

New Poem Attributed to Phillis Wheatley: “On the Death of Love Rotch”

Interview with Dr. Wendy Roberts



Dr. Wendy Roberts on the new poem found in the Jones Family Papers at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. She cites the omniscient authority and theological nature of “Love Rotch” as important parallels to known Wheatley poems.

What are the specific moments or features in the text of the newly discovered poem that, to you (Dr. Roberts), point to this poem being Wheatley Peters’s work?

The overall movement of the elegy is typical of a Wheatley Peters elegy—favoring comfort or refusal of lamentation (“weep not”) to those closest to the dead; there’s an omniscient authority present in her voice while she also presents herself close to the situation; and she claims her poetic inspiration (“That Love Emmerce that now Inspires the Pen”).

I find the commands not to weep to be one of the most convincing pieces of textual evidence from the poem. The first elegy we have to another white woman, “Mrs. Leonard,” does the same thing: “cease ye sighs” and “Cease thy complaints.” Wheatley Peters also joins in the mourning and in more intense ways with those that she says she is close to—for instance in the Sewell elegy.

The Love Rotch elegy is also very similar to the other 1767 poems that we have in that they are all very theological and all of them begin with a question. I find the line “I opened my Mouth, O Lord because— “to resonate very closely with the “Hussey and Coffin” poem. It is striking that both poems employ a very similar strategy of speaking while withholding speech and do so through divine language (one the language of the Psalms and the other the language of Seraphim).

I don’t think there is anything in the poem that points toward it not being Wheatley Peters. But, there are severe limits to the kind of attribution we can do from the text alone, especially in the eighteenth century when poetry is valued for its skill at imitation. This is one reason why the kind of work I’m trying to do with networked manuscript writers is important—it helps lay a firmer groundwork for finding poems that may be hers.

If, somewhere in the archive, someone found evidence of connection between Love Rotch and Wheatley, how would that help to support your claim of Wheatley’s authorship of this poem? What kinds of textual evidence might help establish such interpersonal links?

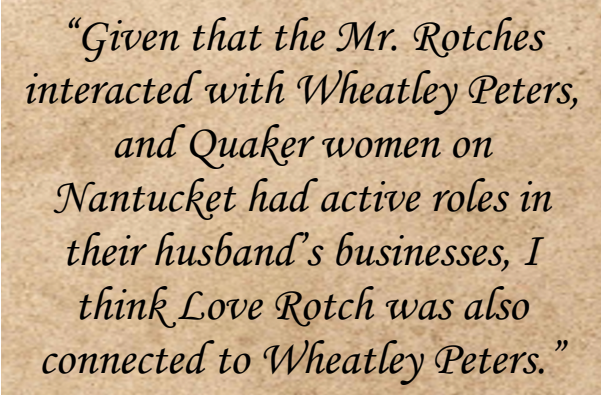
Well, not included in my article because I didn’t know about at the time, is a Quaker journal (by Jabez Maud Fisher) in which Jabez records that one of the Mr. Rotches took his friend to see Wheatley Peters after she returned from London, and she showed the manuscript volume of poems to him!

This seems to underscore what I’m already saying in my recent article—the relationship of Wheatley Peters to the Rotch family was tight in terms of her business as a poet. As a general approach to these things, when I see the men interacting, I think the women are there in the background as well. Given that the Mr. Rotches interacted with Wheatley Peters, and Quaker women on Nantucket had active roles in their husband’s businesses, I think Love Rotch was also connected to Wheatley Peters. I’ve seen this pattern repeat.

We had letters between Mr. Andrews and Mr. Barrell talking about Wheatley Peters’s poetry, but no one seemed to think the women in the background were involved. Turns out Mrs. Andrews was the one writing poetry about Wheatley Peters’s new book. So, I think the real open question is: did Wheatley Peters spend time in Nantucket with Love Rotch and was she her “mistress”? —whatever that actually means.

I was so disappointed when I went on a trip to Nantucket Historical Society after finding the Love Rotch elegy and came

up empty handed. It doesn’t mean nothing exists, but that I couldn’t spend more time on it as I was trying to get this article and the poems out as quickly as I could in a responsible manner.



