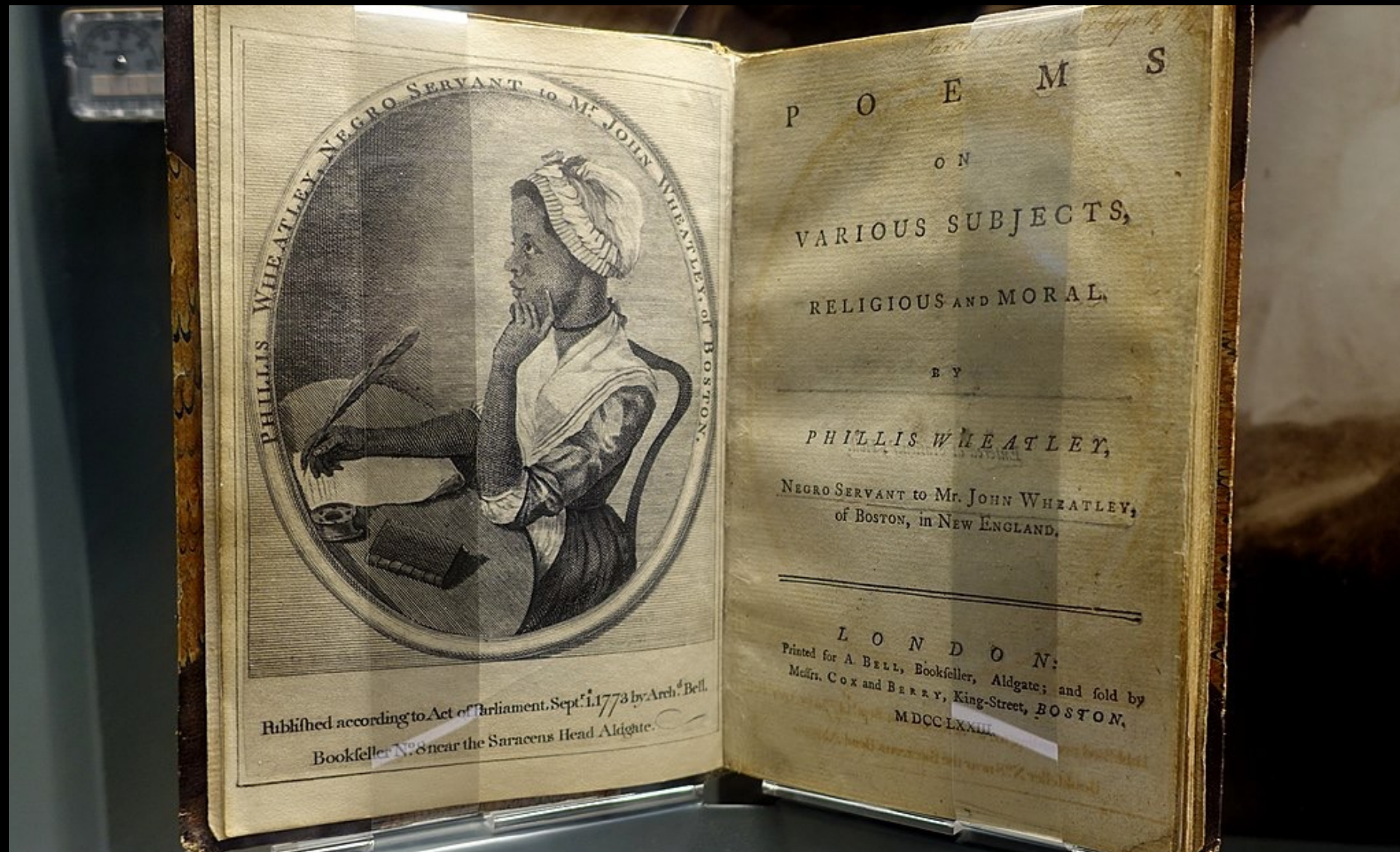


Janelle Poe

BLST 10100 F20 - CCNY

Individual Presentation

Phillis Wheatley: Away With Words



Phillis Wheatley

Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral (1773)

image: Daderot 1773

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Poems_on_Various_Subjects,_Religious_and_Moral,_by_Phillis_Wheatley,_1773_-_Old_South_Meeting_House_-_Boston,_MA_-_DSC05815.jpg

