

The Women's Print History Project

The Transatlantic Publication of Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* [Spotlight]

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Amanda Law

This post is part of our *Black Women's and Abolitionist Print History Spotlight Series*, which will run between 19 June and 31 July 2020. Spotlights in this series focus on our work to find Black women who were active participants in the book trades during our period, to acknowledge the ways in which white female abolitionists exploited print's powerful potential for eliminating slavery, and to revisit the lives and books published by well-known Black female authors.



Figure 1. Portrait of Phillis Wheatley, attributed by some scholars to Scipio Moorhead, *British Library*, 992.a.34.

Phillis Wheatley is perhaps best known as the first African-American to publish a book of poems. Born in West Africa *c.* 1753, Wheatley was sold into slavery in 1761 and brought to Boston, Massachusetts where she was purchased by the merchant **John Wheatley** for his wife, Susanna, who sought to “secure herself a faithful domestic in her old age” (Wheatley et al. 11). Phillis Wheatley learned to read and write under the instruction of Susanna and her daughter Mary. She published her first poem in 1767 (“On Messrs Hussey and Coffin”) in the December 21st issue of the *Newport, Rhode Island, Mercury*.

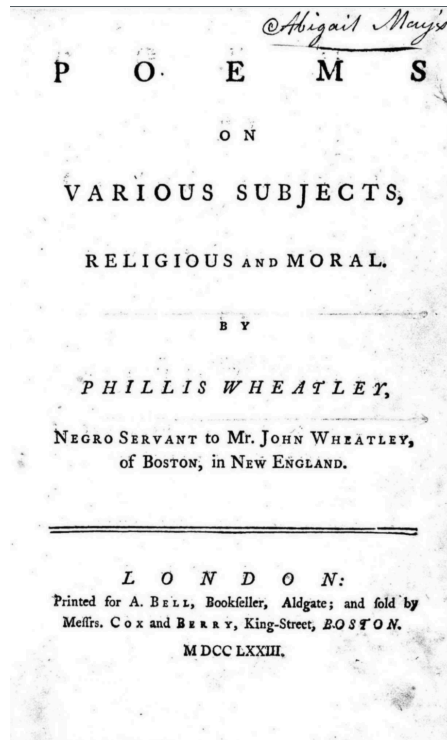


Figure 2. 1773 Edition with all prefatory material. NCCO.

When Wheatley published *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in London in 1773, she had to navigate a complicated publication process that required her to traverse the Atlantic to see her work come to fruition. Wheatley originally intended to publish her collection in Boston, and in 1772, with the help of Susanna, she advertised a collection of twenty-eight poems “by Phillis, a Negro Girl, from the strength of her own Genius” in the *Boston Censor*, a short-lived periodical that only ran from 1771–1772. They intended for the volume to be an octavo of about two hundred pages and priced the “handsomely bound and lettered” edition at four shillings while the edition “stitched in blue” would cost three.

P R O P O S A L S
For Printing by Subscription.

A Collection of PO E M S, wrote
at several times, and upon various occasions, by PHILLIS,
a Negro Girl, from the Strength of her own Genius, it being
but a few Years since she came to this Town an uncultivated
Barbarian from Africa; The Poems having been seen and
read by the best Judges, who think them well worthy of the
Publick View, and upon critical examination, they find
that the declared Author was capable of writing them.
The Order in which they were penned, together with the
Occasion, are as follows;

—On the Death of the Rev. Dr. Sewall, when sick, 1765.
—On virtue, 166.—On two Friends, who were call away, 49.
—To the University of Cambridge, 1767.—An Address to
the Atheist, do.—An Address to the Deist, do.—On
America, 1768.—On the King, do.—On Friendship,
do.—Thoughts on being brought from Africa to Ameri-
ca, do.—On the Nuptial of Mr. Spence to Miss Hooper, do.
—On the Hon. Commodore Hood, on his pardoning a Deserter,
1769.—On the Death of the Reverend Dr. Sewall, do.—
—On the Death of Master Sider, who was killed by Ebenezer
Richardson, 1770.—On the Death of the Rev. George White-
field, do.—On the Death of a young Miss, aged 15 years, do.
—On the Arrival of the Ships of War, and landing of the
Troops.—On the Army in King Street, on the Evening of
the 5th of March.—On the death of a young Gentleman,
To Samuel Quincy, Esq; a Panegyrick.—To a Lady on her
coming to America for her Health.—To Mrs. Leonard, on
the Death of her Husband.—To Mrs. Boylston and Chil-
dren, on the Death of her Son and their Brother.—To a
Gentleman and Lady on the Death of their Son, aged 9
Months.—To a Lady on her remarkable Deliverance in a
Hurricane.—To James Sullivan, Esq; and Lady on the
Death of her Brother and Sister, and a Child, aged 12
Months.—Gethab of Gath.—On the Death of Dr. Sa-
muel Marshall.

