

Old-School

Season 1, Episode 1

“A Letter to Phillis Wheatley” Part I

Chi: Poets are always shouting out to Phillis Wheatley. There’s Robert Hayden’s “A Letter from Phillis Wheatley, London 1773.”

Chad: And Honorée Fanonne Jeffers’ entire book, *The Age of Phillis*.

Chi: Plus all the people slapping her name on stuff other than poems! Like Phillis Wheatley Hall at UMass Boston. Or the nineteenth-century Phillis Wheatley Women’s Clubs.

Chad: My favorite one of these involves Marcus Garvey, the Black nationalist at the head of the Back to Africa Movement. He was charged with mail fraud in 1922 because he put a fictional ship on an ad for his Black Star Line shipping company. So, like, picture a really dark, grainy photo of a ship—you can’t tell this from the ad, obviously, but it was a German ship called the SS Orion, it belonged to someone else entirely—and then he just sort of photoshopped a new name on the bow. And this fictional new name was the SS Phyllis Wheatley.

Chi: So who is this mysterious Phillis Wheatley person? What did she think? What did she feel? Does she tell us in her poems and her letters? Or do we need the imaginative work of these other poems about her—and halls and ships—to understand what she means to Black intellectual and artistic traditions?

Chad: Stay tuned and find out.

[intro music: “Who Dat” by Amber Spill]

Chi: Welcome to Old-School, a podcast about Black Studies and the classics. I’m your host, Chiyuma Elliott.

Chad: And I’m your other host, Chad Hegelmeyer.

Chi: African American writers have been embracing and rejecting the classics since 1773.

Chad: We honor that history by telling both of those stories.

Chi: First up on our first ever episode of Old-School: A story about Phillis Wheatley.

Chad: Coming up, we're going to hear one of those poems we just mentioned: Robert Hayden's "A Letter from Phillis Wheatley, London 1773."

Chi: And then we're going to talk about some of the ways the classics mattered in Wheatley's work.

Chad: We're not going to tell you the whole plan. There will be some surprises along the way.

Chi: So buckle in folks! We're going *all the way back* to Revolutionary era America today.

Chad: And antiquity!

Chi: Serious old school. With America's first Black female poet.

Chi: Before we jump into the poem, Chad, maybe tell our listeners who Wheatley was. Give us..give us three facts about her.

Chad: Oh yeah, OK, good idea. So, if I can only choose three, I guess I'll go with these...

[*"Who Brought the Funk"* by Chronillogical]

Fact #1: We think she was born in 1753 somewhere in West Africa and she's kidnapped and brought to Boston when she's 7 or 8.

Fact #2: In 1761, the white Wheatley family buys her and names her after the ship on which she survived the middle passage.

Fact #3: The Wheatley kids—Mary and Nathaniel—teach Phillis to read. And she just has this immediate aptitude for language and literature. She starts writing poetry and gets her first poem published at the age of twelve in the *Newport Mercury* newspaper on December 21, 1767.

Chi: That is way more than three facts, Chad! [laughing]

Chad: [laughing] I know, I know. But there's so much to say about her!

Chi: Okay, so do you want to share some more Phillis Wheatley facts?

Chad: Just one more! And this fact kind of sets up Hayden's poem anyway. So, Fact #4: Wheatley can't find an American publisher for her first book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. So, in 1773, she travels to England with Nathaniel Wheatley looking for a British publisher. And she finds one, thanks to the support of the Countess of Huntingdon, to whom she dedicates the book. That trip is the occasion of Robert Hayden's poem.

Chi: Ok, with that, Here is Robert Hayden reading his Wheatley poem in 1968.

Robert Hayden: "So here is Phillis Wheatley writing to her friend, Obour Tanner, a freewoman who lived in Boston who was a close friend of Phillis:"

"A Letter from Phillis Wheatley, London 1773"

Dear Obour

Our crossing was without
event. I could not help, at times,
reflecting on that first—my Destined—
voyage long ago (I yet
have some remembrance of its Horrors)
and marvelling at God's Ways.

Last evening, her Ladyship presented me
to her illustrious Friends.

I scarce could tell them anything
of Africa, though much of Boston
and my hope of Heaven. I read
my latest Elegies to them.

'O Sable Muse!' the Countess cried,
embracing me, when I had done.
I held back tears, as is my wont,
and there were tears in Dear
Nathaniel's eyes.

At supper—I dined apart
like captive Royalty—
the Countess and her Guests promised
signatures affirming me
True Poetess, albeit once a slave.

