

# "Upon Being Brought from Africa to America"

By Phillis Wheatley

*Transcription, correction, editorial commentary, and markup by  
Students of Marymount University, James West, Amy Ridderhof*

On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA., <sup>brought</sup>

1 'Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,  
2 Taught my benighted soul to understand  
3 That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too:  
4 Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.  
5 Some view, <sup>some</sup> our sable race with scornful eye,  
6 "Their colour is a diabolic die."  
7 Remember, *Christians* , *Negros* , black as *Cain* , <sup>Cain</sup> ,  
8 May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

## Footnotes

brought The title of one Wheatley's most (in)famous poems, "On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA" alludes to the experiences of many Africans who became subject to the [transatlantic slave trade](#). Wheatley uses biblical references and direct address to appeal to a Christian audience, while also defending the ability of her "sable race" to become "refin'd" through Christian theology. Henry Louis Gates, who in *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (1989) situates Wheatley as an important voice in the eighteenth-century debate about natural human rights, summarizes the "recurrent suggestion that Wheatley has remained aloof from matters that were in any sense racial, or more correctly, 'positively' racial," as a "misreading" (74-75). Notable for the complexity of its brief discussion of blackness in the Christian slaveholding American republic, this poem in particular is frequently criticized for its apparent rejection of Africa and African-ness. However, Wheatley was working within a non-free context, and her critique of slavery is mediated by Christianity acquired as part of her enslavement. For a fuller exploration of Wheatley's poem, see *Authority and Female Authorship in Colonial America*, by William Scheick (especially chapter 4). The image included here, [via the British Library](#), shows a diagram of the Brookes' slave ship (c.1801).

- [JW]

some Wheatley's description of those who "view our sable race with scornful eye" (5) is a clear rejection of what [Lena Hill describes as "ignorant" interpretations of "visual blackness"](#) (37-38), as is her attribution of speech in direct discourse: "'Their color is a diabolic die'" (6). Henry Louis Gates argues that Wheatley's very presence as an author complicated assumptions of "natural" inferiority. For more about this topic, see Gates' *Figures in Black* and Walt Nott's discussion of Wheatley's public persona in "From 'Uncultivated Barbarian' to 'Poetical Genius': The Public Presence of Phillis Wheatley."

- [TH]

Cain The phrase "black as Cain" is a distortion of the biblical idea of the mark of Cain ([Genesis 4:15](#)) and was used as justification for the enslavement of people of color. Many scholars point out that this was Wheatley's "most maligned poem," ([Hill 37](#)) which is ultimately about the inclusion of Africans in the "Christian family" and her critique of "ignorant" interpretations of "visual blackness" (37-38). For an interesting contemporary read of the mark of Cain in anti-abolitionist discourse, see Josiah Priest's *Slavery as it Relates to the Negro* (1843), where he rejects the possibility that dark-skinned peoples could be related to Adam by blood (134-136). For a larger reading of Wheatley's use of blackness and the role of blackness in the early American imagination, see Lena Hill's chapter "Witnessing Moral Authority in Pre-Abolition Literature," from *Visualizing Blackness and the Creation of the African American Literary Tradition* (2014)

- [JW]