It is supposed they will make one small Octavo Volume,
and will contain about 200 Pages.

They will be printed on Demy Paper, and beautiful Types;
The Price to Subscribers, handsomely bound and lettered,
will be Four Shillings.—Stitched in blue, Three Shillings.

It is hoped Encouragement will be given to this Publica-
tion, as a reward to a very uncommon Genius, at present a
Slave.

The Work will be put to the Press as soon as three
Hundred Copies are subscribed for, and shall be pub-
lished with all Speed.

Subscriptions are taken in by E. RUSSELL, in Marlborough
Street.

Figure 3. 1772 Boston Censor advertisement. *The Open Anthology of Literatures in English*.

Wheatley and Ezekiel Russell, the owner of the *Boston Censor*, planned to publish her book by subscription, intending to begin printing copies once 300 subscribers committed to purchasing the book. The advertisement ran three times that year, in February, March, and April (Shields 193), but it seems they were unable to amass enough subscribers. Robinson suggests that the lack of enthusiasm for Wheatley’s collection was due to “early Boston racist refusal” (187) to believe she had authored the poems, gesturing to a letter written by Boston merchant John Andrews, who had subscribed for the book, to his brother William Barrell on 24 February 1773.

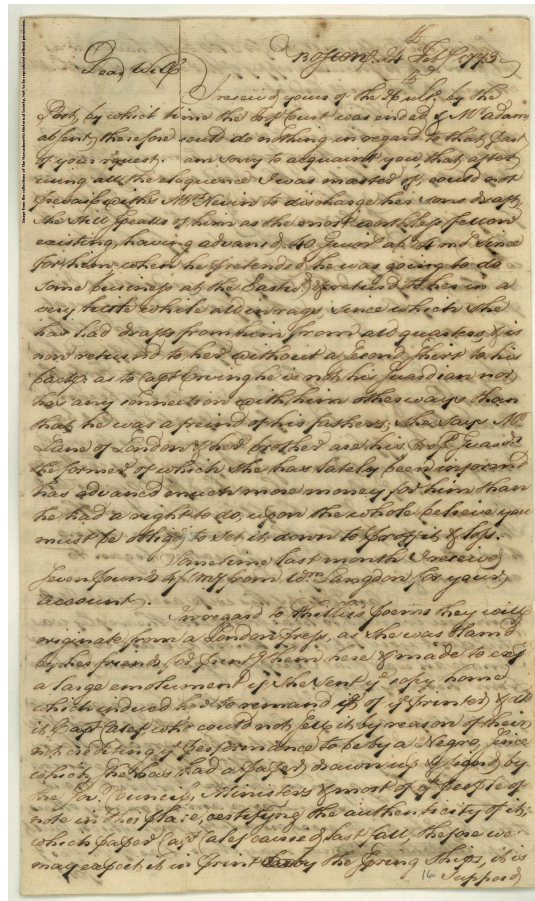


Figure 4. Letter from John Andrews to William Barrell, 24 February 1773. Collection of the [Massachusetts Historical Society](#).

The Massachusetts Historical Society transcribes the section referring to Wheatley’s collection as follows:

In regard to Phillis's poems they will originate from a London press, as she was blamd by her friends for printg them here & made to expd a large emolument if she sent ye copy home, which induced her to remand yt of ye printer & dld [delivered] it Capt Calef, who could not sell it by reason of their not crediting ye performance to be by a Negro, since which, she has had a paper drawn up & signd by the Govr. Council, Ministers & most of ye people of note in this place, certifying the authenticity of it; which paper Capt Calef carried last fall, thefore [therefore] we may expect it in print las by the spring ships, it is supposed the Cobby will sell for £ 100 sterlg: have not as yet been able to procure a copy of her dialogue with Mr Murry, if I do, will send it.

