3-Katy Chiles.mp3

Mary Mahoney [00:00:00] From Trinity College. This is Hidden Literacies.

Mary Mahoney [00:00:18] Welcome to Hidden Literacies, the podcast. On this show, we'll hear from contributors to the Hidden Literacies Anthology on the sources they've selected, how they became hidden, the lessons we can learn from them, and what they reveal about the stakes of each contributor's scholarship.

Mary Mahoney [00:00:35] My name is Mary Mahoney and I'm the Digital Scholarship Coordinator at Trinity College. On this episode it's my privilege to bring you a conversation with contributor Katy Chiles. Katy's an associate professor of English and teaches and writes about African-American and Native American literature, early American literature and culture, critical race theory and print cultures. I'll let her introduce herself.

Katy Chiles [00:01:01] My name is Katy Chiles and I am an associate professor at the University of Tennessee.

Mary Mahoney [00:01:07] I asked Katy to describe the text she chose to explore for Hidden Literacies, a letter written by Susanna Wheatley likely dictated to the famous poet she enslaved, Phillis Wheatley.

Katy Chiles [00:01:19] I am very interested in a woman named Phillis Wheatley, who was an African-American woman who was enslaved in Boston during the revolutionary time period. And I am writing about a letter that we think that Phillis Wheatley inscribed. But the letter itself was from her enslavers, Susanna Wheatly to Samson Occom, who was a Mohegan Native American and minister. And I'm interested in Wheatley because she published a book of poetry entitled Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral, in 1773. And we often think about Wheatley in that context, writing her own poetry. But I'm interested in the likelihood that she was in amanuensis. She was a scribe for this letter from her enslaver to a Native American minister.

Mary Mahoney [00:02:20] Now, let me pause a moment and offer a quick definition for those of us who may be new to the word amanuensis. The Oxford English Dictionary defines amanuensis as, quote, one who copies or writes from the dictation of another. Her role, taking dictation for the woman who thought of her as property she owned is important and helps us to get at what is, quote, hidden about this letter, a letter that is fairly well known by people who study Phillis Wheatley as Katy describes.

Katy Chiles [00:02:49] So people who have been reading Phillis Wheatley's book of poetry poems on various subjects, religious and moral, have known about this letter for a long time.

Katy Chiles [00:03:00] So in some senses, it's not hidden at all. And the reason that scholars know about this particular letter is because this particular letter talks about some of the collaborative labor that went into Phillis's book of poetry itself. So we've known about it for a long time. And scholars of Wheatley's poetry have often cited the letter.

Mary Mahoney [00:03:23] I asked Katy to explain the contents of the letter to give us a window into the complicated literary network of which Phillis was a part.

Katy Chiles [00:03:32] So one of the interesting things about this letter is that the letter does not directly mention Phillis Wheatley at all. It doesn't mention her directly by name at all. But on the other hand, the letter actually has everything to do with Phillis Wheatley. So one context for this is that Susanna Wheatley and Occom were exchanging letters and at the same time, over a number of years, Phillis Wheatley and Occom exchanging letters between the two of them. And so there were lots of letters circulating and all of them probably would have recognized, even without being told explicitly, that Phillis was a person who had handwritten the letter. In addition to this, the letter that I'm talking about quotes another letter that addresses the publication at Wheatley's poems. In the second quoted letter is to Susanna Wheatley from a man named Captain Robert Kalev, and he was employed by the Wheatley family to sell their merchant ship, the London packet, back and forth between London and Boston and, also on their behalf, this Captain Kalev negotiated with the man who would print Phillis Wheatley's book of poetry, his name is Archibald Bell, to publish Phillis's work and also to ask Bell, the printer, to solicit the Countess of Huntington. She was a prominent sponsor of religious causes and transatlantic black writers, and Bell solicited her to allow the book to be dedicated to her.

Mary Mahoney [00:05:12] Got that? I asked Katy to share a quotation from the letter in question to let us hear some of this 18th-century conversation about the efforts to publish the poetry for which Wheatley would be remembered.

Katy Chiles [00:05:24] The following is an extract from Captain Kalev's letter dated January 5th. And then it goes on to quote it directly, which suggests that either Susanna read Kalev's letter, out loud to Phillis, or that Phillis copied Kalev's letter directly into the letter to Occam. And here is the quote from Kalev's letter that's quoted in the letter from Susanna to Samson Occom. Many, many layers of this. So it says, Mr. Bell, the printer, acquaints me that about five weeks ago, he waited upon the Countess of Huntington with the poems. He was greatly pleased with them and prayed him to read them and often would break in upon him and say, is not this or that very fine. Do you read another? And then expressed herself. She found in her heart's in it with her and questioned him much whether she was real without a deception. I had like to forgot to mention something to you. She is fond of having the book dedicated to her. But one thing she desired, which she said she hardly thought would be denied her, was to have Phillis's picture in the Frontispiece so that if you would get it done, it can be engraved here. I do imagine it can be easily done and think would contribute greatly to the sell of the book? I am impatient to hear what the old Countess says upon the occasion and shall take the earliest opportunity of waiting upon her when she comes to town, unquote.

