

KAREN A. WEYLER, *Empowering Words: Outsiders and Authorship in Early America* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2013), 311 pp.

In *Empowering Words: Outsiders and Authorship in Early America*, Karen A. Weyler gives a fascinating account of non-elites' strategies—primarily collaborative writing and sponsorship by patrons and editors—to get their texts published during the radical expansion of American print culture from 1760 to 1815. Weyler's book focuses on “those Americans without the advantages of an elite education, social class, or connections, who relied largely on their own labor for subsistence” (4) and “experienced significant constraints on their liberty and labor” (5). For many of the laborers, near-illiterates, slaves, indentured servants, unenfranchised, and women, whose texts Weyler considers, gaining access to print would have been impossible without elite support, first and foremost because most of them were poorly educated and could not write. In eighteenth-century America, “nonelite individuals often read reasonably well without being able to write much beyond their name, if that,” but their immersion in oral culture in many cases ensured that “being unable to write did not mean that one was unfamiliar with the rhetorical tropes or commonly expressed religious sentiments of the time” (7). Weyler sums up her observations concerning different degrees of literacy in an early statement that amounts to the book's main thesis: “Participation in early American literary culture did not require functional literacy but rather a *functional understanding* of literacy and how it operated in Anglo-American culture” (8; emphasis in orig.).

What enables Weyler to trace the history of this highly heterogeneous group's textual production is extensive archival research on ephemeral media (pamphlets, broadsides, newspapers), where outsiders published their captivity narratives, poems, formal addresses, and essays. Her inquiry takes us into hitherto unexplored territory not only in social terms but also in geographical terms, in her forages into archives outside of New England centers of cultural production. In methodological terms, Weyler usefully draws on what Jerome McGann calls ‘materialist hermeneutics,’ a recent approach that brings together the kind of text-based interpretation that literary scholars are most familiar with and book historians' alertness to the materiality of texts.

Chapter one (“Mourning New England: Phillis Wheatley and the Broadside Elegy”) is devoted to a well-known writer who has a secure place in U.S. literary histories. In focusing on Phillis Wheatley's early work rather than on her celebrated *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), Weyler is able to sketch in great detail the strategies that allowed Wheatley to become the first African American to publish a book of poetry. These strategies included her participation in evangelical networks (which prominently included her mistress Susannah Wheatley), her recourse to the popular genre of the elegy, and her choice to publish her poems in the cheap and widely disseminated medium of the broadside. Crucial to Wheatley's rise to fame was her 1770 broadside publication of a patriotic elegy on the famous English evangelist George Whitefield which Weyler describes as “a watershed moment in American print history” (28). The chapter ends with a discussion of racist ‘Bobalition’ broadsides that distorted African-American dialect to comic effect to ridicule what its anonymous authors perceived as Wheatley's pretensions to learning and gentility. Weyler rightly notes that, vicious as they are, these responses also testify to Wheatley's powerful presence in the pre-revolutionary public sphere. Weyler's approach in this chapter is also highly instructive because it allows us to reconsider why it was Wheatley who made her mark rather than other contemporaneous African-American writers (e.g., Jupiter Hammon, Benjamin Banneker, and Prince Hall) or any of the other ten Whitefield elegists.

The second chapter (“An ‘Englishman under English Colours’: Briton Hammon, John Marrant, and the Fungibility of Christian Faith”) focuses on two black men, Briton Hammon and John Marrant, whose accounts of their captivities found their way into print thanks to their (in Marrant's case troubled) affiliation with evangelical individuals and institutions. The chapter begins with a useful recapitulation of the strategies that Wheatley made use of to get her texts published: “sophisticated mastery of the English language, support from powerful patrons, carefully planned literacy events, emphasis on her evangelical faith, deployment of the wildly popular Christian elegy, and use of the inexpensive medium of the broadside and later a poetry collection” (77). Turning to Hammon and Marrant, Weyler notes that the relative obscurity of these

writers in their own time as well as our own has much to do with the fact that several of the strategies Wheatley employed simply were not available to them.