Captain Robert Calef worked for the Wheatley family and, as implied by this excerpt, presented Wheatley’s manuscript to different prospective publishers and financiers when her call for subscribers in the *Boston Censor* yielded less than promising results. As Andrews indicates in his letter, people held suspicions about the veracity of Wheatley’s authorship.

Unable to amass her desired audience in Boston, Wheatley turned to London at the prompting of Susanna, who had many contacts in England. In Boston in 1770, Wheatley published, as a broadside, a widely celebrated eulogy on the English evangelist George Whitefield (*An Elegiac Poem, on the Death of that Celebrated Divine, and Eminent Servant of Jesus Christ, the Late Reverend, and Pious George Whitefield*), from which she had garnered most of her fame. She mailed a manuscript of this poem to Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon on 2 October 1770. Whitefield had been the Countess's personal and much respected chaplain and Susanna knew the Countess through their dissenting evangelical Methodist organization. Wheatley had maintained this connection to the Countess since 1770 and, when she turned to her in 1772 after her disappointment in Boston, the Countess agreed to finance the publication of Wheatley's poems by London bookseller **Archibald Bell**. In an effort to garner more attention for Wheatley's collection, the Countess allowed the book to be dedicated to her, which is advertised in the title of the **1802 American edition**. In addition, the Countess interrupted the production of the book until a portrait of Wheatley could be commissioned for the preface (see the top of the page).

Although the abolition movement was much stronger in London than Boston in the 1770s, distrust of Wheatley's poetic ability due to her race still persisted. When Captain Calef traveled to London on behalf of the Wheatleys to meet with the Countess and Bell, he brought the attestation which can be found in the preface of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. This is a document signed by prominent figures in Boston including **reverend Charles Chauncey, John Hancock, Thomas Hutchinson, the governor of Massachusetts, and his Lieutenant Governor, Andrew Oliver**, verifying that they had examined Wheatley in court and deemed she was capable of the work she claimed as her own. Similar to *The History of Mary Prince* (read Sara Penn's spotlight on this title [here](#)), which included supplementary material that "sought to establish the veracity of Prince's account and her credibility" (Penn), Wheatley's book required this material to dispel racist disbelief of her abilities.

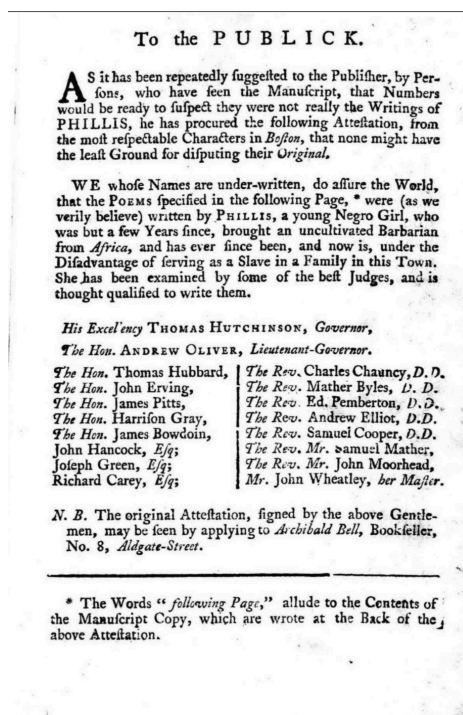


Figure 5. Attestation from 1773 edition with all prefatory material. NCCO.

Wheatley arrived in London from Boston on June 17, 1773 accompanied by Nathaniel Wheatley, John Wheatley's son, to oversee the publication of her book. During her time in London, she was kept busy revising the poems for her book and visiting English nobility and dignitaries. She was hosted by Granville Sharp and met with Ignatius Sancho, who dubbed her 'Genius in bondage' (British Library) (read Kate Moffatt's spotlight on his wife, bookseller Ann Sancho, [here!](#)). Wheatley's trip was cut short as Susanna fell ill, forcing Wheatley to return to Boston before she could meet the Countess of Huntingdon in person, before her scheduled audience with King George III, and before her book was even published.

On 16 September 1773, the collection was finally ready, and the *London Chronicle* announced its appearance in a full-page spread:

POEMS ON VARIOUS SUBJECTS, RELIGIOUS AND MORAL. By PHILLIS WHEATLEY, Negro Servant to Mr. JOHN WHEATLEY, of Boston in New England. ODAVO, pp. 124.

