

## First words, last words: Phillis Wheatley's elegies to children

Article (Accepted Version)

Haslanger, Andrea (2019) First words, last words: Phillis Wheatley's elegies to children. *English Language Notes*, 57 (2). pp. 127-132. ISSN 0013-8282

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/81577/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

### **Copyright and reuse:**

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Andrea Haslanger  
University of Sussex

### First Words, Last Words: Phillis Wheatley's Elegies to Children

"Elegy promotes this heightened sense of form's responsibility to something outside."  
—Angela Leighton, *On Form*

It is hardly possible to think about memory without thinking about the dead. This entails questions about whether and how the dead are remembered, and by whom. So too does it open onto ethical concerns about what is owed the dead, and how to determine adequacy and justice in this regard. Aesthetic forms, like the elegy, which memorialize the dead, offer the opportunity to think about these dimensions of memory in relation to form.<sup>1</sup> Each helps to illuminate the other, for just as memory goes in search of form (and finds form wanting), form seeks frameworks, ethical and otherwise, that memory can furnish.

The following remarks approach the relationship between memory and form in a very limited context, but nevertheless aim to offer one indication of how such a method might proceed. They consider form by way of formal convention, focusing on what happens when a central convention of elegy—the dead's silence—is disrupted. In elegy, it is generally the case that the dead do not speak. Much turns on this simple fact: the dead's silence gives rise to the poetic speaker's remarks and, crucially, the poetic speaker's rhetorical authority.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, when this convention is overturned, as it is in two poems by Phillis Wheatley discussed below, rhetorical authority is reconfigured. Such readjustment invites reflection on relations of authority within and beyond the realms of poetic speech: elegies in which the dead speak tend to grant the dead authority over the living and, in some cases, authority they did not possess while alive.

As is well known, Wheatley is a poet of elegy, writing predominantly in this form: her 1773 volume, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, contains several elegies written to commemorate the deaths of friends and acquaintances of her master's family, the Wheatleys, as well as eminent figures like Reverend George Whitefield, a major figure in the Great Awakening. The two poems under discussion here, "On the Death of a Young Lady of Five Years of Age" and "A Funeral Poem on the Death of C. E. an Infant of Twelve Months," represent the deceased as speaking from beyond the grave.<sup>3</sup> In death, these child speakers possess an assured command of language and of what their deaths should be taken to mean, but they also remain children, with all the vulnerability and non-majority that entails. Their fluency is set alongside the inability to speak; their self-possession alongside its absence. These oppositions highlight the child as a poetic and political category of non-majority while also endowing the child with wisdom and self-direction that belies this. By overlaying one relation of authority (the adult and the child) with another (the elegist and the deceased), Wheatley refashions both. She brings elegy's power of expression to the deceased's fragility, making elegy a meditation on vulnerable states.<sup>4</sup>

Wheatley's elegies are often structured so that they move vertically from the world of the living to "the realms above."<sup>5</sup> This is the case in "On the Death of a Young Lady of Five Years of Age," which describes a young girl's death in terms of physical and spiritual transformation. Nancy, the deceased, ascends from darkness to light, from pain to "eternal love," and "finds unknown beatitude above."<sup>6</sup> The poem invites her parents to soften their grief—also represented as darkness—by allowing Nancy to console them: "But hear in heav'n's blest bow'rs your Nancy fair, / And learn to imitate her language there" (13-14). That Nancy's parents are to imitate her, rather than vice versa, reverses the parent/child relationship as we would typically understand it.

In death, Nancy becomes preternaturally advanced not only in her speech but also in her devotion. In contrast to her parents, who utter inarticulate “groans,” Nancy celebrates her death as providence in perfectly crafted speech: “‘Thou, Lord, whom I behold with glory crown’d, / ‘By what sweet name, and in what tuneful sound / ‘Wilt thou be prais’d? .... / ‘To thee let all their grateful voices raise, / ‘And saints and angels join their songs of praise” (23, 15-20). The precocity of the deceased child might be read in at least two ways. Clearly, it signals the spiritual development death can bring to the faithful and the innocent. It is consistent with the longstanding Christian association of childhood and innocence. But it also presents the child as self-determining. This depiction of the child as in command of herself and her wishes is at odds with the idea of the child as a being who needs guidance from others. As such, it invokes and to a degree overturns political definitions of the child, discussed below.

