

Representation of Female Poetics in Anne Finch's Poetry

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Anne Kingsmill Finch, the Countess of Winchelsea (1661-1720), holds an established position in the history of women's writing. Although she was a very well-known poet during late 17th and early 18th centuries, Anne Finch went into obliteration in time and has only recently received the appreciation and the praise that she deserves. Anne Finch's exploration of her poetic capability encourages her to question the assumptions of the 18th century poetics. Described as "a highly self-conscious poet who reflected on her art" by Charles H. Hinnant, Anne Finch is preoccupied with an attempt to redefine the dominant discourses of her time about the concepts of femininity, womanhood and authorship (*The Poetry of Anne Finch* 99). Therefore, the poetry of Anne Finch, which seems to be personal in its exploration of the experiences of a woman poet in the 18th century, is, in fact, fully replete with ideological arguments, as she attempts to change firmly established conventions of writing in her own time. Therefore, through a detailed analysis of her poetry, the major concern of this article will be to demonstrate that Anne Finch's poetry is specifically committed to the creation of a consciousness for women writers, distinguishing herself and her poetry from the general trend of her own period which attempts to eliminate women writers from the domain of the male writing tradition.

Adopting Ardelia as her pseudonym (Barash 9), Anne Finch mainly concentrates on the negative stereotypes which humiliate women by ascribing

passive roles to them and she attempts to undermine these assumptions, and thus, becomes outspoken in her critique of male resistance to the poetry of women. In this regard, “The Appology” can be considered as a poem which confronts the prevailing gender stereotypes about women in the 18th century.

From the very beginning of the poem, the subversive attitude of Finch can be clearly observed. Although the title of the poem gives the reader an impression of a woman poet’s apology for writing poetry, which is accepted as a platform for males only, the very first line of the poem highlights the poet’s proclamation of her authority to write by saying that “ ‘Tis true I write and tell me...” (Finch 1). Hence, rather than apologising for her attempt to write, Finch imprudently paves her way in the domain of a writing career. Finch continues to retain her challenging attitude in the following lines where she claims that:

Why shou’d it in my Pen be held a fault
 Whilst Mira paints her face, to paint a thought
 Whilst Lamia to the manly Bumper flies
 And borrow’d Spiritts sparkle in her Eyes,
 Why shou’d it be in me a thing so vain
 To heat with Poetry my colder Brain. (5-11)

As it is indicated in these lines, Anne Finch refers to the activities which are generally expected from the women in her age, and develops her argument against the constructed gender stereotypes like women’s make up and drinking habits in public circumstances. Rejecting to deal with the traditionally accepted trivialities as most of the women in her time usually engaged in, Finch affirms her determination to deal with the activities which will feed her intellect by expressing her desire to heat her brain with poetry.

Similar to “The Appology” which brings forth a confrontational argument to the prejudiced opinions about women’s creative poetic capabilities, “The

"Introduction" is another poem which illustrates Finch's challenging attitude to the dominant ideologies of her age:

Did I intend my lines for publick view,
How many censures wou'd their faults persue,
Some wou'd, because such words they do affect,
Cry they're insipid, empty, uncorrect. (1-4)

The poem begins with a complaint about the critical opinions about women's creativity. She talks about the obstacles that woman writers confront when they attempt to embrace the career of a writer which was generally accepted as a male occupation. She states that just because it is written by a woman, her work will certainly be approached with prejudice and will receive harsh critical response from the public. Her lines are like a warning for woman writers about the censure that will attend any woman's entrance into the public sphere, and she tells them that they should be ready to face these prejudices. She anticipates the fact that men will condemn women's writing as "insipid, empty and uncorrect" (4). Finch in this poem focuses on the gender-based assumptions and acknowledges the function of socially constructed ideologies which force women to accept their secondary positions:

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 vertue be redeem'd.
They tell us, we mistake our sex and way;
Good breeding, fassion, dancing, dressing, play
Are the accomplishments we shou'd desire,
To write, or read, or think, or to enquire
Wou'd cloud our beauty, and exhaust our time. (9-17)

Describing her attempt at writing as an intrusion into the male terrain of writing, Finch insists on undermining the negative stereotypes about the women who are expected to be preoccupied with "good breeding, fashion, dancing, dressing and playing" (Finch 14), and continues to underline her aim to write, read,

think and inquire. The poet later continues to speculate on what is considered as appropriate deeds for women and tries to undermine the stereotypes which are created for women such as the ideology of women being too simple-minded to indulge in intellectual matters. According to this ideology, the main concern of women should be to preserve their beauty, wear fashionable clothes and learn dancing. And every woman should behave in accordance with the patterns of her own gender. The poem thus, tries to deconstruct the concept of women as beautiful but insignificant creatures. She later traces the origins of these false assumptions and declares that:

