



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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In 1773, the slave Phillis Wheatley literally wrote her way to freedom. The first person of African descent to publish a book of poems in English, she was emancipated by her owners in recognition of her literary achievement. For a time, Wheatley was the most famous black woman in the West. But Thomas Jefferson, unlike his contemporaries Ben Franklin and George Washington, refused to acknowledge her gifts as a writer—a repudiation that eventually inspired generations of black writers to build an extraordinary body of literature in their efforts to prove him wrong.

In *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. explores the pivotal roles that Wheatley and Jefferson played in shaping the black literary tradition. Writing with all the lyricism and critical skill that place him at the forefront of American letters, Gates brings to life the characters, debates, and controversy that surrounded Wheatley in her day and ours.

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