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Moving Forward

What would be nice to find? A letter from Love Rotch that mentions Wheatley Peters or includes a poem; a letter from Love Rotch that is in Wheatley Peters handwriting (serving as an amanuensis like she did for Susannah Wheatley); anything that mentions Wheatley Peters being in Nantucket.

If there is clearer evidence for Wheatley Peters being either hired by the Rotches or being taught by Love Rotch (one meaning of the term “mistress”), I think this would help make the case for confident attribution even stronger. I’m also still trying to understand how exactly Wheatley Peters’s poems are showing up in this network and for what purposes—this can also help us think through why the poem might be attributed to her with incorrect information (if it is incorrect).

I have a larger case I’m building about the kind of access this network had to Wheatley Peters’s early manuscript poems that I think will also help solidify this attribution as confident.

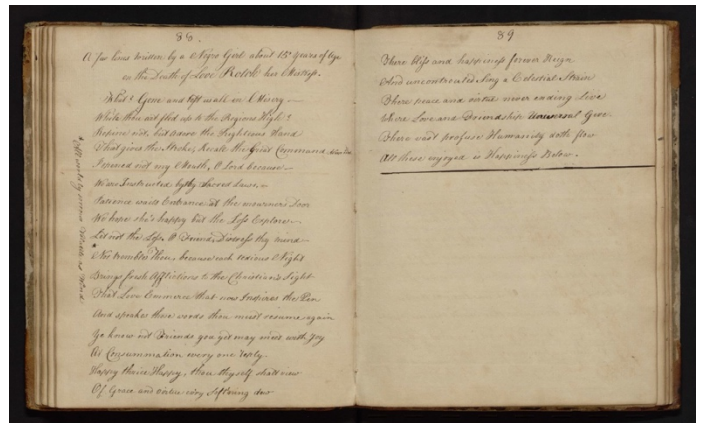
One of the questions brought up in the Library Company of Philadelphia online session mentioned the possibility of another young Black poet who could have been writing at the same time as Wheatley. Most of Wheatley’s poems are connected to the phrasing of “a young negro woman,” suggesting that kind of description was relatively common in the manuscript and poetry culture of the time. In your research in the archives, did you find any other poems with a similar description of the author?

To be clear, in the manuscript circulation of her poems that I have seen and recently studied, the byline is usually a variation of “a negro girl of 14 (or 15 depending on the network) years old.” In the manuscript cultures of the eighteenth century, I’ve seen copyists include poems by children as they come of age in verse including poems by their own child or other relative and this seems to usually be between about 10 and 15 years of age. Often, they include how the person is related or their name. This is similar to Wheatley Peters’s bylines, but with racialized information. And in this Quaker network, they use the age 15 when they use Wheatley Peters’s age.

“I have not seen another poem not already known to [be] PWP’s with the phrasing “a negro girl of 14/15 years old” in this network.”

If Wheatley Peters was not so closely connected with the Rotch family—we didn’t have other poems by her to this family, her

manuscript and published book didn’t travel on Rotch ships, she didn’t interact with them so closely—I would entertain this being another poet. But I think everything points to it being Wheatley Peters and the poem itself seems to be her writing as well. I also want to push back a bit on the assumption that her age or any identifying feature always attended her poems in manuscript. This doesn’t seem to be the case.



Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania

Another Black Poet?

The other Black poet I alluded to in the talk I do not yet know much about, but I have come across one of her manuscript poems in a box of materials connected to this larger Quaker women’s poetic network in the Delaware Valley. Unfortunately, the poem does not have a date, but it could be from the 1760s. It is not as polished as the Rotch elegy. It is probably another young Black woman poet at this time. I have a lot I want to say about this poem, but I have too much left to do before I can.

In answer to your question, it gives a first name and the descriptor “a negro girl.” This makes me think it is another young Black woman writing poetry.

However, it is complicated by the fact that the name is also directly connected

to another Wheatley Peters poem and could be a cognomen for Wheatley Peters that unlocks other manuscript poems written under this name. Both would be extremely important—and important to get right.

