

## British Lyric Afterlives

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The eighteenth-century British lyric enjoys an extraordinary afterlife in the culture of the contemporary United States. In the weekly rhythm of ordinary life, tens of millions of Americans learn eighteenth-century British verse texts by heart. At regular intervals of celebration, during rites of passage, and in moments of intense individual and collective emotion, the eighteenth-century British lyric articulates, and lends ritual accompaniment to, Americans' deepest joys and griefs.

American scholars of the British eighteenth century may not think about this fact very much. The verse texts in question do not belong to our core academic canon of eighteenth-century poetry—they are not by Pope, Swift, Montagu, Gay, Gray, Barbauld, Wheatley, or Wordsworth. The living legacy of eighteenth-century verse beyond the academy is in the hymns of the Nonconformist Isaac Watts, the Methodist Charles Wesley, and the Anglicans John Newton and William Cowper, as well as in hymn texts by lesser-known figures or authors better known to scholars for other works, such as Joseph Addison, Christopher Smart, and Edward Young. These hymns are regularly sung in thousands of churches across the United States. The feast of Saint Cecilia is seldom commemorated in our time with performances from Dryden or Pope, but Americans celebrate Christmas with Wesley's "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" (1739) and Watts's "Joy to the World" (1719)—the latter originally a paraphrase of Psalm 98 that was repurposed as a seasonal hymn. I am not aware of any performances from *The Beggar's Opera* by Al Green or Johnny Cash, but both have recorded Augustus Toplady's "Rock of Ages" (1776). And when he delivered the eulogy for Clementa C. Pinkney, the pastor and South Carolina congressman who was one of the martyrs of the Charleston church shooting of 2015, Barack Obama did not offer consolation from Johnson or Blake, but, in an act that has itself become the title of a folk song by Zoe Mulford, covered by both Joan Baez and the Kronos Quartet, [the president sang "Amazing Grace" \(1779\)](#).

My paper opens by noting that the development of English literature as a canon and discipline distinct from religion occludes this wide and deep stream of eighteenth-century reception from the view of the secular academy. Two further sections will focus respectively on cultural-sociological and textual dimensions of the contemporary American afterlife of the eighteenth-century British hymn. First, I will draw on censuses such as the NEH-funded [hymnary.org](#) to offer an overview of the scale of eighteenth-century hymn texts in American hymnals, as well as noting other ways in which the language of these texts remains vital in American culture. I will then turn to a case study—hymnals published by Mennonite Church USA, a small denomination on the periphery of liberal American Protestantism—to examine the very different textual principles that govern scholarly and hymnodic editing of eighteenth-century texts. Whereas scholarly editors serve their present by creating texts that faithfully represent the past, hymn editors alter or adapt tunes and change language from the past to reflect the cultural and theological needs of the present, such as altering texts to efface references to either God or the Christian believer as "he." I will close by noting resonances between these procedures and the work of literary scholars such as Jonathan Culler who explore the tension between historicism and present-oriented performance and reception in the experience of the lyric.