

### Introductory Biographies

**Author:** [Dr Katarina Stenke](#) is a Senior Lecturer in Eighteenth-Century English Literature at the University of Greenwich, where she teaches and supervises at BA, MA and PhD levels. Since completing her PhD (University of Cambridge, 2012) on eighteenth-century long poems, Dr Stenke has published peer-reviewed articles and chapters in the *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, *Studies in the Literary Imagination* and elsewhere on topics such as: being subversive in eighteenth-century religious verse; connections between orientalism and parochialism; and representations of mazes and statues in eighteenth-century poetry. Her current project is an intersectional, cross-genre study of elegy in women's poetry in the long eighteenth century.

**Title:** "'Suspend the Sigh, dear Sir, and check the Groan': gender-subversive voice and address in Phillis Wheatley Peters' elegies".

**Author:** Abigail Zitin is Associate Professor of English at Rutgers University and author of *Practical Form: Abstraction, Technique, and Beauty in Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics* (Yale 2020). Her essays have appeared in *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, *ELH*, and *differences*, and another is soon to appear in *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*. (If you like, you can add that I'm heading to San Juan after ISECS, where I'll be talking about a course I taught that paired Wheatley with Daniel Defoe; that's at the upcoming meeting of the Defoe Society, organized in partnership with the Early Caribbean Society.)

**Title:** Lost Letters? Phillis Wheatley Peters and the Verse Epistle

**Author:** Amelia Worsley, Amherst College, [aworsley@amherst.edu](mailto:aworsley@amherst.edu)

Amelia Worsley is an Assistant Professor of English at Amherst College. She is author of *Singing by Herself: Lonely Poets in the Long Eighteenth Century* (forthcoming, Cornell UP) and co-editor of a forthcoming Special Issue of *Romantic Circles Praxis, Teaching Romantic Abolitionist and Antislavery literatures: Pedagogies and Contexts*, on pedagogical approaches to Romantic Abolition texts.

**Title:** Allusion as Critique in Phillis Wheatley Peters' "On Imagination"

## ISECS, Rome, 2023 Abstracts and Bibliographies.

[Dr Katarina Stenke](#) is a Senior Lecturer in Eighteenth-Century English Literature at the University of Greenwich,

### ABSTRACT / RESUMÉ / BREVE SINTESI

**Title: "“Suspend the Sigh, dear Sir, and check the Groan”:** gender-subversive voice and address in Phillis Wheatley Peters’ elegies”.

**Abstract:** This paper illuminates the politics of voice in Boston poet Phillis Wheatley’s neoclassical elegies in *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) and from among her uncollected works.

As the first African-born woman to publish a poetry collection in English, Wheatley’s oeuvre has long been of interest to scholars of Early American and eighteenth-century British literary history, and her fiercely eloquent yet politic protests against the injustices of chattel slavery are key texts in the African-American canon. Although the rhetoric and politics of Wheatley’s elegies have been compellingly analysed by scholars including Gregory Rigby, Isani Mukhtar Ali and, more recently, Andrea Haslanger and Antonio T. Bly, scholarship on Wheatley has yet to connect these insights into Wheatley’s “sass” (Bly, 2018) to the gender-ambiguous rhetoric of lament that allowed eighteenth-century English-speaking Protestant women to use neoclassical elegy as a vehicle for political debate in the public sphere.

Adopting a gender-ambiguous elegiac voice derived from classical and neoclassical sources, Wheatley both ventriloquizes *and* re-codes a set of “antique” metrical patterns, rhetorical figures and religio-literary allusions. In this strategy of “subversive affirmation,”<sup>1</sup> the authority long sought by eighteenth-century female elegists is ironized by being voiced by a woman who, as chattelized, is doubly disenfranchised. This results not only in an ironic Du Boisian “double” voice, as critics have long argued, but – taking voice here to mean “the interplay of rhetoric and tropes” (Reed, 2017) – produces a critical deconstruction of eighteenth-century feminine lyric voice as paradoxically disenfranchised yet authoritative and, thus, complicit. Christian death, as occasion, provides the context and alibi for this subversion.

