

Anne Finch

Anne Finch (1661-1720) bridged the worlds of coterie, manuscript poetry and print publication with some of the same kind of deliberation and purposefulness as did Alexander Pope, with whose career she overlapped. Early in her career, she wrote in the context of Stuart court using the pen name "Ardelia"; later in life, she published a volume of her own works that stands as a landmark of English poetry in the eighteenth century. Her poetry was written in a variety of forms and modes, but throughout it traces the movements of an extraordinary sensibility, a thoughtful and sensitive observer who captures her emotional responses to people and the natural world with wit and formal innovativeness. Anne Finch's poetry was admired by Romantic poets like William Wordsworth and by others who have admired her skill, intelligence, and sensitivity.

Born Anne Kingsmill, she seems to have started writing poetry when she was a member of the Stuart court in the 1680s, a place where lots of courtiers wrote verse. Finch was a lady in waiting to Princess Mary of Modena, the second wife of James, the Duke of York. Anne met her husband, Heneage Finch, the son of the Count of Winchilsea, at court; he was one of the Duke's courtiers (officially Heneage was a "Gentleman of the Bedchamber," which was a plum position, guaranteeing close access to the Duke). Anne's poetry—which included a play in verse—remained in manuscript during this period, and she later said that she largely kept it secret, since she feared being ridiculed for "Versifying."



Anne Finch, by Peter Cross, watercolour on vellum (that is, animal skin), circa 1690 (National Portrait Gallery, London). This is a small picture, about 3 inches by 2 1/2 inches, so it would have been intended for private use—in the possession of her husband or a close family member—rather than for prominent public display. Finch was about 30 years old when this portrait—the only one we have

of her—was painted.

James, the Duke of York, became King James II in 1685 when his brother Charles II died, and the Finches followed along with the reset of the court as he took over the monarchy. But when James was deposed in 1688, they shared his disgrace. Heneage was arrested as a “Jacobite,” a supporter of James, and spent months in jail before the charges were dropped. Rather than joining the rest of the deposed Stuart court in France, Anne and her husband went into a kind of internal exile. They ended up living on the family’s country estate in Kent, which had descended to Heneage’s nephew Charles. They had no hopes now of returning to the center of power in London, which created an opening for Heneage to become a collaborator with Anne on her poetry. He was her amanuensis, copying out her poetry and helping her revise it. From time to time, a poem or two of hers reached print, most notably “The Spleen,” which was first published anonymously in 1701 in a collection of poems by a number of writers.

Things changed in 1712. Heneage’s nephew died and he became the Count. Things were complicated, though, because he refused to give up his sympathies for the Jacobite cause and to declare his loyalty to the reigning monarchy. Heneage never got all the money from the estate, and was not allowed to take his seat in the House of Lords. But there was a bit of a thaw for a few years as a Tory government, more sympathetic to the Jacobites than the Whigs had been, took over the government. Anne seems to have taken the opportunity to publish a full-scale collection of her poems in 1713. *Miscellany Poems, on Several Occasions* is a beautiful volume, containing eighty-six of her poems along with a play in verse, a tragedy called *Aristomenes* (it seems never to have been performed). Our texts are taken from that edition. Many of her poems remained in manuscript and were not published until the early twentieth century.

Finch was much admired by other poets in her own day, and was remembered by William Wordsworth, who praised her "Nocturnal Reverie," clearly seeing in it an important precursor to his own kind of poetry. She has remained popular with readers ever since.