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Phillis Wheatley: The Poetic Bridge Between Methodism and Romanticism

Amelia Fuss

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Dr. Emily Field, Thesis Director
Dr. Kevin Kalish, Committee Member
Dr. Renee Somers, Committee Member

Introduction

In 1761, a child of only seven or eight years old was captured from her home in West Africa and brought to the American colonies to be sold as a slave. She was bought by the Wheatley family in Boston, Massachusetts, and named Phillis, after the boat she arrived on. Vincent Carretta, in his 2001 biography, theorizes that she was purchased because of her youth. When she was purchased, she was approximately the age of the Wheatley's oldest daughter¹; the anniversary of her death had been weeks before they bought Phillis, so he theorizes that the family was sympathetic to her age and stature which led them to treat her more as a daughter than as a slave, although she still served them in minimal ways (14). It took Phillis only two years to become fluent in English and publish her first poem before going on to compile a book of poetry called *Poems on Various Subjects: Religious and Moral* (1773), making her the first African American to publish a book on any subject in the colonies. Her education was uncharacteristic of the time because some colonies still prohibited any education of African Americans², and even where it was legal, it was not widely practiced. She was not only educated in the Bible, but in Classical literature as well; she would often be included in lessons with the Wheatley children. During her young life, she would attend services at the Old South Church with the Wheatley family who identified as Congregationalist. However, "Congregationalist Susanna Wheatley, for example, befriended Presbyterian and Anglican Methodist missionaries

¹ Carretta presents evidence that this daughter was favored by John and Susanna Wheatley because of how unusually precise her headstone was for a child in those times. She passed nine years before they bought Wheatley so Phillis was approximately the same age she would have been had she lived.

² Excerpt from the South Carolina act of 1740, which prohibited the education of slaves: "Be it enacted, that all and every person and persons whatsoever, who shall hereafter teach or cause any slave or slaves to be taught to write, or shall use or employ any slave as a scribe, in any manner of writing whatsoever, hereafter taught to write, every such person or persons shall, for every such offense, forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds, current money" (WGBH PBS).

who often stayed with the Wheatleys when they preached in Boston” (26). So, although they practiced as Congregationalists, they welcomed the ideas and practices of others outside of their own religion. Because of this, Phillis Wheatley was given the freedom to choose her own denomination taking into consideration not only the denomination of her masters, but the preachers who often stayed with the family. She chose to join the Methodist movement, specifically under the religious guidance of the preacher George Whitefield. Even though she labeled herself as a Whitefieldian Methodist, she was baptized in the Congregational church because they were the most sympathetic towards Methodism compared to other Boston churches (Carretta 35).³

From the time Wheatley found success in writing, she has been the subject of a variety of literary conversations among scholars. For example, Henry Louis Gates Jr. explores Thomas Jefferson’s response to her work as pivotal to the creation of African American Literature by confronting his harsh criticism towards her that is rooted in racist sentiment. His book, titled *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley* (2003), details the literary legacy that Jefferson’s criticism of Wheatley left while also taking a historical approach to reading one of the prefatory documents included in *Poems on Various Subjects: Religious and Moral*. This document is an attestation of authenticity, signed by eighteen Boston dignitaries, judges and politicians including the governor, Thomas Hutchinson, and John Hancock. The document states that “She has been examined by some of the best Judges, and is thought qualified to write [the poems]” (Carretta 8). Gates dramatizes the attestation by featuring the image of a young African girl defending her poetry in front of Boston’s most well-known men.

³ All biographical information on Wheatley comes from Vincent Carretta’s book *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*.

In response to *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley*, Joanna Brooks has written “Our Phillis, Ourselves” which presents historical evidence that no such event happened. The only known copy of the attestation to be dated was 28 October 1772, and “On that very day, at Faneuil Hall, the freeholders of Boston convened an emergency meeting to investigate reports that salaries for colonial judges would no longer be paid by the colony but by the Crown” (Brooks 3). Brooks concludes, from this evidence, that the men would have been otherwise occupied by these political proceedings and that the most likely scenario is that Wheatley went to the event in order to solicit signatures on that date when the men were gathered. In addition to this fact, Brooks cites a letter written by John Andrews which, “states that Wheatley herself ‘had a paper drawn up & signed’ attesting to the authenticity of her manuscript” (5). What this means is not only did she seek out the men who signed the letter, but she wrote it, knowing it would help her become published. Brooks furthers her position by arguing Wheatley as having been as much a businesswoman as a poet because she also capitalized on her ability to write for her audience and because she recognized the cultural changes that were shifting towards a more humanistic outlook, she was able to, trade her consolatory sentiments for emotional gratification; Brooks describes this as, “a transactional, sentimental culture of mourning [that] enabled them to indulge feelings of self-consciousness” (8). In one way, Brooks is establishing Wheatley as an observer of the changing cultural values that were historically more tolerant of emotional response. This argument builds on what Brooks is saying by asserting that not only did Wheatley perceive these changes, but acted upon them by displaying them in her work. I take this argument in a different direction by trying to decipher the meaning behind the tone Wheatley takes with her audience and arguing that she is an agent of change whose writing was ahead of her time.

