

Dr. Iman Farouk El Bakary

**Soaring with “contracted wing”, Anne
Finch: a poet and critic defying all
classification**

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Appreciation.

Abstract

This paper is a New Historicist, feminist study of Anne Finch (1661 – 1720) as poet and literary critic. The focus of this work is Finch’s mastery at subverting many of the poetic forms she uses, rebelling against the pressures exerted by the contemporary, male-oriented literary market, seeking to establish an unfettered female poetic voice, while criticizing the cultural, political, literary and social practices of urban, Augustan England.

In addition, this paper seeks to undermine the narrow categorization of Anne Finch as a Pre-Romantic poet, disregarding the multi-faceted complexity of her work. Moreover, it is hoped that reviving the interest in such a unique poet and critic would establish her merit as a canonical literary figure of the first rank, alongside her male counterparts such as Dryden, Pope and Johnson.

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ملخص

إن هذا البحث دراسة تاريخانية جديدة و نسوية للشاعرة و الناقدة الإنجليزية ((آن فينش)) و التي عاشت ما بين عامي ١٦٦١ - ١٧٢٠. و يركز هذا البحث على براعة الكاتبة في استخدام كافة الأشكال الفنية المعاصرة مع تطويعها لما تطمح إليه من إيصال صوتها كإمرأة و شاعرة و ناقدة لأحوال السياسية والاجتماعية و الثقافية والأدبية، متحديّة كل الضغوط التي تهمش الكاتبات من النساء اللاتي يسعين إلى نشر أشعارهن في سوق أدبية يسيطر عليها الرجال من الكتاب و النقاد.

بالإضافة إلى ذلك يهدف البحث إلى تجاوز التصنيفات الجائرة و المحدودة لإبداع ((آن فينش)) والتي تكتفي بوصفها كاتبة رومانتيكية سابقة لعصرها، متجاهلة بذلك العمق و التنوع الشديدين لأعمالها. وأخيرا يرجى من هذا البحث إعادة النظر ولفت انتباه الدراسات الأدبية إلى تلك الشاعرة و الناقدة العبقريّة كي تتبوأ مكانتها الطبيعيّة بين أقرانها من الشعراء والنقاد الرجال أمثال ((درايدن)) و ((بوب)) و ((جونسون)).

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Introduction

On examining the work of Anne Finch, Countess of Winchelsea (1661-1720), one is astounded by the multi-faceted body of work composed by that prolific poet who tried her hand at numerous genres: nature poetry, songs, the Pindaric ode, the fable, the elegy, the pastoral, religious poems and social satires. Through such established poetic forms, Finch's mastery is evident in her manipulation of the social and artistic restrictions of her age by subverting every form she employed in an attempt to achieve her goals as a woman poet and critic. It is evident that Finch foreshadowed women poets of the Romantic Age such as Anna Barbauld, Mary Robinson and others, in expressing the same concerns about the marginalization of women poets. A political dissenter, a shrewd satirist and a progressive feminist are but a few terms that could describe Anne Finch. However, Finch's dissatisfaction with the confrontational nature of the literary debates of her time caused her to retreat into a countryside haven where she could express her poetic self and her critical stance through her poetry. While

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acknowledging the well-established, critical contributions of Dryden and Pope, Finch sought to elevate the stature of poetry, and transcend the binary nature of critical disputes which seems to have prevailed in an almost exclusively male-oriented body of criticism. Thus, it was her wish that men and women be judged fairly upon their talent, regardless of their gender. This paper attempts a close reading of Finch’s social, political and literary criticism interwoven woven into the rich tapestry of her poetry. While highlighting her artistic contribution, the paper also emphasizes the complexity of her work as defying any simplistic classification. The theoretical framework of the paper is informed by the work of the New Historicists since the research is based on a past era, and draws upon several facets of Finch as a feminist, satirist and literary critic. This work is an attempt at understanding how the poems reflect multiple, coexisting systems of meaning, thereby emphasizing textual and historical complexity which mark the entire work of a great poet like Anne Finch. On the other hand, the question of the literary canon emerges as an issue that certainly invites reconsideration. Besides highlighting the merit of Anne Finch’s verse, this paper seeks to revive interest in her as a major canonical woman poet and critic who paved the way for subsequent female pioneers.

Anne Finch: A Pre-Romantic poet?

