Phillis Wheatley

On Being Brought from Africa to America
The Influence of Phillis Wheatley

Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784) was the first African American woman to have a book published. She was born in Africa, likely in what is now Senegal, and sold into slavery at the age of 7 to John and Susannah Wheatley of Boston. Susannah taught her English, Christianity, Latin, history, geography, and Western mythology.

Her first book *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* was the first book written by a black woman in America and the second book to be written by any woman in America.

She was emancipated in 1775 and married a free black man (John Peters) in 1778. She died in childbirth in 1784 giving birth to her 3rd child, who also died.
On Being Brought from Africa to America

‘Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,
   Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there’s a God, that there’s a *Saviour* too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
   “Their colour is a diabolic die.”
Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*,
May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train.
Analysis Questions

1. What argument does the speaker of this poem make against the prevailing view of Africans during this period of time?
2. In line 3, what is the significance of Phillis Wheatley’s distinction between “a God” and “a Saviour too”?
3. What difference would it have made if she had used “heathen” instead of “Pagan”? (yes, there is a difference)
5. What is the impact of her description of her color as “sable”?
6. What tone does the speaker take when she addresses her audience with the imperative, “Remember, Christians”?