Brooks' argument is one of many that encounter race relations and how Wheatley fits in between, as well as among, her own race as well as her masters'. Aside from historical, feminist and racial criticism, Wheatley has often been read as a neoclassical poet in many formalist readings.⁴ John Shields has written about Wheatley from many points of view and even about her connection to the Romantic period of literature. In his book, *Phillis Wheatley and the Romantics* he concludes, "surely by now there can be little lingering doubt that Phillis Wheatley was ably prepared to engage that discourse which was shaping the movement of thought we now refer to as Romanticism" (118). In this book, he has taken the conversation in a new direction, presenting Wheatley as an early adopter of the elements specific to qualifications of Romantic poetry, comparing her to some of the most well known white Romantic poets like William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

In this argument, I will present evidence that Wheatley serves as a bridge between the Methodist faith and the introduction of Romantic literature. Perceptively recognizing major shifts in the attitudes of those around her, Wheatley herself became an agent of change who became what Shields' argues her to be: a progenitrix of Romantic poetry.⁵ I will situate her in her Methodist beliefs to suggest that arguing her to be an early Romantic rests upon the foundation of her religious influences. This paper will read Wheatley's work next to the sermons of Reverend George Whitefield, the narrative of contemporaneous African American author John

⁴ Reading Wheatley's work with a focus on the classical elements of her poetry has been popular in formalistic criticism. This area reads Wheatley's work as neoclassical; it includes critics like John Barnard and those included in the recent 2011 book, *New Essays on Phillis Wheatley*. John C. Shields edited the first edition of *New Essays on Phillis Wheatley*.

⁵ Consider Vincent Carretta's summary of Methodism when he says, "Although Wesley and Whitefield were concerned with saving souls, and not reforming society, eighteenth-century Methodism was perceived as far more subversive than the socially conservative Methodism of the following centuries" (29). By placing Wheatley at the beginning of one movement, she can be seen as an agent of change that led to another movement because she recognized the direction in which popular sentiment was headed.

Marrant, and the elegies of early romantic poet Charlotte Smith. These three authors are important to this paper by serving as representatives multiple literary contexts, each representing one important context for reading her work. What this argument seeks to accomplish is to incorporate Wheatley as an African American woman who has been overlooked as a Romantic poet; this paper will illustrate why Wheatley should be read not only in the African American canon of literature, but also in the Romantic canon of literature.

Shortly after Shields' book, in 2016, Helen Boyles published a book called *Romanticism and Methodism: The Problem of Religious Enthusiasm* in which she makes the comparison of Methodist beliefs to themes in Romantic poetry by expanding on evidence previously explored by Frederick Gill in 1937. Like Shields, her argument is focused only on the white, male representatives of each movement without mention of Charlotte Smith, so this paper seeks to augment her evidence by presenting Wheatley as an unexplored avenue and to include a female representation as well.

Unlike John Shields, who situates Wheatley in the context of various philosophers, the following pages will walk through a chronological reading of Wheatley with three of her contemporaries, both theological and literary: George Whitefield, John Marrant and Charlotte Smith. The objective is to situate people representative of their time next to her in order to position her as a link between them. This contrasts to Shields' foundation of research because he relies on ancient philosophy like that of Plato and even the more modern Kant and transitions to speaking about the white male Romantic poets without spending much time with Wheatley's peers. My goal is to rely on more contemporaneous figures to Wheatley as a more relevant base to establish that the image of the Romantic child finds its roots in the Methodist religion which, because of its importance as a thematic trope to Romanticism, provides evidence for classifying

Phillis Wheatley as a Romantic poet and recognizing her as a bridge between the Romantic period and its roots in Methodism.

The first person that I will read Wheatley with is George Whitefield, who was a preacher of the Methodist denomination. Not only was he a well-received Methodist preacher in the American colonies, but was an acquaintance of hers who became the subject of one of her poems: “On the Death of the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield”. There is a distinct resemblance between his sermons and her poetry, which reveal the thematic and tonal influence that he had on her work.

Methodism was progressive in its split from the Anglican Church because it promoted the belief that everyone was welcome to worship equally and allowed African Americans to be baptized while other denominations did not. It began as a movement so early Methodists were simply followers, like Wheatley, not members of a church. Even though Whitefield advocated for religious freedom for slaves, he was not an abolitionist. In fact, he was the owner of a large plantation.⁶ Methodism contrasts with Anglicanism by also promoting God above the earthly doctrine and putting emphasis on individual relationships with God over the institution of the church in addition to challenging the idea of predestination. Phillis Wheatley’s early adoption of Romanticism is reflected in her choice to follow Methodism. Her following of George Whitefield specifically influenced the tone she took with her audience, which was sermon-like in quality. The quality of this didactic tone is constant in other contemporary Whitefieldian Methodist authors like that of John Marrant who was also an African American. His work is different from hers in form because he wrote prose, but the importance is revealed through structural and thematic parallelism, which reveal a consistency of Methodist influence. By

⁶ For more information on Whitefield’s relationship with slavery and abolition, refer to Stephen J. Stein’s article “George Whitefield on Slavery: New Evidence.”

writing in an instructive tone, Wheatley, like Marrant who wrote sermons and a short narrative, is able to impart her knowledge on her audience. The tone that is used to address an audience during a sermon was very familiar and acceptable to the public, so in a way she capitalizes on what she knew to be familiar and well received among her community. She was able to impart her Methodist beliefs on her audience and was well received because the general atmosphere and attitude towards religion was evolving and she was one of the first voices to record it. The poet credited with producing some of the first Romantic poems was Charlotte Smith, whom William Wordsworth himself dubbed “a lady to whom English verse is under greater obligations than are likely to be either acknowledged or remembered” (Hunt).⁷ Both poets symbolize an underrepresented demographic of Romantic poetry: women. The reason Wheatley should be included in the Romantic canon is because of similarities in her portrayal of children to that which appears in Charlotte Smith’s work. They both describe what is now labeled “The Romantic Child,” which is a representation of childhood as being an age of innocence and purity, contrasting with the historical Calvinist view of “the sinner child” that viewed children as being born with original sin and lacking the education to defy sin. The image of the child is integral to Smith’s overall body of work and part of why it is now labeled Romantic. So, because of their comparable views on the institution of childhood, the poetry of Phillis Wheatley should be viewed as incipient Romantic literature.

