

2003

## Anne Finch's "Fair" Play

Susannah B. Mintz

*Skidmore College*, [smintz@skidmore.edu](mailto:smintz@skidmore.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://creativematter.skidmore.edu/eng\\_fac\\_schol](https://creativematter.skidmore.edu/eng_fac_schol)

---

### Recommended Citation

Mintz, Susannah B. "Anne Finch's" fair" play." *The Midwest Quarterly* 45.1 (2003): 74-95.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Creative Matter. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Creative Matter. For more information, please contact [jluo@skidmore.edu](mailto:jluo@skidmore.edu).

# Anne Finch's "Fair" Play

SUSANNAH B. MINTZ

ANNE KINGSMILL FINCH, the Countess of Winchelsea (1661-1720), holds an established position in the history of women's writing, but scholars have not always agreed on whether Finch reproduces or challenges the gender-bias of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century poetic conventions. On the one hand, Finch could be outspoken in her critique of male resistance to women's poetry, but on the other, Finch herself clearly worries about how her poetry will be received, and thus seems at times to uphold the very standards against which her own writing might be doomed to fall short. The complaint that opens "The Introduction," for example, is well known for its pithy illustration of the obstacles facing women writers. Here, Finch anticipates the "censure" (2) that will attend any woman's entrance into the public sphere, and assumes that men will be quick to "condemn" (7) women's writing as "insipid, empty, uncorrect" (4):

Alas! a woman that attempts the pen,  
Such an intruder on the rights of men,  
Such a presumptuous creature is esteem'd,  
The fault can by no virtue be redeemed.  
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 enquire  
Would cloud our beauty . . . (9-17)

Worried about exposing a lack of wit, Finch displays her intelligence through irony, appeal to biblical authority, and rhetorical sophistication, thus proving the inadequacy of misogynistic denouncement. But at the very same time, such poetic strategies demonstrate the lengths to which she must go to ensure that her work will not be read as "uncorrect" (the

“fair” sex may be deemed but “fair,” mediocre writers). The poem thus records a tectonic unsteadiness, working to deconstruct the myth of women as beautiful but insignificant even as it manifests the poet’s anxiety about the “beauty” of her work in the very world that imposes that censure.

In what follows, I will argue that poetry, for Finch, becomes a site of contest over the refracting discourse of “fair.” By manipulating her culture’s assumptions about beauty, femininity, and intellect, Finch’s work ultimately exposes the insufficiencies of a patriarchal law that reproduces “unfairness” in both its construction of women and its determination of what counts as aesthetically pleasing. In a deceptively witty manner, Finch admits that by presenting herself to the world intellectually, she may render that self a monstrous deviation—the “ugly” spectacle that is the woman writer. By dint of such acknowledgment, however, she exacts her own form of condemnation, utilizing this catalogue of patriarchal insults (“an intruder,” “a presumptuous creature”) to impugn the culture’s construction of a “fair sex” confined to “the dull manage of a servile house” (19) and to the shallow maintenance of beauty. Despite, but also because of, insecurity about their worth, Finch’s poems work to rescue women from confinement as objects in men’s poetry, and insist upon the legitimacy of female visibility and speech.

“The Appology” exemplifies Finch’s skill at shifting rhetorical position to stage an argument against gender construction and cultural prohibitions barring women from writing. The title disingenuously apologizes; the first clause—“’Tis true I write”—immediately opens a space of resistance to what must be apologized for: a woman who, in defiance of some “Rule” that might “forbid” her from “play[ing] the fool,” writes anyway (1-2). Writing is aligned with a kind of gaming or masquerade, and as the poem develops, Finch appears to liken herself, as a poet, to other women who engage in more conventional (but, perhaps, equally self-indulgent) behaviors: Mira, who “paints her face” (6), Lamia, whose “borrow’d Spiritts sparkle in her Eyes” (8), and Flavia, who

continues “to lett that face be seen / Which all the Town rejected at fifteen” (13-14). By describing her writing in terms of activities that are not just typically feminine but also deliberately entrapping, Finch points to the peculiarly gendered obligation a woman writer has to seduce her audience, and also reveals the pressures women are under to beautify themselves in an unforgiving world—one disinclined, for instance, to ignore the depredations of aging.