Traditional literary criticism, usually obsessed with periodization, has fallen into the trap of classifying Winchelsea as a pre-Romantic poet. However, this arbitrary categorization is contested by Barbara McGovern who critiques Wordsworth’s interpretation of Finch’s poem entitled “The Spleen”, (1701) showing how he only focuses on the eight lines which deal with nature, and simply ignores

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“this richly philosophical and didactic ode...” (*The Poetry of Anne Finch* 44, 45) Besides, while editing “Petition for an Absolute Retreat”, he omits the satire and classical allusions which were “probably too neoclassical for his taste.” (45) As for “Enquiry After Peace,” he simply omits its ‘vanity of human wishes’ theme apparently either too moralistic or not poetic enough for him.” Besides Wordsworth, Leigh Hunt, Robert Southey, and Myra Reynolds’ edition of Finch’s poems, “touted her as a prophetess of romantic sensibility...” (47) These poets and critics, among others, are thus responsible for “the continued miscasting of Winchilsea as a misplaced Romantic.” (48) Indeed, who would not associate the following lines with Romantic sensibility?

What art thou, SPLEEN, which ev’ry thing dost ape?
Thou Proteus to abus’d Mankind,
Who never yet thy real Cause cou’d find,
Or fix thee to remain in one continued Shape.
Still varying thy perplexing Form,
Now a Dead Sea thou’lt represent,
A calm of stupid Discontent,
Then, dashing on the Rocks wilt rage into a Storm.

(1-8)

However, Robert Bunton’s “The Anatomy of Melancholy,” (1621) had “created further interest in the malady and helped stimulate its increased popularity as a literary idea.” (McGovern 173) Therefore, through John Donne’s Sonnets, Milton’s “Il Penseroso and the works of Vaughan and others, “melancholy lyrics are evident throughout the seventeenth century. In the latter part of that century, and the early eighteenth century, however, such melancholy themes as solitude, retirement, meditation, grief, melancholy, the vanity of human life, sleep, and death became particularly

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common in English poetry. Moreover, we can distinguish between Finch’s melancholy and Romantic melancholy when we realize that her poems such “To Death,” “An Invocation to Sleep,” “A Song on Greife,” “All is Vanity,” and “On Affliction,” do not seek melancholy for its own sake, but have external causes. They were written after the 1688 Revolution. Keeping in mind Anne and her husband’s jeopardized existence as non-jurors who remained loyal to the exiled King James, one realizes that the expressions of grief and loss have a highly politicized subtext. (175) Thus, it could be said that it is unfair to regard Finch’s work solely as a foreshadowing of Romanticism , thus disregarding her entire body of work.

In her interesting Ph.D. Dissertation entitled “My Daring Pen: The Autobiographical Poetry of Sarah Fyge” (1994), Jeslyn Medoff asserts the impossibility of categorizing the writers of any given Age, and above all, eighteenth-century women writers, declaring that there is no such thing as “the eighteenth century woman writer”. This is due to the fact that the the latter term “encompasses women who worked in every genre: ... women of nearly every political and religious belief, women of many...classes, and most importantly, women who lived over a period of about 170 years (1660-1830)”.

In my opinion, the same is true, not just of women writers but even of such representative figures as Alexander Pope, the epitome of reason and rationalism. For example, one is puzzled on reading Pope’s “Ode on Solitude” which ends with these touching, melancholic, meditative thoughts:

Thus let me live, unseen, unknown:

Thus unlamented let me dye:

Steal from the world, and not a stone

Tell where I lye.

(17-20)

Finch, the Female Satirist

Finch's satire is deeply entrenched in gender politics. Pamela Plimpton regards "the collusion of public and private" in one of Finch's most read poems, "The Spleen," as illustrating "the most telling characteristics of the satiric mode, duplicity and self-bifurcation; these mirror the monstrosity of our own specific actions, and those of mankind in general." (*Inconstant Constancy* 232) In fact, Finch's satire is evident in lines like the following:

Patron thou art to ev'ry gross Abuse,
The sullen Husband's feign'd Excuse,
When the ill Humour with his Wife he spends,
And bears recruited Wit, and Spirits to his Friends.

(90-93)

Indeed, while attacking melancholy and spleen, Finch ironically admits that she herself has fallen victim to the same malady. In these lines the poet achieves multiple goals. Resorting to self-derision, she describes the debilitating effects of melancholy on her creative powers, states that she is aware of the "presumptuous" nature of her poetic endeavour, while asserting her delight in straying from the "common way":

O'er me, alas! Thou dost too much prevail:
I feel thy Force, whilst I against thee rail;
I feel my Verse decay, and my cramp'd Numbers fail.
Thro' thy black Jaundice I all Objects see,
As Dark, and Terrible as Thee,
My Lines decry'd, and my Employment thought
An useless Folly, or presumptuous Fault:

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Whilst in the Muses Paths I stray,
Whilst in their Groves, and by their secret Springs
My Hand delights to trace unusual Things,
And deviates from the known, and common way;
(74-84)

“The Spleen” turns out to be much more than a mere “psychosomatic reaction” to the attacks directed against Finch as a woman poet. Instead, it is a highly ironical poem. (McGovern 189,190) Besides, the irregular form of the ode devoid of serious subject matter turns “The Spleen” into an “anti-form” in its attempts to assume the dignity of the ancient Pindaric. (Plimpton 233)