Methodism in Context and George Whitefield

One of Wheatley’s poems, first published in 1770, was an elegy addressed to the Reverend George Whitefield, a founder of the newly formed movement called Methodism, a

⁷ Wordsworth’s sentiments were originally written as a note in his copy of her poems but this citation comes from “Wordsworth and Charlotte Smith:1970” where Bishop C. Hunt Jr. details their social and literary relationship.

group of practicing Christians. There is no concrete evidence that reveals Wheatley to have been present at any of Whitefield's sermons, but because of the Wheatley's patronage of the Old South Church and the fact that he preached there, a safe assertion can be made that she would have been present (Carretta 32). In addition, her poem addressed to him indicates a relationship between the two. One of the topics that Whitefield would preach about was the equality of men and women, both black and white (Russell 1). This idea was forward thinking for Americans and appealed to many African Americans, including Wheatley. The most notable effect that Whitefield had on Wheatley's writing was her rhetorical use of the sermon-like didactic tone with which she speaks to her audience; she uses this tone to impart her faith upon them. It is the religious structure that allows her to take this authority despite the racial politics of her time; her tone allowed her to transcend her social status in order to teach her audiences. This is audacious of her because the majority of them were white.

When Whitefield came into contact with the Wesleys, their goal, which would create the bedrock of Methodism, was, "to find real spiritual depth and commitment to God" (Kidd 26). These beginnings have been compared to "the bursting of a bud into blossom" (Boswell 1).⁸ The reason this image so powerfully explains those first desires that created Methodism is the almost imperceptible importance to the founding event. To be more specific, Methodism began as a study group at Oxford University among a group of young scholars in 1729. At the time, the study group was just a bud of intellectual curiosity that eventually turned into the flower of the religious denomination called Methodism. Aside from being an optimistic image of life and vitality, it also mimics the peacefulness in which the religious denomination began.

⁸ The book in which this was found, *A Short History of Methodism*, was written for the Bible Teacher's Study Circle for the purpose of classroom study in 1900.

The founders, first of the study circle, and then of Methodism, were John and Charles Wesley, joined by George Whitefield in 1733. Their goal was to interpret the Bible and discuss their understandings and questions in order to live more religiously fulfilled lives. This community became the basis of Methodism where all parties were able to participate in peace (Russell 1). The way in which Methodism came to be also sheds light on how their beliefs are structured. As I will demonstrate through close readings of his sermons, Whitefield advocated for the members of the movement to put their personal Faith ahead of their doctrine because Faith is what will lead to heaven, not adherence to a routine (Whitefield “The Righteousness of Christ, an Everlasting Righteousness”). He was also a strong supporter of religious freedom for Blacks to be baptized while some other religions denied them even this freedom. This particular fact is often credited as the reason why Wheatley and other African Americans would have been drawn to the religion (Russell 1). The founders originally spoke with anti-racist rhetoric as well despite defending the institution of slavery. George Whitefield himself owned a plantation in Georgia and upon his death, his slaves were left to the Countess of Huntingdon who kept them in service (Tyson 211).⁹ Methodists were also much more accepting of musical worship, as discussed in *African American Religions, 1500-2000: Colonialism Democracy, and Freedom*, which often appealed to people of African origin because many African religions had strong traditions in musical expression.¹⁰

⁹ For more information the Countess of Huntingdon and her role in early Methodism, consult *In the Midst of Early Methodism: Lady Huntingdon and Her Correspondence* (2006) for the first complete compilation of her correspondence and explanation of her role.

¹⁰ *African American Religions, 1500-2000: Colonialism Democracy, and Freedom* by Sylvester A. Johnson, gives a detailed history of African American religious history in American. For follow-up reading, refer to *A Will to Choose: The Origins of African American Methodism* by J. Gordon Melton.

The doctrine of Methodism was not written immediately upon being established because it began as a movement, not as a distinct church. It was not until the mid 1700s that a doctrine was forged and dictated for the practices of Methodism (Heitzenrater 223). *Wesley and the People he called Methodist* (1995) by Richard P. Heitzenrater, provides the context needed to place Whitefield historically beside the Wesleys in order to situate Wheatley in comparison to him. For example, Heitzenrater paraphrases one of the themes of one of Wesley's sermons: "Faith is the only condition directly necessary for God's forgiveness or justification, which is the work of Christ that results in a relative change in the individual, who is then 'accounted as righteous'" (247). This concept is a principle in the foundation of Methodist practices, which leads individuals to search for their redemption not simply in service attendance or in behavior but through their sincerest belief in the Bible and Christ. This message appears in several of Whitefield's sermons. In his sermon "The Righteousness of Christ, an Everlasting Righteousness," Whitefield says first that, "God is pleased to make light come gradually in, and by that means we are prepared to receive it" (1) and follows this through with the metaphor of "the Sun of righteousness, [rising] gradually upon men" (1). In both of these moments, Whitefield relies on the image of the sun rising, a typically optimistic image, to describe Faith to his listeners. By using this device, he is assuring his audience that Faith is a process of comprehension and does not happen immediately. Faith is established in increments depending on the person and his or her willingness to receive it.

In both of these instances, and throughout his sermons, Whitefield speaks in a didactic tone with his audiences as is fitting to position as a preacher and public speaker. Wheatley, even though she is an author speaking to her audiences, does not hold the same gravity that Whitefield has as a preacher and yet she still speaks authoritatively towards her audience. She was able to

capitalize on the commodification of her work, which is what Brooks suggests in “Our Phillis, Ourselves” and popularize herself among her white audiences. By building a market around her work, she was able to step beyond the boundaries of social expectations to speak with an audacity in tone. Because of her status, using a didactic tone makes Wheatley’s poetry modern to the time she was writing in.

