

Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea

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The earliest evidence of Finch's writing dates to her time at the English court where she served as a maid of honor to Mary of Modena, wife of James II, between 1683 and 1688. Here, Finch met and married Heneage Finch, a gentleman of the bedchamber to James. After James and Mary were exiled in 1688, both Anne and Heneage remained loyal to the Stuarts and were forced to leave the court, unable to support the new rule. The two eventually settled with Heneage's nephew, the Earl of Winchilsea, in 1691, and Finch began publishing her poetry anonymously in various collections. In 1712, Heneage's nephew died and Heneage and Anne inherited the titles of Earl and Countess of Winchilsea. A year after gaining her title, Finch published *Miscellany: Poems for Several Occasions*, one of the first poetry collections published by a woman in England. The collection was initially credited to "A Lady" until 1714 when the publisher added credits to "the right Hon[ora]ble Anne" against her wishes (Kennedy 23).

Finch was well respected among her peers, maintaining close friendships with Elizabeth Rowe (see "The Reflection," in this anthology), Alexander Pope, and Jonathan Swift. Her poems lost popularity shortly after her death but saw a brief revival in the early nineteenth century after praise from William Wordsworth. Finch's work found a sustained revival following a critique published by Edmund Gosse in 1891 and a complete collection of poems published by Myra Reynolds in 1903. Finch is now considered one of the best woman poets of the eighteenth century, garnering praise from Virginia Woolf and increased critical attention from scholars after the mid-twentieth century.

Finch wrote across several genres and themes, but is most known for her poetry on nature, female friendships, and happy marriage. Taking care to moderate her expressed political views, Finch left her more personal and political poems unpublished. Of her published poems, many of the most political are found within a large body of adapted fables. The natural playfulness of fables provided a medium for Finch to publicly express her more private views on society. Many of these fables deal with themes of morality and power such as the

position of women in society and include violent elements (as we see in the conclusion of “The Prevalence of Custom” where the wife threatens to hang her husband). Finch’s fables also include her few works that depict unhappy marriages. In a marriage herself that was very happy for the time period, Finch is better known for the affectionate poems she wrote about Heneage and their relationship.

Written in mock-heroic iambic tetrameter couplets with feminine rhymes, “The Prevalence of Custom” falls within Finch’s body of fables and is adapted and translated from La Fontaine’s fable “L’Ivrogne et sa Femme” (“The Drunkard and his Wife”). The poem follows the same narrative as La Fontaine’s but differs in its focus on the wife rather than the husband. Finch also finishes her poem with the wife threatening to hang the husband, while La Fontaine finishes with the husband asking for a drink. Finch honours the original by referencing the Fury Tisiphone, reminiscent of La Fontaine’s wife character being dressed in “robes like those the Furies wear.” “The Prevalence of Custom” was only published within her *Miscellany* while Finch was alive and can be found in few collections published since.

Further Reading

Backscheider, Paula R. “Anne Finch and What Women Wrote.” *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and Their Poetry: Inventing Agency, Inventing Genre*. John Hopkins University Press, 2005, pp. 28-79.

McGovern, Barbara. *Anne Finch and Her Poetry: A Critical Biography*. U of Georgia P, 1992.

References

de La Fontaine, Jean. *The Fables of La Fontaine: A New Edition, with notes*. Translated by Elizur Wright, Project Gutenberg, 2005.

Kennedy, Deborah. “‘She Triumphs with a Song’: The Poetry of Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea.” *Poetic Sisters*. Bucknell UP, 2013, pp. 19-58.

The Prevalence of Custom⁴⁴

A Female, to a Drunkard marry'd,
When all her other Arts miscarry'd,⁴⁵
Had yet one Stratagem to prove him,
And from good Fellowship⁴⁶ remove him;
Finding him overcome with Tipple,⁴⁷ 5
And weak, as Infant at the Nipple,
She to a Vault transports the Lumber,⁴⁸
And *there expects* his breaking Slumber.
A Table she with Meat provided,
And rob'd in Black, stood just beside it; 10
Seen only, by one glim'ring Taper,⁴⁹
That blewly burnt thro' misty Vapor.
At length he wakes, his Wine digested,
And of her Phantomship requested,
To learn the Name of that close Dwelling, 15
And what offends his Sight and Smelling;
And of what Land she was the Creature,
With outspread Hair, and ghastly Feature?
Mortal, quoth she, (to Darkness hurry'd)
Know, that thou art both Dead and Bury'd; 20
Convey'd, last Night, from noisie Tavern,
To this thy still, and dreary Cavern.

⁴⁴ *Miscellany Poems, on Several Occasions: Written by the Right Honble Anne, Countess of Winchilsea*, Benj. Tooke, William Taylor, and James Round, 1713, pp. 22-24; *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*

⁴⁵ *Miscarry'd* the failing of a plan

⁴⁶ *Good Fellowship* carousing

⁴⁷ *Tipple* slang for strong alcohol

⁴⁸ *Lumber* figurative phrase identifying "useless or cumbrous material" (*OED*)

⁴⁹ *Taper* a wax candle; sometimes associated with penance

What strikes thy Nose, springs from the Shatters
 Of Bodies kill'd with Cordial Waters,⁵⁰
 Stronger than other Scents and quicker,
 As urg'd by more spirituous Liquor. 25
 My self attend on the Deceas'd,
 When all their Earthly 'Train's⁵¹ releas'd;
 And in this Place of endless Quiet,
 My Bus'ness is, to find them Diet;
 To shew⁵² all sorts of Meats, and Salades, 30
 Till I'm acquainted with their Palates;⁵³
 But that once known, then less suffices.
 Quoth he⁵⁴ (and on his Crupper⁵⁵ rises)
 Thou Guardian of these lower Regions,
 Thou Providor for countless Legions, 35
 Thou dark, but charitable Crony,⁵⁶
 Far kinder than my *Tisiphony*,⁵⁷
 Who of our Victuals thus art Thinking,⁵⁸
 If thou hast Care too of our Drinking,
 A *Bumper*⁵⁹ fetch: Quoth she, a *Halter*,⁶⁰ 40
 Since nothing less thy Tone can alter,
 Or break this Habit thou'st been getting,

⁵⁰ *Cordial* alcoholic medicine, often drink, that was used recreationally; now, liqueur

⁵¹ *Train* servants

⁵² *Shew* to serve food

⁵³ *Palates* the "seat of taste" (*OED*); relates to the appreciation for specific flavours

⁵⁴ *Quoth he* signals the end of the wife's dialogue and introduces the husband's response

⁵⁵ *Crupper* a man's buttocks, often used humorously; also used to describe horses' rears

⁵⁶ *Crony* a close associate; also a pun on crone

⁵⁷ *Tisiphony* Tisiphone, a Fury of vengeance in Greco-Roman mythology; here, the husband uses it to refer to his wife with insult

⁵⁸ *Of our... Thinking* attending to his food needs

⁵⁹ *Bumper* a cup brim-full with alcohol

⁶⁰ *Halter* a noose meant for hanging; also used to describe leads for horses

To keep thy Throat in constant wetting.



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