Finding A Voice Through Poetry:
Women in Eighteenth Century England

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ABSTRACT:

In order to study how women in eighteenth century England found agency through poetry, I look at the metaphors abstracted by women poets during this time period. Mainly, I seek out Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea. Finch’s diverse range of poems and styles of poetry make her the opportune subject for exploring eighteenth century England through poetry. Finch often wrote about her yearn for independence as a women. Finch is among other poets spotlighted in this essay, Charlotte Smith, Helen Maria Williams, and Jane Cave, who identify through their poetry and try to equalize women’s rights to that of men. In particular, Charlotte Smith uses the sonnet as her vessel for proclamation. I attempt to give a brief synopsis of women’s rights and education system during this time period to explain the outspoken complexion attributed to a woman writer. Subsequently, to understand the purpose of poetry in the advancement of women advocacy, it is important to delve into the topics women wrote about during this time period in England, and in particular, the use of nature and relationships with non-human characters.
In eighteenth century England, women began to question the expectations put on them to breed, marry, and learn vacuous tasks like needlepoint (Jones 98). It was a turning point. Women wanted the rights that were extended to their male counterparts; the fact being that by wanting to equalize themselves with men, women perpetuated the concept that men’s rights were the standard, and thus, “man” was synonymous with “human” (McCalman 43). This meant two things. Firstly, by referring to men’s rights as human rights, women degraded themselves to below human. Secondly, this gave men the power over human rights and the misconception that women did not deserve these standard human rights.

When a woman became a wife and a man a husband, the husband controlled both of their property. A wife could not be sued or enter into contracts, nor could she leave the house without permission from her husband. Furthermore, if a woman became a mother, she had no legal rights over the child that she birthed (Wipprecht 5). Women wanted rights to ownership of their property and children as well as legal rights. They wanted a right to a proper education, and they wanted to voice their demand for these rights in the political domain of society. Poetry allowed women to access this political sphere because it was “written to participate in the most serious social and political debates and to express, and therefore propagate and teach, philosophical arguments” (Backsheider 28). Poetry was the loophole that gave a woman something to own; she could own her words.

In particular, women poets reached their full potential of expression through metaphor. Writing in metaphors, as Anne Finch and Helen Maria Williams did when
comparing themselves to immured animals, enabled women to express their desire for women’s right to equate with men’s rights. Use of standard inherited form in poetry, such as Charlotte Smith’s application of the sonnet, gave women a space to write with the conviction of masculinity, or like a man, while employing pseudonyms gave women the ability to write as a man. Writing with masculinity meant expressing dominance. Often male writers wrote in erotic ways that degraded women. For instance, most Augustan poetry referred to women as “more or less unworthy love objects, existing for the amusement of men and never individualized human beings” (Rogers 85). While this type of writing was considered masculine, it was not that particular form of masculinity to which women poets conformed. Rather, the concept that “loss of language is a 'castration'” implies that the use of language in writing exudes masculinity. This suggests that “only the masculine is truly endowed with verbal expression; and conversely, that verbal expression -- and more particularly, expression in one’s own language -- is a means of asserting masculinity” (Milne 66). It is metaphor that gave women the opportunity to identify as whomever they wanted; allowing women to be read and heard as they intended in ways that the feminine association and subjection may not have otherwise allowed during this time. Through poetry, women gained agency and found a voice in eighteenth century England. Poetry became a language for women and a form of identity for women; in turn poetry gave women power to claim a voice in society.

Literature Review

Prevalence of Anne Finch:
Anne Finch, Charlotte Smith, and Mary Wollstonecraft pioneered the movement of woman speaking out to equate their rights to that of white, British men in eighteenth century England. Finch is first mentioned as early as 1815 in William Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* where he praises Finch for her use of “new images of external nature” in Finch’s “Nocturnal Reverie” (Jump 410). Harriet Devine Jump’s review of a biography about Anne Finch in 1995 recognizes Finch as “one of the few women poets whose works… have consistently found their way into anthologies” (410). *British Women Poets of the Long Eighteenth Century: an anthology* (2009) edited by Paula R. Backsheider and Catherine E. Ingrassia evidences Jump’s point by listing Anne Finch as the first section in its introduction, then featuring Finch numerous more times throughout the anthology in regards to her variety of poems.