She speaks in the same tone as Whitefield by addressing her audiences and teaching them patience in accepting religious instruction, but does so in two different ways. The first avenue she pursues is a direct address to her audience. This can be found in her poems “To the University of CAMBRIDGE, in NEW-ENGLAND” and “On the Death of the Rev. Dr. SEWELL. 1769.” In her address to the students at Harvard, she says:

ye sons of science ye receive
The Blissful news by messenger from heaven,
How *Jesus*’ blood for your redemption flows. (10-12)

and follows up with:

Improve your privileges while they stay,
Ye pupils, and each hour redeem, that bears
Or good or bad report of you to heav’n. (21-23).

In the first quotation, Wheatley talks about the liberal education that the students were receiving which was nondenominational in nature when she labels them “sons of science” (10).¹¹ Because Harvard had recently begun switching to more secular teaching methods, their inattention to

¹¹ John Leveritt was the president of Harvard from 1662-1724 and was the first secular president of the University. For an overview of his presidency, there is a history of the presidency on the Harvard University webpage. Samuel Eliot Morison writes extensively on the history of Harvard and considers Leveritt to be the spearhead of the liberal tradition at the school. For more detailed information about the history of the Harvard education, consult Morison’s book *The Founding of Harvard College*.

religious training was concerning for those who did not believe in the separation of church and education. What Wheatley is doing is reminding the students of their religious teachings that preceded their university educations. In the second quote, she is boldly taking the position of instructor by reminding them not to waste their education, but to apply their knowledge towards being more Faithful, which, as Heitzenrater quotes Wesley, “is the only condition directly necessary for God’s forgiveness” (247). Wheatley taking on the position of teacher is no doubt apparent in her poem, but it is this teaching of Methodist doctrine where her motivation lies.

Wheatley’s promotion of the belief that Faith is the only vehicle for forgiveness is stated in more implicit terms in her elegiac poems. Specifically, her call to Faith is found in sections of “To a Lady on the Death of Three Relations,” “To a Lady on the Death of her Husband,” and “On the Death of a Young Lady of Five Years of Age.” Each of these poems takes a similar structure with Wheatley calling on her audience to forgo their mourning in favor of Faith. For example, in “On the Death of a Young Lady of Five Years of Age,” Wheatley says, “Why then, fond parents, why these fruitless groans?/ Restrain your tears, and cease your plaintive moans” (23-24). Here, Wheatley directly addresses the parents of a young girl who has recently passed and encourages them not to give in to their mourning. She goes on to ask them, “Why would you wish your daughter back again?” (26) because, according to her beliefs, their Faith should be strong enough to know their daughter is in heaven: a better place. By discouraging the mourning of the dead, Wheatley encourages her audience to let their Faith be stronger than their sorrow. This is a theme that runs throughout her elegiac poems in her direct addresses to those who are grieving. Although many of her poems were published, she often took commissioned work to write these death poems to help console the grieving and bring peace to them (Brooks 10). Her words discouraging sadness can seem harsh to contemporary readers, but because of the

respectfully moralistic tone in which she speaks to them, she is able to push her social boundaries to take on the position of teacher in her expression of consolation.

The Christian denomination of Methodism evolved from the theocentric beliefs of Anglicanism to form a set of practices that are anthropocentric in nature, which means their emphasis is based on a person's relationship to God rather than God's relationship to a person (Yrigoyan 169). What this means is that instead of prioritizing church ceremonies, they are more concerned with Faith. This means that while Calvinists believed in predestination, their religious practices were concentrated upon actions of piety, which put God before themselves. The change that Methodism proposed was a lack of belief in predestination. Not believing in predestination meant that Earthly action would determine the afterlife of each individual person. Whitefield preaches about the importance of Earthly action effectively in his sermon, "Directions on How to Hear a Sermon." His argument attempts to convince his audience that attending services and being physically present for religious life will not suffice as Faith in the eyes of God. He believes in the changing nature of humanity and believes in the individual human's ability to accept or reject the teaching of God through free will. His emphasis on his audience's ability to choose their Faith reflects his human-centered style of preaching by centering the religious experience on the individual rather than chiefly on God's expectations and reveals his anthropocentric tendencies towards religious belief.

Wheatley similarly keeps the emphasis upon her audience as humans with free will. For example, many of her elegies address those who are left behind in the wake of a death. In these elegies she often encourages her audience to have the faith that the deceased is in a better place and to focus more on living out the rest of their Earthly experience. The best example of Wheatley's anthropocentric focus is her poem "An HYMN to HUMANITY." This poem walks

through images taken from the Bible and gives concise, poetic interpretations through her illustration of the images. She finishes her poem with the stanza:

Can *Afric's* muse forgetful prove?
 Or can such Friendship fail to move
 A tender human heart?
 Immortal *Friendship* laurel-crown'd
 The smiling *Graces* all surround
 With ev'ry heav'nly *Art*.

This stanza infuses her neoclassic style with her Christian images by referring to the image of “the muse” and “Graces” in the same section. The poem overall, however, focuses upon the human elements of religion. The “Friendship” (32) she alludes to can be interpreted as the relationship of people to God because the poem provides an optimistic representation of Jesus descending to form relationships to the people of Christianity. She mentions “A tender human heart” (33), which centers the final moments of the poem on the gentle, emotional complex of the human being. The whole poem leads up to this ending; it speaks more explicitly of Jesus’s redemption as she illustrates a hopeful, symbiotic relationship between Jesus and his people, almost on a level of equality. This concept of painting humanity as being on a more equal level with God than had been the case in the past appears in the first stanza when she describes humanity with the epithet, “Divine *Humanity*” (4), even though the word divine is usually reserved for talking about God.