In fact it is interesting to observe that Finch “deviates” from the typical Augustan meter of iambic pentameter. Nor does she adhere to the restrictive use of the heroic couplet. Highlighting “Finch’s exquisite mastery of discordant elements,” Plimpton mentions the

inconsistent meter - that deftly complements a line’s content, irregular rhyme that almost ... fools us into searching for a regular pattern; sudden shifts in how quickly or slowly lines read, and varieties of tone that at one point evoke our sympathy for those afflicted by the darker, more sinister forms of spleen, and at another encourage scorn for those who melodramatically call on “Spleen” as the rationale for their own irrational behavior. (234)

Thus, the poem should not be read merely as “an autobiographical painting of her own struggle with depression, her own feelings of impotence.” (235, 236) Instead, the poem’s self-reflexive references should be read through the “self-reflexive irony” that “when she is free of spleen’s debilitating effects, she engages in a craft – writing, poetry – which “The Introduction” ...calls ...”Wit”. (234)

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It could be argued that “with the affliction of spleen, there may not be all that great a difference between the two”. Thus, Finch blurs the boundaries between the woman poet’s private and public voices. Therefore, it could be said that “The Spleen”, which is often regarded as a clear-cut melancholic, private poem, masterfully voices the poet’s personal and public concerns.

Through the poet’s clever strategy of reiterating the marginalizing, prejudiced concepts of her male critics, and playing against them at the very same time, Winchilsea emerges as a true feminist critic of the social and literary prejudices of her contemporaries. In her poem entitled “The Introduction”, which is ironically written within the Neo-classical constraints of the heroic couplet and the iambic pentameter, Anne Finch voices her utter dissatisfaction with the biased reception of her work by contemporary male critics. The feminist tone is so prominent in the following poem that it seems pertinent to cite it in full:

Did I, my lines intend for public view,
How many censures, would their faults pursue,
Some would, because such words they do affect,
Cry they’re insipid, empty, and uncorrect.
And many have attained, dull and untaught,
The name of wit by finding fault.
True judges might condemn their want of wit,
And all might say, they’re by a woman writ.

(1-8)

The poet is certain to be condemned for exposing her verse “for public view” and that only few judges would critique her lines fairly upon artistic merit. The fact that her verse is “by a woman writ” is enough to trigger the ready accusation that “they’re insipid, empty, and uncorrect.” Furthermore,

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Winchilsea is well aware that any woman poet would be regarded as “an intruder on the rights of men.”

Alas! A woman that attempts the pen,
Such an intruder on the rights of men,
Such a presumptuous creature, is esteemed,
The fault can by no virtue be redeemed.

(9-12)

In addition, she exposes contemporary society’s view that women should preserve their beauty by satisfying themselves with their domestic pastimes like “fashion, dancing, dress, play.”

They tell us we mistake our sex and way;
Good breeding, fashion, dancing, dressing, play
Are the accomplishments we should desire;
To write, or read, or think, or to inquire
Would cloud our beauty, and exhaust our time,
And interrupt the conquests of our prime;
While the dull manage of a servile house
Is held by some our utmost art, and use.

(13-20)

Moreover, she deplores the inadequate opportunities of intellectual advancement, and the unjust treatment of women poets due to the prevalence of false, male, critical practices:

How are we fall’n, fall’n by mistaken rules?
And education’s, more than nature’s fools,
Debarred of all improvements of the mind,
And to be dull, expected and designed;
And if some one would soar above the rest,
With warmer fancy, and ambition pressed,
So strong th’opposing faction still appears,
The hopes to thrive can ne’er outweigh the fears,

(51-58)

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In the final lines of “The Introduction,” Anne Finch’s bitterness reaches its climax as she declares her resolution to retreat into the shade. This actually turns out to be a clever strategy which ends up recentralizing the decentralized female poet and critic:

Be cautioned then, my Muse, and still retired;
Nor be despised, aiming to be admired;
Conscious of wants, still with contracted wing,
To some few friends, and to thy sorrows sing;
For groves of laurel thou wert not meant;
Be dark enough thy shades, and be thou there content.

