

Phillis Wheatley, Amanuensis

The Literacy of Phillis Wheatley

It might seem counterintuitive to claim that *any* literacy of Phillis Wheatley is hidden. She is, after all, the eighteenth-century world's most famous Black woman who became literate despite her enslaved status. In many respects, we are familiar with this story. Stolen from her family in west Africa and forced through the transatlantic slave trade, Phillis Wheatley arrived as a girl in the Boston slave market in 1761.¹ Because she was beginning to lose her teeth, slave traders guessed that she was around seven years old. But as scholar Christina Sharpe reminds us, Phillis Wheatley was "never really a girl; at least not 'girl' in any way that operates as a meaningful signifier in Euro-Western cultures; no such persons recognizable as 'girl' being inspected, sold, and purchased at auction in the 'New World.'"² John Wheatley, a local merchant, bought this child and named her Phillis after the slave ship on which she had been imprisoned during the Middle Passage. He gave her to his wife, Susanna, who allowed Phillis to be educated alongside and by her teenage twins, Mary and Nathaniel. In Sharpe's words: "The Wheatleys made an experiment of her."³ Wheatley prodigiously acquired many types of literacies: she learned English and Latin, read the Bible and classical texts, and composed verse of heroic couplets and many letters to a wide variety of New Englanders. Most visibly, she wrote and published *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in the fall of 1773.

Many white readers doubted not only that Africans could learn to read or write but also that Wheatley herself could have developed the literacy skills to publish such highly stylized poetic forms, in a second language, so quickly. They assumed she must have had an inordinate amount of help. They assumed someone collaborated with her on her works. Wheatley

anticipated this. After London publishers initially turned down her manuscript because they could not believe it was written by a “Negro,” Wheatley, likely herself, drew up or had drawn up the famous “Attestation” that prefaces her book of poetry.⁴ Signed in October 1772 by eighteen of Boston’s most influential public men, the “Attestation” reads in part: “As it has been repeatedly suggested to the Publisher, by Persons, who have seen the Manuscript, that Numbers would be ready to suspect they were not really the Writings of PHILLIS, he has procured the following Attestation, from the most respectable Characters in *Boston*, that none might have the least Ground for disputing their *Original*. // 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.”⁵ Further, on July 3, 1773, an unattributed note to the “Printer” of the *London Chronicle* reads: “Sir, You have no doubt heard of Phillis the extraordinary negro girl here, who has *by her own application, unassisted by others*, cultivated her natural talents for poetry in such a manner as to write several pieces which (all circumstances considered) have great merit” (emphasis added).⁶ Or, in another way to put it, as an advertisement in *The London Chronicle* and *The Morning Post and Daily Advertiser* states: Wheatley’s book “displays perhaps one of the greatest instances of pure, unassisted genius, that the world ever produced.”⁷ Phillis Wheatley, the attestation, the note, and the ad insist, really wrote the poems and really wrote them *alone*.

But *this* letter—from Susanna Wheatley to Mohegan minister Samson Occom—suggests that Phillis Wheatley did *not* always write alone. Indeed, hidden within this letter is a writing skill Wheatley likely performed in being a scribe, serving as an amanuensis for Susanna, who,

though literate, was too ill to inscribe her letter to Occom herself and dictated to Wheatley instead.⁸ Certainly, this specific co-labor is not the same kind of collaboration that has worried Wheatley readers and scholars for almost 250 years. Instead, this literacy has remained hidden, in plain sight, almost never commented upon by scholars. But considering this hidden literacy—the labor that Phillis probably contributed as an amanuensis to the production of this letter from Susanna—might help us reconceive the suspected collaboration between Susanna and Phillis that some readers conjectured went into the publication of *Poems on Various Subjects*. In addition, attending to this hidden literacy has the potential not only to give us another way to understand Phillis Wheatley but also to change the way we think about early African American literature.