Wheatley and Whitefield both emphasize themes of free will and the human elements of religion as well as discuss the theological background and implications of their argument. What is significant about the moments in which they mention God and, more specifically, Jesus, is

their concentration on the redemption of Christ. Whitefield, a prolific preacher, spoke about many moments of the Bible and quotes a diverse number of passages, but those he gives the most attention to are often about the figure of Jesus. Of his sermons, at least five mention Christ in their titles.¹² He was taken with this concept and, likewise, Wheatley was as well. Wheatley's presentation of Christ and his redemption are best illustrated in her poems, "To the University of CAMBRIDGE in NEW-ENGLAND" and "On Being Brought from AFRICA to AMERICA." In both poems, she uses her own experiences traveling from Africa to America to metaphorically illustrate the redemption of Christ. In the poem, "On Being Brought from AFRICA to AMERICA" she says, "'T'WAS mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land, Taught my benighted soul to understand/ That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too" (1-3). In this image, she alludes to her voyage to America as positive because it was what allowed her to find the teachings, and by extension, the redemption of Christ. In Africa, she was without Christ but her journey to America symbolizes her journey to finding Christ and her life in America reflects her life with Christ.

This passage has caused great controversy in the reading and interpretation of her work, especially in during a resurgence of study during the second half of the twentieth century. However, despite the Gates' summary that Wheatley was "too black to be taken seriously by white critics in the eighteenth century, and too white to interest black critics in the twentieth... she was given a new role: race traitor" (Gates 82), her physical journey simply provided her a concrete concept to compare her religious enlightenment to. Aside from the geographical

¹² *Sermons of George Whitefield* published by Hendrickson Publishes in 2009 is the source referenced for this information. The titles of the sermons are "Christ, the Support of the Tempted," "What Think Ye of Christ?," "Christ, the Believer's Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification, and Redemption," "Of Justification by Christ," and "Christ, the Only Preservative against a Reprobate Spirit."

movement of her body that mimics her view of redemption, this poem also can be read as a comment on anti-slavery because redemption can have not only religious connotations, by independence ones as well.

Whitefield's themes and especially his tone can often be seen as emulated through Wheatley's work. Because of this, her attention to the redemption of Christ and trying to explain it through an image she is able to write about makes sense. The way that she uses her experience to try to explain and interpret the teachings of the Bible in and of themselves mimics the model of a preacher's sermon. This in turn helps to explain the resulting didactic tone in which she writes to her audience.

John Marrant and Phillis Wheatley

Wheatley was not the only eighteenth-century African American author to adopt sentiments from Methodist practices. Shortly before Wheatley was born and brought to America, a free African American man named John Marrant was born in 1755 in New York before moving south. Similar to Wheatley, he was a child prodigy but in the art of music rather than poetry. He grew up in admiration of George Whitefield, although he found no support in his family for his religion. He eventually joined the movement as a preacher and spent many years preaching in Nova Scotia (Saillant 4). He settled down in Canada for a number of years in which most of his preaching was done. Knowledge of his life survives in both his sermons and his narrative, titled *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black* (1785). Although concise, it is a telling of his life's story and reveals the depth to which he lived his life in faith.

Shortly after his conversion, Marrant goes into detail about his time with the Cherokee tribe. When he first met up with a member of the tribe, he was imprisoned, and by their law, he would be "execut[ed] in the afternoon of the very next day" (41). His time spent awaiting

execution was in prayer; he prayed out loud, allowing those around him to hear his worship of God. After describing his time of prayer while awaiting death, he says, “I believe the executioner was savingly converted to God” (42) which led to other members of the Tribe converting and allowing him to live with them. His story teaches his audience the saving power of God and how his faith in Jesus as a Redeeming figure saved him. His faith also allows him to instruct those who had yet to learn of his religion in which instance he acts as a missionary. He speaks of his religion as redeeming both his own life and those around him in the same way that Wheatley speaks of her own experience in coming to America from Africa. When she addresses the students at the University of Cambridge and speaks imperatively towards her white audiences in her other poems, she is using her religion to appeal to her captors through her poetry by teaching them of her faith. Like Wheatley, Marrant is able to use his faith to find favor with his captors but in a much more direct way.

Both Wheatley and Marrant were followers of Whitefield’s teachings specifically, and followers as well as contacts of Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon, to whom Wheatley’s book was dedicated. Marrant actually was able to meet the Countess and stay with her, something Wheatley was never able to do. Reading Marrant and Wheatley’s work in conjunction to each other allows for the formation of a foundation upon which claims can be made about the influence of Whitefield and his teachings of Methodism on the work of his followers. For one, Marrant was a missionary who preached his sermons in Nova Scotia. His themes include similar sentiments of Redemption through religion like that which can be seen in Wheatley’s work. Marrant himself practiced what he preached; he focused on individual faith and relationships with God to the point where, “Family and friends took offense at his intense piety and his reprovals of their lax faith” (Saillant 3).

John Marrant's narrative is short and episodic in nature; he presents the audience with a collection of stories from his life, each with the intent to teach a lesson. Although the scenes flow together in a linear fashion, each moment in the narrative has the structure of a biblical parable. A parable is a short episode in the Bible that conveys meaning through short, direct stories for readers to interpret and relate to; parables are often meant to teach a lesson to the reader. Just as this style is meant to impart wisdom on readers of the Bible, Marrant uses it to teach his audiences in the same way that Wheatley writes imperatively. By centering the themes of his work on his religious experience, he appears to be preaching his religion by presenting his life as a series of lessons for the reader to learn from, starting with his life before Methodism, during his conversion, and those he encounters on his journeys as a preacher.