(59-64)

In this context, Finch can be rightly placed within a tradition of female advocates long before Mary Wollstonecraft’s defence of women. (Jeslyn Medoff, 1994) Referring to “The Female Advocate” by Sarah Fyge’ (1670 - 1723), Medoff states that it was “the first and only contribution by a woman to a series of treatments, inspired by Robert Gould’s [misogynist satire on women] ... (1682) (*My Daring Pen* 42) Realizing the devastating effect of “presumptuously” writing poetry, Fyge writes, “But ah! My Poetry, did fatal prove, / And robb’d me of a tender Father’s Love,” (qtd. 22) Medoff adds that “During this period [the late seventeenth century] and well into the eighteenth century, a common defense of a published woman writer’s modesty was the fact that she published anonymously with no prefaces, no explanatory claims to fame” . (41, 42) Yet, Sarah Fyge’s poem entitled “The Liberty” could be seen as “A Declaration of Independence”. Fyge challenges the constraints of society on women and female poets as follows:

My daring Pen, will bolder Sallies make,

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And like myself, an uncheck'd freedom take;
Not chain'd to the nice Order of my Sex,
And with restraints my wishing Soul perplex:
(qtd. 53)

Referring to Sandra Glibert and Susan Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Elaine Showalter reminds us of the fact that for many woman writers, gender becomes “a painful obstacle or even a debilitating inadequacy.” (*Contemporary Literary Criticism* 468) In their statement referring to nineteenth century women writers, but which is certainly applicable to Finch, Fyge and their contemporaries, Showalter adds:

Thus the loneliness of the female artist, her feelings of alienation from male predecessors coupled with the need for sisterly precursors and successors, her urgent sense of her need for a female audience together with her fear of the antagonism of male readers, her culturally conditioned timidity about self-dramatization, her dread of the patriarchal authority of art, her anxiety about the impropriety of female intention – all these phenomena of “inferiorization” mark the woman writer's struggle for artistic self-definition and differentiate her efforts at self-creation from those of her male counterpart.

Indeed, these statements from Finch's Preface (1702), which circulated privately with manuscripts of poems, and was withheld from publishing during her lifetime, are revelatory:

Itt is still a great satisfaction to me, that I have not so far abandon'd my prudence, as out of mistaken vanity, to let any attempts of mine in Poetry show themselves whilst I liv'd in such a publick place as the Court, where everyone wou'd have made their

remarks upon a Versifying Maid of Honour; and far the greater number with prejudice, if not contempt. (qtd 15) In this context, McGovern describes the prejudice against women poets during the Restoration, referring to “the disdain of women evidenced in the verse and plays of the Restoration Court Wits and in the impulse towards antifeminist satire that extended well into the middle of the eighteenth century.” (60)

However, it is worth highlighting that Finch’s was more fortunate than her female sister poets whose write to equal opportunity and appreciation she advocated. Winchilsea was able to publish a considerable body of work with the support of her husband. In her interesting dissertation entitled *Ladies of the Shade: The Pastoral Poetry of Aphra Behn, Anne Finch and Elizabeth Singer Rowe*, Heidi Laudien significantly states that “While Finch repeatedly identifies with her literary sisters from Sappho to Katherine Philips and Aphra Behn, her literary and social position distinguish her from...[them] (84) In fact, male admirers of her verse included such figures as Sir George Etherege, William Wycherley, Alexander Pope and Jonathan; a fact which reinforced her public career”.

An important feminist attitude manifested in Finch’s poetry is her departure from the rule of shyness and subordination to the other sex by openly expressing her love and desire for her beloved husband. In “A Letter to Daphnis”, she reverses the Restoration concept that love and marriage are incompatible, and that fidelity is against human nature. She writes to the Count of Winchilsea:

They err, who say that husbands can’t be lovers.

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With such return of passion as is due,
Daphnis I love, Daphnis my thoughts pursue;
Daphnis my hopes and joys are bounded all in you.

(6-9)

In this context, the reversal of the typical roles of nymph and swain characteristic of pastoral poetry is remarkable. Here love “is not a hierarchical love based upon difference, but a progressive love that acknowledges the possibility of mutual passion, equal love, and perfect respect”. (Laudien 122)

On another note, Anne Finch rebels against the inequality of the typical Augustan marriage institution, in which the husband feels free to break the sacred vow of marriage through infidelity, whereas the wife is expected to be the dutiful, patient sufferer. Reversing the *carpe diem* theme, Winchilsea “scorns the unequal chains of marriage. (McGovern 83) An angry feminist voice, Finch is indignant at “The double standard inherent in the male view of marriage”:

Mariage does but slightly tye Men
Whils't close Pris'ners we remain
They the larger Slaves of Hymen
Still are begging Love again
At the full length of all their chain.