Indeed, they were most kind, and spoke,
moreover, of presenting me
at Court (I thought of Pocahontas)—
an Honor, to be sure, but one,
I should, no doubt, as Patriot decline.

My health is much improved;
I feel I may, if God so Wills,
entirely recover here.
Idyllic England! Alas, there is
no Eden without its Serpent. Under
the chiming Complaisance I hear him Hiss;
I see his flickering tongue
when foppish would-be Wits
murmur of the Yankee Pedlar
and his Cannibal Mockingbird.

Sister, forgive th'intrusion of
my Sombreness—Nocturnal Mood
I would not share with any save
your trusted Self. Let me disperse,
in closing, such unseemly Gloom
by mention of an Incident
you may, as I, consider Droll:
Today a little Chimney Sweep,
his face and hands with soot quite Black,
staring hard at me, politely asked:
'Does you, M'lady, sweep chimney's too?' [audience chuckles]
I was amused, but dear Nathaniel
(ever Solicitous) was not.

I pray the Blessing of our Lord
and Saviour Jesus Christ be yours
Abundantly. In His Name,

Phillis

[applause]

[Source: Hayden, Robert, Archive Of Recorded Poetry And Literature, and
Gertrude Clarke Whittall Poetry And Literature Fund. Robert Hayden reading his
poems with comment in the Coolidge Auditorium, Oct. 5. 1976. Audio.
<https://www.loc.gov/item/96707024/>.]

Chi: I love the friendship in this poem. It stays mysterious, but it's also where we learn a lot about the speaker's feelings (which she's really understated about).

Chad: Yeah, she apologizes to Obour for letting things get dark, for the "nocturnal mood" that she wouldn't share with anyone else. That's so interesting.

Chi: And she's totally justified in feeling that way! In the poem, she experiences a bunch of what my students would call racial microaggressions. I think the ending of the poem is heartbreaking because she makes a joke out of one of them.

Chad: Yeah, it's sort of like a friend calling another friend and saying, "I just had this weird thing happen when I was hanging out with these white people." She's writing to a friend who's going to get what she's saying, even if the reader doesn't understand the racial dynamics at first—like I didn't when I first read this poem. It took me a minute.

Chi: This is one famous poet imagining another famous poet's inner life. And it's full of allusions: to people, and places, and real and imaginary historical events.

Chad: I think Hayden wrote this persona poem about Wheatley because it let him explore the limits of what's shared between her and us, the 20th century (and now 21st century) readers. A lot of these readers—me and my students included—tend to read Wheatley poems like "On Being Brought from Africa to America" where Wheatley describes her capture and enslavement as a "mercy" because it's what introduced her to Christianity. And we think, did she *really* believe this? Or did she just need to pretend that she believed this? Or was this a belief she took on because it helped her survive the horror and pain of that event?

Chi: I think writing a poem in the form of a letter helps you explore exactly those kinds of questions because you have a voice talking to another consciousness. Plus, if you pick up a book of Wheatley's collected writing, you'll find that most of the pages will be devoted *not* to her poems but to the letters she wrote to various people—some of them familiar to us, like George Washington, and other correspondents much more obscure.

Chad: So Chi, why do you think people write poems as letters from Phillis Wheatley specifically?

Chi: Is it cheating if I let Robert Hayden answer this himself? [Chad chuckles] The recording we just played is from a reading he did at the Library of Congress. Before he reads "A Letter from Phillis Wheatley" he says this...

Hayden: “Phillis Wheatley, as you know, was a slave poet, a genius, who when she was quite young was discovered to be a genius. And the Wheatley family in Boston raised her and really made her into a bluestocking so that when she was in her teens she was reading Latin and she was writing neoclassical verse.”

Chad: So a couple things stand out to me there. One is that Hayden is really interested in Wheatley as a poet engaged with the classical tradition: she reads in Latin and is writing “neoclassical poetry,” he says. Meaning later poetry that’s deeply committed to staying true to classical approaches and verse forms.

Chi: Neoclassical poetry was a *huge deal* in the early 1700s for English language writers.

Chad: You’re talking about people like Alexander Pope...

Chi: Wheatley certainly read neoclassical poets like Pope.

Chad: Which sparks some controversy later on because scholars start arguing about whether Wheatley actually studied classical poetry in Greek and Latin or only learned about it indirectly, through the work of other neoclassical poets who wrote in English. Her creative legacy is really complicated!