Mary Mahoney [00:06:49] Katy offered this explanation of the letter, which references a now-famous engraving of Wheatly that appears in her book of poetry.

Katy Chiles [00:06:57] So that quote is so, so fascinating and so interesting because it gives us a history of how the Countess of Huntington asked for the frontispiece of Wheatly that was likely done by Sophia Moorhead, was an enslaved artist who did it. And then it was sent over and used to do the frontispiece of the book. And it talks about all the different labors that went into Phillis Wheatley's book itself. And also the question that the Countess of Huntington raised, which is was really real. Was she real without a deception, did she really write the books, was she really an enslaved woman who had acquired literacy to such a high degree that she could compose this poetry. So it is it's confusing, but also really fascinating.

Mary Mahoney [00:07:45] One scholar referenced the letter as possibly being written in Phillis's hand, a claim that inspired Katy to examine the letter herself at the Connecticut Historical Society.

Katy Chiles [00:07:57] There is one scholar who is named Julian Mason. And in his collected edition of Wheatley's Works, he says and he's talking about the letter and he says in a subordinate clause, he says it appears to be in Phillis's handwriting, appears to be in Phillis's hand. And when I saw that, I got really, really interested and thinking about Phillis Wheatley serving as an amanuensis for this letter. So when I was in Hartford, Connecticut, I got to go to the Connecticut Historical Society and actually see the letter myself there for the first time. And I think that I agree with Julian Mason that it is in Phillis Wheatley's handwriting. And also it makes sense or other mentions that perhaps other members of the family also dictated to Wheatly to transcribe things for them.

Mary Mahoney [00:08:55] Now, why does recovering this hidden element of a well-known letter between Susanna Wheatley, the woman who owned Phillis and Samson Occam, the native minister who helped publish Phillis's poetry, matter? For one thing, acknowledging Phillis' work as a scribe and noting this in the catalog record of Connecticut Historical Society, where the letter is held, can help support a larger effort to uncover the multiple roles folks like Phillis played in print culture, rules often raised in archival in library records that focus on acknowledging certain kinds of labor by mostly white laborers.

Katy Chiles [00:09:32] So a lot of scholars are working to tell us the stories about either free or enslaved African-Americans or Native Americans who were contributing in a vast number of ways through printing, making ink, making paper, serving as scribes, serving as translators. And there were all these kinds of contributions that have not been documented in as robust of a way as contributions that white people were making to the antebellum print culture. And so this is really exciting to document this and to get it into the cataloging so that people will know these things about these print culture documents. It's amazing work and it's really, really exciting.

Mary Mahoney [00:10:16] This kind of recovery of Phillis's work as an amanuensis also allows us to complicate how we understand her role in print culture, the culture commonly understood to rely on many forms of collaboration. As Katy explains, most scholars focus on Phillis Wheatley as a poet who worked alone.

Katy Chiles [00:10:35] This letter is really, really important to the story we tell about in the way that we think about Phillis Wheatley. So when she was writing and working and published in the late 18th century, of course, many of her early white readers doubted that she had acquired the skills, the capabilities to be able to publish a kind of poetry that she did. Phillis Wheatley anticipated this. There were statements or attestations that said, no, she did this work. She knows just English and she's a student of Latin. She's read the Bible and classical sources. And so there was always this kind of suspicion coming from various quarters that maybe she didn't write completely and totally alone, quote-unquote. And what I love about this letter and why this letter is so important is because it kind of flips that question around a bit to say, well, we know in this instance that she didn't write alone because she and Susanna were likely collaborating on this letter. And when we see and identify the labor that Phillis Wheatley likely put into the production of this letter, then I think, of course it will. The fact that the letter itself records the collaboration that went into the publication of her book of poetry. So it's really ironic in that way that I think it helps us reconceive a collaboration in a different way.

Mary Mahoney [00:12:07] Rather than focus on Phillis Wheatley solely as a poet. Katy's suggesting we instead imagine Phillis as a collaborator in a larger print culture and so doing we can appreciate more about Phillis's work and about the complexities of publishing in general that relied on collaboration.

Katy Chiles [00:12:26] So I think that recognizing Wheatley's collaborative work, likely collaborative work is amanuensis. This is one of the kinds of collaboration that print culture scholars say characterizes the production of every single printed text. And when we realize that book historians and print culture scholars have been saying all literary texts are necessarily collaborative and social in some way. I think that allows us to look at the collaborative labor that went into Phillis Wheatley's book of poetry differently.