(16-20)

It is remarkable that breaking the traditional, gender expectation of a submissive female, is parallel to technical innovation. An example of this is the use of quintets with flexible meter. Thus, “Winchilsea uses ... a verse form of her own invention.” (84) Her quintet stanzas alternate between eight and seven syllables, ending in a combination of masculine and feminine rhyme. The masculine rhyme ending lines 2, 4 and 5 seems to “imitate the sense of confinement and entanglement that the poem conveys.” At

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the end of the poem, there is “no final resolution to the tension, but, rather, and intensification of it” in the line “At the full length of their chain.” Thus, “The reader experiences through sound and meter the entangling, burdensome and unequal fetters that bind a woman and man in marriage. And this poem, which exploits the *carpe diem* tradition, becomes ultimately a bitter anti-seduction poem.” (85)

Another facet of Finch’s feminism is her antagonism towards the mercenary nature of Restoration marriage. In her funny yet pathetic poem entitled “Ralph’s Reflections,” Finch presents a dramatic monologue of Ralph who is celebrating the anniversary of a marriage which, he confesses, was arranged for mercenary reasons only. Finch, while arousing our pity toward Ralph, is expressing a general disgust with the immorality of such mercenary matches. Here, the poet does not only condemn such hypocrisy and avarice, but also “probes the depths of a mind that is trapped in its own ambivalence. Ralph begins to rationalize his own motives in agreeing to the marriage, by attributing similar avarice to the rest of the world ... the Church, the State, and even his personal friends”. (80) It is almost tragic to observe Ralph’s “quiet compliance and dutiful kiss [to his wife which] signify that he will probably try to make the best of an unfortunate marriage.” (81) The final words of the poem, that Ralph “no remorse confess’t,” touch the reader with their “poignant and rich ambiguity”.

However, it is of utter importance to keep in mind that Anne Finch, while expressing bitterness about the institution of marriage in general, clearly voices her praise of her own bliss in marriage in a number of poems like her “Letter to Daphnis,” and “To Mr. Finch Now Earl of Winchilsea”. Hence, Winchilsea’s zealous endeavor to

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reform the morals of her contemporary society through satire and irony often go beyond her own personal issues.

Finch, the Subversive Poet

In view of Finch’s multi-faceted talent and the difficulty of classifying her work, it is important to bear in mind Lois Tyson’s statement that

There is no *monolithic* (single, unified, universal) spirit of an age and there is no adequate totalizing explanation of history ... There is, instead a dynamic, unstable interplay among discourses: ... Furthermore, no discourse is permanent. Discourses wield power for those in charge, but they also stimulate opposition to that power. This is one reason why new historicists believe that the relationship between individual identity and society is mutually constitutive: on the whole, human beings are never merely victims of an oppressive society, for they can find various ways to oppose authority in their personal and public lives.

(Tyson 285)

The difficulty of classifying Finch’s poetry has already been established. In fact, Winchelsea’s poetry seems to fire back at the society she shuns by subverting all the traditional forms in her verse. The relevance of New Historicism to Finch’s work seems to find expression in Paul A. Cantor’s evaluation of the exercise of New Historicists. In his article entitled “Stephen Greenblatt’s New Historicist Vision,” Cantor sees new historical practice as “the broad shift from political, military, and diplomatic history to economic, social, and cultural history, and above all the new emphasis on what is often called the history of private life.” (4)

Thus, in my opinion, it is important to reevaluate the position of a marginalized poet like Anne Finch whose work was in constant dialogue with the established wits of her time such

as Dryden and Pope. Besides, her oeuvre should not be solely regarded as expressing an individual poet's dilemma. As Cantor points out, "the subject is a construct, a historical and social construct. The individual is a fiction, an illusion; human beings are in fact constituted by a series of categories imposed on them, largely by the accidents of their birth, above all, the by-now famous ... categories : race, class, and gender." (6, 7) Of particular interest to the argument put forward in this paper is what Cantor refers to as the "New Historicist principle of subversion and containment; [that] any form of subversive thought must still be contained within a larger frame of orthodoxy". (9) Referring to the notion expressed by such critics/philosophers like Greenblatt and Foucault, "Any move against a system is reconstrued as a move within that system, and hence acts of rebellion become the surest evidence for orthodoxy". (9) He adds that "any attempt to think independently of one's times is governed precisely by some deeper thought pattern of one's time." (10)

This is truly representative of what Finch achieves through her verse. It is the phenomenon which Cantor defines as "speaking to two different levels in one's audience at once, conveying an orthodox meaning to the ignorant and a subversive meaning to those who know." (12) This might explain the lack of conclusiveness on judging Finch's oeuvre which seems to resist any form of narrow methodological allegiances which result in narrow readings of texts and their meanings.