The initial effect of the poem is to minimize the potential “threat” of a woman’s writing, since if poetry is mere artifice and intoxicant, aimed at impressing, attracting, disguising, and tricking, its fictive status can be uncovered; it can be dismissed as temporary, unreal, and trivial; and its fundamental insignificance in the “real” world of male judgment can be emphasized—writing is a “weakness” like drinking or face-painting. But the link between the poet and Mira, Lamia, and Flavia is only partially asserted, at the end of the speaker’s more overt act of distancing herself from the follies of women. In part the speaker strategically opposes herself to easily recognized, and dismissed with, stereotypes of gender, arguing that her project of writing not be found guilty through association with women’s behavior. She insists that she not be held accountable for, or have her work trivialized because of, other women’s subscription to trivial pursuits, nor that she be considered “vain” (consumed with self, or with her own beauty) because she wants to “heat” herself with poetry (9-10).

In the same set of statements, then, Finch hits the issue from all possible sides. If she is to be joined disparagingly to other women, she can undercut such attack on its own grounds (since women are silly, women’s writing should be no cause for concern); women are weak, so writing is simply one more form of female extravagance. At the same time she declares her difference from certain women; their precedent should *not* pertain to all, especially those who write. Moreover, the speaker claims, even men who write don’t succeed indiscriminately: “Nor to the Men is [success] so easy found

/ Ev'n in most Works with which the Witts abound," because "(So weak are all since our first breach with Heav'n)" (17-19) Why, then, should a woman fret over the quality of her writing vis-à-vis male standards if so much writing produced by men fails to achieve those standards ("Ther's lesse to be Applauded then forgiven"[20])? And why should she care about looking the fool when most women are already foolishly devoted to pleasing men with their beauty?

It is the very generality of the women in "The Appology" (the painted coquette, the aged rouée) that marks their conscriptedness in a patriarchal world. Finch hints here at the intransigent way in which women are reduced to types, to tropes of femininity—so that while the speaker may seem on one level to register an uncritical complaint about the lumping-together of all women, she is also decrying the articulations of subjectivity to which women are limited by patriarchy. At the same time, her fear that her writing might be perceived as a form of self-promotion no less ludicrous than Flavia's desperate insinuations into society—hidden, as it were, in her attempt to seem unconcerned about that very possibility—reveals again a woman writer's particular subjection to male approval. Thus what sounds at first like her own assessment of her poetic potential—her aim to write is "hop-lesse to succeed" (16)—may also be a dig at the Republic of Letters whose ranks are barred to women; at the same time, what may sound like a sarcastic aside expressing the speaker's recognition of hostile reaction to her work ("But I write ill and therefore shou'd forbear" [11]) shows again Finch's fear that that "unfair" appraisal might in fact be true

In a single deft move, "The Appology" seems to reiterate a cultural condemnation of the emptiness of women's behavior; establish the writer's similarity to and difference from such behavior; demonstrate that what women do (flirt, primp, write) and do badly, men also do, thus reducing male activity to the stature of women's; and finally realign Finch as the poet in a more positive way with the writing men do for which they garner cultural approval and respect. With extraordinary

rhetorical finesse, Finch suggests that literary “fairness” is a function of ideology which she can, to an extent, manipulate, via a stratagem Nancy K. Miller has described as “a double move of appropriation that both meets the master narratives on their own grounds and refuses them as the only grounds of theoretical power” (40). Charles H. Hinnant writes that because poems like “The Appology” “appear to invoke the reigning stereotypes of women, it is not surprising that the motive behind them can sometimes be misinterpreted” (82). Yet such texts exemplify Finch’s style at its most cunning and subversive, because they maneuver readers into a position of compromised desire where unquestioned cultural assumptions about feminine identity—at once played up and revealed by the poet—must be reckoned with, and then only uncomfortably adhered to.

“The Circuit of Appollo” reiterates such an effect, where what appears to be a prejudice against women on Finch’s part is instead an integral component of a strategy of reversal whereby stock insults directed at women are reiterated, only to be undermined. At the start of the poem, Appollo, returning from a “Circuit” through “the lands of the Muses,” is “Resolv’d to encourage” the few poets that he discovers in Kent—“most” of whom are women (1-2). He commands a performance, so that “she that writt best, with a wreath shou’d be crown’d” (6). The presentation of female creative work in the poem is thus based from the start on a competition staged by a male figure of power and judgment the potential effect of whose arbitration will be not simply to align the “four” women writers along a scale of externally determined value, but further to establish dissension in an already slight (and perhaps beleaguered) community of women writers. Alinda, the first, sings a love song “compos’d with such art” (23) that Appollo reaches for his laurel crown; Laura, the next, reads a “paper” on “Orinda” (Finch’s predecessor Katherine Philips) that again has Appollo ready to grant the prize. Valeria then intrudes on the god’s “musing suspence” (35), taking him aside to proffer such volumes of exemplary work

that Apollo “so often . . . read, and with still new delight, / That Iudgment t’was thought wou’d not passe till twas ’night” (39-40). Finally Ardelia—Finch’s name for herself—appears; Ardelia humbles herself, comes last, and expects the least praise (she writes for “pleasure”[44], “occasion” and “fancy”[45], but not “for the Bays”[44]), yet she also writes in a more various way, including songs and plays.