I'm eager to say more, but research is infuriatingly slow. It may be the case that I'm not able to discern who wrote it—then I will be writing about both of these possibilities.

You found the poem “On the Death of Love Rotch,” which you’ve attributed to Wheatley Peters, in the Jones Family collection, specifically in a set of commonplace books dated between 1760 and 1790. Can you describe a bit what those archives are like? How many commonplace books are in the collection?

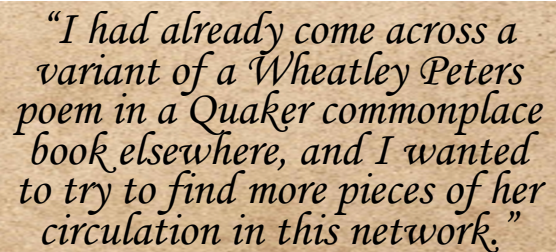
Let me clarify: I’ve been looking at any commonplace books I can between 1760 and 1790 anywhere I find them. When I was at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, I looked at commonplace books across many collections. One of those collections was the Jones Family Papers, which is primarily financial and legal papers and correspondence. It has one commonplace book in it that the finding aid lists as a commonplace book with poems from 1782 kept by Mary Powel Potts. That is the commonplace book with the elegy on Love Rotch and the elegy on Black Rose.

What drew you to study this particular collection of commonplace books?

I was looking at any commonplace books that had (or might have) poetry and were assembled between about 1760 and 1790. While at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and the Library Company of Philadelphia, I was especially interested in commonplace books kept by Quaker women because we already knew that the Quaker

Hannah Griffiths had copied and circulated Wheatley Peters writing, among others. I had already come across a variant of a Wheatley Peters poem in a Quaker commonplace book elsewhere, and I wanted to try to find more pieces of her circulation in this network.

Also, one of the Barrell brothers resided in Philadelphia—and I had already written about poems pertaining to Wheatley Peters within the coterie of Ruth Barrell Andrews and have been working on more poems connected to Wheatley Peters in that network.



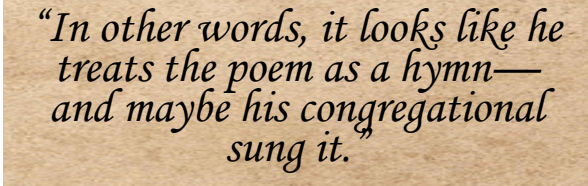
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I should say that over the years slowly researching commonplace books I have not been methodical or picky. Perhaps I’ve “wasted” a lot of time. But I’ve often come across the most interesting new pieces of information when I have cast my net large.

How often, if at all, did you come across Wheatley poems that we already associate with her canon? Which poems? How were those poems treated in the commonplace books?

Not often enough! These are all great questions—and ones I’m hoping to have partial answers for in the book that I am just beginning as I near the end of my research phase. I’m not ready to quantify them, but I’ve come across “On Being Brought,” “Hymn to the Morning/Evening,” “On Imagination,” “Goliath of Gath,” and the Whitefield elegy.

One interesting thing about one occurrence of “On Being Brought” by a minister in England is that he numbers the lines. In his commonplace book he only does this to other hymns that he writes to go along with his sermons. In other words, it looks like he treats the poem as a hymn—and maybe his congregational sung it. This is just one example.



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I still have most of the processing of materials and analysis to do, and your questions are at the forefront. How did copyist treat the Wheatley Peters poems they copied? Which ones did they tend to copy and when? Why? When did they put her name and when did they not? Where do variants appear and what can this tell us about particular networks circulating her poems?

From what I have seen, and clearly I haven’t seen every commonplace book in the period, she shows up in different ways and each is an opportunity to not only think about how the copyist and that particular network understands and circulates her poetry and to what purpose, but also how this is a trace of Wheatley Peters’ efforts to circulate her poetry, what work her poetry is doing in that space that the copyist does not comprehend, and how communities of color obscured in relation to the predominantly white archive might come into focus.