1909, 88 (line 9-10)*

The key to the second riddle is prince Euphorbus of Troy according to Greek mythology. It should be noted that "*Dardan*" is synonymous with Trojan related to the city of Troy. Euphorbia was killed by Menelaus Helen's husband and the Greek king of Sparta. (<https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ménélas>). The latter is therefore the monarch who killed the hero of Troy. Phillis thus solved the second riddle of the second stanza.in the following words.

- *Each Helen strikes the mind with sweet surprise,*
- *While living lightning flashes from her eyes,*
- *See young Euphorbus of the Dardan line*
- *By Menelaus' hand to death resign; (Wheatley: 1909, 88, line 11-14)*

As for the last stanza James Bowdoin's poem, it goes as follows:

- *A peer of popular applause*
- *Who doth our violated laws,*
- *And grievances proclaim.*
- *Th' initials show a vanquished town,*
- *That adds fresh glory and renown*
- *To old *Britannia*'s fame. (Wheatley: 1909, 87, line 13-18)*

It contains a single riddle: Quebec, the new British territorial conquest, wrested from France after a harsh war called: "the Seven Years' War", and the signing in 1763 of a "Treaty of Paris (Vaugeois, <https://www.fondationlionelgroulx.org/Le -10-fevrier-1763-le-traite-de-html>)

- *The well known peer of popular applause*
- *Is C...m zealous to support our laws,*
- *Quebec now vanquish'd must obey*
- *She too must annual tribute pay*
- *To *Britain* of immortal fame.*
- *And add new glory to her name. (Wheatley, 1909, 88 line 15-20)*

The exact answers given by the poet, Phillis Wheatley are tangible proof of the extent of her book culture. She knows about Sacred Scripture: the allusion to quail; about History: description of the coat of arms of the United Kingdom and she has insight knowledge about the Treaty of Paris; she also knows about Geology: the description of the emerald; about Geography: the description of Boston the city where she lives; and as for Greek mythology: the underside of the Trojan War where a Trojan, Menelaus, kills another Trojan, Euphorbia.

Phillis can easily be compared to Pantagruel to whom Gargantua, his father, wants to give an encyclopedic knowledge so that he has "a well filled head" in other words an abyss of science or in French , "un abîme de science" ("La lettre de Gargantua à Pantagruel : le texte" in (<https://commentairecompose.fr/lettre-de-gargantua-a-pantagruel-texte>)). Phillis has awell filled head and she is comfortable in everything related to book knowledge.

Unfortunately, she has not referred to her native country in none of her poems. She even developed the syndrome of the oppressed who loves her oppressor, called Stockholm syndrome. Stockholm syndrome is a psychological response. As Kimberly Holland the "*Stockholm syndrome is a psychological response. It occurs when hostages or abuse victims bond with their captors or abusers'. [...]. With this syndrome, hostages or*

*abuse victims may come to sympathize with their captors. Over the course of time, some victims do come to develop positive feelings toward their captors. They may even begin to feel as if they share common goals and causes.*". (Kimberly Holland, <https://www.healthline.com/health/mental-health/Stockholm-syndrome>). This aspect of Wheatley's personality is easily read in her poem entitled: "On being brought from Africa" (Wheatley, 1909, 12).

Wheatley in this poem is grateful to have left her pagan land and to have known not only a God (the Whites' God) but also a savior. She denigrates her native land which has taught her neither the existence of a God nor the possibility for her to seek to be saved as it is the case in Boston in the United States. Nevertheless, she expresses a slight resentment about the daily experiences of black people in North America. White people think that the color of Blacks' skin is an evil hue. She uses an allegory where she compares the darkness of the Negroes to that of the fratricidal Cain. (Genesis, 4, 1-16). The latter, after killing Abel his brother, is said to have changed the color of his skin from white to black because God puts a curse on him.

In fact, according to Eva Mroczek „*nothing in the Bible suggests it [God's curse] is related to skin color, the motif that Cain was cursed with blackness – and that black people are cursed as well – was common from the 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century. [...] this interpretation of Cain's mark was deployed to justify the slave trade, and some religious denominations in America used it to support segregation and the exclusion of African Americans from church leadership*” (Mroczek, „Bible Odyssey“ in <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/443/people/related-articles/mark-of-cain>) This reinforces the idea that bad behaviors are the result of darkness not only of the mind but also of the body. Phillis Wheatley concludes by stating that Negroes can obtain the redemption promised by the Holy Scriptures to all Christians regardless the color of their skin.

### Conclusion

Phillis Wheatley did not get a good reception from contemporary critics of black American obedience. She was criticized for her excessive fascination with American culture and her lack of enthusiasm for fighting for the Blacks and for not appealing for the abolition of slavery. It is true that she was hardly treated as a slave; her master sometimes relieved her from domestic chores so that she could study books. After her emancipation, at the death of her master, she could do nothing with her freedom. She has only learned how to read and write but this does not nourish a human being and therefore does not allow a man or a woman to live decently. Phillis has found a job as a cook in a boarding school but she is not used to cooking. And she suffered a lot. She died in destitution and total indifference. Neither of her two children survived her. In fact, her first child died in infancy and the last one died on the same day as her and the two of them were buried in the same coffin. Nonetheless, Phillis Wheatley proved that when taught, Africans can acquire knowledge as quickly as possible.

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