

PHILLIS WHEATLEY



FRONTISPIECE FROM THE
ORIGINAL EDITION OF THE POEMS

(See p. 100 for more information)

Phillis Wheatley

POEMS ON VARIOUS SUBJECTS,
RELIGIOUS AND MORAL

AND

A MEMOIR OF
PHILLIS WHEATLEY,
A NATIVE AFRICAN
AND A SLAVE



RENARD PRESS

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Kemp House
152–160 City Road
London EC1V 2NX
United Kingdom
info@renardpress.com
020 8050 2928

www.renardpress.com

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PHILLIS WHEATLEY

*Poems on Various Subjects,
Religious and Moral*

and

*A Memoir of Phillis Wheatley,
a Native African and a Slave*

TO THE PUBLIC

In 1761, a slave ship called *The Phillis* docked at Boston harbour, having made a slow and tortuous journey from West Africa to the British colony of Massachusetts. On this boat was a seven-year-old girl, who was sold to the well-to-do Wheatley family in Boston; the family's slaves were growing old, and they wanted a young domestic slave to keep them company in their dotage. Thus Phillis Wheatley was born – renamed after the ship which tore her from her family and the family whose property she became.

Phillis was adored by the family – Susanna Wheatley, in particular – and they helped her to learn English and allowed her to study the classics. Just like Terence, the Roman playwright she writes of, Phillis was brought as a slave to a strange city far from home, and showed such a natural aptitude for language that her owners granted her her freedom.

As related in the 1834 memoir republished in this volume, by Benjamin Bussey Thatcher (1809–40), an outspoken proponent of antislavery, the road to publication was not straight, and early biographers point out that much of Phillis' poetry may be unknown, since she had such an appetite for writing that she would even do so with chalk on the Wheatleys' walls, not having the paper to commit her words to. Once

her talent became known and the Wheatleys began to encourage her writing, she was met with real disbelief.

In 1772, she was interrogated by a panel and forced to defend the ownership of her own words, since many believed that it was an impossible that she, an African-American slave, could write poetry of such high quality. This view was so prevalent, so acceptable, that the first publisher prefaced the volume of poetry with an ‘attestation from the most respectable characters in Boston, that none might have the least ground for disputing’ their authorship.

In publishing this volume in 2020, moving the attestation of authorship to the end of the book, along with the ‘letter from her master’ and condescending note from the original publishers of the memoir and the poems, it is this Publisher’s fervent hope that the twenty-first-century reader can discover Phillis Wheatley as she should always have been read – as a poet, not property.

– RENARD PRESS, 2020

POEMS ON VARIOUS SUBJECTS,
RELIGIOUS AND MORAL

TO THE RIGHT HONOURABLE THE
COUNTESS OF HUNTINGDON,
THE FOLLOWING
POEMS
ARE MOST RESPECTFULLY INSCRIBED
BY HER MUCH OBLIGED,
VERY HUMBLE
AND DEVOTED SERVANT,
PHILLIS WHEATLEY

TO MAECENAS *

Maecenas, you, beneath the myrtle shade,
Read o'er what poets sung and shepherds play'd.
What felt those poets but you feel the same?
Does not your soul possess the sacred flame?
Their noble strains your equal genius shares
In softer language and diviner airs.

While Homer paints, lo! circumfus'd in air,
Celestial Gods in mortal forms appear;
Swift as they move hear each recess rebound,
Heav'n quakes, earth trembles and the shores resound. 10
Great sire of verse, before my mortal eyes,
The lightnings blaze across the vaulted skies,
And, as the thunder shakes the heav'nly plains,
A deep-felt horror thrills through all my veins.
When gentler strains demand thy graceful song,
The length'ning line moves languishing along.
When great Patroclus courts Achilles' aid,*
The grateful tribute of my tears is paid;
Prone on the shore he feels the pangs of love,
And stern Pelides'* tend'rest passions move. 20

Great Maro's strain in heav'nly numbers flows,
The nine* inspire, and all the bosom glows.*
O could I rival thine and Virgil's page,
Or claim the muses with the Mantuan sage;*
Soon the same beauties should my mind adorn,
And the same ardours in my soul should burn:
Then should my song in bolder notes arise,

And all my numbers pleasingly surprise;
 But here I sit, and mourn a grov'ling mind,
 That fain would mount, and ride upon the wind. 30

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 Terence¹ 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; 40
 From age to age transmitting thus his name
 With the finest glory in the rolls of fame?

Thy virtues, great Maecenas, shall be sung
 In praise of him, from whom those virtues sprung;
 While blooming wreaths around thy temples spread,
 I'll snatch a laurel from thine honour'd head,
 While you indulgent smile upon the deed.

As long as Thames in streams majestic flows,
 Or naiads in their oozy beds repose,*
 While Phoebus* reigns above the starry train, 50
 While bright Aurora* purples o'er the main,
 So long, great sir, the muse thy praise shall sing,
 So long thy praise shall make Parnassus* ring –
 Then grant, Maecenas, thy paternal rays;
 Hear me propitious, and defend my lays.

¹ He was an African by birth.

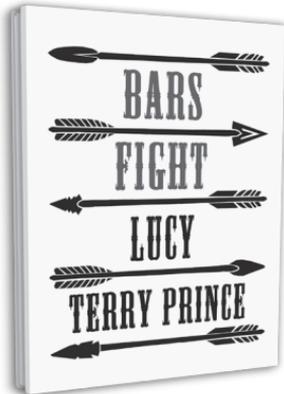
ON VIRTUE

O thou bright jewel, in my aim I strive
To comprehend thee. Thine own words declare
Wisdom is higher than a fool can reach.
I cease to wonder, and no more attempt
Thine height t'explore, or fathom thy profound.
But, O my soul, sink not into despair;
Virtue is near thee, and with gentle hand
Would now embrace thee – hovers o'er thine head.
Fain would the heav'n-born soul with her converse,
Then seek, then court her for her promis'd bliss.

Auspicious queen, thine heav'nly pinions spread,
And lead celestial Chastity along;
Lo! now her sacred retinue descends,
Array'd in glory from the orbs above.
Attend me, Virtue, thro' my youthful years!
O leave me not to the false joys of time,
But guide my steps to endless life and bliss.
Greatness, or Goodness, say what I shall call thee,
To give me a higher appellation still,
Teach me a better strain, a nobler lay,
O thou, enthron'd with cherubs in the realms of day.



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