



The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers

Henry Louis Gates Jr.

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The slave Phillis Wheatley literally wrote her way to freedom when, in 1773, she became the first person of African descent to publish a book of poems in the English language. The toast of London, lauded by Europeans as diverse as Voltaire and Gibbon, Wheatley was for a time the most famous black woman in the West. Though Benjamin Franklin received her and George Washington thanked her for poems she dedicated to him, Thomas Jefferson refused to acknowledge her gifts. "Religion, indeed, has produced a Phillis Wheatley," he wrote, "but it could not produce a poet." In other words, slaves have misery in their lives, and they have souls, but they lack the intellectual and aesthetic endowments required to create literature. In this book based on his 2002 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities at the Library of Congress, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., explores the pivotal roles that Wheatley and Jefferson have played in shaping the black literary tradition. He brings to life the characters and debates that fermented around Wheatley in her day and illustrates the peculiar history that resulted in Thomas Jefferson's being lauded as a father of the black freedom struggle and Phillis Wheatley's vilification as something of an Uncle Tom. It is a story told with all the lyricism and critical skill that have placed Gates at the forefront of American letters.

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