Letters from Susanna and Phillis Wheatley to Samson Occom

The March 29, 1773, letter from Susanna Wheatley to Samson Occom was one of many they exchanged, as Susanna was part of a network of evangelical patrons who supported Occom’s ministerial work. This is in addition to the several letters Phillis and Occom exchanged themselves—one, in 1765, no longer extant, that the letter signed by John Wheatley to Archibald Bell mentions, itself published just before the “Attestation” in *Poems* as proof of how Phillis’s “own curiosity led her to [writing]” and, apparently, that Phillis inscribed herself;⁹ and another, in 1774, in which Wheatley famously denounced slavery and that was printed in more than ten colonial newspapers.¹⁰ This 1773 letter from Susanna to Occom falls between those two letters from Wheatley, and, at first, seems to have nothing to do with her. Susanna opens by assuring Occom she has received two of his letters and details how she’ll ask a Dr. Downes to carry her letter and to forward it to Occom. She relates that Mr. Wheatley remains largely bedridden from a falling accident and that she herself is “very weak and low.” She requests Occom’s prayers for herself, John Wheatley, and especially Nathaniel—for whom, she conjectures, after her death,

Occom will be “the only praying friend he will have left.” Unlike these several others living in the Wheatley household, Phillis Wheatley is referred to only indirectly in Susanna’s letter.

Phillis’ Emergence from Behind the Letters

But despite this, the letter actually has *everything* to do with Wheatley. Though Susanna does not mention it, Occom likely would have known Wheatley was serving as an amanuensis for this letter because, as a recipient of letters from both Susanna and Phillis, he could have recognized Phillis’s handwriting; he also probably would have surmised that Wheatley was acting as an amanuensis because Susanna was ill. In addition, this letter quotes another letter that addresses the publication of Wheatley’s *Poems*. The second, quoted letter is to Susanna from Captain Robert Calef, whom the Wheatleys employed to sail their merchant ship, the *London Packet*. Also, on the Wheatleys’ behalf, Calef negotiated with London printer Archibald Bell to publish Phillis’s work and to solicit the Countess of Huntingdon, a prominent sponsor of both religious causes and transatlantic Black writers, to allow the book to be dedicated to her. The letter to Occom notes that “The following is an Extract from Capt Calef’s Letter dated Jany 5,” and then quotes it directly—suggesting that either Susanna read Calef’s letter aloud to Phillis or that Phillis copied Calef’s letter directly into Susanna’s letter to Occom. The quotation from Calef’s letter reads:

Mr. Bell ^(the printer) acquaints me that about 5 weeks ago he waited upon the Countess of Huntingdon with the Poems, who was greatly pleas’d with them, and pray’d him to Read them, and often would break in upon him and say, “is not this, or that, very fine? do read another.” and then expres’d herself she found her heart to knit with her and Questiond him much, whether she was Real with out a deception? He then Convinc’d her by bringing my name [Calef] in question. She is expected in Town in a short time when we [Calef

and Bell] are both to wait upon her. I had like to forgot to mention to you She is fond of having the Book Dedicated to her; but one thing she desir'd which she said she hardly tho't would be denied her, what was to have Phillis' picture in the frontispiece. So that, if you ~~can~~ ^{would} get it done it can be Engrav'd here. I do imagine it can be easily done, and think would contribute greatly to the Sale of the Book. I am impatient to hear what the Old Countess says upon the Occasion & shall take the Earliest Oppy of waiting upon her when she comes to Town.

Susanna never mentions Wheatley directly, only replicating Calef's letter's pronouns—"she" and "her," without any named antecedent—and its allusion to "Phillis' picture." Susanna likely writes Occom about Wheatley's poems because they had corresponded about her in the past, because Occom also knew Phillis, and perhaps because Occom had already expressed interest in selling *Poems* once it was published, as he would indeed eventually do, and this excerpt spoke directly to "the Sale of the Book."¹¹ (And, as Wheatley scholars know, Wheatley did agree to have her picture drawn, presumably by Scipio Moorhead, an enslaved artist in Boston, and engraved in London, and the image that would become the famous Wheatley frontispiece of *Poems* also graces the Hidden Literacies website.)