Parables are often used in Christian sermons during services and masses because they are able to be understood by a majority and present the thematic purpose in a concise, direct way. By using this style, Marrant's narrative has an overall tone of a religious proclamation, one similar to that of a sermon. This style is something that he could have picked up from George Whitefield because Whitefield writes his sermons as a conversation between himself and his people. He saw himself as a connection between his people and God, and he used his knowledge of sophisticated rhetoric to appeal to his audiences, which is what attracted such large crowds to him. Like Whitefield, Marrant writes to appeal to his audiences through a structure they are familiar with.

Marrant's story of his experience with the young girl's death and the result of her mother's conversion is one of his parables. He goes into great detail about her actions and characterizing her before her young death; he describes her acceptance of death and ends by saying, "[she] fell asleep in the arms of Jesus" (47). By saying she fell asleep in the arms of Jesus, Marrant is again making a reference to the biblical teaching of God sending his son Jesus

to die for the redemption of humanity and open the door to the afterlife, or heaven. This image puts the child and Jesus side-by-side to illustrate this concept to the reader. Wheatley demonstrates the subjects of her poems in similar ways to communicate this belief in redemption and path to the afterlife. She describes one young man as leaving Earth for, “joys to this terrestrial state unknown,/ And glories richer than the monarch’s crown!” (17-18) in her poem “To a Lady and her Children on the Death of their Son and Brother.” Although she does not mention the figure of Christ, she alludes to the redemption he has allowed for the child’s soul to reach heaven.

What is important to notice about these two references to the redemption of Christ in death is the figure they are concerned with. Both are writing about young children. Marrant allows for the idea that this young girl has great Faith and admires her by immortalizing her in his work. Wheatley likewise addresses the child in her poem, “On the Death of a Young Gentleman”, “WHO taught thee conflict with the pow’rs of night,/ To vanquish Satan in the fields of fight?” (1-2). By asking him how he vanquished Satan, she is implying that he had the Faith to refuse sin. Because the theme of redemption is so important to Methodism and to both the work of Marrant and Wheatley, both of their works reveal influences of Methodist beliefs in their work. Adding onto this, Marrant and Wheatley both exhibit a view toward childhood that was characteristic of Methodism. Their tone towards childhood became popularized by the Romantics and is not a qualifying factor of categorizing Romantic work.

Wheatley and the Romantic Child

The importance of recognizing Wheatley and Marrant’s views on childhood is that the “Romantic Child” has become an important touchstone Romantic poetry. In her book, *Reading Children’s Literature: A critical Introduction*, Carrie Hintz lays out the defining features of both

the Romantic Child and the Sinful Child. Historically, the Sinful Child, which is described as being, “in need of discipline and training.... Born corrupted by the original sin of Adam and Eve, easily swayed to do wrong, and susceptible to evil” (Hintz 18), dominated popular sentiment and was the way in which children were portrayed in literature before the Romantics. This image stemmed from the earlier denominations of Christianity like Calvinism, the doctrine from which Methodism split. This image of the sinful child did not allow for the glorification of youthful innocence that became popularized in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The importance of recognizing the shift in tone towards children as a result from the split from Calvinism is that the new image of children has become one of the more well-known aspects of Romanticism, and by tracing it back to Methodism, the argument can be made that parts of Romanticism came from Methodism. The importance of the shift in sentiment towards the child in religious denominations is the impact the portrayal has on society and literature. As we have seen, both Marrant and Wheatley participated in the evolving discourse of the Romantic child.

In 1690, John Locke first depicted the Romantic Child as having a mind like a “blank slate” (Hintz 15). Closer chronologically to Wheatley is Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s 1762 version of the child who “warns against forcing adult reason onto the child who is not ready for it” (15). The image of the Romantic child is a new view on the child as being born pure, without original sin and with opportunities to grow and develop. The Romantic poets such as Blake, Keats, Wordsworth, and Coleridge, all popularized and solidified the image of the Romantic child with depictions in their own work. One of the greatest examples is Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight,” which juxtaposes an older man with his infant son. The man looks at his son and addresses him:

Dear Babe, that sleepest cradled by my side,
Whose gentle breathings, heard in this deep calm,

Fill up the intersperséd vacancies
 And momentary pauses of the thought!
 My babe so beautiful! it thrills my heart
 With tender gladness, thus to look at thee. (44-59).

In this passage, Coleridge illustrates what the Romantic child is. He is “gentle,” “calm,” and enjoyable to look at and interact with. The rest of the poem goes on to explain the father’s desire for the son to stay a child because he himself looks so fondly on his own childhood. In this way he sees growing up as a curse because it means leaving childhood behind. This image contrasts to that of the sinful child that has the need “to be save[d], discipline[d], and educate[d]” (Hintz 19).

However, the Romantics did not invent the image of the Romantic child, they only popularized it in poetry. The attitude towards children was changing for a long period of time before it became the norm. Locke, in his 1690 book exemplifies how far back this image went even though it was over a hundred years before the image became so well-received. Because this attitude took a while to solidify in translation from societal norm as well from Europe to American, Wheatley’s early adoption of the sentiment serves as evidence for her ability to recognize change and what was popular in ethos. She wrote elegies specifically on the topic of children and only looks at their ability to get to heaven and be redeemed, not their suffering from original sin.

One of Wheatley’s most notable poems on childhood is “On the Death of a Young Lady of Five Years of Age,” in which she compares the child to “the morning sun, which rose divinely bright” (11). By describing the child as divine, Wheatley is demonstrating a much more positive tone towards the child in life as well as in death because of her certainty that the child was

brought to heaven after her death. In addition to Wheatley, John Marrant's depiction of the young girl of seven who passed away also exemplifies his confidence in her ability to get to heaven. They both are much more focused on the deceased's Faith rather than their age, which shows their acceptance of the children into the Faith. Just as Methodism was welcoming to all races and genders under one worship of God, children were also seen as equal. Not only was Methodism radical in its racial politics, but in its portrayal of the image of the child.