Works that discuss women writers in eighteenth century England in any sense tend to focus on Finch, even when the main subject of the work does not immediately scream Anne Finch. For instance, author Heather Meek recently published an article titled *Medical Discourse, Women’s Writing, and the ‘perplecing Form’ of Eighteenth-Century Hysteria* (2016). The article focuses on improper diagnosis of hysteria put unto women in the eighteenth century, and calls upon one of Finch’s poems, *The Spleen* (1702). Much of the past literature written about Finch, such as Margaret Doody’s *Love in All Its Oddness: The Affections in Women’s Private Poetry* (2000), speaks to Finch’s personal life and happy marriage. However, more current work, like Heather Meek’s article, uses Finch as the subject of a topic typically kept separate from poetry. This goes to show how prominent Finch’s poems are in the
literature of eighteenth century England and poetry that she has gone from Wordsworth praise of her work to more unorthodox articles relating her poems to medical language.

*Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and Their Poetry: Inventing Agency, Inventing Genre* by Paula R. Backsheider shows that Finch is not associated with any one form of poetry in its chapter “Anne Finch and What Women Wrote.” On the other hand, this same piece of literature pinpoints Helen Maria Williams and Charlotte Smith, two poets that were prominent in eighteenth century England, to the sonnet in its chapter, “The Sonnet, Charlotte Smith, and What Women Wrote.” Thus, Finch’s work can be easily related to many subjects, from nature to medical language, while Smith and William’s works have less variety.

**Mary Wollstonecraft in Literature:**

More current work less focused on women writers and more centered on family dynamics, such as a chapter, ‘Unimaginable sensations’: father–daughter incest and the economics of exchange, in *Gothic Incest* by Jenny Diplacidi highlights Mary Wollstonecraft (2018). Literature that does speak to Wollstonecraft’s literature mostly centers on her politics, but not the craftsmanship of her writing itself. Kristin Wilcox’s *Vindicating Paradoxes: Mary Wollstonecraft’s “Woman”* (2009) uses “the singular "Woman" in the title of her book [to signal] Wollstonecraft's determination to write into being a new kind of female subject. Wilcox pursues a similar trend followed by Richard Adelman and Catherine Packham in *Political Economy, Literature & the Formation of Knowledge, 1720-1850* and Wendy Nielson in *Wollstonecraft’s Ghost: The Fate of the Female Philosopher in the Romantic Period / The Joseph Johnson Letterbook* to point
out Wollstonecraft’s political backdrop, proving that in current writing one cannot write about politics in eighteenth century England without mentioning her efforts.

As previously stated, Anne Finch is the subject of many works of literature that want to highlight her poetry and use of language. It started with Wordsworth’s praise and has transformed into more analytical articles, such as Heather Meek’s article, which still analyzes Finch’s use of language, but in a more unconventional manner. Wollstonecraft on the other hand, is commonly recognized for her outspoken attitude towards women’s rights in literature such as Sibylline Apocalyptics: Mary Wollstonecraft’s “Vindication of the Rights of Woman” And Job’s Mother’s Womb by Mary Wilson Carpenter (1986), and in more recent work, such as Wilcox’s 2009 piece regarding Wollstonecraft’s “woman.” My goal in this essay is to combine the two. By this I mean, I want to use Finch’s language to prove her role in the fight for women’s right as well as supplement my arguments with some of Wollstonecraft’s statements, reminding the modern audience of the beauty and power in her language.