Chi: There are a *lot* of classical themes and references to argue about! Like Wheatley’s poem “Niobe in Distress for Her Children, Slain by Apollo” from the story in *Ovid’s Metamorphoses*.

Chad: Or “Ode to Neptune.” Or “On Recollection,” which starts with that apostrophe to Mneme, the Muse of memory.

[“Wasted Education” by Blue Topaz]

Chi: People often look at Phillis Wheatley’s poetry and see something other than poetry. Very often, I think what people see is racial politics. At the front of Wheatley’s book there are a bunch of testimonies, right, from prominent white people assuring us readers that they know Wheatley personally and can attest that she did, in fact, write the poems in her book. The assumption back then was that Black people weren’t capable of writing poems at all, let alone knowing enough about literary traditions to be casually conversant with classical and neoclassical writers the way Wheatley seemed to be.

Chad: Even Thomas Jefferson, the guy that wrote “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal” did not believe it was self-evidently true that Black people could write poetry. And he specifically name checks Wheatley on this in his book called *Notes on the State of Virginia*. He writes, “Religion, indeed, has produced a Phyllis Whately [sic]; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism.”

Chi: Yeah, that was not his finest hour...

Chad: Yea. But to your point that people mostly see racial politics when they read Wheatley’s poetry, here we have Jefferson arguing that Black people can’t create true poetry; they can only mimic it. But contemporary literary critics like Henry Louis Gates Jr. claim that Wheatley’s poetry is literally a form of protest answering the racism of America’s Founding Fathers.

Chi: Which is interesting because her poems are also really patriotic.

Chad: Yeah, I mean, as far as I understand, she supported the Revolution because she believed that an American Republic might abolish slavery and recognize Black people as equal citizens. Hayden’s persona poem picks up on that patriotism theme. His Phillis Wheatly explains that she would have to politely decline any invitation to meet British royalty at Court because she’s an American. A “true patriot,” as Hayden puts it.

Chi: In the 1700s, white people in America took questions about Black creative capacity really seriously. It wasn’t just a question of art and literature—it was this bigger political question. Before a lot of people would read Wheatley’s poems, she had to prove to them that she could read and write and think for herself.

Chad: So what does Wheatley’s engagement with the classics mean in this context?

Chi: The 18th century manner that Robert Hayden talked about is really steeped in the classical tradition. He has the Countess of Huntingdon call Wheatley a “muse,” after the ancient Greek divinities in charge of the arts and inspiration. But Wheatley’s use of this tradition is more than just eighteenth-century neoclassicism. For Hayden, it’s connected to who Wheatley was as a human being: this precocious, teenaged bluestocking, knowledge he thinks we’ve lost.

Chad: So, given all of this, it’s so interesting to me that Hayden does this fact check of himself, tells us that he’s using the facts we used to *think* we knew about her because they’re more interesting. Actually, he seems to go even further and claim that these

fictional details and scenarios help us to recover the real human being named Phillis Wheatley from history. That feels like a tension or paradox to me—is it?

Chi: It's the ultimate art paradox: it's art lying to tell the truth.

Chad: That last thing he said about there not being any records that show what Wheatley really thought and felt—is that why you think people want to write these poems? And, if so, why are we so interested in what Wheatley thought in the first place? Is it really such a big mystery?

Chi: Maybe we care because poets help us remember our collective past, and what connects us to one another. The historian Daniel Boorstin described poets not as “makers” but as “remembrancers.” Meaning people who “remind us of our tie to the past, our tie to all other human beings, our tie to the poets of other ages.”

Chad: Oh, that's really interesting. It seems like an almost obvious thing to say about Robert Hayden, whose poetry is so intent on conjuring the poetic past...but *less* obvious with regard to Phillis Wheatley whom I so often think of as making something radically new: a tradition of African American poetry that basically didn't exist before her.

Chi: Which is true! But she did that by corresponding with the past, by placing herself in a long tradition that included the African Latin poet Terrence and John Milton and a bunch of other folks.

Chad: Ok, you're totally right. Because now I'm calling to mind one of her poems called “On Recollection”—this is the one I mentioned earlier that begins with an apostrophe to Mneme the Muse of memory: “Mneme, immortal pow'r, I trace thy spring:/ Assist my strains, while I thy glories sing:/ The acts of long departed years, by thee/ Recover'd....” There's something integral for her there about poetry's power to recover, to re-collect from the past.