Stephen Greenblatt's view that the autonomy of art is an illusion is evident in his essay entitled "Shakespeare and the Exorcists," in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Greenblatt writes:

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I believe that the most important effect of contemporary theory upon the practice of literary criticism ... is to subvert the tendency to think of aesthetic representation as ultimately autonomous, separable from its cultural context and hence divorced from the social, ideological, and material matrix in which all art is produced and consumed. [Thus,] one position is always infected with traces of its radical antithesis ...” (429)

Further emphasizing the reciprocal influence of history and literature, Greenblatt adds:

it is important to expose the theoretical untenability of the conventional boundaries between facts and artifacts, ... these impure terms that mark the difference between the literary and the nonliterary (429, 430)

On reading Finch’s “Elegy Written Upon the Death of King James II,” (1701) one realizes that lamenting the exiled and now deceased King James helps Anne Finch strike several notes. While using the traditional panegyric theme, Finch subverts it by satirizing the King’s subjects for their disloyalty. Thus, the lamentation turns into a political statement reflecting the poet’s loyalty to the deceased king. By refusing to give the poem a pastoral setting, the accompanying classical names or the requisite pathetic fallacy, Finch assumes “a prophetic voice of a national poet ... For Finch, Britain broke a sacred promise. James II’s forced exile and subsequent death on foreign shores was an unforgivable act of treason on the part of the British subjects”. (Plimpton 222) Thus,

Finch combines with elegiac praise for the deceased King a scathing Juvenilian satire

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directed toward his former subjects. She decries Britain's treatment of James II and scorns the current leadership and its accompanying Whig ideology. (220) ... Finch's Elegy mourns not only the "king", but the loss of public memory of him ... As did [Aphra] Behn in her Pindaric to Charles II, Finch writes herself into the role of public poet.

Indeed, Winchilsea's disillusionment with history, and her estrangement, as well as her financial troubles due to her husband's imprisonment, find expression in her sympathy with the deceased king. Besides, she blames those poets who have shifted their allegiance and failed to mourn him appropriately for fear of the loss of political approbation or financial benefit. Thus, Finch uses the elegy for her own political purposes by repeating such bitter questions as:

If the possession of Imperial Sway
Thou hadst by Death, unhappy Prince, resign'd,
And to a mournful Successor made way,
Whil'st all was Uncontested, all Combined;
How had the Streets? How had the Palace rung,
In Praise of thy acknowledged Worth?
What had our Numerous Writers then brought forth?
What Melancholy Dirges had they sung?"
What weeping elegies prepar'd;
If not from Loyal Grief, yet to obtain Reward.

(II, 1-10)

It is worth noting that Winchilsea has much to say about the integrity of a poet as she "directs her satire toward the loss of the vocational and ontological role of the poet, indeed of poetry itself, and toward the ... disloyalty of royalists who

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have now prudently ‘gone over’ to William and Mary.” (223, 224)

Here, again, she does not only subvert the subject matter of the elegy, but also experiments with her meter which oscillates between iambic tetrameter, pentameter and hexameter. Nor should one overlook the fact that Finch breaks away from the heroic couplet as the rhyme scheme in this extract is [abab cddc ee].

Asserting that publishing the “Elegy” was “no small risk for Finch’s reputation, Plimpton elaborates:

Her reason for writing the elegy served as a foil to that of contemporary poets. In contrast, Finch’s “interested” political stance and her publication of the poem put the Finch’s “market value” on the line. Finch and her husband risked continual material losses and political reprisals with the publication of such a charged critique of the status quo. (225)

Thus, the private and the public undoubtedly intersect in Finch’s “Elegy” in which she emerges as a fearless critic whose poem at once “validates her public voice as well as the content of her poem.” (228) In fact, the poet’s daring stance finds expression in her drawing a parallel between King William and the incompetent and tyrannical Nero. (224) However, at the end of the “:Elegy,” Finch switches “to the voice of the removed aloof satirist [which] brings no resolution ... we understand that the speaker’s grief will never be resolved.”

On the other hand, it is remarkable to note how Anne Finch reverses the traditionally accepted role of the female mourner and the male poet-prophet:

Finch assumes the position of not only mourner, but of eulogizer in elegiac verse ... by appropriating the traditionally masculine voice of the poetic prophet to

urge the public to take on the traditionally feminine task of the physical, ritualistic mourning of the deceased hero ... [Since] this public act [of mourning King James II] cannot occur, ... the poem refuses to reach closure [in the private and] the public sense. (231)

However, towards the end of the Elegy, the poet again shows her masterful strategy of subversion and containment. She seems to refuse to assume so public a calling, by retiring to the shade. Until her economic security, and her husband's political influence can be restored, "the poet resigns herself to the corrective role of the satirist and is "like Solitary Men, / Devoted only to the Pen."

Anne Finch and the Literary Critical Canon

An important aspect of Anne Finch's work which this paper seeks to highlight is her contribution to the field of literary criticism. In this context, Michael Gavin's article entitled "Critics and Criticism in the Poetry of Anne Finch" is seminal. Gavin writes, "Historians of English literary criticism should consider Finch's work ... Finch provides a unique and rich body of commentary on the poetic culture of her day ..." (n.p.) Besides, relating Finch's ambivalent attitude to publishing to her view of poetry and criticism in general, Gavin states that

As she increasingly sought publishers for her poems, Finch stripped critical discourse from her self-presentation, explicitly avoiding public presentation ... this move is usually ascribed to Finch's modesty, her reluctance to insert a too-authoritative woman's voice in a public sphere dominated by men. However, ... this shift reflects her deliberate intervention in the relationship between criticism and poetry. Finch

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looked at the printed works of the 1690s and early 1700s and saw a desolate field that had abandoned the pursuit of pleasure, and a reading public that valued only joyless techniques of back-biting satire. (n. p.)