### Brief indicative bibliography:

Bassard, Katherine Clay, *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender, and Community in Early African American Women’s Writing* (Princeton UP, 1999)

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Andrea Haslanger, “First Words, Last Words: Phillis Wheatley’s Elegies to Children,”

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<sup>1</sup> For this term, borrowed from the field of political history, see S. E. Wilmer, “Subversive Identification and Over-Identification,” in *Performing Statelessness in Europe* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69173-2\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69173-2_7).

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for panel 43, "Phillis Wheatley: Rethinking Legacies of the Enlightenment through Antiquity

## **ABSTRACT / RESUMÉ / BREVE SINTESI**

### **Lost Letters? Phillis Wheatley Peters and the Verse Epistle**

This presentation considers Wheatley's poems in relation to the literary genre of the verse epistle, asking why, despite her frequent use of figures of address, she did not seem to position herself more explicitly as an inheritor of the Horatian epistolary tradition, a tradition channeled in the eighteenth century by Alexander Pope and other British poets we know Wheatley to have read. I read "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth" as a verse epistle in fact if not in name, and I adduce some criteria for that categorization, making reference along the way to other, comparable poems as well as to her prose correspondence.

Understanding the verse epistle in an expanded literary-historical context is, I argue, essential for understanding Wheatley Peters's oeuvre and ambitions (her second book, never published, was, after all, to have been "a Volume of Poems And Letters"). I consider the permeable boundary between public and private correspondence to be even more salient than the distinction between verse and prose. Finally, I suggest that reading some of Wheatley's works as Horatian epistles might give rise to a surprising genre attribution for contemporary epistolary poetry in the vein of Honorée Fanonne Jeffers's "Lost Letters": these poems, which speculate on the unexpressed feelings of Wheatley Peters and the historical actors surrounding her, bear comparison with Ovid's proto-novelistic *Heroides*.

### **Bibliography**

Bynum, Tara. *Reading Pleasures: Everyday Black Living in Early America*. University of Illinois Press, 2023

Deutsch, Helen. "Dismantl'd Souls: The Verse Epistle, Embodied Subjectivity, and Poetic Animation," in *Vital Matters: Eighteenth-Century Views of Conception, Life, and Death*, ed. Deutsch and Mary Terrall. University of Toronto Press, 2012.

Overton, Bill. *The Eighteenth-Century Verse Epistle*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Waldstreicher, David. *The Odyssey of Phillis Wheatley*. FSG, forthcoming March 2023.

Wheatley, Phillis. *The Writings of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Vincent Carretta. Oxford University Press, 2019

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### **Allusion as Critique in Phillis Wheatley Peters' "On Imagination"**

#### **ABSTRACT / RESUMÉ / BREVE SINTESI**

When Phillis Wheatley Peters alludes to classical texts, she often also references the way in which her contemporaries have cited these works, in a kind of palimpsest of allusion. Paying attention to the specificity of these allusions often reveals further depths to the biting irony her texts are known to display.

In her well-known poem "On Imagination," for instance, Wheatley Peters overlays references to Homer and Virgil with a reference to Alexander Pope's translation of Homer, in order to further ironize the stance of what it means to participate in the tradition of praising the poetic freedom that the imagination allows.

Pope first translator to make Aurora blush with sexual excitement as she leaves her shared bed with Tithon and rises into the sky at dawn. In turn, Wheatley Peters draws attention to the way Aurora has been coded as white, and is therefore allowed to soar in the sky with rosy cheeks, while the speaker of the poem is forced back down to earth. The personified figure of "Winter," who drags her down, is both a classical trope and another trope associated with whiteness.

In a slow and careful consideration of Wheatley Peters' various references to Aurora, I complicate the stakes of her allusive method, arguing that her unusually complex approach to allusion is yet one more aspect of the way in which she works within the constraints forced on her, in order to critique a system of bondage (both poetic and otherwise) she finds herself trapped within.

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