How are we fal'n, Fal'n by mistaken rules?
 And education's more than Nature's fools;
 Debarr'd from all improve-ments of the mind,
 And to be dull, expected and designed;
 And if some one would Soar above the rest,
 With warmer fancy, and ambition press't,
 So strong th'opposing faction still appears,
 The hopes to thrive can ne'er outweigh the fears.
 (51-58)

Finch in these lines tries to offer an explanation for the secondary position of women and refers to the fact that throughout centuries women are always subordinated and are specifically left uneducated. Refusing to accept the subordinate role for her, Finch emphasizes the fact that women are not naturally born as the weaker sex but it is a socially and culturally constructed identity for women. Describing Anne Finch as a displaced poet who is unfit for her time, Ruth Salvaggio points out that:

In asking what it means for Finch to write 'as a woman', I have found that it means to write simultaneously in the historical predicament of an actual woman, and through the process of disruption that was suppressed in the discourse of Newton, Pope, and Swift. Anne Finch, it seems to me, is one of many woman writers who challenge us

to explore the connections between the largely feminist concern with recovering the lost women of history, and largely theoretical concern with figuring loss and absence as feminine. (2)

Significantly enough, Anne Finch as a displaced poet from the Age of Enlightenment challenges the hierarchical masculine discourses of her own age. From this perspective it may not be wrong to claim that Finch exceeding her own historical context with her confrontational arguments about the prevalent discourses of her time, becomes one of the pioneers of women writers. In addition to Finch's argument about the right of woman to be poet and rejecting to accept woman as a sexual object in "The Introduction", another poem "The Bird and the Arras" symbolically represents the imprisonment of a female poet by the restrictions of convention:

By neer resemblance see that Bird betray'd
 Who takes the well wrought Arras for a shade
 There hopes to perch and with a cheerfull Tune
 O're-passe the scorchings of the sultry Noon.
 But soon repuls'd by the obdurate scean
 How swift she turns but turns alas in vain
 That piece a Grove, this shews an ambient sky
 Where immitated Fowl their pinnions ply
 Seeming to mount in flight and aiming still more
 high. (1-9)

The poem depicts a bird which is imprisoned in a room in which a tapestry is hung on the wall. Deluded by the figures of the sky and grove woven on the tapestry, taking them as real, the bird, unavailingly, tries to fly high over the sky, aiming to reach the grove. Unfortunately, its futile attempts result in falling on the ground which the poet expresses with the words, "Till the dash'd Ceiling strikes her to the ground" (12). The symbolic use of the bird in the poetic tradition is not a new phenomenon. Jean Mallinson comments on the image of the bird as symbolic representation and points out that:

The bird is of a very old emblem in English poetry. It has a range of signification as wide as that of any of the old, central images in our literature: harbinger of spring, figure of transience of life, embodiment of freedom, symbol of the singer and poet. In Anne Finch's poetry, the bird often occurs in the figures of speech about herself. (70)

The bird's imprisonment in a tapestried room is interpreted by Jean Mallinson as symbolic representation of Finch's "sense of herself as a poet and woman" (75). Remarkably, the poet's choice of "she" as a pronoun for the bird rather than "it", also supports Mallinson's assumption. It may further be argued that the bird's struggle to fly higher than the other birds, and its falling on the ground can be considered as a depiction of Anne Finch's first attempts to become a poet and her struggle to open a place for herself in the terrain of male writers. As Jennifer Keith also remarks, "it is through her identification with the bird that Finch repeatedly defends her authority to write" (6). Her exclusion from the tradition of writing which causes her to fall on the ground does not discourage her and she never loses her hope which, in the end, leads her to success:

But we degresse and leaue th' imprison'd wretch
 Now sinking low now on a loftyer stretch
 Flutt'ring in the endless cercles of dismay
 Till some kind hand directs the certain way
 Which through the casement an escape affoards
 And leads to ample space the only Heav'n of Birds.
 (16-21)

Although the first attempts of the poet result in failure, in the last part of the poem, she finally achieves to liberate herself from the imprisonment in the closed room and proves herself as a female poet in the literary arena of her time. Generally speaking, the bird may be taken as a representation of Anne Finch's process of becoming and proving herself as a female poet after a long period of obstacles and

difficulties on her way to success. She uses the male convention of writing and never deviates from it, yet her poetic style is determined by a woman's interpretation, inquisition and further subversion of that tradition. Therefore, it may be claimed that she writes within the borders of male tradition only to undermine it. The voice of the social norms which prevent women from writing is also heard in another poem "To The Nightingale":

