

John Hanson

Reading  
Phillis Wheatley  
in New England  
Burial Grounds



Published according to Act of Parliament, Sept. 1, 1773 by Arch<sup>d</sup>. Bell,  
Bookfeller N<sup>o</sup> 8 near the Saracens Head Aldgate.

## Reading Early Epitaphs

Take a look at this gravestone for John Treat, a Connecticut man who died in 1794. It is a fine memorial, and it would have been expensive – stonecutters charged by the word. It was meant to be read in perpetuity, by Treat's descendants and his community.

The epitaph verse merits careful reading:

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*Though Earth to Earth & dust to dust return  
And Silent sorrow sits to guard the Urn  
Yet moves the Soul through Ether confin'd  
Thrice happy state of the immortal mind  
While Angel guards lead on their shining way  
To fairer Mansions of unclouded day  
In bliss to dwell till the last Trump shall sound  
Shall clear the skies, and shake the solid ground  
The Elect Redeemed shall wing their Aerial flight  
To reign forever in the realms of light.*

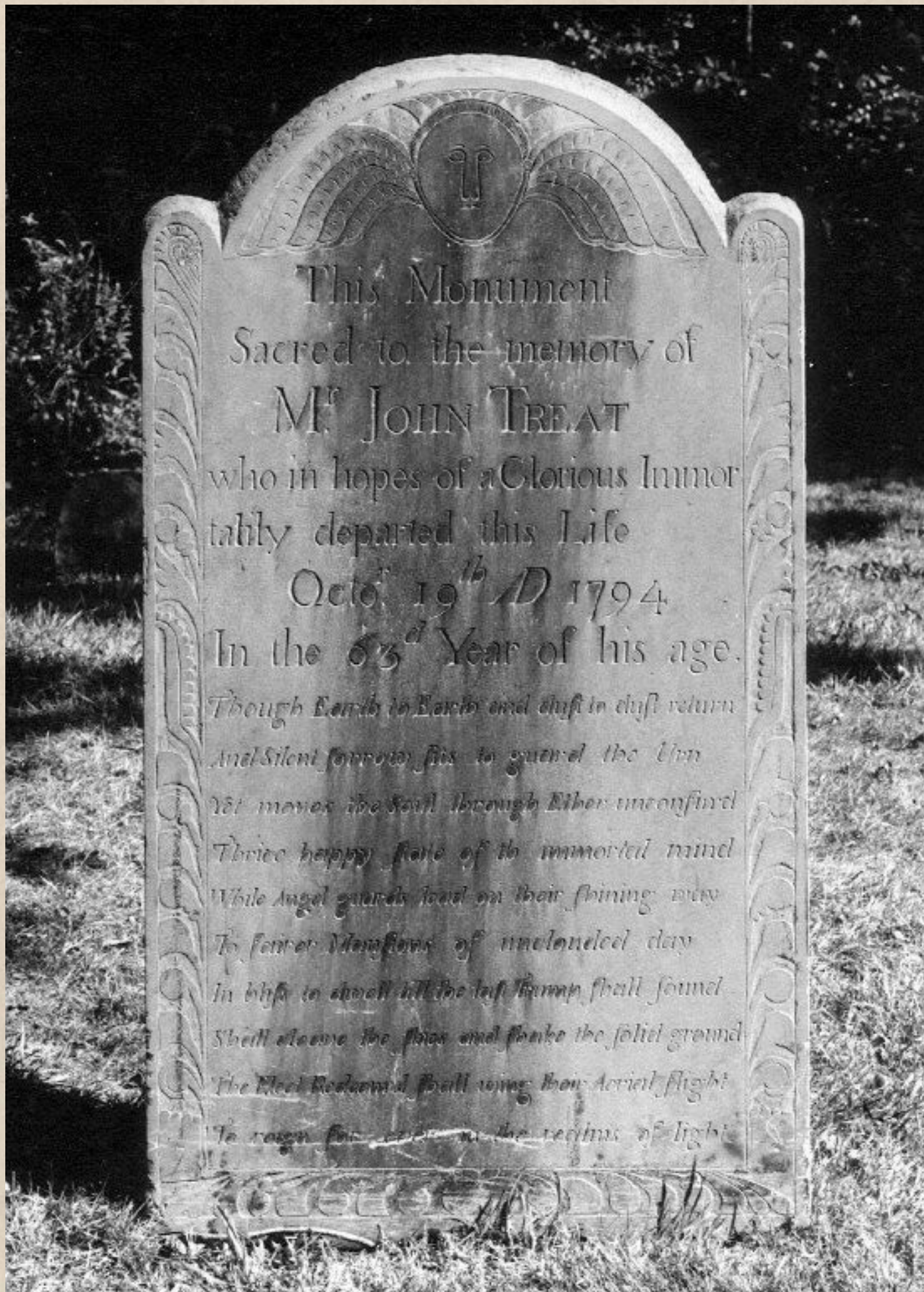


Image Credit: American Antiquarian Society

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# Consider the Text

## What are the words telling us?

See how the epitaph provides an detailed narrative of the soul's step-by-step progress from death to eternal paradise.

The first two lines earth-bound, static, with a Biblical reference to "Earth to Earth and dust to dust." Sorrow, like an immobile statue, guards the urn that holds John Treat's ashes.

Next his soul moves through the ether to a land where a parade of angels marches it to mansions in the sky.

Then, after a period of paradise, the trumpet sounds, and the ground shakes and the Elect depart for eternity in realms of light. Truly a dynamic tour de force of devotional writing. And while it is mostly an original composition, it also borrows from a published poem...

## Treat Epitaph Text

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And Silent sorrow sits to guard the Urn  