Katy Chiles [00:12:58] So, for instance, we could see suggestions from Susanna or the other white Bostonian women who heard Phillis Wheatley read her poems. We could think of the suggestions from them as feedback that any writer gets. We could think of markings on her manuscript pages as a form of copyediting, which every single writer's work as we copyediting before one publishes it.

Katy Chiles [00:13:24] So in other words, maybe if we can see Wheatley's likely labor that she contributed to this letter, we can also see the kind of collaborative labor that contributed to her poems, but not in any kind of way that would indicate Wheatly or her poetry or her abilities.

Mary Mahoney [00:13:42] This new way of reading is a pivot from earlier scholarly approaches to understanding Phillis Wheatley in context and exposes an understanding of authorship only afforded to white authors. As Katy explains in recalling work on her first book, Transformable Race, Surprising Metamorphosis in the Literature of Early America.

Katy Chiles [00:14:02] Began to wonder if part reason why folks were so interested and suspicious of what she was up to was not just the fact that she was an enslaved African-American woman producing this poetry, but also that there was something unsettling about the concept of women in radically different positions Susanna Williams and enslaver Phillis Wheatley as an enslaved poet, and maybe even Mary Wheatly, whose Susanna Wheatley's daughters older than Philis and might have been reading and writing alongside with her doing lessons or teaching her things.

Mary Mahoney [00:14:42] This led her to trace different scholars approach to understanding authorship by writers of color in early America, which ultimately frustrated Katy.

Katy Chiles [00:14:51] What had been said about that kind of collaboration over and over and over again in a way that is exceedingly frustrating and really boring at this point, is that either it showed that these folks, quote unquote, couldn't really do the work or that somehow deauthenticated their work or of their abilities, and I am really bored and frustrated with that conversation, because if book historians say all literary texts are collaborative, many different hands go on to making books. But some of those collaborations have become so naturalized that we don't even see them anymore. Somehow they don't matter.

Mary Mahoney [00:15:43] Writers of color, however, are not afforded this same expansive definition of authorship, which presumed participation in a broader system.

Katy Chiles [00:15:51] Literary scholarship continues to, I think, try to hold these early writers of color to this impossibly pure standard that we threw out at absolutely threw out years ago. And so I think having a more, as I'm trying to do in my current book project, is thinking about collaboration among people of various races in this earlier time period. I think about opening up, opening that conversation up will actually show us more about what these writers are doing in a way that does not deauthenticate them for their work or their abilities.

Mary Mahoney [00:16:32] In fact, such analysis could reveal the realities of life in publishing for authors of color in a world defined by issues of power and violence.

Katy Chiles [00:16:41] So thinking about these early African-American writers, I think that maybe we can see them, all of them, whether or not they use an amanuensis work with a white editor or not published with an anti slavery society or not distribute their books through trade house channels or not as individuals working strategically and very wisely and candidly within necessarily collaborative, necessarily racially complex writing and publication processes. And I think we will see how they produce text within the context of and in spite of the violent history of slavery and white supremacy and intense racism. So instead of seeing less of what they have done, I think and seeing their collaboration, we'll see so much more more of what they've done and more of the complicated conditions under which they did it.

Mary Mahoney [00:17:28] Reading a new and provocative ways has implications for how we think about Phillis Wheatley and her peers, Katy suggests, and for how we think about issues of race now.

Katy Chiles [00:17:38] In some ways, the world in which Phillis Wheatley lived in 1773 was so different from the moment that we live in 2019. And in some ways it is very, very problematically similar. Folks are still dealing with antiblack racism. We are still dealing with white supremacy and the ideologies of whiteness. And so my hope is that if we can see in finer detail all the things that Phillis Wheatley did to negotiate those systems, hopefully, maybe in our present moment we can acknowledge the ongoing problematic systems and maybe come up with invigorated new ways to fight against those systems and also to recognize all the labor that folks put into trying to dismantle those systems.

Mary Mahoney [00:18:46] Katy Chiles is associate professor of English at the University of Tennessee Knoxville, and listeners can get more information on her research by checking out her book, Transformable Rates Surprising Metamorphosis in the Literatures of Early America.

Mary Mahoney [00:19:08] Hidden Literacies is a production of Trinity College, edited by Hilary Wyss and Christopher Hager with support from the English Department and Information Services with technical support by Mary Mahoney, Joelle Thomas and Cait Kennedy. This podcast was produced by me, Mary Mahoney, with the support and permission of the contributors to Hidden Literacies for more information on Hidden Literacies and to explore the text and commentaries described here, please visit www.HiddenLiteracies.org