The Hiddenness of Collaboration

Thus, as we can now appreciate, this is likely a collaboratively produced letter that documents the collaborative labor that produced *Poems on Various Subjects*. Susanna and Wheatley's probable collaboration on this letter to Occom—a letter that itself records the many collaborations that went into *Poems*—has remained a largely hidden literacy, which is both striking and absolutely to be expected. Readers and scholars have commented on labors many others put into *Poems*—Susanna as enslaver patron and publicist, Calef as agent, Bell as printer,

Huntingdon as dedicatee and *de facto* endorser, Moorhead as illustrator, and Occom as bookseller—but overlooked Phillis’s probable labor in writing the letter that lists these other forms of labor. And this is not even to mention Obour Tanner, a literate Black woman who was Wheatley’s dear friend and correspondent, who circulated Wheatley’s book proposals and later sold her books; the white Bostonian women who suggested topical content and requested elegies;¹² and, the collaboration most worried over by Wheatley scholars, that of Susanna or someone else whose direct writing on Wheatley’s manuscript, according to an 1850 note from Philadelphian Edward Ingraham tucked into a first edition of *Poems* at the Library of Congress, resembles “an elaboration of them by some one other than Phillis herself.” Ingraham states he had “the originals of many of Phillis Wheatley’s Poems” and “compared them with those in this copy—many differences were found, and the style and spelling had been corrected by someone.” This, to my mind, sounds an awful lot like copyediting, an essential step inherent to the publication process where a copyeditor or other trusted interlocutor suggests revisions to one’s manuscript for clarity, precision, and style.¹³

The Need to See Phillis the Amanuensis

But it is Phillis Wheatley’s potential work as an amanuensis, I argue, that we so desperately *need to see*. For if we see her work as a scribe, we can imagine her in the room with Susanna, inscribing her words on the page. We might wonder how the bed and desk were arranged, whether Phillis was facing or had her back to the dictating Susanna. Perhaps Phillis copied the above quote directly from Calef’s letter into this one, or perhaps Susanna read it aloud. Perhaps Wheatley silently, without a single comment, in one smooth flow, copied Susanna’s every word; perhaps they had to stop and start several times over, for Susanna to cough or to rest; perhaps Wheatley suggested to her what to write; perhaps she prompted her or

perhaps she suggested entire sentences—paragraphs even—to which Susanna consented.

Perhaps Wheatley resented the fact that Susanna did not name her, ask for Occom to pray for her, or speak of her directly at all; or, maybe Susanna assumed that Wheatley was also writing Occom herself and left the updating *about Phillis to Phillis*. Perhaps Wheatley did not care at all, either because she *was* writing Occom around this time; because she knew Occom could recognize her handwriting, her success in her poetry moving so quickly to publication, and her very real involvement in the letter—without Susanna having to say so; or because of some other reason we can't even fathom. Because the fact of the matter is that we may never know the answer to these or many more questions. We can never fully get back to this or any other scene of composition to know who exactly contributed what, what any given contribution meant to the person who contributed it, and what any given contribution was intended to mean. But what we can see now, more clearly, is Phillis Wheatley's likely labor as an amanuensis.

And recognizing the potential of Phillis Wheatley's collaborative work as an amanuensis—one of the kinds of collaboration that, as book historians have it, characterize the production of *every single printed text*, what Jerome McGann calls “the collaborative or social nature of literary production”¹⁴—allows us to look at collaborative labor that went into or might have gone into *Poems* differently. Maybe we could see suggestions from Mary, Susanna, or the other white Bostonian women who heard, copied, and circulated her poetry as feedback to Wheatley; the markings on her manuscript pages as a form of copy-editing or of a printer's work to prepare the manuscript for print publication; or the steps that Susanna or Calef took to facilitate publication of *Poems* as the work of a book agent that many writers use. In other words, maybe if we can see and recognize Wheatley's likely collaborative labor that produced this letter, we can also see and recognize the collaborative labor that may have produced *Poems*

