generations and the work of the people who became the faces of Black politics later in the nineteenth century. James M. Shinn Jr. introduces readers to Black activism during the early struggle for Cuban independence. Shinn argues that Black Americans came together to push their government to support Cuban rebels. Drawing on a long political tradition that valued representative government and free labor, some of the most notable Black Americans called on President Ulysses S. Grant and his administration to support Cubans’ attempts to bring their homeland out of the darkness of colonialism and human bondage. In chapter 10, Dale Kretz investigates Black politics through the lens of Black people’s work to obtain Civil War pensions in the Reconstruction South. Kretz reveals how Black southerners turned persistence and protest into tangible benefits for themselves and their communities. According to Kretz, by gaining access to federal pension benefits, freedpeople claimed citizenship rights long withheld from them in the years before emancipation. In the book’s epilogue and afterword, Kellie Carter Jackson and Laura Edwards provide parting words to readers seeking to tie together the findings of the book’s ten different views of nineteenth-century Black politics.

Gosse and Waldstreicher have assembled a well-organized and carefully edited collection. The editors and the authors have thoughtfully merged the unique historical research and analysis of each author with the volume’s larger arguments about nineteenth-century Black people’s political engagement. Their collection is only a preview of a developing body of work that will surely transform scholarly understandings of the evolution of US politics.

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Awakening Verse: The Poetics of Early American Evangelism

WENDY RAPHAEL ROBERTS
Oxford University Press, 2020
320 pp.

Wendy Raphael Roberts’s Awakening Verse: The Poetics of Early American Evangelism masterfully argues in clear, elegant prose that poetry
was not ancillary, but primary to the development of evangelical religion in colonial and early republican America. Roberts reveals that where we might have once considered evangelical verse secondary to other genres, like the sermon or conversion narrative, the linguistic effects of such texts emerge out of a poetic culture that viewed poetry as a crucial vehicle for religious expression. Marshalling an impressive array of archival and print sources to stage its argument, *Awakening Verse* stands as a landmark achievement in the literary historiography of early American poetics.

Roberts's study joins other recent work on early American and religious poetry, like Colin Wells's *Poetry Wars: Verse and Politics in the American Revolution and Early Republic* (U of Pennsylvania P, 2017), Christopher Phillips's *The Hymnal: A Reading History* (Johns Hopkins UP, 2018), and the essays of Joanne van der Woude, among others. As Roberts describes, *Awakening Verse* thus participates in the broader recovery of poetry and language’s centrality to early American culture associated with scholars such as David Shields, Meredith Neuman, Patrick Erben, and Max Cavitch. In doing so, Roberts advances the conceptual work of historical poetics in two crucial ways by transcending national narratives in order to recover the distinctly transatlantic circulation of evangelical media and by grounding her analysis in eighteenth-century religious poetic criticism, like that of John Dennis. As a result, the book offers a robust contextualization of the social, theological, and literary dimensions of these poems while deepening our understanding of the growth of evangelical culture across eighteenth-century British America.

Roberts begins by examining the circulation and reception of the Reverend Ralph Erskine’s *Gospel Sonnets* in colonial America, arguing that Erskine, Scottish Presbyterian minister, produced through his poetry a reconfiguration of aesthetics that would influence evangelical poetry throughout the eighteenth century. According to Roberts, Erskine developed a “Calvinist couplet” that registered in its prosody “the believer’s espousal to Christ and the affective balances required of Calvinist belief” (19). Drawing connections between Erskine, George Whitefield, and Jonathan Edwards, Roberts convincingly argues that the aural dimensions of revival poetry helped believers internalize their committed relationship with Christ and recognize gospel truths. The discussion of Erskine establishes several key concepts that *Awakening Verse* takes up as it proceeds. The first is the notion of the “print-itinerant,” or the production
of an itinerant minister persona that circulated via print publication, thus conceiving of the transmission of texts as a kind of ministry unto itself.

The second key concept is that of “espousal piety,” the notion that true conversion was marked by the believer assuming the role of a bride of Christ. Roberts argues that Erskine’s *Gospel Sonnets* acts as a print ministry, preaching throughout the transatlantic world as the text circulated, while encoding notions of espousal piety in the form of the couplet and the sounds of its meter and rhyme. The argument here is notable both for its attention to form as well as for its examination of the poetics articulated in the various prefaces Erskine produced for different editions of *Gospel Sonnets*.