An attestation is prefixed to these Poems, signed by the Governor and Lieutenant-Governor of Boston; also by several Gentlemen of the Council, many of the Clergy, &c. of the Province, that they were really written by Phillis, a young Negro girl.

The following letter, from the girl's mother to the publisher, is likewise prefixed to these pieces, two of which are inserted after the letter:

"PHILLIS was brought from Africa to America, in the year 1761, between seven and eight years of age. Without any assistance from school education, and by only what she was taught in the family, she, in sixteen months time from her arrival, attained the English language, to which she was an utter stranger before, to such a degree, as to read any of the most difficult parts of the sacred writings, to the great astonishment of all who heard her.

"As to her writing, her own curiosity led her to it; and this she learnt in so short a time, that in the year 1765, she wrote a letter to the Rev. Mr. Ocoom, the Indian Minister, while in England.

"She has a great inclination to learn the Latin tongue, and has made some progress in it. This relation is given by her Master who bought her, and with whom she now lives.

Boston, Nov. 14, 1772. JOHN WHEATLEY.

On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA.

"TWAS mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, *Christians, Negroes*, black as Cain,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

Thoughts on the WORKS OF PROVIDENCE.

ARISE, my soul, on wings enaptur'd, rise
To praise the Monarch of the earth and skies,
Whose goodness and beneficence appear
A round its centre moves the rolling year,
Or when the morning glows with rosy charms,
Or the sun flutters in the ocean's arms:
Of light divine be a rich portion lent
To guide my soul, and favour my intent.
Celestial music, my arduous flight sustains,
And raise my mind to a seraphic strain!
A Lord for ever be the God unseen,
Which round the sun revolves this vast machine,
Though to his eye its axis a point appears:
Ador'd the God that whirls furrounding spheres,
Which first ordain'd that mighty *Sol* should reign.
The peerless monarch of th' ethereal train:
Of miles twice forty millions is his height,
And yet his radiance dazzles mortal sight
So far beneath—from him th' extended earth
Without derive, and ev'ry flow'ry birth:
Walk through her orb she moves with easy grace
Around her Phœbus in unbounded space;
T'net to her course th' impetuous storm derides,
Triumphant o'er the winds, and furling tides.
Almighty, in these wondrous works of thine,
What *Powers*, what *Wisdoms*, and what *Goodness* shine!
And are thy wonders, Lord, by men explor'd,
And yet creating glory unador'd!
Cries th' smiles in various beauty gay,
While day to night, and night succeeds to day:
That *Wisdom*, which attends *Jehovah's* ways,
Shines most conspicuous in the solar rays:
Without them, destitute of heat and light,
This world would be the reign of endless night.

