

“Phillis Wheatley’s First Effort”

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BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH AT THE MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY HAS DISCOVERED IN THE 1773 DIARY OF JEREMY BELKNAP (1744–98), a Congregationalist clergyman, what is likely a text by Phillis Wheatley that predates any known before now.¹ Belknap’s diary is interleaved in *Bickerstaff’s Boston Almanack. For the Year of Our Lord, 1773*. The last page includes a twenty-word poem in Belknap’s hand that he identifies as “Phillis Wheatley’s first Effort——AD 1765. Æ 11.” Belknap transcribes the text twice. The first version is in three lines, as if he could not decide whether it was prose or poetry, with an inserted two-word phrase placed above the first line and located by a caret below it:

Unto Salvation
M^{rs} Thacher’s Son is gone, her Daughter too
so I conclude
They are both gone to be renewed

Belknap’s second transcription, immediately following the first, presents the text as a four-line poem, framed in the manuscript by an opening bracket:

M^{rs} Thacher’s Son is gone
Unto Salvation
Her daughter too, so I conclude
They are both gone to be renewed

The two transcriptions were made at different times. The three-line version is written in dark ink. The four-line poem and the “Unto Salvation” added to the three-line version are written in a lighter-colored ink.

Mrs. Thacher (d. 30 Jan. 1776), the former Bathsheba Doggett, was the widow of John Kent of Boston when she married a widower, Oxenbridge Thacher, Sr. (1681–1772), as his second wife, in 1740. Her seventeen-year-old daughter, Sarah, married his twenty-one-year-old son, Oxenbridge Thacher, Jr. (1719–65), the following year. Consequently, Oxenbridge Thacher, Jr., was the “Son” of Mrs. Oxenbridge Thacher, Sr., in two senses: he was her stepson and her son-in-law. Oxenbridge Thacher, Jr., and his wife lived in central Boston,

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a couple of streets west of the home of Wheatley's owners, John and Susanna Wheatley, and their adult twins, Mary and Nathaniel. Oxenbridge Thacher, Jr., a well-respected Boston lawyer, was also a prominent and promising local politician. Like John Wheatley before him and Nathaniel Wheatley after, Oxenbridge Thacher, Jr., held various town offices. He was an early proponent of colonial rights and one of Boston's four representatives in the Massachusetts General Assembly when he died. Sarah Thacher died on 4 July 1764 at her father-in-law's house in Milton, Massachusetts (*Boston Gazette and Country Journal* 9 July 1764), a victim of the small-pox epidemic that struck Boston in 1764. Oxenbridge Thacher, Jr., who apparently never recovered from the side effects of having been inoculated against the disease, died on 9 July 1765 in Boston, "after a long languishment" (*Massachusetts Gazette and Boston News-letter* 11 July 1765).

There are many grounds for accepting Belknap's attribution of the verses on the deaths of Mr. and Mrs. Thacher to an eleven-year-old Phillis Wheatley. The poem would thus be the first of nineteen elegies we could now assign to her (not including variants of several of those). It would also be the first of her many occasional poems—that is, her earliest poem written in response to a recent event. The brevity, style, genre, content, and allusions of the piece all point to Phillis Wheatley as its author in 1765. The succession of brief clauses, the staccato rhythm, and the nearly successful attempt to write couplets are typical of juvenilia, especially by someone who had lived in an English-speaking environment for only four years. As a brief occasional elegy on the death of a Boston notable, the lines in Belknap's diary anticipate the most common type of poem found among Wheatley's later works. Not surprisingly, the emphasis on private and domestic loss in the poem contrasts with the concentration on public and political loss found in fourteen lines titled "Written Extempore, on Hearing of the Death of Oxenbridge Thacher, Esq.; on a Supposed View of the Corps," by "S. Y." and published in the *Boston News-letter and New England Chronicle* on 18 July 1765. As one might expect from a young girl, the pious sentiment expressed

in the piece that Belknap attributes to Wheatley concerns only the surviving mother and her late children. Though still alive, Oxenbridge Thacher, Sr., is overlooked. If Wheatley wrote the poem, she may have ignored the father because he had been living in Milton for several years and thus was unfamiliar to her. Sarah and Oxenbridge Thacher, Jr., on the other hand, were members of the Congregationalist Old South Church, which Phillis Wheatley formally joined in 1771. Writing an elegy on their deaths effectively highlighted the spiritual community the author shared with them.

Belknap, who founded the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1791, knew Wheatley, or at least knew of her, before 1773. He was sent a variant manuscript version of her elegy on the death of Joseph Sewall (1688–1769), a Congregationalist clergyman, which is now at Dartmouth College. The Thacher and Sewall elegies may have reached Belknap through a source or sources other than Wheatley. Belknap was living in New Hampshire in 1765, when the lines on the Thachers would have been written by an eleven-year-old Wheatley, as well as in 1773, when he transcribed them. But he frequently visited Boston, his hometown, during that period. More significantly perhaps, he maintained a close relationship with his uncle, Mather Byles (1707–88), a major published colonial poet who resided in Boston. An amateur poet himself in his youth, Belknap imitated Byles in his own early attempts at poetry. Byles also served as a model for Wheatley, whom he encouraged as a poet, and he is one of the eighteen Boston worthies who attested in print to the authenticity of her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, published in London in 1773.² Before the twentieth century, amateur authors, particularly women, often circulated their writings in manuscript before, or instead of, having them printed. Pride in their slave's precocious efforts may have motivated the Wheatleys to share them with members of the Boston literati. The publication of Wheatley's *Poems* and Belknap's familiarity with at least one of her earlier elegies may have prompted him to seek more information about her in 1773, and his uncle was clearly in a position to inform him about her progress as an aspiring author.

Assuming that the lines Jeremy Belknap recorded in his diary in 1773 are indeed by Phillis Wheatley and assuming that she composed them shortly after the death of Oxenbridge Thacher, Jr., in 1765, they constitute her earliest known piece of writing of any kind. Until now, her earliest writings were thought to be the missing “On the Death of the Rev. Dr. Sewall, When Sick, 1765,” included in her 1772 “Proposals,” and her missing letter to Samson Occom. John Wheatley mentions the latter in his letter prefacing her *Poems*, but he misdates it 1765 rather than 1766. Belknap apparently accurately described the lines he recorded in 1773 as “Phillis Wheatley’s first Effort.”

NOTES

1. I very gratefully thank the National Endowment for the Humanities and the John Carter Brown Library for the fellowship support that made this research possible. I am equally grateful to the Massachusetts Historical Society for granting me permission to reproduce the poem.

2. On the probable influence of Byles on Wheatley, see Shields.

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