Viewing Finch’s desire to retreat from public critical discourse as a deliberate, masterful strategy, Gavin explains that

By bringing the public discourse of criticism into her ostensibly private writings, Finch engenders poetry as a new kind of intimacy. In print, Finch eschews the typical practice of provoking controversy as a way to mediate between text, author, and reader. In all cases, we see in Finch a poet rethinking criticism as an instrument for advancing poetry. (n.p.)

In fact, Finch’s uniqueness lies in the fact that she alternatively acknowledges and goes beyond Augustan literary traditions. The importance of Finch’s prose Preface to her largest manuscript lies in her praise of the recent tradition of poetic theorists and translators such as Dryden and Pope, and her claim that poetry had been fully theorized:

Whereas many male contemporaries derided critics for slavishly judging according to rules ... Finch suggests that such rules meant women’s talents could be recognized for the first time. Now fully theorized, poetry is more egalitarian in gender terms because it enables a more precise hierarchy of literary merit. (n. p.)

In her poem entitled “The Critick and the Writer of Fables,” Finch is keen on distinguishing between being criticized for being a woman poet, on the one hand, and for being a bad writer, on the other. As Sharon Young points out in her article entitled “The Critick and the Writier of Fables: Anne Finch and Critical Debates. 1690-1720)”, Finch welcomes

the theorizing of Dryden and his fellow critics of the late seventeenth century as a new and accessible scale of merit which should be used to scrutinize all poets [whether they be men or women.] (8, 9) Thus, it could be said that Finch's great achievement in "The Introduction" lies in the fact that it makes "a distinction between criticism, true judgment and public opinion."

The fact that Finch acknowledges that enough rules have been theorized about poetry,

is not to suggest ... that Finch believed poets must adhere strictly to any particular theoretical doctrine, nor that her own poetry was unambiguously neoclassical ... her embrace of neoclassical poetics was ambivalent and ... her poetry often resists or undermines typically Augustan values. (n. p.)

Finch thus distances her poetry from criticism by "depicting critics as reader-barbarians at the gates, and ... by allocating their authority to a past that authorizes new poetry but invites no further contribution to its theory." Hence, for Finch, "criticism is not the best employment for a poet's acumen, a significant departure for someone who venerated Dryden and would befriend Pope." It could thus be stated that in "elevating figures of authority without engaging them directly - ..., - Finch opens a space for poetic innovation and play."

On the other hand, Winchilsea's oscillation between manuscript and print was an indirect comment on the critical practices of her time. Often opting for a country audience for her manuscript poems, "Finch felt that bad poets catered to an ill-natured, urban readership, that critics valued nothing but back-biting satire, and that these two factors engendered a culture of mutually assured detraction." However, as Gavin

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explains, Finch did not avoid print altogether ... [though publication]

meant addressing the same contentious reading public that she simultaneously decried in her hand-written collections. [Thus] Rather than shrink from publicity, Finch sought ways to engage readers without being subsumed by a context of print controversy that dominated poetry around the turn of the century. (n. p.)

Analyzing Finch’s strategic distancing of her texts from the critical discussions of her time, Sharon Young reminds us that “she [Finch] draws a distinction between theory and criticism. ... (3) Young remarks that “The poems reveal a strategic positioning by Finch of her texts, away from the direct glare of critical reception ... [which contributed to] her late inclusion in the canon or canons of eighteenth-century poetry.”

In this context, Dryden’s awareness of the confrontational nature of criticism causes him to deplore the fact that “We poor Poets Militant ... are at the mercy of Wretched Scribblers and when they cannot fasten upon our verses they fall upon ou[r] moral, our Principles of State and religion. (qtd. 6) However, both Dryden and Pope were capable of *ad hominem* attacks. A glaring example of this biting satire is Dryden’s *MacFlecknoe* (1682) which “was designed to ruin the reputation and career of his rival Thomas Shadwell and, in the process, establish Dryden’s own reputation more firmly. (7) Engaged in aggressive criticism, both Dryden and Pope helped ruin the reputation of fellow writers. This Anne Finch had in mind while advocating

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

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guiding mode of interpretation and replace it with something like disinterested judgment. She advocates for readers to disregard critical dispute and focus on readerly pleasure ... to reformulate reading as an aesthetic experience of pleasure and amusement. (n. p.)