Tracing Wheatley's Methodist sentiment is important for understanding her work, but in order to establish her as an early adapter of Romanticism, her work must correspond to that which is classified canonically as Romanticism. Charlotte Turner, born in 1749, lived a short childhood. When she was sixteen years of age, her father married her to a man named Benjamin Smith. She referred to this marriage as "legal prostitution."¹³ Like her father, Benjamin Smith was a gambler and often found himself in debt, causing an unstable home life for his wife and children. She lived a difficult and turbulent life before and after the marriage but eventually, at the age of thirty-eight, Charlotte left Benjamin with their children and began supporting them with her writing (Fletcher 1). Today her name is not as widely recognized as it was when she was writing as a contemporary author; nevertheless, she remains as one of the earliest Romantic writers of the British literary tradition.

Charlotte Smith was a prolific writer who wrote numerous novels, novellas, children's books, and poems over her career as an artist. Some of her most famous and notable poems are her elegiac sonnets, which is an apparent paradox of style and form. The elegy is a lyric poem that is often written on the topic of death; contrastingly, the sonnet has often been associated

¹³ This quote comes from a letter Smith wrote while describing her marriage. Although this particular phrase has been quoted in a variety of sources, see *Charlotte Smith: A Critical Biography* but Lorraine Fletcher (1998).

with love. Putting this style and this form together can give a jarring and unsettled feeling to the poems, especially when read formalistically.

Unlike Wheatley, Smith was not in the practice of writing directly to others, neither using apostrophe nor sending her poems directly to their subjects. Instead, Smith would write to herself or about herself with deeply mournful tones. The importance of including Charlotte Smith in a reading about Phillis Wheatley is that she has been credited with her contribution to the Romantic Movement. Because this argument seeks to have Wheatley included in readings of Romantic poetry, it is appropriate to read her side-by-side with a credited Romantic for confirmation of style. Shields does this in his book, but he only reads Wheatley with Coleridge and Wordsworth and not with any Romantic women. I prefer to read Wheatley with Smith because she herself is underrepresented as a female poet in the movement.

Both women use the style of elegy to effectively create in their audiences a profound reflection on loss. Even though the audiences addressed in their respected poems are quite different, the topics written about by Wheatley and Smith are parallel to each other. Take for example Charlotte Smith's poem "Sonnet II," in which she perverts the expectations of Spring to elegize the childhood she felt she had lost. Although she speaks specifically about her own loss, the inability to relive childhood can be seen as universal to all adults who cannot return to what can be seen as a happier time of life. Likewise, Wheatley's poem "To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth, His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for North-America &c." says, "The silken reins, and *Freedom's* charm unfold./ Long lost to realms beneath the northern skies" (8-9). This is another one of her poems where she uses the allegory of a journey in order to express themes of freedom by moving from childhood to adulthood. What she is expressing in this quote is that by growing up, she has lost control of her only freedom, which can be seen as

freedom from knowledge of the world until her innocence was lost under the “northern skies” (9). This could be referring specifically to her youthful freedom which Vincent Carretta says, “would not have been very different had she been legally free” (22). It would have been only as she grew older that she would have become aware of the reality around that she was not as free as she grew up to believe.

Wheatley also wrote multiple poems using the imagery of childhood, especially when she elegizes those who passed away young. This is most explicitly seen in her poems, “On the DEATH of a Young Gentleman” and “On the Death of a Young Lady Five Years of Age.” Each of these poems directly consoles the loss of a young child, in one case a little girl and the other a little boy. In these poems, Wheatley elegizes the loss of childhood through the death of the child because they will never finish childhood or grow up. However, she finds consolation in the fact that they will never have this understanding of loss because by dying in childhood, they remain innocent to the world; their deaths occurred in the greatest and most pure part of life so when she speaks to her audience she is able to say, “Why would you wish your daughter back again?” (“On the Death of a Young Lady Aged Five Years” 26) and “How great thy conquest, and how bright they crown!” (“On the Death of a Young Gentleman” 4).

A hallmark of Romantic poetry is this idea of idealizing childhood. In “Sonnet II,” Smith shows her belief in this by expressing her deep grief towards her inability to reverse her life:

Ah! poor humanity! so frail, so fair,
 Are the fond visions of thy early day,
 Till tyrant passion and corrosive care
 Bid all thy fairy colours fade away! (9-12).

What she does in this poem is elegize humanity's inability to reverse time. We can only watch life fade away with age, and although spring comes back each year, there is no return to the beginning. She finishes the poem by saying "why has happiness-no second spring?" (14) to reiterate the point that although spring is annual, it is also linear and does not reset time.

Both poets are taken with the idea of childhood and idealize the time in one's life spent in innocence because they both lost out on a conventional childhood. Smith, as previously mentioned, was married off young. Wheatley was kidnapped from her home and although she was able to live a semblance of a childhood, she lost her innocence after that and could not go back to where she had been before. In a way, Smith elegizes them both by writing about all of humanity in her poem.

