

Anne Finch

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Anne Finch was born in 1661 in Hampshire, England, and passed away in 1720. She was known as the Countess of Winchilsea and a poet. Finch began writing in the 1680s and published some of her poetry in the 1690s–1700s. Although she had already circulated some of her poems, 1713 was the year Finch published a whole collection of her poetry. This was a year after her husband passed away and also a year after she gained the title Countess. The collection was named *Miscellany Poems, on Several Occasions. Written By a Lady*. By adding “Written By a Lady” to the title of her collection Finch claimed status as a rare female poet but also kept herself anonymous. A lot of her poetry was about nature or gender politics.

Finch appreciated and enjoyed when people she personally knew read her work, but she was uneasy when her number of readers grew. In *The Poetry of Anne Finch: An Essay in Interpretation*, Charles Hinnant writes, based on the “Introduction” in her collection, that Finch believed the audience for her poetry collection “to be largely masculine and largely hostile” (21). The poem “Reformation” addresses that assumed audience by speaking about a noisy and controlling woman. Though she mentions the gentleman in the poem to be “wretched in his Lot,” she does not elaborate or focus on how wretched that man is. In this case, she removed any attention that she could have placed on men’s characters, instead choosing to place the focus on how men perceive women.

In “Critics and Criticism in the Poetry of Anne Finch,” Michael Gavin writes that “Finch advocates a model of reading that steps outside of critical dispute to value pleasure and merit for their own sakes. [...] Finch hopes to remove controversy as the guiding mode of interpretation and replace it with something like disinterested judgment” (651). We do not see, however, this way of presenting and interpreting in “Reformation.” Finch presents a story and information without seeming to expect a discussion, but the attitude that the speaker takes on, especially through the adjectives they use, automatically pushes readers to make judgments. “Reformation” is from *Miscellany Poems, on Several Occasions. Written By a Lady*, and is in heroic couplets, a popular verse form Finch used often. Though this poem, specifically, does not express her “disinterested judgement,” she appears to be writing as someone who understands the male

perspective. Readers may choose for themselves whether to see this as a straightforward affirmation of patriarchal stereotyping of women or as a subversive exaggeration of it.

Further Reading

Bakary, Iman Farouk El. "Soaring with 'Contracted Wing,' Anne Finch: a Poet and Critic Defying All Classification." *ELLS*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2016, pp. 15–42.

Mermin, Dorothy. "Women Becoming Poets: Katherine Philips, Aphra Behn, Anne Finch." *ELH*, vol. 57, no. 2, 1990, pp. 335–352.

Quinsey, Katherine M. "Nature, Gender, and Genre in Anne Finch's Poetry: 'A Nocturnal Reverie.'" *Lumen*, vol. 26, 2007, pp. 63–77.

References

Gavin, Michael. "Critics and Criticism in the Poetry of Anne Finch." *ELH*, vol. 78, no. 3, 2011, pp. 633–55.

Hinnant, Charles H. *The Poetry of Anne Finch: An Essay in Interpretation*. University of Delaware Press, 1994.

Reformation⁶¹

A Gentleman, most wretched in his Lot,
 A wrangling⁶² and reprovng⁶³ *Wife* had got,
 Who, tho' she curb'd⁶⁴ his Pleasures, and his Food,
 Call'd him *My Dear*, and did it for his Good,
 Ills⁶⁵ to prevent; She of all Ills the worst, 5
 So wisely Froward⁶⁶, and so kindly Curst.
 The Servants too experiment her Lungs,⁶⁷
 And find they've Breath to serve a thousand Tongues.
 Nothing went on; for her eternal Clack⁶⁸
 Still rectifying, set all Matters back;⁶⁹ 10
 Nor Town, nor Neighbours, nor the Court cou'd please,
 But furnish'd Matter for her sharp Disease.
 To distant Plains at length he gets her down,⁷⁰
 With no Affairs⁷¹ to manage of her own;
 Hoping from that unactive State to find 15
 A calmer Habit, grown upon her Mind:
 But soon return'd he hears her at his Door,
 As noisy and tempestuous as before;

⁶¹ *Miscellany Poems, on Several Occasions: Written by the Right Honble Anne, Countess of Winchilsea*, J.B., 1713, pp. 227–229; *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*

⁶² *Wrangling* arguing or debating

⁶³ *Reprovng* blaming or scolding

⁶⁴ *Curb'd* restrained and controlled

⁶⁵ *Ills* misfortunes, errors, struggles

⁶⁶ *Froward* someone who does not listen or is difficult to interact with (*OED*)

⁶⁷ *Experiment her lungs* provoke her to yell often

⁶⁸ *Clack* to speak a lot, quickly

⁶⁹ *Set all Matters back* the servants do not have enough time to do everything because she is constantly yelling and ordering them to do things

⁷⁰ *To distant Plains at length he gets her down* she moves from London to the country with her husband

⁷¹ *Affairs* household duties

Yet mildly ask'd, How she her Days had spent
 Amidst the Quiet of a sweet Content, 20
 Where Shepherds 'tend their Flocks, and Maids their Pails,⁷²
 And no harsh Mistress domineers, or rails?⁷³
 Not rail! she cries — Why, I that had no share
 In their Concerns, cou'd not the Trollops⁷⁴ spare;
 But told 'em, they were Sluts⁷⁵ — And for the Swains,⁷⁶ 25
 My Name a Terror to them still remains;
 So often I reprov'd their slothful⁷⁷ Faults,
 And with such Freedom told 'em all my Thoughts,
 That I no more amongst them cou'd reside.
 Has then, alas! the Gentleman reply'd, } 30
 One single Month so much their Patience try'd?
 Where you by Day, and but at Seasons due,
 Cou'd with your Clamours⁷⁸ their Defects pursue;
 How had they shrunk, and justly been afraid,
 Had they with me one Curtain-Lecture⁷⁹ heard! 35
 Yet enter *Madam*, and resume your Sway;

⁷² *Maids their Pails* milkmaids with pails of milk

⁷³ *Rails* protests or complains

⁷⁴ *Trollops* women who are “negligent or lazy with regard to personal appearance or household cleanliness” (*OED*)

⁷⁵ *Sluts* “an untidy, dirty, or slovenly woman; a woman who is habitually careless, lazy, or negligent with regard to appearance, household cleanliness” (*OED*)

⁷⁶ *Swains* shepherds

⁷⁷ *Slothful* something done without any effort

⁷⁸ *Clamours* a lot of noise

⁷⁹ *Curtain-Lecture* when a woman would scold her husband while they were in bed (*OED*)

Who can't Command, must silently Obey.
In secret here let endless Faults be found,
Till, like Reformers who in States abound,
You all to Ruin bring, and ev'ry Part confound.

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