In their excess how would our race complain,
Abhorring life! how hate its length'ned chain!
From air adu'd what num'rous ill would rise?
What dire contagion taint the burning skies?
What pestilential vapours, fraught with death,
Would rise, and overp'cad the lands beneath?
Hail, smiling morn, that from the orient main
Ascending dost adorn the heav'nly plain!
So rich, so various are thy beauteous dyes,
That spread through all the circuit of the skies,
That, full of thee, my soul in rapture soars,
And thy great God, the cause of all adores.
O'er beings infinite his love extends,
His *Wisdom* rules them, and his *Pow'r* defends.
When talks diurnal tire the human frame,
The spirits faint, and dim the vital flame,
Thou too that ever active bounty shines,
Which not infinity of space confines,
The fable well, that *Night* in silence draws,
Conceals effect, but shows th' *Almighty Cause*;
Night seals in sleep the wide creation fair,
And all is peaceful but the brow of care.
Again, gay Phœbus, as the day before,
Wakes ev'ry eye, but what shall wake no more;
Again the face of nature is renew'd,
Which still appears harmonious, fair, and good.
May grateful strains salute the smiling morn,
Before he beams the eastern hills adorn!
I shall day to day and night to night conspire
To show the goodness of the Almighty Sire?
This mental voice shall man regard as hear,
And never, never raise the filial pray'r?
To-day, O hearken, nor your folly mourn
For time mispent, that never will return.
But see the fons of vegetation rise,
And spread their leafy banners to the skies,
All-wise Almighty Providence we trace
In trees, and plants, and all the flow'ry race;
As clear as in the nobler frame of man,
All lovely copies of the Maker's plan,
The pow'r the same that forms a ray of light,
That call'd creation from eternal night.
"Let there be light," he said: from his profound
Old Chaos heard, and trembled at the sound:
Swift as the word, inspir'd by pow'r divine,
Behold the light around its Maker shine.
The first fair product of th' omnific God,
And now through all his works diffus'd abroad.
As read th' pow'rs by day our God disclose,
So we may trace him in the night's repose:
Say what is sleep? and dreams how passing strange
When action ceases, and ideas range
Licentious and unbounded o'er the plains,
Where *Fancy's* queen in giddy triumph reigns.
Hear in soft strains the dreaming lover sigh
To a kind fair, or rave in jealousy:
On pleasure now, and now on vengeance bent,
The lab'ring passions struggle for a vent.
What pow'r, O man! thy *reason* then restores,
So long suspended in nocturnal hours?
What secret hand returns the mental train,
And gives improv'd thine active pow'rs again?
From thee, O man, what gratitude should rise!
And, when from balmy sleep thou op'rt thine eyes,
Let thy first thoughts be praises to the skies.
How merciful our God who thus imparts
O'erflowing titles of joy to human hearts.
When wants and woes might be our righteous lot,
Our God forgetting, by our God forgot!
Among the mental pow'rs a question rises,
"What most the image of th' Eternal shows?"
When thus to *Reason* (so let *Fancy* rove)
Her great companion speak immortal *Love*.
"Say, mighty pow'r, how long shall strife prevail,
And with its murmurs load the whist'ring gale?
"Refer the cause to *Reverend Wisdom's* shrine,
Who low proclaims my *undiscover'd* mine,
"The cause whence heav'n and earth began to be,
"And is not man immortal'd by me?"

"Reason let this most cautelefs strife subside."
Thus *Love* pronounc'd, and *Reason* thus reply'd:
"Thy birth, celestial queen! 'tis mine to own."
"In thee respondent is the Godhead shown;
"Thy words persuade, my soul enaptur'd feels
"Reflex beauty which thy smile reveals."
Ancient the spoke, and, kindling at her chariot,
She clasp'd the blooming goddess in her arms.
Infinite *Love* where'er we turn our eyes
Appears: this ev'ry creature's wants supplies;
This most is heard in *Nature's* constant voice,
This makes the morn, and fills th' eve rejoice;
This bids the folk'ring rains and dews descend
To nourish all, to serve one general end,
The good of man: yet man ungrateful pays
But little homage, and but little praise.
To Him, whose works array'd with mercy shine,
What songs should sing! how constant! how divine!

Dedicated, by permission, to the Right Hon. the Countess of Huntingdon.

This Day was published,
Price as above, or, in 6s. neatly bound, adorned
with an elegant engraved likeness of the Author,
A Volume of POEMS, on various Subjects,
RELIGIOUS AND MORAL.
By PHILLIS WHEATLEY,
Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley, of Boston.
London, printed by A. Bell, Bookbinder, Aldgate,
and at Boston, for Messrs. Cox and Berry, in King-
street.

To the PRINTER.

SIR,
It would have been impertinent if not unjust
to have anticipated the verdict of the Jury,
and urged the absolute necessity of their ac-
quitting Major General Ganfield, *procurator* to the
trial.—But since he has been justified by the laws
of his country, and obtained the approbation of
twelve of his fellow citizens, on whom his life
depended, it may not be unfeasible to say a
few words upon a subject more important in its
consequences perhaps than is generally imag-
ined.
I shall not have occasion, Sir, to examine into
the *policy* and *justice* of imprisonment for debt;
it has already been sufficiently exposed and con-
demned: I shall confine myself entirely to the
abuses committed by Sheriff Officers, and the
particular circumstances attending the arrest of
General Ganfield.
The General, from the unhappy embarrass-
ment of his affairs, suspected an arrest; and to
avoid the inconveniences of it, as well as the
insolent brutality of those men, whose duty it
is to execute this very *repulsive* business, con-
fined himself to his chamber. The Bailiff by
some means gets admittance into the house, with
two brazen assistants; the first outrage is
offered to the Lady of the house, from whence
they absolutely steal a double barreled pistol,
forgetting perhaps that they are officers of the
civil law, and under no circumstances whatever
have a right to offensive weapons.
Having in the first instance been guilty of vio-
lence and injustice, they proceed up stairs, and
finding the room door shut, threaten to "*blow*
out the brains" of the person they are in search
after, unless he immediately admits them. This is
as peremptory refused, and the General, in
defence of himself, as well as in support of the
law, which ascertains a man's house to be his
castle, opposes them. The Bailiff, with his
gang of desperadoes (who are rewarded in pro-
portion to the danger they run) attempt a pas-
sage *vi et armis*.—A scuffle ensues, the General
discharges his pistol; a second goes off by acci-
dent, who low proclaims my *undiscover'd* mine, and after
seizing the unhappy captive, lead him insultingly
along in triumph to the infernal dungeon of one
of their confederates.—No mischief is done to