This presentation of events is multiply subtle. At one level, an increase in the degree of sophistication in each woman’s artistic production is implied by the progression from single love song to single panegyric “paper” to fuller but undifferentiated body of “works” and finally to a more diverse *Œuvre*. In much the same way, the degree to which each woman is willing to publicize herself to Apollo seems at first steadily to increase, from Alinda, who simply “began” (22), to Laura, who “quickly a paper had read” (30), through Valeria, who almost explicitly muscles into Apollo’s indecision and physically “withdr[aws] him a little from thence” (36). The initial implication might thus be that the more a woman writes—the more her pretensions run toward high-brow literary forms dominated by men—the more forward she becomes, in her willingness to confront men, in her coveting of fame, and in her desire to dissociate from other women. In a sense, Finch may be speaking quite straightforwardly here, suggesting that one effect of women’s inculcation into the dominant misogyny of the public (male) domain of writing is that woman become nasty to one another—so that, in Hinnant’s terms, women may appear “divisive and degrading,” seeking to “engender conflict rather than unity” because of a patriarchal structure that rewards surface appearance (95).

But at another level, Finch aims her critique against the expectation that such divisive behavior is *inevitable* if women write by making the women’s apparent self-promotion just that: deceptive and illusory. Upon Apollo’s declaration that “no harmony else” but from his own lyre could suffice to “wait upon words, of so moving a sound” (27-28) as Alinda’s work, Laura “quickly” reads her paper—but it is a text that

praises another woman poet and so inscribes her own debt to a community of women writers; and Valeria's seemingly immodest act of moving Apollo aside allows her to confess to him a far more humble truth: that "Her works, by no other, but him shou'd be try'd" (38)—in other words, that she is hesitant to make them public. The final poet, moreover, whose work is presented as the most various of the four (she "would sometimes endeavour to passe a dull day, / In composing a song, or a Scene of a Play" [46-47]) is also the most self-effacing of all, "Not seeking for Fame, which so little does last" (48). Thus we see a dual attack: women (as men) would be well to guard against the temptation of self-promotion, as Valeria, at least by one way of reading, seems not to understand; on the other hand, women are not necessarily self-promoting or competitive—indeed the most worthy (the most productive) may be the least self-aggrandizing.

That women are "inherently" jealous, competitive, and shrewish seems not to trouble Apollo at first, or even to occur to him; equally taken with each woman's display of artistic talents, he prepares to confer the Bays upon the head of each in succession, only to be deferred by the subsequent appeal of the next performer. Through the first 51 lines, then, the poem radically suggests that women are capable of multiple and multiply impressive forms of creative production, and also of interesting variety in how they present themselves to a reading public. What wins Apollo over to each woman's suit in the competition he arranges is not her ability to sway him seductively, through beauty or guile, or even through the charms of innocence, for Valeria's persuasions, Ardelia's self-effacement, Laura's alacrity, and Alinda's neutrality are ultimately inconsequential in regard to his own experience of the merits of their work. What finally causes Apollo's problem—what indeed amounts to the crux of the poem—is the moment at which he must *choose*, a moment coinciding with his recapitulation of a patriarchal system that determines worth through rank and privilege.



The stanza break that occurs between Apollo's sustained pleasure at what he hears and the dilemma of his inability to choose between the women is brilliantly positioned by Finch, because it marks the breach between the poem's representation of two different ethical systems. Faced with the memory of Helen and the assumption that "in Witt, or in Beauty, itt never was heard, / One female cou'd yield t' have another preferr'd" (60-61), Apollo "changed his dession, and devided his praise" (62), dividing the prize between all the women and congratulating himself on his own "art, / Who thus nicely has acted so subtle a part" (66-67). But while the poem may seem thus to confirm that the women—immature and frivolous—have been patronized by the male god's greater wisdom, which successfully palliates their contentious rivalry, the very fact that "they all had a right to the Bay's" (63) emphasizes two important points: that women should be as widely encouraged toward artistic endeavor as men; and that the skillful female writer, contrary to popular belief, was less the singular exception than a potentially repeatable commonplace.

