

"On the Death of the
Rev. MR. GEORGE
WHITEFIELD"

By Phillis Wheatley

Transcription, correction, editorial commentary, and markup by Students of Marymount University

On the Death of the Rev. MR. GEORGE WHITEFIELD., ^{Whitfield}

1770.

1 HAIL, happy saint, on thine immortal throne,
2 Possesst of glory, life, and bliss unknown;
3 We hear no more the music of thy tongue,
4 Thy wonted auditories, ^{wonted} cease to throng.
5 Thy sermons in unequall'd accents, ^{unequalled} flow'd,
6 And ev'ry bosom with devotion glow'd;
7 Thou didst in strains of eloquence refin'd
8 Inflame the heart, and captivate the mind.
9 Unhappy we the setting sun deplore,
10 So glorious once, but ah! it shines no more.
11 Behold the prophet in his tow'ring flight!
12 He leaves the earth for heav'n's unmeasur'd height,
13 And worlds unknown receive him from our sight.
14 There *Whitefield* wings with rapid course his way,
15 And sails to Zion , ^{Zion} through vast seas of day.
16 Thy pray'rs, great saint, and thine incessant cries
17 Have pierc'd the bosom of thy native skies.

- 23 -

18 Thou moon hast seen, and all the stars of light,
19 How he has wrestled with his God by night.
20 He pray'd that grace in ev'ry heart might dwell,
21 He long'd to see *America* excel;
22 He charg'd its youth that ev'ry grace divine
23 Should with full lustre in their conduct shine;
24 That Saviour, which his soul did first receive,
25 The greatest gift that ev'n a God can give,
26 He freely offer'd to the num'rous throng,
27 That on his lips with list'ning pleasure hung.
28 "Take him, ye wretched, for your only good,
29 "Take him ye starving sinners, for your food;
30 "Ye thirsty, come to this life-giving stream,
31 "Ye preachers, take him for your joyful theme;
32 "Take him my dear *Americans* , he said,
33 "Be your complaints on his kind bosom laid:
34 "Take him, ye *Africans* , he longs for you,

35 "*Impartial Saviour* is his title due:
36 "Wash'd in the fountain of redeeming blood,
37 "You shall be sons, and kings, and priests to God."

- 24 -

38 Great *Countess* , ^{countess} , we *Americans* revere
39 Thy name, and mingle in thy grief sincere;
40 *New England* deeply feels, the *Orphans* , ^{orphans} mourn,
41 Their more than father will no more return.

42 But, though arrested by the hand of death,
43 *Whitefield* no more exerts his lab'ring breath,
44 Yet let us view him in th' eternal skies,
45 Let ev'ry heart to this bright vision rise;
46 While the tomb safe retains its sacred trust,
47 Till life divine re-animates his dust.

Footnotes

Whitfield George Whitefield (1714-1770; pronounced "wit-field") was one of the most famous people of the eighteenth-century Anglophone world. As a student at Oxford in the early 1730s, he got to know John and Charles Wesley, the founders of the Methodist movement in the church of England. Whitefield joined them in attempting to "methodize" the faith, returning it to the simple principles of the early church. But more than the Wesley brothers, Whitefield made this reformist movement into a public ministry. A famously charismatic public speaker, Whitefield preached to crowds numbering in the thousands in England and the American colonies, becoming a central figure in what was known as the "Great Awakening," a revival of evangelical Protestantism that was influential on both sides of the Atlantic. Benjamin Franklin and Olaudah Equiano were each impressed (though in very different ways) when they saw Whitefield preach in Philadelphia and Savannah, respectively. Whitefield made several visits to the Boston area, and it seems likely that the Wheatleys saw him preach there. Phillis might very well have joined them, but we cannot be sure. Whitefield died unexpectedly in Newburyport, Massachusetts on September 30, 1770, a few days after he left Boston on what turned out to be his last tour of the colonies.

Phillis Wheatley's elegy for Whitefield changed her life, transforming her from a young enslaved woman with a small readership among friends of the Wheatley family to an author with an international readership. The poem was published as a broadside on October 11, 1770, and was an immediate success. It was reprinted several times in colonial cities, as well as London, and also appeared in several newspapers. The poem brought Wheatley to the attention of Selina, the Countess of Huntingdon, who is addressed in the poem itself. A fervent Methodist herself, the Countess was Whitefield's patron, supporting him on his evangelical missions. The Countess became Wheatley's patron as well, sponsoring the publication of her only volume of poems, published in London in 1773.

[George Whitefield by an unknown artist, about 1770, National Portrait Gallery, London]

- [JOB]

wonted wonted: "Accustomed, customary, usual." Oxford English Dictionary; auditory: "An assembly of hearers, an audience." Oxford English Dictionary, hence the meaning here is something like "usual audience."

- [JOB]

unequall'd unequalled accents"; Whitefield was a famously eloquent and compelling public speaker; the sense here is that no other speaker could match the "accent" or style of his voice.

- [JOB]

Zion Zion is a name in the Hebrew bible for Jerusalem, and the term has often been extended to mean the entirety of what believers think of as the holy land, or even the afterlife.

- [JOB]

countess The Countess of *Huntingdon*, to whom Mr. *Whitefield* was Chaplain. [Wheatley's note]. Selina Hastings, the countess of Huntingdon (1707-1791), was a major figure in the Methodist

movement, using her wealth to support the founding of chapels and a training school for ministers. Whitefield became her personal chaplain in the 1740s. Wheatley sought and received her patronage as well, and Wheatley's 1773 volume of poems was published with her support.

[Selina Hastings by an unknown artist, about 1770, National Portrait Gallery, London]

- [JOB]

orphans Whitefield first came to the American colonies in 1738, when he travelled to Savannah, Georgia, where the colony's trustees had hired him to serve as minister. He decided to make his main project in Savannah the establishment of an orphanage, and he returned to England after only four months to raise money for the project. The Bethesda Orphan House was founded in 1740, and Whitefield continued to raise money and to return for visits to the institution throughout his lifetime.

- [JOB]