In the case of Hammon's *Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings, and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man* (1760), Weyler reasons that, given proscriptions against teaching slaves writing skills, he could probably read but not write, which makes it likely that his narrative is an "as-told-to story" (87). Weyler situates Hammon's text, which narrates both his Indian and his Spanish captivity, in the context of the French and Indian Wars (1755-1763). During these wars, many British colonial subjects were captured by Native American tribes, which in turn led to a resurging popular interest in captivity narratives that "fanned anti-French, anti-Catholic, and anti-Indian sentiment" (82). In styling himself a Protestant Englishman, Hammon's narrative could tap into that sentiment, highlighting his moral and cultural superiority over both his Indian and his Catholic Spanish captors while de-emphasizing the color of his skin in contradistinction to the editor's titular addition of "a Negro Man."

Unlike Hammon, Marrant could write. But his own captivity narrative *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black* (1785) entered the world of print in ways that powerfully testify to the constraints elite sponsorship and collaboration imposed on non-elite writers. The publication history of Marrant's *Narrative* is more complex than Hammon's because two texts based on his life story preceded it: an early version of the *Narrative* penned by the Methodist minister William Aldridge in 1785 and the English poet Samuel Whitchurch's narrative poem *The Negro Convert* of the same year. Both these texts are based on the conversion narrative Marrant delivered when he was ordained a minister in the evangelical Huntingdon Connexion. It was only in the fourth, revised and expanded edition of the *Narrative*, published later in the same year, that Marrant was able to regain control of his life's story. Most significantly, Marrant counters Aldridge's and especially Whitchurch's emphasis on his race by foregrounding his Christian piety and his proselytizing among his Cherokee captors. In a more aggressive vein, Marrant also adds a passage in which he contrasts his Cherokee captors' benevolence with the white savagery he encountered on a southern plantation, thus

reminding his evangelical patrons and Anglo audience of white Christians' sins.

The book's third chapter ("Common, Plain, Every Day Talk" from 'An Uncommon Quarter': Samson Occom and the Language of the Execution Sermon") explores the lives and work of two Native American authors: Patience Boston, who worked with Reverend Samuel Moody to produce a conversion narrative that was published after her execution for the murder of a white child, and the much better-known Mohegan Reverend Samson Occom, whose *A Sermon Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul, an Indian* (1772) mediates a more distinctly Native American voice that draws on but is not easily contained by the discourses of Christian morality and the law. In bringing these two very different figures together, Weyler illustrates both the constraining and enabling power of evangelical networks for Native American writers. As with Wheatley, Weyler takes into account Occom's "literacy events" (114) prior to his most famous publication, in particular his "A Short Narrative of My Life" (which was, however, published only posthumously). Turning to Occom's *Sermon*, she shows how, more so than Wheatley but similar to other minority writers of the era, he speaks both as an individual and a representative of his ethnic community even as his variation on the "Dying Indian speech" (128) liberally draws on the established genres of the execution sermon and the deathbed confession. In doing so, Occom inscribes both himself and the condemned murderer into a Christian community that believes in the possibility of salvation and redemption for even the greatest of sinners, whatever ethnic community they may belong to. And along the way, Occom subtly reminds his white audience of its own sins: the history of colonial exploitation and racial discrimination that pushed Moses Paul into alcoholism and crime.

Boston's agency as co-author of *A Faithful Narrative of the Wicked Life and Remarkable Conversion of Patience Boston Alias Samson* (1738) was far more constrained than Occom's since her confession and conversion narrative was written by Reverend Samuel Moody, who ensured that her voice was safely contained within evangelical discourse. Boston was "forced to surrender final authority over [her] words in order to grasp limited agency as [a] speaking subject[t]" (122). Her narrative also testifies to the costs of literacy for some non-elite subjects: both Boston and her third child

were bound out to a religious white family. Boston learned to read there but this enabled her neither to escape a life of deprivation, alcoholism, and crime nor to take charge of her own life story: “Sometimes [native literacy] is instead a dark thread running through the tapestry of eighteenth-century literacy studies, outlining the cultural dislocation and despair of displaced people living as outsiders in their own homeland, forcibly included in the provincial polity and struggling to retain their sovereignty” (125).