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The Elect Redeemed shall wing their Aerial flight  
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To the Rev. Mr. *Pitkin*, on the  
DEATH of his LADY.

WHERE Contemplation finds her sacred Spring ;  
Where heav'nly Music makes the Centre ring ;  
Where Virtue reigns unfulled, and divine ;  
Where Wisdom thron'd, and all the Graces shine ;  
There sits thy Spouse, amid the glitt'ring Throng ;  
There central Beauty feasts the ravish'd Tongue ;  
With recent Powers, with recent glories crown'd,  
The Choirs angelic meet her Welcome round.

The virtuous Dead, demand a grateful Tear---  
But cease thy Grief a-while, thy Tears forbear,  
Not thine alone, the Sorrow I relate,  
Thy blooming Off-spring feel the mighty Weight ;  
Thus, from the Bosom of the tender Vine,  
The Branches torn, fall, wither, sink supine.

Now flies the Soul, thro' Æther unconfin'd.  
Thrice happy State of the immortal Mind !  
Still in thy Breast tumultuous Passions rise,  
And urge the lucent Torrent from thine Eyes.  
Amidst the Seats of Heaven, a Place is free  
Among those bright angelic Ranks for thee.  
For thee, they wait---and with expectant Eye,  
Thy Spouse leans forward from th' ethereal Sky,  
Thus in my Hearing, " Come away, " she cries,  
" Partake the sacred Raptures of the Skies !  
" Our Bliss divine, to Mortals is unknown,  
" And endless Scenes of Happiness our own ;  
" May the dear Off-spring of our earthly Love,  
" Receive Assistance to the Joys above !

" Attune the Harp to more than mortal Lays,  
" And pay with us, the Tribute of their Praise  
" To Him, who died, dread Justice to appease,  
" Which reconcil'd, holds Mercy in Embrace ;  
" Creation too, her MAKER'S Death bemoan'd,  
" Retir'd the Sun, and deep the Centre groan'd,  
" He in his Death slew ours, and as he rose,  
" He crush'd the Empire of our hated Foes.  
" How vain their Hopes to put the God to flight,  
" And render Vengeance to the Sons of Light !"