In the end, and despite his smirking "smil[e] to himself" (66), Apollo seems the laughable one, because the poem's women have succeeded in having him approve of all of them equally. One could contend, of course, that such a conclusion does little to counteract misogynistic denial of women writers, since it merely reasserts the necessity of male approbation. Hinnant writes that "the kind of flattery exemplified by Apollo's decision not to award a prize to the best female poet represents no real advance over the derision [Finch] anticipates" in other poems, because though it seems to allow all women the right to write, it simultaneously "deprive[s] that right of any genuine significance by refusing to subject it to the same kinds of norms that apply to male poets" (14). By appealing to the image of women as "cooperative" rather than competitive, moreover, Apollo's decision encourages women to "recognize themselves as the legitimate and authorized origin of their own marginalization" (14).

I would argue that the poem exacts a more radical resistance to the male norms that seem to inform and undergird its drama. That Apollo effectively returns in defeat to Parnassus—where “the case” will have to be “referr’d” to “a councill of Musses” (72-73)—that he can’t, on his own, figure out what to do with a scenario that exceeds the bounds of his method of making meaning, implies that falling back on the explanatory power of familiar narratives of female subjectivity becomes especially attractive when confronted with the inadequacy of a patriarchal system to define, or curtail, female behavior. Apollo’s divinely ordained method of determining value and worth would reduce everything to a singularity—a single winner; instead, he is confronted by female multiplicity whereby the four women, refusing to be forced into linearity, circle him in an flux of sound and poetry whose beauty he lacks the means to understand, read, hear, or praise, except through recourse to what he already knows: either his own inadequate means of defining the “superiour,” or by referring women’s work back to himself, his own poetic impulse, as when he “catch’d up his Lyre” (26) to accompany Alinda. I would argue too that the slight on Aphra Behn early in the poem (Apollo “own’d that a little too loosly she writt” [14]), proves this very point: not that Finch herself was discomfited by Behn’s bawdier style, but rather that Finch recognizes that women writers were under particular duress, that they had to work especially hard to be sure their poetry would be accepted, since it was bound to meet with harsh criticism from men.

“The Circuit of Appollo” plays daringly with the idea of “fairness” as a way of articulating resistance to male literary norms. Apollo is trying to be “fair”: he really does genuinely seem to find the women equal. But he also wants to *seem* fair to women *he assumes* are inevitably jealous. His performance at being “fair” proves therefore just how *unfair* the male world of Letters really is, since it operates on hierarchies of value that privilege some authors over others, some of the species over others, some kinds of poetry over others. Finch

voices a tripartite petition: for women to stand behind their writing, to trust to that alone, and not to showy forms of persuasion; for men to accept and acknowledge women on the basis of their writing, and not for more superficial attributes or pleasures; and for a world in which all manner of women and writing might be possible and accepted, a world without hierarchization or false division through competition and antagonism.

The fundamental conflict for women—a mutual-exclusivity, as it were—between beauty and writing recurs time and again in Finch's work. In the short poem "Melinda on an Insipid Beauty," for instance, the speaker asserts in a self-satisfied tone:

You, when your body, life shall leave  
 Must drop entire, into the grave;  
 Unheeded, unregarded lye,  
 And all of you together dye;  
 Must hide that fleeting charm, that face in dust,  
 Or to some painted cloath, the slighted Image trust,  
 Whilst my fam'd works, shall throo' all times surprise  
 My polish'd thoughts, my bright Ideas rise,  
 And to new men be known, still talking to their eyes. (1-9)

But the ability of her contention (a familiar one, of course, to earlier male sonneteers)—that the ephemerality of physical beauty will be survived by the intellectual force of poetry—to argue on behalf of women writers dissolves in the poem's central paradox: the speaker's claim to differentiate herself from the "insipidness" of a woman whose sense of self owes to her prettiness is in fact just another form of seduction. Though she contends it is her "works" that will "surprise" and her "thoughts" and "Ideas" that will "rise," the speaker confines the parameters of her audience to a specifically heterosexual intersubjective dynamic. To "be known," finally, remains a desire to attract "new men," to be "still talking to *their* eyes." Though "Melinda on an Insipid Beauty" might therefore seem to dismantle itself before *our* eyes, I would argue that Finch exacts a critique here very much like the

one at the core of "Circuit of Appollo," setting in high relief the fact of male appraisal. Writing, Finch understands (as perhaps her speaker here does not), may be more akin to the flaunting on one's physical "fairness" than a woman suspects; the tension in the last line between "new" (a hopeful word, trusting to the future and to fame) and "still" (a heavy word, suggesting the relentless longevity of ideology) brings this parallel into stark view. As long as women court the looking and approval of men, the poem seems to warn, the particular details of the performance—writing or flirting—may be of no consequence.