as the kind of collaboration that is similar to the collaboration that goes into all texts and, simultaneously, dissimilar because of the racialized power dynamic particular to it. But, *crucially*, we should *not* think of it as a kind of collaboration that would somehow de-authenticate Wheatley, her poetry, or her poetic abilities. Maybe we can stop holding early African American writers—many of whom dictated to amanuenses for a variety of reasons, and all of whom necessarily engaged in quotidian collaborative practices inherent to all textual production but specifically fraught because of the racialized context—to the impossibly pure standard of “the Author,” the single and lone genius who produces original, great art in utter, autonomous solitude—a fantasy the field of literary studies threw out long ago. Maybe we can see them—all of them, whether they use an amanuensis or not, work with a white editor or not, publish with an anti-slavery society or not, distribute their books through trade house channels or not—as individuals working strategically within necessarily collaborative, necessarily racially complex, writing and publication processes. We could see how they produced texts within the context of—and in spite of—the violence of chattel slavery, white supremacy, and intense racism. Instead of seeing less of what they have done, I think, in seeing collaboration, we will see so much more—more of what they have done and more of the complicated conditions under which they did it. Indeed, this will allow us to see *so much more* about early African American literature, I argue, and it will allow us to see Phillis Wheatley, Poet, *and* Phillis Wheatley, Amanuensis.

¹ Vincent Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: A Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

² Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 52-53.

³ Sharpe, *Wake*, 43.

⁴ Joanna Brooks, “Our Phillis, Ourselves,” *American Literature* 82.1 (March 2010), 6. “Negro” is the language of Boston merchant John Andrews. For more on the publication of Poems, see also Mukhtar Ali Isani, “The First Proposed Edition of *Poems on Various Subjects* and the Phillis Wheatley Canon,” *American Literature* 49.1 (March 1977), 97-103; and Carretta, *Biography*, 91-105.

⁵ Phillis Wheatley, *Complete Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 8.

⁶ “To the Printer of the London Chronicle,” note appended to publication of “Farewell to America,” July 3, 1773, *London Chronicle*, 13.

⁷ Quoted in Wheatley, *Complete Writings*, xviii. Sept, 11, 1773.

⁸ Julian D. Mason, Jr., notes this in a subordinate clause: “The letter, which appears to be in Phillis’s hand, indicates that she [Phillis] was not the only one with physical problems.” Mason, “Introduction,” The Poems of Phillis Wheatley, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 6. Mason includes the entire letter in his “Introduction” and “believe[s] this is the first time that this letter has been published in full” (7). William Robinson claims that Phillis served as a scribe for Nathaniel Wheatley on at least two occasions: for a 2 January 1770 letter to Eleazar Wheelock (linked below), and for a 12 November 1770 letter to William Channing. See Robinson, Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1984), 14, 305, and 307. Vincent Carretta expresses doubt about distinguishing Phillis’s handwriting from that of Nathaniel and, thus, about Robinson’s claim (Biography, 40-41). For more on Phillis’s education, see Biography, 37-41. On her handwriting in general, see Complete Writings, 195-196. Building on Mason, I feel strongly that Phillis Wheatley served as an amanuensis for this letter. Mary married in 1771; the letter itself indicates that Mr. Wheatley was also quite ill. I find it unlikely that Nathaniel served as a scribe for this letter, given what Susanna says about him (discussed below). Further, Phillis was known to sit at Susanna’s bedside and was there when she died (Biography 143-44). Lastly, comparison among the following letters demonstrates similarity in handwriting between the 29 March letter and those known to be written by Phillis, in contrast to that known to be written by Susanna. See Susanna Wheatley to Samson Occom and Nathaniel Whitaker, 1765, <https://collections.dartmouth.edu/occom/html/diplomatic/765681-2-diplomatic.html>; Phillis Wheatley to Obour Tanner, 1772, https://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=773&mode=large&img_step=1&&br=1; Phillis Wheatley to David Wooster, 1773,

https://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=771&mode=large&img_step=1&&br=1; and Phillis Wheatley to Samuel Hopkins, 1774, <http://www.bostonliteraryhistory.com/chapter-2/phillis-wheatley-1753-1784-reverend-samuel-hopkins-1721-1803.html>. The letter Robinson claims to be transcribed by Phillis for Nathaniel is from Nathaniel Wheatley to Eleazar Wheelock, 1770, <https://collections.dartmouth.edu/occom/html/diplomatic/770102-diplomatic.html>.