Thus having spoke she turn'd away her Eyes,  
Which beam'd celestial Radiance o'er the Skies.

Let Grief no longer damp the sacred Fire,  
But rise sublime, to equal Bliss aspire ;

# A Source for the Text

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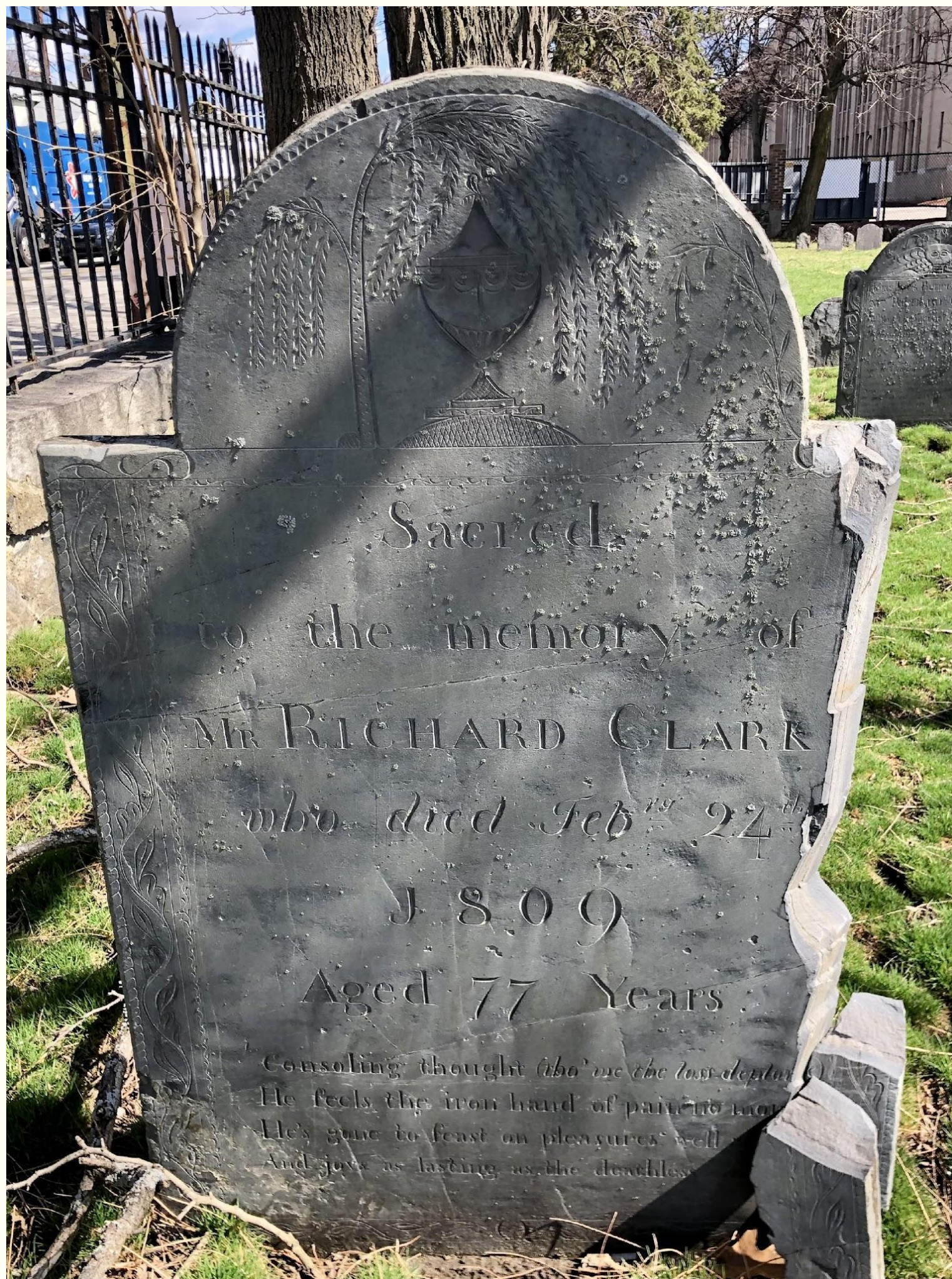
# Working with Wheatley's Words

