

MS Epistle to Martha Wesley¹

Martha Wesley (1706–91), Charles Wesley’s sister (called “Patty” in the family), was visiting her uncle Matthew Wesley in London in early 1734 when she met Westley Hall (1710–76), one of John Wesley’s pupils at Lincoln College, Oxford. Hall wooed Martha and they were soon betrothed, without the knowledge of her family (in part because her father had derailed earlier suitors). In April 1734 Hall accompanied John Wesley to Epworth, where he met the youngest Wesley sister, Kezia (1709–41). Hall was infatuated with Kezia and within days had proposed marriage to her! Thus began a set of twists and turns in which Hall finally married Martha on September 13, 1735, to the consternation of her family. Their sense of things was that Martha had stolen Hall’s affections from Kezia, whom they believed was his first love interest. The extended poem below gives strong voice to this perspective, accusing Martha of the equivalent of incest. While the charge was unfounded, Martha lived to regret her decision to marry Westley Hall, because he proved unfaithful both to her and to his vocation as an Anglican priest.²

If the situation provoking this admonishment to Martha Wesley is clear, the authorship of the Epistle has been a bit contested. The only surviving copy of (a portion of) the Epistle in manuscript is in the hand of Samuel Wesley Jr., older brother of John and Charles.³ This has led a few to ascribe the verse to Samuel.⁴ But this is hardly sufficient warrant. The section of Samuel’s manuscript notebook which includes “To Miss M[artha] W[esley], an Epistle 1735” is not limited to his own works. Indeed the item immediately preceding this epistle, a poem titled “The Wisest Choice,” is attributed to “Samuel Wesley Sr.”⁵ Closely following the Epistle comes another work ascribed to Samuel Sr., “An Epitaph on a Dog imitated.”⁶ So what about the Epistle to Martha Wesley? Unfortunately, the surviving notebook is incomplete, covering only the first twenty lines of the poem, because two sheets have been torn out (those containing the pp. 81–84).⁷ We are missing the page on which Samuel Jr. could have indicated the author of the poem.

More to the point, we have convincing evidence that Charles Wesley was the composer of this Epistle to Martha Wesley. In a letter sent to Joseph Benson on February 4, 1814, Charles Wesley’s daughter Sarah speaks of her father as the author and provides Benson with some details on the situation behind the poem.⁸ Just as significantly, the Epistle was *published* in the *Westminster Magazine* in 1774,

¹This document was produced by the Duke Center for Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition under editorial direction of Randy L. Maddox, with the diligent assistance of Aileen F. Maddox. Last updated: May 9, 2021.

²For more on both sisters and their treatment by Westley Hall, see Frederick E. Maser, *Seven Sisters in Search of Love* (Rutland, VT: Academy Books, 1988), 79–110.

³It appears within a two-volume set of manuscript poetry by Samuel Wesley Jr., held in the Manuscript Collections of the British Library, call number Add. 42051, 42052; see vol. 2, p. 80 (also numbered p. 40b).

⁴Particularly James Nichols, editor of *Poems on Several Occasions, by Samuel Wesley, Jun.* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1862), p. 556.

⁵Samuel Wesley Jr. Notebook 2 (call number 42052), pp. 78–79 (also numbered 39b–40a).

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 88–91 (also numbered 42b–44a).

⁷These pages were missing when the notebook was accessed into the British Library, as the modern numbering goes from 40b (on p. 80) to 41a (on p. 85).

⁸The letter is present in MARC, DDWF 14/31.

by an unidentified person, who calls it “an original poem by Charles Wesley.”⁹ While it is unclear how this person got hold of the poem, there is every indication that it was being printed without Charles Wesley’s permission or knowledge (which is why we have not placed it in the section of this online collection devoted to verse that Charles Wesley published). In the notes commenting on the poem, the anonymous author dismisses Methodism as enthusiasm gone bad, with Westley Hall as an example of the damages it causes, and describes Charles Wesley as mistaken in his evaluation of his sister.

In 1791 John Hampson inserted the Epistle in his *Memoirs of the late Rev. John Wesley*,¹⁰ attributing it to Charles Wesley. Adam Clarke included the Epistle in his *Memoirs of the Wesley Family* some 30 years later, also ascribing it to Charles Wesley.¹¹ Significantly, the text in Hampson and Clarke are almost identical, while differing in a few places from that published in the *Westminster Journal*. This suggests that they were drawing on an independent manuscript of the complete poem, which does not appear to have survived. By contrast, the text in Hampson and Clarke differs at several points from the text of the opening twenty lines found in Samuel Jr.’s notebook. It seems most likely that Samuel Jr. had transcribed an early draft of the Epistle, which Charles continued to polish.

We present below the text as found in Hampson, because it most closely resembles Charles Wesley’s spelling and punctuation. The one alteration we have made is to adopt Wesley’s more typical pattern of capitalization. We also add notes on any variants between the version in Hampson / Clarke and that found in either the *Westminster Magazine* or in Samuel Jr.’s notebook.