A further obstacle to the creation of poetry that might provide a woman both success in the external world and satisfaction of her own artistic integrity is the reality that language, and art, are not always easily made to bend to the poet's designs, resulting in a potential loss of control of the "pen." A concern to ensure that poetry is "fair" in the sense of doing justice to the strength of the poet's emotion and to the subject being described comes up against the inadequacy of linguistic signification in "Friendship between Ephelia and Ardelia." Writing about intimacy (as about grief or depression) is inevitably illegitimate, Finch implies, because the love of friendship will always exceed the limits of language. That words should fail the poet in a moment of extreme emotion is hardly new to Finch, of course; yet she inflects the old story here with a specifically gendered as well as public argument: that friendship between women eludes the lexicon of patriarchal discourse, which is thus exposed as a problematic one with which to depict female experience—in particular, female intimacy.

The dialogue begins with Ephelia's demand that "What *Friendship* is, ARDELIA shew" (1). The strangely compacted form of this imperative works quickly to convey that language's usual syntactical rules are somehow suspended—obviated, or even dispensed with—when a woman tries to articulate her feelings for another woman. Ardelia, as poet-speaker, replies in language (not in action), but her re-

sponse indicates immediately that language has already failed: thus, “ ’Tis to love, as I love you” (2). Ardelia tries to present herself as the proof, not her words, but that presentation occurs in a tautologically encrypted “explanation.” Ephelia must decipher from Ardelia’s answer a definition of “friendship” based on what she already knows (psychically, emotionally) about her relationship; she must look to memory, or fantasy, or her own imagination.

Ardelia seems to be suggesting that a return to the body could establish the meaning of intimacy, that the epistemology of the body somehow exists beyond language and is therefore the only form of knowledge to be trusted. But Ephelia replies by declaring that her “enquiring Mind” (4) is not satisfied with “This Account, so short (tho’ kind)” (3), and repeats her question: “What is *Friendship* when compleat?” (6). Significantly, Ephelia keeps the dialogue in motion, manifesting at once the strength of a woman’s desire to know, as well as the notion that while language may be suspect or inadequate, they cannot escape its uses—indeed, she seems to function here as a foil for Ardelia to display her powers of definition. As Ardelia consents, though, to the lengthy answer Ephelia requires, it becomes clear that language can only repeat its own metaphors, that it is restricted to a limited conceptual framework:

’Tis to share all Joy and Grief;  
 ’Tis to lend all due Relief  
 From the Tongue, the Heart, the Hand;  
 ’Tis to mortgage House and Land;  
 For a Friend be sold a Slave;  
 ’Tis to die upon a Grave,  
 If a Friend therein do lie. (7-13)

Employing a language of economy and politics—friendship is a “lending,” a “mortgage,” a form of slavery or ownership or debt—Finch doesn’t so much play with such metaphors as raise them precisely to prove their failure to depict the strength of feeling between Ardelia and Ephelia.

Moreover, this list of analogies points out the way in which women, even in an attempt to define their own relations, might succumb to relational and poetic paradigms set by men. This becomes clear when Ephelia replies to Ardelia another time, chiding her for the unoriginality of her language: "This has all been said before, / Can ARDELIA say no more?" (17-18). To be "fair" to escape the trap of writing in an inadequate, illegitimate, falsely constructed way—in a sense, to avoid constructing the friendship in a language too implicated in male rules—Finch denies any linguistic flourish at all, circling Ardelia's "definition" of friendship back to the bodies and selves of the women involved: "Words indeed no more can shew: / *But 'tis to love, as I love you*" (19-20). What might seem a failure of effort to extricate women from the patriarchal attitudes that influence their expression of self can therefore also be read as a desire to protect their privacy from an intruding world. (In Ephelia's insistence to know, her admission of an "enquiring Mind," Finch recalls her own "Introduction," wherein the risks are high for curious, inquisitive women.) And, what might appear to prove a woman's failure to write poetry in a compellingly fresh, original way simultaneously reveals the inadequacy of both conventional poetic tropes and male standards of interest.

By staging a debate between women about the nature of friendship, a debate that must take as its "proof" their own friendship itself and as its vocabulary the worn imagery of patriarchal culture, Finch calls attention to the lack of precedent for such a conversation, since female friendship is not a subject of wider spread philosophical treatises, and ironizes, at the same time, the limits of masculinist discourse. Moreover, the poem's peculiar impenetrability—its way of keeping readers at a certain distance from the friendship under discussion by *not* providing more specific details about that friendship—works to protect Ephelia and Ardelia from two strands of misogynistic disapproval. For the audience is not only denied the voyeuristic pleasure of witnessing the embodied occurrence of friendship (which could most easily

slide into a form of policing or dismissive surveillance of woman's intimacy), but the deliberately tautological quality of Ardelia's definition seems even to foreclose literary interpretation. It is as if, with her penultimate line "Words indeed no more can shew," Finch would deny a male onlooker/reader the ability to critically respond, in words, to her work. What can be said, the poem seems to ask, about a text that denies its own pretensions to textuality?