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We see that whoever composed this remarkable epitaph borrowed two lines (without attribution) from a funeral ode by Phillis Wheatley: Lines 3 and 4 of the Treat memorial can be found in lines 15 and 16 of "On the Death of his Lady."

We can only try to imagine how Wheatley's poem traveled from Boston to Connecticut as a broadside (as shown in the previous slide) or in an anthology, distributed via traveling peddlers and journals and almanacs, and finally eventually was read by the now-anonymous writer who composed John Treat's epitaph.

# Reading Early Epitaphs



Here's another example of a Wheatley poem incorporated into an epitaph, on the gravestone of Richard Clark, who died in 1809 in Watertown, Massachusetts:

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*Consoling thought (tho' we the loss deplore)  
He feels the iron hand of pain no more  
He's gone to feast on pleasures well refin'd  
And joys as lasting as the deathless mind.*

*ON THE DEATH OF A YOUNG LADY  
OF FIVE YEARS OF AGE.*

FROM dark abodes to fair ethereal light  
Th' enraptur'd innocent has wing'd her flight;  
On the kind bosom of eternal love  
She finds unknown beatitude above.

This known, ye parents, nor her loss deplore,  
She feels the iron hand of pain no more;  
The dispensations of unerring grace,  
Should turn your sorrows into grateful praise;  
Let then no tears for her henceforward flow,  
No more distress'd in our dark vale below.

Her morning sun, which rose divinely bright,  
Was quickly mantled with the gloom of night;  
But hear in heav'n's blest bow'rs your *Nancy* fair,  
And learn to imitate her language there.

The first and second lines of the epitaph in the previous slide are taken from another Wheatley poem.

The fourth line, incidentally, is from an old hymn that begins "The Lord of life and glory stands".

Who put all this verse together? We will likely never know, but it must have been a sincerely religious person. She or he was clearly familiar with contemporary hymns *and* the devotional poetry of Phyllis Wheatley.

This composition gives us another glimpse of the dense weave of writing, reading, and public and private devotions in early New England.

In Memory of  
M A R C Y G O R D O N  
daur of Mr John  
& Mrs Hannah Gordon  
who died August 12  
1 7 8 3  
aged 20 months.

In memory of  
WILLIAM W GORDON  
who died July 6<sup>th</sup>  
1 7 8 9  
Æ 3 years & 9 months

In Memory \*\*  
H A N N A H G O R D O N  
who died December 31<sup>st</sup>  
1 7 8 7  
Æ 14 days

“ Through airy roads they wing their infant flight,  
“ From dark abodes to fair ethereal light,  
“ The enraptured innocents has wing<sup>d</sup> their way,  
“ To purer regions of Celestial day.  
“ The Angels view them with delight unknown,  
“ Press their soft hands & seat them on their throne,  
“ Thrice welcom, now the enraptured Babes replies  
“ Thanks to our God who snatch<sup>d</sup> us to the skies.

## A Complicated Composition

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Here's an inscription from King's Chapel Burying Ground in Boston, Massachusetts, for two sisters and a brother, all of whom died in infancy – a sad but common circumstance at the time. The stone is no longer standing; this image is taken from a 19th century book of transcriptions.

We have seen the second line of this epitaph on the previous slide, in *On the Death of a Young Lady*.

Other lines use language from another Wheatley poem....



# Working with Wheatley's Text

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Look at how hard the person who composed the epitaph worked to weave in Wheatley's imagery and language – and how carefully he or she must have read the poems.