Deborah Sampson’s enlisting of white writers and artists in her successful attempt to clear her name at the court of public opinion is the focus of Weyler’s fourth chapter (“Becoming ‘The American Heroine’: Deborah Sampson, Collaboration, and Performance”). Sampson fought disguised as a man during the American Revolution, an action that qualified as a punishable offence. It was the combined force of Herman Mann’s fictional biography *The Female Review* (1797), Philip Freneau’s poem “On Deborah Gannett” (1797), Joseph Stone’s portrait of her (c. 1797) as well as the public oration she gave on various occasions dressed as a soldier that shaped Sampson’s public image as an overzealous but righteous patriot in whom female virtue (chastity) and male virtues (courage, honor, duty) converged. Her strategic use of literacy and public performances of gender not only helped her avoid being sentenced for her illegal cross-dressing but also ensured that she received back pay and an invalid pension for her military service: “Sampson exercised her agency not in writing but by persuading more powerful men to write *about* her—a process that enabled her celebrity and compels us to reconsider the nature of collaboration” (147; emphasis in orig.).

In her fifth chapter (“‘To Proceed With Spirit’: Clementia Rind and the *Virginia Gazette*”), Weyler considers the career of Clementia Rind, owner of a print shop and the editor of the *Virginia Gazette*, to make the argument that many editors of the period should be reconsidered as writers in their own right given the amount of text that they wrote (e.g. editorials, short news items, obituaries) and the significant changes they made to the writings they selected for publication. This is perhaps the weakest point made in *Empowering Words* since it is based less on a sustained argument and redefinition of the public functions of editors than on the desire to move ne-

glected female actors back into the historical narrative: “if we broaden our understanding of authorship to include the intellectual labor of editing a paper for a wide-ranging audience, we suddenly find that we have many more southern women ‘authors’” (193). While I fully sympathize with the overall project, I am not so sure it requires us to rename editors “authors.” After all, Weyler emphasizes Rind’s considerable influence on the eve of the American Revolution as editor of a widely read newspaper when she labels her “the center of the flow of information in and out of Williamsburg” (181). At the same time, this chapter gives us a very good sense of the formidable economic and physical demands that colonial printing and editing imposed, particularly for a widowed woman like Rind, who had to support three children with the print shop she inherited from her husband William in 1773.

The sixth and final chapter of *Empowering Words* (“When Barbers Wrote Books: Mechanic Societies and Authorship”) invites us to reconsider what counts as a cultural institution in post-revolutionary America. Focusing on mechanic societies’ active support of its members’ social uplift, she allows us to appreciate the cultural work done by formal addresses penned and given by barbers, farmers, and printers to “dignify the labor of the artisan, celebrate his national economic importance, and argue for public education, firmly locating the mechanic in the national imaginary” (206). These mechanic societies represented the economic, social, and cultural interests of its members; accordingly, writers from their ranks strove to fashion and consolidate a collective and decidedly secular public identity different from that of merchants and the landowning classes. Weyler’s account focuses on formal addresses delivered at mechanic societies’ meetings by three individuals: “the barber (and later civic leader) John Howland, the farmer-turned-printer (and later editor and politician) Joseph Buckingham, and [the] printer-turned-politician Benjamin Russell” (206). After the events, their speeches were published as handsome pamphlets directed at a public well beyond their societies’ confines. Weyler shows how the written dissemination of Howland’s, Buckingham’s, and Russell’s speeches helped them launch public careers in which they continued to fight for their class interests and strove further to consolidate artisans’ place in the nation, for

instance, by advocating, as Howland would go on to do, free public education.

In her succinct conclusion, Weyler reminds us once more not to limit our literary-historical inquiries to the expensive medium of the book. In focusing on cheaper and more widely available ephemera such as broadsides, pamphlets, and newspapers, she develops a more encompassing and more democratic understanding of literacy and authorship that future scholars can profitably draw on to excavate yet

further neglected writers, texts, and genres. Not only that: Weyler's change of focus also sheds new light on firmly established writers such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Wilson, who continued to rely on elites' support even after they had become famous. *Empowering Words* has whetted this reader's appetite and he hopes for more scholarly work in this vein and of this high quality.

Basel

Philipp Schweighauser