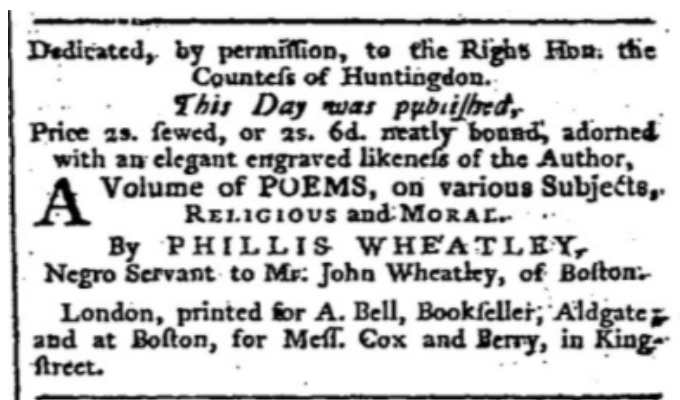


Figure 6. 16–18 September 1773 *London Chronicle* advertisement for Wheatley’s collection, sold by Archibald Bell in London and Cox and Berry in Boston. *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*.

Mukhtar Ali Isani argues that the prefatory material that accompanied the text diverted attention away from Wheatley’s poems themselves towards her race and enslavement. While this may have detracted from her work, this attention may have also contributed to her emancipation soon after the publication of her collection. London reviews of the book gestured to the hypocrisy of the attestation verifying her abilities even while she was still enslaved. A review in the September 1773 issue of *Gentleman’s Magazine* condemned the fact that so many prominent figures signed the attestation and yet “[y]outh, innocence, and piety, united with genius, have not yet been able to restore [Wheatley] to the condition and character with which she was invested by the Great Author of her being” (qtd. in Isani 146). Perhaps as a result of this sort of criticism, the Wheatleys freed Phillis Wheatley in November 1773.

Robinson notes that there was a **first London edition** of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* that did not contain all of the prefatory material because Bell withheld this material to release it in newspapers as promotional content (196). He also states that “English concern” (199) with Wheatley would continue well beyond her death in Boston in 1784, even leading to a “second edition” in 1787, retitled *Poems on Comic, Serious, and Moral Subjects* and published by **John French**. Our database contains several American editions with the original title published after 1784 (1786, 1787, 1789, 1793, 1801, 1802, 1804, 1816), but we are still searching for further London editions and any other American editions we may be missing. If you have any information or find an edition we do not have, please contact us.

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Wheatley, Phillis (person, author)

Wheatley, John (person, editor)

Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral (title, 1773 edition with all prefatory material)

Russell, Ezekiel (firm, publisher, and bookseller)

An Elegiac Poem, on the Death of that Celebrated Divine, and Eminent Servant of Jesus Christ, the Late Reverend, and Pious George Whitefield (title)

Archibald Bell (firm, publisher, and bookseller)

Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral (title, 1802 American edition)

The History of Mary Prince (title)

“The First Slave Narrative by a Woman: The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave” (spotlight by Sara Penn)

Sancho, Ignatius (person, author)

“A Search for Firm Evidence: Uncovering Ann Sancho, Bookseller” (spotlight by Kate Moffatt)

Messrs. Cox and Berry (firm, bookseller)

Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral (title, first London edition)

Poems on Comic, Serious, and Moral Subjects (title)

John French (firm, publisher)

Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral (title, 1786 American edition)

Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral (title, 1787 American edition)

Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral (title, 1789 American edition)

Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral (title, 1793 American edition)

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Further Reading

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