Chi: And now we can't help doing that to her body of writing. It's no wonder that Wheatley's legacy is so complex! She's reading Alexander Pope, John Milton, Ovid, and Terence, and trying to figure out where she fits in this literary tradition she's inherited. And we readers are trying to recover Wheatley's life and world.

Chad: The scholar Tara Bynum has a really interesting article that reflects on her own attempts to read Wheatley that way. She describes reading a letter from Wheatley to this white minister named John Thornton, who's trying to convince Wheatley to marry a

missionary and go back to West Africa. Wheatley responds with a joke at Thornton's expense. Let me read to you what Bynum writes next:

[“Just for Kicks”by Aiolos Rue]

“I don't catch Phillis Wheatley's joke at first. I miss it because I don't know yet to read for her humor. I only know to read her poems and letters on their various eighteenth-century subjects for what I'm looking for, and I'm looking for an easy-to-spot simple and familiar story of a young woman's enslavement and subsequent freedom. I'm reading for a girl—with an unknown birthdate and from somewhere in West Africa—who, in her insufferable living, can only long for freedom. She doesn't have much of anything in my version of her story. There's no family or friends (or maybe just one friend, Obour Tanner), no love or joy, and certainly, no jokes; I've limited her living to the difficult reality of her enslavement and the burden of—what I understood to be—a profoundly lonely life. I've imagined the stoic girl of her poetry volume's frontispiece as ennobled by this single-minded, long-suffering pursuit of legal freedom. I still trust—to a fault—that her quest is what gave way to an entire literary tradition. What I've learned of this tradition privileges a particular kind of 'real' and racialized experience. I understand its literature to represent and document a historical and othered way of living that pursues truth telling, authenticity, and the certainty of resistance as the proper response to suffering. I'm looking for what's 'real' and true in Wheatley's writing. So I can't read yet for the possibility or the certainty of her laughter in her writing because I still think her life was too hard and too heavy to live fully or freely.”

Chi: I'm really struck by the different ways that Robert Hayden and Tara Bynum imagine Phillis Wheatley.

Chad: Yeah! They're both trying to get to a real person who is Phillis Wheatley. Hayden is thinking about style and Bynum's taking an almost sociological or historical approach. And also wondering about how her own feelings are shaping what she imagines.

Chi: The thing they have in common, though, is that they both observe or imagine Wheatley telling a joke. Hayden's Phillis Wheatley writes, “there is no Eden without its Serpent.” Which is this heavy Biblical reference. She compares 18th century racism with Original Sin! But then she follows it up with the joking anecdote about the chimney sweep.... We're going to come back to this reference in another episode.

Chad: In fact, we're going to spend a whole podcast talking about classical references in Wheatley's own poetry.

Chi: You didn't think we were going to get out of here without listening to an actual poem by Phillis Wheatley, did you? Yeah, no.

Chad: Here's the highly allusive epistolary poem that we're going to be talking about in Part Two of "A Letter to Phillis Wheatley." It's addressed to a semi-mythical patron of the arts from Roman antiquity.

Chi: "To Maecenas"

Mæcenās, 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.

Chad:

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.
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.

Chi:

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 ardors 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.

Chad:

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.

Chi:

The happier Terence 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;
From age to age transmitting thus his name
With the first glory in the rolls of fame?

Chad:

Thy virtues, great Mæcenas! 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.

Chi:

As long as Thames in streams majestic flows,
Or Naiads in their oozy beds repose
While Phoebus reigns above the starry train
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, Mæcenas, thy paternal rays,
Hear me propitious, and defend my lays

Chi: Thanks for listening to Old-School!

Chad: Yeah, thank you!

Chi: We'll see you online, and later back at the podcast. Our next episode is about Jupiter Hammon...

Chad: And then, after Hammon, we come back to the world of Phillis Wheatley. It's Black + Classics, folks! Check our show notes if you want some reading recommendations. You can find them at the African American Intellectual Traditions website: aaiti.berkeley.edu.

Chi: Thanks to Phillis Wheatley, for being a ninja. And Robert Hayden, for the same reason. And the Library of Congress, for sharing its incredible poetry recordings.

Chad: Thanks to Tara Bynum, and to the *Hedgehog Review* for publishing her essay on Phillis Wheatley's letters. Thanks to Amber Spill for our theme music, and the Berkeley Institute and the Department of African American Studies at UC Berkeley for sponsoring this shindig. The Old-School podcast is funded by gifts from Boyd and Jill Smith and the Foundation for Excellence in Higher Education.

Chi: Thanks funders! And thank you, listeners. Bye for now.