It is a tribute to the power of Phillis Wheatley's writing that her words helped this bereaved person process their grief.

“ Through airy roads they wing their infant flight,  
“ From dark abodes to fair etherial light,  
“ The enraptured innocents has wing<sup>1</sup> their way,  
“ To purer regions of Celestial day.  
“ The Angels view them with delight unknown,  
“ Press their soft hands & seat them on their throne,  
“ Thrice welcom, now the enraptured Babes replies  
“ Thanks to our God who snatch<sup>d</sup> us to the skies.

## *A FUNERAL POEM ON THE DEATH OF C. E. AN INFANT OF TWELVE MONTHS.*

{ THROUGH airy roads he wings his instant flight  
To purer regions of celestial light;  
Enlarg'd he sees unnumber'd systems roll,  
Beneath him sees the universal whole,  
Planets on planets run their destin'd round,  
And circling wonders fill the vast profound.  
Th' ethereal now, and now th' empyreal skies  
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;  
Then smiling thus. “To this divine abode,  
“The seat of saints, of seraphs, and of God,  
{ “Thrice welcome thou.” The raptur'd babe replies,  
“Thanks to my God, who snatch'd me to the skies,  
“E'er vice triumphant had possess'd my heart,  
“E'er yet the tempter had beguil'd my heart,  
“E'er yet on sin's base actions I was bent,  
“E'er yet I knew temptation's dire intent;  
“E'er yet the lash for horrid crimes I felt,  
“E'er vanity had led my way to guilt,  
“But, soon arriv'd at my celestial goal,

TO A LADY AND HER CHILDREN, ON  
THE DEATH OF HER SON AND  
THEIR BROTHER.

O'erwhelming sorrow now demands my song:  
From death the overwhelming sorrow sprung.  
What flowing tears? What hearts with grief opprest?  
What sighs on sighs heave the fond parent's breast?  
The brother weeps, the hapless sisters join  
Th' increasing woe, and swell the crystal brine;  
The poor, who once his gen'rous bounty fed,  
Droop, and bewail their benefactor dead.  
In death the friend, the kind companion lies,  
And in one death what various comfort dies!

Th' unhappy mother sees the sanguine rill  
Forget to flow, and nature's wheels stand still,  
But see from earth his spirit far remov'd,  
And know no grief recal's your best-belov'd:  
He, upon pinions swifter than the wind,  
Has left mortality's sad scenes behind  
For joys to this terrestrial state unknown,  
And glories richer than the monarch's crown.  
Of virtue's steady course the prize behold!  
What blissful wonders to his mind unfold!  
But of celestial joys I sing in vain:  
Attempt not, muse, the too advent'rous strain.

No more in briny show'rs, ye friends around,  
Or bathe his clay, or waste them on the ground:  
Still do you weep, still wish for his return?  
How cruel thus to wish, and thus to mourn?

Here is one last example, from  
Beverly Massachusetts, from yet  
another Wheatley poem.

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IN MEMORY OF  
M<sup>r</sup>. EZRA TRASK FOSTER,  
who departed this Life  
Nov<sup>r</sup> 6<sup>th</sup> 1789, In the  
38<sup>th</sup> year of his age.

*In death the friend the kind companion lies  
And in one death what various comfort dies  
On his cold bosom drop a tender tear (here  
Who foremost walk'd the scenes of friendship  
How humbled in the dust so all must die,  
But virtue triumphs o'er mortality.*

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All these memorials demonstrate how widely and how thoroughly Wheatley's poems were read in her time, and how they were internalized by those readers and then put to deliberate, didactic use in the distinctive context of epigraphy.

Scholars today can and should interrogate the relationship between herself and her contemporary readers.

But in the case of these six deaths, we have indisputable evidence that Wheatley's words helped these early Congregationalists express, with moving eloquence, their deepest feelings of sorrow, love, loss, and hope.

## Mourning With Wheatley's Words

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