Although Smith's poems seem more dismal than optimistic, it is in her presentation of melancholy and mourning of life that she became so popular with her audiences. She, like many female authors of her time, became a trailblazer for diversity in a field that was male-dominated. However, her femininity worked in her favor when she received one outstanding review that compared her to the genius of John Milton.¹⁴ Claire Knowles writes about the legacy of Charlotte Smith and her position in relation to a group of poets called the Della Cruscans. However, her focus is upon the doubtless sincerity of Smith's poems. She explains Smith in contrast to the Della Cruscans by saying, "Whereas the Della Cruscans revel in their theatricality, the overtly theatrical elements of both Smith's performance of sensibility and her poetic self-representation are veiled by her apparent claims to sincerity" (50). What is important about this fact is that Smith did not rely on the popular tradition of poetry of her time; rather, she stayed

¹⁴ This review can be found in the book *Sensibility and Female Poetic Tradition, 1780-1860: The Legacy of Charlotte Smith* by Claire Knowles on page 42, chapter two where she discusses the response Smith found when she published her work.

true to herself as an individual poet, and it is in her individualistic and straightforward sincerity where she found most of her popularity. It is her strong voice and personal narrative that helped to bring her recognition. In this way, she was very much like Wheatley because neither of them had a literary tradition to back them up: each had to create her own tradition. In the end, Smith became one of the first Romantic poets and Wheatley began the African American canon.

Even though neither Smith nor Wheatley let on to all of the perceived autobiographical elements of their work, the raw and tangible emotion that they describe helps audiences look beyond the speaker to try to imagine the life of the author. The autobiographical nature is the poets' perception of a lost or unfulfilled childhood which allowed them to write with the deeper emotion that which was well-received by their readers. However, what if Smith were not writing simply to exhale some of her pain? What if she were doing this on purpose to evoke sympathy from her audiences and gain support? Jaqueline Labbe explores this possibility in her book *Charlotte Smith: Romanticism, Poetry and the Culture of Gender*. She refers to Smith as being "Self-aware" (6) and discusses Smith's "desire to enlist a kind of gendered sympathy from her readers: that as a woman writing, with female needs, she required a certain kind of response" (6).

Parallel to Labbe's theory on Smith is Joanna Brook's argument that Wheatley was also self-aware and that she also knew what she was doing when she was writing individualized poems to members of her audience and taking commissions. "Our Phillis, Ourselves" is Brooks's argument that because of the historical evidence that debunks Wheatley's "trial," Phillis was enabled to pursue her career "not by securing a single endorsement by powerful men, but by cultivating an intricate network of relationships among white women" (7-8). She goes on to give evidence in this piece that Wheatley used social connections to better popularize her work. This

is comparable to what Labbe says about Smith that she would look to the emotions of other women to become popularized.

Daniel Robinson in his piece “Elegiac Sonnets: Charlotte Smith’s Formal Paradox,” he cannot help but discuss the effect of her work beyond her form and style of writing. He states:

In other words, where we look in vain for Smith lamenting a particular death, we find instead her readers grieving for her pain, in effect, mourning for her. The contemporary response evident in the reviews and certain poetic tributes to Smith is founded to a large degree in sympathy for the suffering expressed in the sonnets, combined with either a real or imagined comprehension of the poet's personal misfortunes. (Robinson 195)

Although Labbe and Robinson discuss Smith exclusively, these same arguments can be applied to Wheatley after laying out evidence that she was an agent of change who could perceive what her audience desired and play to their emotions. This goes back to Brooks’ idea of using her poetry as an emotional transaction to validate the pain and sadness of the grieving white audiences around her.

Conclusion

Phillis Wheatley, credited as one of the first poets of the African American canon of American literature, is one of many writers who is categorized as a contributor to a single area of literature. Her work goes far beyond that of an African American author; it transcends one category, which is why I’ve laid out evidence for why she should not only be read this one way, but as a Romantic poet as well. She was writing before the Romantic poet in history, but art movements do not originate over night. They take years to form and require artists to lay the foundation. Phillis Wheatley was one of the poets to do this for Romanticism. Even though she

was writing before the historical movement, her work qualifies as Romantic specifically because of her tone towards childhood which echoes that which is seen in the work of Charlotte Smith.

Helen Boyles has written about the influence Methodism had on Romanticism but in her argument Wheatley does not appear. Her work, however, can be applied to Wheatley to help show the connections of the broader movements while she serves as a direct textual bridge between them. Wheatley is a key factor in bridging these two movements because she can be read in context with George Whitefield, an early Methodist preacher and John Marrant, one of her contemporaries and also in context with Charlotte Smith, one of the earliest credited Romantics. The key factor that links Wheatley from Methodist to Romantic is her use of the Romantic child in her work which is seen in both Marrant's and Smith's work.

John C. Shields argues Wheatley to have been a Romantic but he looks at the Philosophical basis of her work and the Romantic period and only reads her in context with white male poets. Bringing Charlotte Smith into the conversation is important to compare the two women in a feminist sense. Similar to this is the importance of John Marrant because Wheatley also needs to be read within her own race and with a contemporary of a more similar outlook or understanding of the world. Finally, it has been extremely important to contextualize Wheatley in a much smaller window of time. Shields reads Wheatley in context with ancient philosophers, which is appropriate for a writer as versed in the classics as was Wheatley, but in order to understand the intricacies of her work, it is important to read her with people writing closer to her own time who would have had more historically similar outlooks of the world. By presenting this evidence, the goal was to supplement these two previously published works with an unexplored avenue.

Phillis Wheatley was an incredible young female poet who had a thoroughly unorthodox education for her time. Because of this, she was able to read and write English and go on to write poetry that is still read more than three hundred years later. Although her work has been interpreted in many different ways, one of the most poignant parts of her work is the deep faith that she expresses. She uses her faith to present harsh images of death and childhood and like Charlotte Smith, reveals information about herself like her beliefs that she missed out on her childhood. This subject is important in learning more about her and the time in which she grew up in. In her poetry, Wheatley is able to convey to the reader different attitudes she picked up on among her peers by expressing them in her writing. In this way, she was an agent of change who helped shape African American Literature and Romantic Literature as it is studied today.

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