Cease then, prithee, cease thy Tune;
Trifler, wilt thou sing till June?
Till thy Bus'ness all lies waste,
And the Time of Building's past! (26-29)

In these lines, there is an implication of reprimand for the bird which persists in singing and neglecting its major duty of building its nest. The poet expresses the voice of masculine tradition which forbids women to write poetry by reminding them their domestic duties which should not be neglected. In Charles Hinnant's words, "the nightingale is no longer the symbol of an ideal that transcends gender but rather the emblem of a deluded and implicitly feminine effort to escape one's place in domestic economy" ("Song and Speech in Anne Finch's 'To the Nightingale'" 508). Disregarding the rebukes of the masculine society, Anne Finch still expresses her desire to compose poetry, as free as the nightingale's song as she expresses as follows: "Free as thine shall be my Song / As thy Musick, short or long" (5-6).

Similarly, "The Unequal Fetters" deals with the issue of marriage which causes a biased entanglement for women. The poet argues that women can love and be loved by somebody as long as they preserve their beauty and youth. Once women have lost their beauty and physical attraction, men immediately try to find love and affection in younger and more beautiful women:

But since we must loose those Graces
Which at first your hearths have wonne

And you seek for in new Faces
 When our Spring of Life is done
 It wou'd but urge our ruine on. (6-10)

She thinks that it is unfair for a woman to be deserted by her husband when her youth has gone away. The persona in the poem does not believe in men's love which is useless and brings emotional destruction to woman and ruins her life afterwards since man's love only depends on woman's preserving of youth and beauty. For this reason, she decides that she will remain as Nature made her, and will not allow herself to be caught in such an unfair institution, in her own terms she does not "Yield to be in Fetters bound / by one that walks a freer round" (14-15). She protests against the marriage institution and its biased rules and conventions which are binding for women while providing endless freedom for men. She declares her own natural freedom and rejects to be the prisoner of marriage:

Marriage does but slightly tye Men
 Whil'st 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)

What Finch cannot accept is the double standards which allow men to fall in love with other women without the restriction of marriage, while obedience and loyalty are expected from women in their marriage throughout their lifetime. Katharine Rogers elaborates on Finch's conception of love and marriage and her critical attitude to them and points out that:

As a woman, Winchilsea could not treat love and marriage as flippantly as did men for whom they were a minor part of life; respectively, pastime or dull obligation. Because it was impossible for a woman to be comfortable in the convention, she could not follow it without question as they did. (36)

Being aware of the restrictions on woman's social position in the society in which they lived, Ann Finch yearns for something which is beyond the bondage of the standards of her own society and thus, diverts from the general pattern of her own period. Finch continues to undermine the traditionally accepted patterns of behaviour and conventions of writing poetry in "A Letter to Daphnis". Finch expresses her love for her husband during his absence from court. She reacts against the idea that married people cannot be passionate lovers, and thus, challenges the dominant ideology of the time which does not associate marriage with love. She expresses her opinion by saying:

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

Finch later draws a correlation between passions of love and writing poetry and indicates that neither is complete without the other one. And she gives an explanation about the reason of her writing. It was her love for Daphnis that provoked her to take up an occupation which was considered to be unsuitable for a woman:

Even, I for Daphnis's and my promise' sake,
What I in women censure, undertake
But this from love, not vanity, proceeds;
You know who writes, and I who'tis that reads.
Judge not my passion by my want of skill:
Many love well, though they express it ill; (10-15)

She states that what awaits women who attempt to write is "censure" (11), and she defends herself by claiming that her motivation results from her love for her husband not from vanity. As it is clearly observed in this poem, Finch's love poems

written to her husband also include ideological arguments which try to change strongly established conventions of writing poetry with the aim of solving problems that these conventions pose to the expression of a woman's intimate thoughts of love or other personal emotions.

In conclusion, after a detailed analysis of Ann Finch's poetry which also provides insight into her personal life, it can be seen that her poetry is committed to the creation of woman's consciousness, with its repudiation of "the role of the objects of representation" for women (Keith 9). She distinguishes herself and her poetry from the general trend of her own time by creating her own alternative forms of representation for women, and thus, confronts the masculine ideology which tries to eliminate women from the domain of male writing tradition. One can observe her critical attitude to the gender-biased assumptions about a woman poet and challenges these assumptions by paving her own way in this tradition.

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