Poetry, Finch acknowledges, is dangerous, because it becomes a public act, its creator enters into the realm of evaluation with its arbitrary criteria and its arbiters of taste. What's more—and indeed as an exact result of that value-making domain—art is dismayingly prone to obscuring true feeling, and can thus keep two people at odds with one another. In "A Song" ("Tis strange, this Heart"), for example, the speaker longs to know "what's done" (4) in the heart of her other (lover, husband, friend?):

In vain I ask it of your Eyes  
 Which subt'ly would my Fears controul;  
 For Art has taught them to disguise,  
 Which Nature made t' explain the Soul. (5-8)

The speaker here invites a certain kind of looking, one so completely stripped of artifice that the soul's integrity would be appropriately revealed through the windows of the eyes. Significantly, though, she also seems to recognize that even an honest gaze, a gaze unencumbered or unmediated by the influence of cultural narrative—if such a look could be posited at all, as Finch implies that it could not—would nonetheless be a containing, limiting, even policing one, capable of a form of "controul" over female emotion. The point is moot, however, since even "*your* Eyes" have succumbed to the false show of Art's disguises.

At one level, "A Song" seems tonally to be addressed to an intimate other, one whose openness and, perhaps more desperately, whose genuine affection the speaker craves a guarantee of. A second possible referent for the poem's "you,"

however, is not a single auditor at all, but rather the *audience*—male readers both specifically (as opposed to women) and in general (in their powerful collectivity). Such a reading turns a private lament about the failure of interpersonal communication into a direct statement about the poet's wish for public approval of her writing as well as her careful perusal of readers' responses for the approbation she hopes they might contain. In this sense the poem proliferates and reiterates a set of interlocking worries that pervades much of Finch's work. Since words can dissemble, be untrue, or are too heavy, too many, too deceptive, to find "Truth" (12) in them, how can one—especially a woman—write poetry that expresses oneself, with words that match feelings and intent; and, more troublingly, how could anyone else understand those words as they were meant? Since readers (men, writers, critics) are far too schooled in manipulating words to their advantage for any positive judgment to be trusted, how can a woman penetrate to the essence of another's evaluation of her work? If a writer can't trust words, how can she trust that an unfriendly audience will accept poetry from a woman? In short, how can, and should, a woman write?

By way of unfolding this set of questions, I would like to argue for Finch's "The Petition for an Absolute Retreat" as an *ars poetica* that takes the mobius strip of writing and specularly as its thematic and structural principle. "The Petition" is usually categorized, along with "The Tree" and "A Nocturnal Reverie," as one of Finch's best-known nature poems, works contingent upon a distinction between nature and culture and which posit the natural world as a spiritual or political counteractant to an unfriendly (anti-feminist, anti-Stuart) society. The retreat of "The Petition" can thus be read as a *location*—for example, of solidarity with other women, in what Carol Barash describes as a "rethink[ing of] the pastoral topos of political retreat as a place where women's shared political sympathies can be legitimately expressed"; or a *process*—an elaborated metaphor for what Charles Hinnant reads as "a philosophic ascent of the human mind" (150). I



would add to these convincing readings the possibility that the petition is a suit for and mapping out of *both* a place and a process of *writing*, which could be protected from the incursions of artifice, ambition, dishonesty, and isolating competitiveness. In this sense "The Petition" stands as a potent manifesto of a way of composing poetry that could resist the pressure of writing to satisfy the demands of patriarchal readers, a constraint to which, Finch reveals elsewhere, she often felt compelled to succumb.