The concept of the print-itinerant and the poetics of espousal piety develop as Roberts’s attention turns to the role of women poet-ministers in the development of evangelical culture in British America. Roberts argues that women poet-ministers played an important role in the revivals precisely because poetry was so central to evangelicalism, allowing women to take on print ministries and perform the poetics of espousal piety. The second chapter brings much needed attention to the influence of British revival poets Elizabeth Singer Rowe and Anne Dutton on the development of British American poetry. In Roberts’s analysis, Rowe institutes a poetic persona that negotiates the line between the evangelical muse, inspiring revival ministers’ poetry, and the “idealized convert,” providing an affective language of salvation that women could draw on to express their own religious experience (57). Dutton, on the other hand, advances the role of the woman print itinerant, using print publication to amplify her spiritual message, while serving via correspondence as a “spiritual director,” to many leading lights of the revival movement (61). Roberts argues that the influence of Rowe and Dutton appears in the poetry of Sarah Parsons Moorhead whose poetry performs the role of the idealized convert even as her writings provided spiritual direction to itinerant ministers throughout New England. Through close analysis of Moorhead’s poems, Roberts makes a decisive case for the importance of Moorhead both to evangelicalism and to colonial American poetics more broadly.

*Awakening Verse* does not limit its attention to New England, however. Roberts devotes two chapters to eighteenth-century Virginia, both of which pay much needed attention to colonial Virginian poetry. The third chapter takes up evangelicalism’s rejection of cultivated, intellectual taste
for indwelling, soteriological experience as the basis for aesthetic judgment. Roberts pursues this line of inquiry through a reading of the storied public newspaper feud between the Reverend Samuel Davies and an Anglican interlocutor who styled himself Dymocke. Davies’s poetics married the religious sublime to a readily graspable idiom intended to reach as many potential converts as possible. In doing so, Davies’s poetry eschewed intellectual conceptions of aesthetic taste, thereby threatening the rigid social hierarchies that underwrote Virginian society. Roberts does important work here, tying Davies’s poetics to both his sermon writing practices and his ministry among enslaved peoples. She is thus able to articulate the complexity of the social, political, and racial anxieties that underwrite Dymocke’s extended attack on Davies while clarifying why poetry would warrant such a response.

Roberts brings her analysis of evangelical poetics to bear on some of Phillis Wheatley’s major poems in the fourth chapter of the book. Roberts reads Wheatley as an evangelical poet whose rejection of certain dimensions of evangelical poetics, primarily the rhymed couplet, espousal piety, and Isaac Watts’s injunction to write for those of “the plainest capacity,” reveals the limitations of evangelical verse while constructing an alternative to print-itinerant in the persona of the “Ethiop” (131). One of the many pleasures of this chapter is the way that the forms, concepts, and tendencies that Roberts presents in the first three chapters crystallize in a new and valuable analysis of Wheatley’s work. Read against the moves of evangelical poetics, Wheatley’s simultaneous deployment of and resistance to Christian and Enlightenment images and themes emerges as, in Roberts’s words, a critique of “the very category of capacity—whether low or high, evangelical or scientific, theologized or racialized—that sustained slavery” (131–32). The chapter’s sustained analysis of Wheatley’s elegy for George Whitefield as well as “On Recollection,” her hymns, and “To the University at Cambridge,” as well as the famous portrait of Wheatley, offer critical new ways to think about these texts and will be of especial interest to anyone who teaches Wheatley regularly.

The final chapter of the book examines the role that poetry played in the late eighteenth-century conversion of backwoods Virginian playboy James Ireland, arguing that “literary games, wit, and imitation,” played fundamental roles in evangelical circles, in converting the unrepentant, but also in negotiating the development of “white evangelical masculinity” (173).
In their unregenerate state, Ireland and his friends viewed the gestures of Baptist conversion as effeminate and a threat to their social standing. By forming ministerial coteries that turned such poetic contests toward religious ends, Ireland and his ilk were able to develop a masculinized religious practice that met their social needs (193). Ultimately, Roberts argues that the focus of revival poetry on addressing the unconverted would influence the development of what we now think of as the modern lyric. Ireland’s text is a fascinating find on Roberts’s part and one that deserves further attention from scholars. The connection made in this chapter between revival poetics and the development of the modern lyric is provocative, providing a historically contextualized and aesthetically minded account that helps situate the book’s larger argument in the broader field of historical poetics.

_Awakening Verse_ will appeal to historians and literary scholars alike, to the former for its rigorously researched account of early American evangelism, to the latter for the centrality of aesthetics to its arguments. Theologians of a historical bent will also find the sophistication with which Roberts discusses complex doctrinal issues refreshing. While the argument of the book is complex and far-reaching, Roberts writes with such poise and clarity that portions of the book would work well in the advanced undergraduate or graduate classroom. In sum, _Awakening Verse_ is a signal achievement that will undoubtedly influence scholarship for years to come. We can only hope that other scholars will take up Roberts’s “invitation for other scholars to further detail [the] forms . . . functions . . . and influences” of revival verse (8).

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_A Literate South: Reading before Emancipation_  

**BETH BARTON SCHWEIGER**  
Yale University Press, 2019  
258 pp.

Does reading lead to liberalization? If so, what reading, or kinds of reading? As Beth Barton Schweiger argues, what she calls “the ideology of literacy,” which insists on a connection between literacy and liberalization,