One can't help applauding Winchilsea's noble, idealistic aspirations for poets, critics and the role of true criticism. Relevant to Finch's disillusionment in and distrust of contemporary critics is her Fable entitled "Mercury and the Elephant," which she concludes with the lines:

Our Vanity we more betray,
In asking what the world will say,
Than if, in trivial Things like these,
We wait on the Event with ease;
Nor make long Prefaces, to show
What Men are not concern'd to know:
For still untouch'd how we succeed,
'Tis for themselves, not us, they Read;
Whilst that proceeding to requite
We own (who in the Muse delight)
'Tis for our Selves, not them we Write.

(34-44)

Thus, in "Mercury and the Elephant",

the position of Finch is clear: not only should all right-thinking poets beware the barbarian critics and the commercial market they underwrite, but poets should not encourage this sterile debate by their participation, even if politically or financially expedient. (Young 10)

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Moreover, deciding to save her wit for another age, more appreciative and less materialistic than hers, Finch ends her Fable entitled “The Miser and the Poet,” with the lines:

I, in that solitary Pit,
Your Gold withdrawn, will hide my Wit:
Till Time, which hastily advances,
And gives to all new Turns and Chances,
Again may bring it into use; ...
New Augustan Days revive,
When Wit shall please, and Poets thrive.
(93- 97, 100, 101)

Anne Finch’s contribution as a literary critic leads us to the puzzling question of the literary canon. Indeed, one can’t help wondering what effort should be made to incorporate women writers like Anne Finch into our curriculum, side by side with the classics of Neoclassicism; Dryden, Pope and Johnson. Attempting to answer the question of how literary works are canonized, Lillian Rombinson interestingly raises the issue of the “tyranny of ‘major’ versus ‘minor’ [texts]”. (*Contemporary Literary Criticism* 616) In my opinion, any perceptive analysis of Winchilsea’s work would certainly prove that she is a “major” writer. The solution to this dilemma of marginalizing women writers in the eighteenth century canon is well-pronounced in a relevant suggestion by Rombinson:

The case here consists in showing that an already recognized woman has been denied her rightful place, presumably because of the general evaluation of female efforts and subjects. More often than not, such work involves showing that a woman already securely established in the canon belongs to the first rather than the second rank. (619)

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Thus, the inclusion of female writers is vital to the reevaluation of the canon:

The rationale for a new syllabus or anthology relies on a very different criterion: that of truth to the culture being presented, the *whole* culture and not the creation of an almost entirely male white elite ... no one seems to be proposing the elimination of Moby Dick or The Scarlet Letter, just squeezing them over somewhat to make room for another literary reality, which, joined with the existing canon, will come closer to telling the (poetic) truth. (620) [Hence], we have to return to confrontation with “the” canon, examining it as a source of ideas, themes, motifs, and myths about the two sexes. (626)

In an enlightening article entitled “Canon of Generations, Generation of Canons,” Paul J. Hunter writes:

It is not only that what we read and learn from each other seems to be having relatively little effect on the choice of primary texts, but it even seems as if, often, teachers are not building the implications of their *own* scholarship and criticism into their courses. (5)

Questioning the eighteenth century canon in a statement relevant to Finch’s case, Hunter writes:

The lion’s share of attention now goes to Johnson, Pope, Swift, and (to a somewhat lesser extent after a brief rise in the 60’s) Dryden ... Addison and Steele have dropped almost from sight; poets like Cowley, Prior, ... and Gay have lost almost completely the one or two poem status they once enjoyed in the period course; the prose of Burke, Gibbon, Hume, Newton, ...etc., has shrunk or disappeared.

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A quintessential issue raised by Hunter, is “whether we regard literature as a living tradition or a monument.” (10) Or, could the criteria of judging those works worthy of being canonized itself be flawed? (Plimpton 3)

Recapitulaton

Anne Finch’s oeuvre undoubtedly places her as a superb poet and critic alongside her male eighteenth century contemporaries who have long “colonized” the canon. Winchelsea’s work, as is obvious from the above considerations of her career as poet and critic, is multifaceted. Therefore, any approach to her work would inevitably be eclectic in nature. She seems to have employed most of the poetic forms of her age while subverting them for her own purposes. Throughout her seemingly private poetic voice, Finch certainly succeeds to voice her attitudes toward contemporary politics, poetics, morals, culture, and literary criticism. By pretending to succumb to the constraints of her age, and by opting for an apparent “retreat” into the “shade”, Anne Finch ingeniously recentralizes herself in the very circles she claims to have shunned. In its truly unique, subversive way, her delightful verse achieves the gigantic feat; the ultimate neoclassical goal of “diverting” and “edifying” her readers. Indeed, she has managed to soar with an ostensibly “contracted wing”.

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