The fantasized locale of "The Petition" is an abundant natural place laden with "All, that did in *Eden* grow" (except the "*Forbidden Tree*") (35-36), a place of "Unaffected Carelessness" (71) far "from Clouds, and Noise" (126), a place where, the speaker exults, she might "remain secure, / Waste, in humble Joys and pure" (202-3). The speaker repeatedly longs to relieve herself of the trappings of a stylized femininity, and to realign "inside" with "outside" in a new form of poetic, philosophical, psychical wholeness: she asks for "plain, and wholesome Fare" (33); for clothes "light, and fresh as *May* (65), and "Habit cheap and new" (67); for "No Perfumes [to] have there a Part, / Borrow'd from the *Chymists* Art" (72-73); and when she "must be fine," she will "In . . . natural Colours shine" (96-97). It is significant, then, that the express longing to inhabit a domain unfettered by the accoutrements and affectations of culture is dressed in so foliate a poetry, whose stanzas are thick with allusion and detail—and, more to our purposes, that the poem repeatedly returns to, and turns on, the phrasing and imagery of "those Windings, and that Shade," the line that closes each of the seven substantial stanzas. The image (the psychical "syntax," as it were) of arriving at a feminized realm of writing and psychic pleasure *through* "Windings" and "Shade" works to establish an opposition far more pointed (if deceptively counterintuitive) than a dichotomy between an idealized, pure, female landscape and the corrupted involutions of patriarchal civilization. If "Windings" conducts us on a topographical level along a path designed to ward off "Intruders" (8), it also traces the

contours of a poetic impulse. Only by twisting and turning, Finch seems to say, does the woman poet avoid the traps of copping to male desire; only by (with the use of) and through (by sustaining the duration of) a deliberate traveling along a winding course, entangling and coiling oneself in one's own poetic energies, can freedom from male expectation be found.

In one way, the very lushness of the natural setting and the poetry that describes it acts as a corrective to institutionalized cultural (human, male) rigidities of politics or social grace. At the same time, though, the poem's depiction of this pastoral Retreat is undeniably laced with references to the very human world it purports to eschew, as when the "Willows, on the Banks" are shown to be "Gather'd into social Ranks" (134-35). What is at work, I think, is Finch's understanding that her own call for "an Absolute Retreat" leaves in place a problematic set of binary oppositions (male/female, culture/nature, reason/emotion, ornamentation/purity, and so on) without defying the epistemology on which such ideologies rest. Instead, Finch suggests a wholly different method of breaking down patriarchal schema via poetic meandering—kind of post-lapsarian revision of the scene of errored wandering that constitutes lapsarian loss—that might conduct women to paradisaal space.

In a complicated sense, to doff the ornamentation demanded of women might in itself be linked to the act of writing poetry, which, according to convention, engenders a manishly unfeminine woman. But Finch goes further than this, arguing instead for a woman writer to symbolically divest herself of dependence upon the apparel of male-centered literary standards (to make herself "plain") and then to redress herself by following a symbolically "Winding" course that separates her from the domain of men and conducts her to a self-determined place that cannot be seen from without. Finch deepens this desire to disentangle herself from constructions (and constrictions) of gender in the poem, but the desire is further problematized by virtue of the poem's very

composition, which re-enacts a “feminine” adorning. Thus the poem in part exhibits what is both “male” and “female”—but in such a way as to deprive each category of ontological status. In this “The Petition” sets in high relief an axiomatic paradox, that the oppositional categories of “masculine” and “feminine” are in fact present to and in each other, and that the toppling of patriarchal authority may best be achieved not simply by reversing the standings of those terms but by a more involved process of poetic “windings” and in an place of “shade” that emphatically contradict masculinist standards of reason, genius, and the pursuit of convention as “enlightened” states of being or mental activities.

That the retreat holds out the promise of intellectual stimulation for women in particular becomes clear in the relationship between two passages, one requesting “A *Partner*” (106), the other “a *Friend*” (197). Though the speaker asks in the first instance for a partner “suited to my Mind” (106), the heterosexual bond is described primarily in terms of a pre-lapsarian fantasy of the “Love” and “Passion” (120) of “but two” (112) whose union is undisturbed by “Bus’ness,” “Wars,” or “Domestick Cares” (114-15). In contrast to a vision of interconnectedness which enumerates no other pastime but being “In Love” (120), the model for friendship is the woman Arminda, who,

Warm’d anew [Ardelia’s] drooping Heart,  
and Life diffus’d thro’ every Part;  
Mixing Words, in wise Discourse,  
Of such Weight and won’drous Force,  
As could all her Sorrows charm,  
And transitory Ills disarm;

.....  
With Wit, from an unmeasured Store,  
To Woman ne’er allow’d before. (166-75)

Women, once situated in the symbolic realm of the “Retreat,” will be able to enjoy a wider set of options for how to be and behave, both individually and in consort with each other, than the earlier description of wedded happiness had seemed to

offer. Women can soothe and rejuvenate each other—unsurprisingly feminine tasks that take on subtly new meaning in the context of a definitively feminine space—but also, more defiantly, they can discover themselves capable of “Mixing Words, in wise Discourse,” of using language with “such Weight and wond’rous Force” that it would “charm,” “disarm,” and “Chea[r]” one another in a way that seems magically “delightful.” Further, women might find “Wit” here, that elusive quality of mind and poetry held so firmly—“To Woman ne’er allow’d before”—by men. The ambiguity of “allow’d” conveys the point exactly: that women have been excluded from the ranks of male poets not because they can’t produce good work, but because of the “mistaken rules” of men who won’t concede women as equal participants in artistic creation (“The Introduction”). Arminda, then, serves as less the singular exception than as an embodied metaphor for what might obtain for women by pursuing “those Windings and that Shade”—what the speaker herself calls, later in the poem, “Contemplations of the Mind” (283).

