



The Trial of Phillis Wheatley

Mr. Ronald Brian Wheatley

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The “The Trial of Phillis Wheatley” selected as winner in eLit awards for 2015 for drama. “The Trial of Phillis Wheatley” By Ronald Wheatley In a preface to the book “Phillis Wheatley and Her Poetry,” Professor Henry Louis Gates asked of an assemblage of distinguished men who gathered at the Governor’s Council Chamber room in the Old State House (“Common House”) in Boston in the fall of 1772: “Why had this august group been assembled? Why had it seen fit to summon this young African girl, scarcely eighteen years old, before it?” This group of ‘the most respectable Characters in Boston,’ as it would later define itself, had assembled to question closely the African adolescent on the slender sheaf of poems that she claimed to have ‘written by herself.’” This young “African girl” was Phillis Wheatley. “The Trial of Phillis Wheatley” is a courtroom drama because it “depicts” what happened in the Governor’s Council Chamber room that day. However, as important as she is to our history and to the drama, the play is not just about Phillis. The play is also about the men in that room and the test that they were facing. The test of overcoming their own prejudices to be willing to put their signature on a document attesting that this African household slave of John and Susannah Wheatley had written a number of poems compiled in a small manuscript. A Negro slave author was a phenomenon that was unique to these men, to Boston, and to a young America. Only if the largely older and all white men in that room were willing to put their names to this attestation would this manuscript have a chance of being published. The consequences of this action for these men were possible ridicule, and the threat of physical violence from an external force, the Boston gang, under the leadership of Ebenezer Mackintosh, street brawler and charismatic leader of the South End Gang. The final verdict would change American History.

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