“A Funeral Poem on the Death of C. E. an Infant of Twelve Months” offers an even starker example of poetic advancement of speech. Like “On the Death of a Young Lady of Five Years of Age,” it describes the ascension of the deceased as a consolation to the living. Charles, the late infant, acquires the power of speech posthumously. He is welcomed to heaven by angels, in answer to whom he utters his polished address:

“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,  
 “Full glories rush on my expanding soul.” (14-22)

These lines offer up a counterfactual catalogue of what would have happened to the infant, had he survived. The repetition that structures them not only underlines death as an avoidance of evil,

but also defines it as a relation of precedence. The infant dies before—before sin, before temptation, before the lash—rather than experiencing life no more. Death is not untimely, but instead arrives at just the right moment. Notably, by depicting the infant’s death in this way, the poem suggests that maturing from an infant to a child to an adult is a process through which one becomes more rather than less vulnerable. Instead of adulthood as a category of majority, here it conjures the physical and psychological suffering that death forestalls. The infant is able to recognize his death as good fortune, the poem suggests, because it exempts him from sin and guilt. Having experienced heaven’s “Full glories,” he would not return to life even if he could: “Thrones and dominions cannot tempt me there,” he says (35).

“Thrones and dominions” refer to earthly possessions, but they are also marks of adulthood.<sup>7</sup> When Charles dismisses property and power as undesirable, he is in some sense making a case for remaining a child, inasmuch as he is rejecting a process of development through which one comes to own oneself and other things. It is worth pausing to consider what the category of the child means and how it is used, not least because it figures significantly in contemporary public discourse and political philosophy. So often the child is understood as what the adult has ceased to be, or as lacking the capacities the adult has developed. The child is a potent category for the American colonists, who see themselves as mistreated children of Britain. It is also crucial to philosophies of liberalism broadly construed, which work to distinguish the political subject’s obedience to government (which must be qualified) from the child’s obedience to its parents (which must be absolute).<sup>8</sup> This line of argument sees the child as what the political subject must be defined against; the child is, in the words of Locke, “not born in this full state of equality,” though “born to it.” Parents have “rule and jurisdiction” over their children, and “[t]he bonds of this subjection are like the swaddling clothes they art wrapt up in, and supported by, in

the weakness of their infancy.”<sup>9</sup> In Locke’s argument, the physical vulnerability of the infant provides the logical grounds for its subjection, which is represented as a form of protection necessary to the child’s continued life. But even though most children grow into adults who are recognized as political subjects able to “freely follow [their] own will”—able, in other words, to speak and act for themselves—not all do.<sup>10</sup> The literal vulnerability of physical infancy shades into the formal or structural vulnerability of political infancy: for Locke, certain humans, like “innocents,” “lunatics,” and “ideots,” are never considered in control of their own wills and are therefore never released from their subjection to their parents.<sup>11</sup> One can be a child for a time or for the entirety of one’s life: to become an adult requires reaching the age of majority and being seen to be capable of directing one’s own will.

For Locke, then, the threshold separating childhood from adulthood is precisely that of having a “will of one’s own to follow,” and being recognized as such. But as we have seen, Locke’s argument moves between literal and metaphorical or categorical registers in its discussion of childhood, because the child can be a physical infant or a being of any age who needs someone else to speak and act on his or her behalf. Wheatley’s elegies to infants and children present us with speakers who are eternally children, who will never be able to grow into the age of majority. However, while the poems’ use of perpetual children recalls Locke’s category of the political child, it also remakes the child as complete in its own right. Whereas Locke uses the infant’s body to conjure a form of life that is dependent and non-autonomous, Wheatley uses the infant’s voice to express certainty and command. It is not merely that the child becomes authoritative in the elegy, but that the elegy takes seriously the authority of the little, the silent, the sick, and the dead. Wheatley’s elegies to children elevate them, but they also ask what might happen if we stopped conceiving of them as needing elevation.

These elegies present the child as occupying two positions at once: that of the earthly child, snatched away too soon, and that of the celestial child, content in the community of angels. In one sense, these children are immature (they will always be children), but in another, they are not (they have no more maturing left to do). They have been lifted out of the developmental narrative in which the body's growth signals the possibility of majority, and transported to a state of eternal blessedness, where death represents a kind of spiritual completion. The maturity they have gained has not been due to the passage of time, or the growth of the body, or the accumulation of rights and responsibilities, but instead to the truncation of all these things. The elegiac child is forever and by definition on the side of loss as well as gain.

