

Mary Collier and Phillis Wheatley: How Peasant Poetry led the way to speaking out against injustice

You sit down in your literature classroom. You open up your poetry book. You take a step back in time to the 18th century, into a room with the most renowned and prominent names of the time - Pope, Wordsworth, Burns, Swift, and so on. It becomes apparent as they laugh and drink that the 18th century literary canon that you've entered is dominated by men. Men of privileged and wealthy backgrounds whose names are the blueprint for 18th century poetry leading into Romanticism. If they were not men born into wealth, then they were men who could easily access opportunities to it. Note the repeated noun here - *Men*. Perhaps one of modern academia's greatest failures is allowing the canon of this time to be so unfortunately exclusive to this gender. This is because some of the most poignant and socially relevant 18th century poetry was written by women who lived in a lower socioeconomic landscape. Two women, both historically insightful and profound writers, contributed to the Peasant Poetry movement - Mary Collier and Phillis Wheatley. The poems that they wrote have led to The Poetry Revolution.

Ironically, the concept of Peasant Poetry was established with a romantic male poet in mind, John Clare, named after his work *The Peasant Poet*. Despite the movement's definition stemming from a male association, Peasant Poetry has always encompassed a broader world of people. It refers to poets who lived in the middle and working classes of 18th century society. These figures were often self-taught and had no formal education; they were far from sophisticated literary institutions. These definitions were what made up the majority of society at this time and still do today. Whilst education has grown to be more accessible than what it used to be, most of the world is still living in working and middle classes. Mary Collier and Phillis Wheatley are two important literary figures of this movement and of these societal classes. The words they wrote were so important because of who they were in life.

Mary Collier was a self-taught washerwoman from Sussex, England. She lived her life in poverty and spent her days tending to both domestic duties of the household and agricultural labours in her community. Her poetry was written with the purpose of preserving her memory later in her life and as a form of personal enjoyment and self-expression. With such an honest and understandable reasoning for writing, it is amazing how relevant her words are today. She had valuable insights and relatable opinions when it came to writing about life as a working class woman. Whilst Collier spent the majority of her life in Sussex, a woman who travelled much more was Phillis Wheatley.

Wheatley was an enslaved woman from West Africa who became historically memorable as being the first African-American person to have her poetry collection published. Somewhat tragically, Wheatley received her education from the family that enslaved her. Yet she admirably used the

lessons given to her in order to write what she believed in, going against the harsh realities she had to face when growing up. Throughout her remarkable life, Wheatley composed poems and letters that had meaningful contributions to early abolitionist movements. It was the real experiences of these women that led to their works of poetry remaining socially relevant in the modern day.

Mary Collier's most renowned work, *A Woman's Labour*, was written as a response to Stephen Duck's poem *The Thresher's Labour*. Duck's poem describes a year of agricultural work and the struggles of it. Even though Duck highlights the realistic nature of being working class, he completely ignores women in his poem. Mary Collier criticises him for this: '*Deign to look down on one that's poor and low, Remembering you yourself was lately so*'. She highlights how his poetry led him to a wealthy life. In *A Woman's Labour*, Collier cleverly crafts a repetitive structure that goes back and forth between domestic and working duties: '*And in the Field our daily Task renew, Soon as the rising Sun has dry'd the Dew*.' This repetition demonstrates the never-ending difficulties that women had to face, both at home and at work. This relevance to the modern-day struggles of working women is what makes *A Woman's Labour* such an important proto-feminist text. Furthermore, Collier makes reference to '*Sol*', which can be interpreted as Latin for *Sun* or as the Norse Goddess of the sun. She writes '*At length bright Sol illuminates the skies...Then comes our mistress to us without fail*'. She paints a picture of a higher female power that these labouring women worship as they work, as if *Sol*'s presence brings hope throughout their toils. Despite the poem's miserable tone of constant labour, Collier represents the women of her class as hardworking, persevering, and strong.