Throughout her work, Finch’s concern is not simply to vent “spleen” against anti-feminist bias, but to ironically undercut the paradigms of that bias by manipulating the very language of its constructions of femininity. “The Petition” reiterates that project in a striking way, suggesting that the subversive ambiguities of a woman’s work may provide the necessary “overgrowth” to protect it from male dismissal. As many have noted, Finch’s complete *Œuvre* includes a broad range of poetic forms; Hinnant remarks that it is “one of the most diverse of any English poet—encompassing songs, pastorals, dialogues, Pindaric odes, tales, beast fables, hymns, didactic compositions, biblical paraphrases, verse epistles, and satires” (17). Such variety implies another form of “winding,” the trying-on of different poetic styles (and selves) that manifest the search for a way of writing that could both legitimize her and solidify an interior sense of poetic integrity.

It is crucial, I think, to Finch’s ideological and literary purposes that though the poem amply analogizes the quality of

experience possible in the "Retreat," it also rests in a subjective mood, called for and imagined but never realized within the frame of the poem itself. The closest we come, in a sense, are the "windings" and "shade" that act as threshold to—but also, powerfully, as guards of—the actual place of a woman's poetic spirit. It is often said of Finch that she was a pivotal writer, echoing predominant seventeenth-century poetic patterns (in particular, the theme of female friendship in Katherine Philips and the poetry of pastoral retreat); using popular eighteenth-century forms to her own, sometimes feminist, sometimes sociopolitical aims; and finally, gesturing toward the inward-looking preoccupations of the Romantics. Such ambiguity in temporally locating Finch seems doubly apt: it accounts for the stylistic, tonal, and structural complexity of her work, but also, in a less direct way, suggests that she has followed her own advice, writing poems "through those Windings, and that Shade."

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Carol Barash. *English Women's Poetry, 1649-1714: Politics, Community, and Linguistic Authority*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.
- Finch, Anne. *The Poems of Anne, Countess of Winchilsea*. Ed. Myra Reynolds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1903.
- Hinnant, Charles H. *The Poetry of Anne Finch: An Essay in Interpretation*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994.
- Miller, Nancy K. *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts*. New York and London: Routledge, 1991.

*monweal*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *High Plains Literary Review*, *New Orleans Review*, and *New Letters*. His poetry has also appeared previously in *The Midwest Quarterly*. Wilson spent the Spring 2003 semester in Slovenia as a Fulbright Scholar. He lives in San Marcos, Texas.

SUSANNAH B. MINTZ demonstrates that English poet Anne Finch played up negative stereotypes belittling women at the turn of the eighteenth century only to undermine them. "On the one hand, Finch could be outspoken in her critique of male resistance to women's poetry, but on the other, Finch herself clearly worries about how her poetry will be received, and thus seems at times to uphold the very standards against which her own writing might be doomed to fall short." Assistant Professor of English at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, Mintz is author of *Threshold Poetics: Milton and Intersubjectivity* (forthcoming from the University of Delaware Press), numerous articles in scholarly journals, and is currently working on a study of contemporary autobiographical writing by disabled women.

STEVEN LOVETT interviews poet William Kloefkorn. A poet whose work has appeared in magazines in the U. S. and Ireland, Lovett is the founding editor of *Stormy Wednesday*, a regional literary magazine printed in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

CYNTHIA ALLAN is Director of Theatre in the Department of Communication at Pittsburg State University. She is a playwright and director with research interests in American theatre, film and gender, and intercultural theory. She has published in *Theatre Studies* and *The New England Theatre Journal*.

DENISE LOW chairs the English Department at Haskell Indian Nations University. Her *New and Selected Poems: 1970-1999* was published by Penthe Press. Her poetry and reviews have appeared previously in *The Midwest Quarterly*.

RONALD CHARLES EPSTEIN, a Canadian freelance writer, has recently published in the *Canadian Book Review Annual* and *Lola*, a Toronto arts magazine. Last summer, he toured central Canada, where he met scriptwriters Dan Aykroyd and Victor-Levy Beaulieu. He lives in Toronto.

◦ ◦ ◦