⁹ Addressing William Legge, Earl of Dartmouth, from New York on 24 March 1772, Englishman Thomas Wooldridge writes that

While in Boston, I heard of a very Extraordinary female Slave, who had made some verses on our mutually Dear deceased friend [Reverend George Whitefield]; 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 acquainted with. She immediately wrote a rough Copy of the inclosed address & letter, which I promised to convey or delivery. I was astonish'd, and could hardly believe my own Eyes. I was present while she wrote, and can attest that it is her own production; she shew'd me her letter to Lady Huntingdon, which I daresay 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*. (Rpt. in Critical Essays on Phillis Wheatley, ed. William H. Robinson [Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1982], 20-21, emphasis added.)

James A. Rawley notes that the statement of “biographical details about Phillis” signed by Nathaniel “is substantially the same as one signed by John a month later, and published as a

preface to the volume of poems” (“The World of Phillis Wheatley,” *New England Quarterly* 50.4 [Dec. 1977], 670). The 12 October 1772 biographical sketch signed by Nathaniel Wheatley ends: “This account is given by Her Mistress who bought her, and with whom she now Lives” (facsimile copy, Robinson, *Writings*, 403); the 14 November 1772 biographical sketch signed by John Wheatley and printed in *Poems* ends: “This Relation is given by her Master who bought her, and with whom she now lives” (*Complete Writings*, 7. Brooks notes, “Just as she had drawn up her own biographical account to be signed by Nathaniel Wheatley, it is likely that Phillis Wheatley also drew up an attestation (or, as [John] Andrews describes it, had one ‘drawn up’) ...” (*Our Phillis*, 6). Carretta claims that “The ‘Account’ Wooldridge mentions was actually dictated by Nathaniel, not John, Wheatley to Phillis. It became the basis of the first two paragraphs of the statement attributed to John Wheatley that prefaces Phillis’s *Poems* published in 1773,” (131). Robinson claims that “When Thomas Wooldridge had visited the Wheatley household in the fall of 1772, to see for himself the much discussed slave poet, Phillis had written, before his very eyes, a poem and covering letter to Dartmouth, and a brief biographical sketch of herself signed for Nathaniel Wheatley, whose name is undersigned with the date ‘Oct. 12th 1772.’ Mrs. Wheatley then had Phillis revise and slightly expand this sketch by adding a few flattering details and by having this version signed ‘John Wheatley./ Boston, Nov. 14, 1772.’ Phillis also prepared a traditional preface, singularized by her clever inclusion of a reminder to her readers that she was a slave ...” (*Writings*, 30-31). Robinson reproduces a facsimile copy of the biographical sketch sent to Dartmouth in *Writings*, 403, where he claims in a footnote that “In the handwriting of Phillis Wheatley, this biographical sketch was dictated by Mrs. Susanna Wheatley and signed for Nathaniel Wheatley—as the male head of the household (John Wheatley had retired the previous year), and was delivered by Thomas Wooldridge to Lord

Dartmouth, along with Phillis's poem, and a covering letter. Phillis would revise this sketch, sign John Wheatley's name to it, date it November 4, 1772, and have this version added to the prefatory materials for the volume of poems published in London in September of 1773 and to subsequent reprinted editions" (403). See also Muhktar Ali Isani, "Early Versions of Some Works by Phillis Wheatley," *Early American Literature* 14.2 (Fall 1979), 149-55.

¹⁰ Phillis Wheatley, *Complete Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 7; 152.

¹¹ *New-London Gazette* July 17, 1774. On Oocom selling books, see Round, *Removable*, 62.

¹² Brooks, *Our Phillis*, 8-10.

¹³ Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London: A. Bell, 1773). Library of Congress, PS866 .W5 1773.

¹⁴ Jerome McGann, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 125.