This nets out to a doubling of what the child can be taken to mean in these poems—the earthly child and the celestial child are twinned, such that each can only be understood in reference to the other. We might describe the movement of these elegies as dialectical not only because they unfold opposing ideas of the child that combine and recombine, but also because they encourage mourners to rechannel their grief into gratitude and gain. In the same way that the celestial child retains traces of the earthly child, gratitude retains traces of grief. This places a limit on the consolation that the poems can offer, but it also shows that the formal principle at work in the poems is one of continuous balancing, rather than wholesale transformation. The child is vulnerable and strong, the mourners are bereft and consoled, the world is full of cruel loss and is carefully ordered. The poems marshal these oppositions effortlessly. But perhaps the most important structuring opposition, and the one most characteristic of elegy, is that between passivity and authority. If elegy is fundamentally about passivity in the face of death, it is also about poetic power in the face of passivity, a primary manifestation of which is declaring what particular deaths and privations mean. Elegy often takes the dead's silence as grounds for the

poet's interpretive authority. But when Wheatley grants the dead a last word, which in at least one case is also a first word, the dead's eloquence momentarily reverses expected relations of authority. This is a formal and conceptual surprise: formal because the dead so rarely speak in elegies, conceptual because the child's remarks distribute authority between the poetic speaker and the deceased. Wheatley is modulating passivity here, distributing it across the dead and the living, such that these elegies more accurately capture the vulnerability of the living, even as they describe death as a balm. The broader consequences of this are twofold: first, it offers us another way to think about passivity in Wheatley's poetry, one not directly determined by her enslavement.<sup>12</sup> Second, it points up a prevalent dynamic in contemporary elegy, whereby poetic speech is the marker not only of life but also of control, an attempt to reduce—or write against—contingency.

---

<sup>1</sup> There is comparatively little recent critical work on elegy, with some important exceptions. Elegy—except perhaps in the field of American literature—is generally out of fashion, in part because of its association with canonical national literary traditions and in part because of the sense that its politics are fundamentally conservative. One account of the turn away from elegy is Jahan Ramazani's *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*, which contends that modern elegy has endured by becoming anti-elegiac. Other important work on elegy includes Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word*, Diana Fuss, *Dying Modern: A Meditation on Elegy*, and Max Cavitch, *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman*.

<sup>2</sup> The dead's silence is a condition of possibility of elegy's claim to privileged knowledge about the dead. As Guillory and others have shown, eighteenth-century elegy reflects and generates social distinctions. See *Cultural Capital*, 85-133.

<sup>3</sup> There are poetic genres other than elegy, of course, that represent the speaking dead. I present a longer argument about this in "The Speaking and the Dead."

<sup>4</sup> In this very short piece, I am not reading these poems as encoding Wheatley's experience of enslavement, though a case could certainly be made for this. On the topic of the elegies' relation to Wheatley's enslavement, see Cavitch, *American Elegy*, esp. 187.

<sup>5</sup> "To the Honourable T. H. Esq; on the Death of his Daughter," in Wheatley, *Complete Writings*, 52, l. 29.

<sup>6</sup> Wheatley, *Complete Writings*, 16-17, ll. 3-4.

<sup>7</sup> Thrones and dominions are also names for kinds of angel, but this does not appear to be their meaning here.



---

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed treatment of the political and philosophical contexts, including Locke, as well as a powerful reading of Wheatley as child author, see Hodgson, “Infant Muse.”

<sup>9</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 31.

<sup>10</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise*, 32.

<sup>11</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise*, 34.

<sup>12</sup> For other readings of passivity, see for instance Johnson, “Euphemism, Understatement, and the Passive Voice.”

---

Works Cited

- Cavitch, Max. *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.
- Fuss, Diana. *Dying Modern: A Meditation on Elegy*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.
- Guillory, John. *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Haslanger, Andrea. "The Speaking and the Dead: Antislavery Poetry's Fictions of the Person." *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 61 no. 1 (2020).
- Hodgson, Lucia. "Infant Muse: Phillis Wheatley and the Revolutionary Rhetoric of Childhood." *Early American Literature* 49 no. 3 (2014), 663-682.
- Johnson, Barbara E. "Euphemism, Understatement, and the Passive Voice." In *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 2014-211. New York: Meridian Books, 1990.
- Leighton, Angela. *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Locke, John. *Second Treatise of Government*. Edited by C. B. Macpherson. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980.
- Ramazani, Jahan. *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Wheatley, Phillis. *Complete Writings*. Edited by Vincent Carretta. New York: Penguin Books, 2001.