Similarly, one of Wheatley's famous poems had these conflicting tones of misery and hope. The piece that achieves this is *To The Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth*. This is a poem that Wheatley wrote to express her gratitude to the Earl for the contributions he made to the abolitionist movement, whilst subtly advocating for this throughout the poem, and the emancipation of the American colonies. '*Hail, happy day, when, smiling like the morn, Fair Freedom rose New-England to adorn*.' is how the poem begins, inviting the reader into an atmosphere of hope and joy that celebrates freedom. Wheatley homogeneously uses the Goddess figure in the same way Collier does - to present hope. She writes '*She shines supreme, while hated faction dies: Soon as appear'd the Goddess long desir'd*'. Freedom is presented as a goddess who brings happiness and success to America. The poem then takes a more autobiographical turn as Wheatley begins to describe her own experience as an enslaved woman: '*I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate, Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat*.' The hopeful tone turns sorrowful as she describes being stolen from her parents to live a life under tyranny and without liberty. These conflicting tones reinforce Wheatley's message that a free world is a beautiful one that has a lot of importance for her personally. Even though this poem is posed to be a thank you to the Earl of Dartmouth, it also serves as a

representation of Black Womanhood in the 18th century and as an elevation for abolitionist ideals and justice.

Mary Collier and Phillis Wheatley were both geniuses when it came to using their work to confront social injustices. It begs the question as to why they are both so overshadowed by the 18th century male poets that have been previously mentioned. This doesn't mean academia should dismiss the influence of poets like Pope or Wordsworth, who made significant contributions to the literary canon. When it comes to discussing the 18th century, their works are important. Yet when reflecting and studying poetry in our modern society where we still face gender inequality, racial injustice, and economic issues, the words of Collier and Wheatley's poetry suddenly become more meaningful for us. Their verses were the first footsteps in starting The Poetry Revolution. The fact that Collier and Wheatley are remembered today demonstrates how the written word is a powerful tool that challenges oppression, reclaims narratives, and gives a voice to those overlooked by history. Peasant Poetry led the way for modern poets to achieve the same goals - Maya Angelou, Margaret Atwood, Kathy Acker. Would any of these women have picked up a pen if, centuries before, these women hadn't? This is why it is so important we study poets like Collier and Wheatley and why we write.

There is revolutionary potential in the simplest of things - submitting your poetry to an indie magazine, reading your work aloud at a poetry pub night, or keeping it tucked away in your notebook to read on rainy days. All of these actions honour the legacy of women like Mary Collier and Phillis Wheatley. It is so vital that now, more than ever, we keep writing and reading for change. The revolution is not yet finished.

Read more about Mary Collier:

The Woman's Labour - [Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive / Works / THE Woman's Labour: TO Mr. STEPHEN DUCK. \(Mary Collier\)](#)

A biography of Mary Collier's life (accessible via institutions) - [Collier, Mary \(1688?-1762\), poet | Oxford Dictionary of National Biography](#)

Purchase her work (*This is an Amazon link, the ISBN number is 9781913724344 if you wish to purchase elsewhere. Independent bookshops, second hand, are always great!*) - [The Woman's Labour: An Epistle to Mr Stephen Duck; Published Here With The Thresher's Labour by Stephen Duck and Other Poems by Mary Collier: Amazon.co.uk: Collier, Mary, Duck, Stephen: 9781913724344: Books](#)

Read more about Phillis Wheatley:

To The Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth - [To the Right Honorable William, Earl of... | The Poetry Foundation](#)

A biography of Phillis Wheatley's life (accessible via institutions) - [Wheatley \[married name Peters\], Phillis \(c 1753-1784\), poet | Oxford Dictionary of National Biography](#)

Purchase her work - (*This is an Amazon link, the ISBN number is 9780140424300 if you wish to purchase elsewhere. Independent bookshops, second hand, are always great!*) - [Complete Writings \(Penguin Classics\) : Wheatley, Phillis, Carretta, Vincent: Amazon.co.uk: Books](#)