Phillis Wheatley

- Biographical details
 - 1753- 1784
 - Born in Senegambia, West Africa
 - House/domestic slave, taught to read & write
 - Published in UK - patron
 - Disputes about her abilities/legal case to affirm/verify her publication (1772)
 - Traveled to British court to defend her work
 - Middle Passage, enslaved at 7 years old
 - 1st African-American to publish a book of poetry, published in UK
 - Christian



On Being Brought from Africa to America

BY PHILLIS WHEATLEY

'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.

Phillis Wheatley

"On Being Brought From Africa to America"

image:screenshot of Phillis Wheatley, "On Being Brought from Africa to America" Poetry Foundation accessed 09.14.20

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45465/on-being-brought-from-africa-to-america>

“On Being Brought From Africa To America”

- Genre: 8 line poem, rhyming couplets, English
- Tone
 - High diction
 - biblical allusions that demonstrate sophisticated understanding of “cursed” racial lineage/religious argument justifying slavery and racial discrimination,
 - Christian lexicon (vocab/word choice)
- Argument: Sees Middle Passage and Transatlantic slave trade as a Spiritual rescue from God, however, criticizes Euro-Am. Christian hypocrisy in racist actions, establishes equality of Christian blacks with whites and access to heaven.
- Audience: Directed towards Euro Christians, also “Negros” who may not trust in Christianity
- Problematic because of lack of condemnation for slavery and negative connotation for African roots and culture, esp. religious
 - “’Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land” (auth. emphasis) (1)
 - “Benighted” - overtaken by darkness/poverty (2)
 - “redemption” and exposure to Christianity viewed as most important discovery/revelation in “America”
- Interesting placement in text as it demonstrates “Black thought” of the time as **INTEGRATIONIST**, looking to separate oneself from African roots and be accepted on colonial terms; does not directly address slavery but uses Christianity as basis of equality.
- Refuted by white audience who don’t believe she’s/Black people are capable of writing such “refin’d” work.

- Major shift between first half and second half of poem
- Racial critique of Euro-Americans, specifically Christians
 - “Some view our sable race with scornful eye, / ‘Their color is a diabolic die’ (5-6)
 - Does not condemn all whites (“Some”)
 - Provocative and potentially sarcastic use of lexicon
 - “sable” related to animals, but used in positive, powerful way (dark/rich)
 - “diabolic die” - condemned to spiritual and physical death because of color, but die vs. dye; questioning permanence? (skin color and spiritual judgement)
 - “Remember, Christians, Negros, Black as Cain” (7)
 - interesting use of punctuation/word play
 - potentially expanding address beyond white Christians to specifically include Negros, while simultaneously drawing attention to “Negros [who are seen as], Black as Cain”
 - Biblical allusion to Cain and Abel, cursed son who murders his brother.
 - “Black” as color or type of soul/character (beyond “race”)
 - “May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train” (8)
 - Reminder that “refinement” is accessible to blacks, as is heaven.
 - Unclear whether refinement is specifically religious, or cultural
 - imagery of processional and direct connection between earthly and heavenly existence

- Key Terms:
 - **Pagan** - Non-Christian; negative or evil connotation (Wheatley, “On Being Brought From Africa to America” 1)
 - **Benighted** - Ignorant; connection to darkness/blackness (Wheatley, “On Being Brought From Africa to America” 2)
 - **Redemption** - returned/b(r)ought back; saved from sin in Christian theology (Wheatley, “On Being Brought From Africa to America” 4)
 - **Sable** - black in color with rich, smooth or luxurious texture; connection to animals (Wheatley, “On Being Brought From Africa to America” 5)
 - **Diabolic** - evil/devilish; Christian terminology with extremely negative connotations (Wheatley, “On Being Brought From Africa to America” 6)
 - **Refin’d** - “refined” (abbreviation/contraction); polished and elevated; related to class/wealth, cleanliness and worth (physical and spiritual) (Wheatley, “On Being Brought From Africa to America” 8)