

Phillis Wheatley

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Phillis Wheatley (1753-84) was an African American poet who was sold into the slave trade in North America as a child. Wheatley is best known for her work in the genre of elegy, which is a short poem occasioned by the death of a person. Elegies are meant to be reflective, as well as to show grief for the dead and offer consolation to the living. Wheatley's elegies largely focus on children. Critics have noted that the role children played in the American Revolution largely influenced how readers at the time interpreted her work (Hodgson 665). Wheatley's public presence among her audience, prior to the American Revolution, was in what Astrid Franke calls a "delicate balance" between groups such as "evangelical revivalists and more secular-minded readers" (234). Religion is as important to Wheatley's writing as social and political influences.

"A Funeral Poem on the Death of C.E. an Infant of Twelve Months" is from Wheatley's 1773 published collection *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious, and Moral*. It consists of thirty-nine poems, twelve of which are elegies, and was published in England when Wheatley travelled there in hopes of getting medical help. It was there that she met Selina Hastings, a religious leader who got Wheatley's work published. In this poem, Wheatley addresses Charles Eliot and his parents. Wheatley tries to console Charles's parents by telling them he is in a better place. The poem is written in heroic couplets, with the exception of two triplets. I have reproduced her bracket markings from the original poem.

Wheatley was sold to a family who provided her with education within the home and mentorship that gave her the ability to develop her voice as a poet and become a published writer as a young adult. Her owners emancipated Wheatley when she entered adulthood, and she married and had children before passing from long-term illness. At a time when the world needs to celebrate the success stories of African Americans amidst the reality of racially motivated injustices, it is important to bring Wheatley into the conversation. Passing on her story of triumph and excellence despite her circumstances is one that generations to come should know and appreciate.

References

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Further Reading

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“A Funeral Poem on the Death of C.E., an Infant of
Twelve Months”¹

Through airy roads he wings his instant flight
 To purer regions of celestial light;
 Enlarg'd he sees unnumber'd systems² roll,
 Beneath him sees the universal whole,
 Planets on planets run their destin'd round, 5
 And circling wonders fill the vast profound.
 Th' ethereal now, and now th' empyreal skies³
 With growing splendors strike his wond'ring eyes:
 The angels view him with delight unknown,
 Press his soft hand, and seat him on his throne; 10
 Then smiling thus: “To this divine abode,
 The seat of saints, of seraphs,⁴ and of God,
 Thrice welcome thou.” The raptur'd babe replies,
 “Thanks to my God, who snatch'd me to the skies,
 Ere⁵ vice triumphant had possess'd my heart, 15
 Ere yet the tempter⁶ had beguil'd my heart,
 Ere yet on sin's base actions I was bent,
 Ere yet I knew temptation's dire intent;
 Ere yet the lash for horrid crimes I felt,
 Ere vanity had led my way to guilt, 20
 But, soon arriv'd at my celestial goal,
 Full glories rush on my expanding soul.”

¹ From *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, edited from the *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online* (ECCO) database.

² Solar systems.

³ The highest part of heaven.

⁴ A rank of angels.

⁵ Before. The first published version contains what seems to be the mistaken spelling “E'er.”

⁶ Satan.

Joyful he spoke: exulting cherubs⁷ round
 Clapt their glad wings, the heav'nly vaults resound.
 Say, parents, why this unavailing moan? 25
 Why heave your pensive bosoms with the groan?
 To *Charles*, the happy subject of my song,
 A brighter world, and nobler strains belong.
 Say would you tear him from the realms above
 By thoughtless wishes, and prepost'rous love? 30
 Doth this felicity increase your pain?
 Or could you welcome to this world again
 The heir of bliss? with a superior air
 Methinks he answers with a smile severe,
 "Thrones and dominions⁸ cannot tempt me there." } 35
 But still you cry, "Can we the sigh forbear,
 And still and still must we not pour the tear?
 Our only hope, more dear than vital breath,
 Twelve moons revolv'd, becomes the prey of death;
 Delightful infant, nightly visions give 40
 Thee to our arms, and we with joy receive,
 We fain⁹ would clasp the *Phantom*¹⁰ to our breast,
 The *Phantom* flies, and leaves the soul unblest."
 To yon bright regions let your faith ascend, }
 Prepare to join your dearest infant friend 45
 In pleasures without measure, without end. }

⁷ A different rank of angels.

⁸ More ranks of angels. May also be a reference to Colossians 1:16.

⁹ Gladly.

¹⁰ "Phantom" and "Charles" are the only words italicized, creating a parallel between them.



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