⁹*Westminster Magazine* (Oct. 1774): 501–2.

¹⁰John Hampson, *Memoirs of the late Rev. John Wesley* (Sutherland: James Graham, 1791), 1:59–61.

¹¹Adam Clarke, *Memoirs of the Wesley Family* (London: J. & T. Clarke, 1823), 518–19.

To Miss Martha Wesley.¹²

When¹³ Want, and Pain, and Death besiege our Gate,
And ev'ry solemn Moment teems with Fate,
While Clouds and Darkness fill the Space between,
Perplex th' Event, and shade the folded Scene. [4]
In humble Silence wait th' unuttered Voice,
Suspend thy Will, and check thy forward Choice;
Yet wisely fearful for th' Event prepare
And learn the Dictates of a Brother's Care.¹⁴ [8]

How fierce thy Conflict, how severe thy Flight!¹⁵
When Hell assails the foremost Sons of Light!
When he who long in Virtue's Paths hath trod,
Deaf to the Voice of Conscience and of God,¹⁶ [12]
Drops the fair Mask, proves Traitor to his Vow;¹⁷
And thou the Temptress, and the Tempted thou!

Prepare thee then to meet th' infernal War,
And dare beyond what Woman knows to dare. [16]
Guard each Avenue to thy flutt'ring Heart,
And act the Sister's and the Christian's Part.
Heaven is the Guard of Virtue; scorn to yield,¹⁸
When screened by Heaven's¹⁹ impenetrable Shield. [20]
Secure in this, defy th' impending Storm,
Tho' Satan tempt thee in an Angel's Form.

And Oh! I see the fiery Trial near:
I see the Saint, in all his Forms,²⁰ appear! [24]
By Nature, by Religion taught to please,
With Conquest flush'd, and obstinate to press,
He lists his Virtues in the cause of Hell,
Heav'n, with celestial Arms, presumes t' assail; [28]

¹²Published posthumously by John Hampson, *Memoirs of the late Rev. John Wesley* (1791): 1:58–61; Adam Clarke, *Memoirs of the Wesley Family* (1823), 518–19; and *Unpublished Poetry*, 3:421–23.

¹³The version published in *Westminster Magazine* begins “While want ...”.

¹⁴Samuel Jr.'s copy reads: “And learn to bear the Part thy self art call'd to bear!”

¹⁵Samuel Jr.'s copy has “fight” instead of “flight.”

¹⁶Samuel Jr.'s copy reads: “When he almost consents to part from God.”

¹⁷Samuel Jr.'s copy reads: “Traitor to God and Men, t' abjure his Vow —.”

¹⁸Samuel Jr.'s copy reads: “Lay hold on Life Eternal, scorn to yield.”

¹⁹Samuel Jr.'s copy substitutes “Faith's” for “Heaven's.”

²⁰*Westminster Magazine* has “charms” in place of “forms”.

To veil, with semblance fair, the Fiend within,
And make his God subservient to his Sin!
Trembling I hear his horrid Vows renew'd.

I see him come, by Delia's²¹ Groans pursued; [32]
Poor injur'd Delia! all her Groans are vain;
Or he denies, or list'ning, mocks her Pain.
What tho' her Eyes with ceaseless Tears o'reflow,
Her Bosom heave with agonizing Woe! [36]
What tho' the Horror of his Falsehood near,
Tear up her Faith and plunge her in Despair!

Yet can he think (so blind to Heav'ns Decree,
And the sure Fate of curs'd Apostasy) [40]
Soon as he tells the Secret of his Breast,
And puts the Angel off—and stands confest;
When Love and Grief²² and Shame and Anguish meet,
To make his Crimes and Delia's Wrongs complete, [44]
That then the injur'd Maid will cease to grieve,
Behold him in a Sister's Arm—and live?

Mistaken Wretch! by thy Unkindness hurl'd,
From Ease, from Love, from thee, and from the World, [48]
Soon must she land on that immortal Shore,
Where Falsehood never can torment her more;
There all her Suff'rings, all her Sorrows cease,
Nor Saints turn Devils there, to vex her Peace. [52]
Yet hope not then, all specious as thou art,
To taint, with impious Vows, her Sister's Heart;
With proffer'd Worlds, her honest Soul to move,
Or tempt her Virtue to incestuous Love. [56]

No! wert thou as thou wast! did Heav'ns first Rays
Beam on thy Soul, and all the Godhead blaze!
Sooner shall sweet Oblivion set us free
From Friendship, Love, thy Perfidy and thee: [60]
Sooner shall Light in League with Darkness join,
Virtue and Vice, and Heav'n and Hell combine. }
Than her pure Soul consent to mix with thine;
To share thy Sin, adopt thy Perjury, [64]
And damn herself, to be reveng'd on thee;
To load her Conscience with a Sister's Blood,
The Guilt of Incest, and the Curse of God!

²¹Delia is a classical name often used as a pseudonym in elegiac poets; in this case it is used to avoid naming Kezia directly.

²²*Westminster Magazine* reads "When grief and love ...".