The Importance of Education:

The current conversation on education stresses its continued essentialism in everyday life as exemplified by the International Literacy Association, which published an article by Hilary Janks, Critical Literacy’s Ongoing Importance for Education (2014). In it Janks argues that “in a perfect world in which social differences did not determine who gets access to resources and opportunity, we would still need critical literacy to help us read the texts that construct the politics of everyday life.” In a previous study conducted by Janks she took an approach to critical literacy [by] integrat[ing] competing
approaches to working with the relationship between language and power and maintain[ing] that any one without the other creates a problematic imbalance for all, not differentiating between men and women (Literacy and Power 2010).

In the eighteenth century the conversation on education focused on the differences between the education of men and women as shown in two widely regarded texts Thoughts on the Education a Daughters by Mary Wollstonecraft and Instructions for the Education a Girl by François Fénelon. In her chapter on “Exterior Accomplishments” Wollstonecraft speaks to the accomplishments that make someone attractive, and quotes someone (who she does not reference) that “a little learning of any kind is a dangerous thing” (Thoughts on the Education 8). She believes that girls do not learn enough to employ their minds in respect to the music, drawing, and geography that makes up their education system (Thoughts on the Education 9). Wollstonecraft also argues that too much of a girl’s time is taken up by her appearance (35). Essentially, Wollstonecraft’s work comments on the shallow education provided to women, and the magnitude of attention that is expected of women on her appearance and trite learning.

The second book that describes a woman’s education in eighteenth century England is Instructions for the Education a Girl by François Fénelon. Wollstonecraft’s work, Thoughts on the Education of Daughters, was as its titled, her thoughts and commentary on female education; likewise, Fénelon’s work has commands for how to educate girls. He stresses the importance of female education and that it is neglected at the time, but then he confirms “it is true there is caution not to make them ridiculous by
making them learned” (2). Fénelon preaches that women should focus too much on their outer beauty, but that there is also an injustice of speaking too strongly against outer beauty. He expresses concerns of witty women, and writes an entire chapter on housewifery (170). While Fénelon does make a movement towards education and away from appearance, his instructions still stress not to cross a line, implying male superiority.

Definitions

Women during the eighteenth century struggled to find their voices in society. This is, of course, a big statement to make, so for the purposes of this essay I will be focusing on heterosexual, white women poets in order to grasp the effect of poetry on the relationship between the majority of British men and British women in both a platonic and sexual approach. Furthermore, the geographical focus of this essay is set in England. The eighteenth century saw many monarchs take the throne in England, giving it a heated political scene in which women wanted to have a role. Perhaps the most memorable were the reigns of King George I and King George III (Panton xxiv). King George I ruled as an unpopular king, leading Britain into two wars even as he was known for his distaste for politics in general.

When King George III took over, he lost colonies during the American Revolution, in turn losing the faith of the British people (Panton 209). Some British men against the king tried to rebel, but failed to overtake the government; however, unrest was still in the air, thus opening opportunities for women to make a statement in the realm of politics. Lastly, for the purpose of this essay, to have a “voice” does not necessarily mean to be
heard or to be read, but to have the right to say something. This could mean “saying something” in writing like Mary Wollstonecraft did in her work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792). Wollstonecraft’s commentary in writing on the lack of rights women had in comparison to men during the eighteenth century set a precedent for feminist waves, such as, that came after her (Dorey-Stein)

To understand the role of poetry in women’s activism of eighteenth century England, one must first set the scene in England during this time. Anne Finch, a now well-read eighteenth century English poet, describes the expectations of women in an excerpt from one of her original poems, “The Introduction:"

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 only by finding fault.
True judges might condemn their want of wit,
And all might say, they’re by a woman writ.
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.
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,
The Introduction, Anne Finch Countess of Winchilsea
This excerpt from her work gives insight as to the situation in England for women during the eighteenth century. For a woman to write, she “intruded” on a man’s right and his ego. It was not only frowned upon for a woman to write, but a “mistake.” During this time women were brought up to raise families, and anything that required a high level of thinking would take away from a woman’s sex appeal to a man. The “satiric stereotype of the sexually unattractive learned woman remained powerfully influential” throughout the eighteenth century in England (Fénelon 8). Writing would not “cloud [a woman’s] beauty” to herself, but to men. It was also during this time that women were painted as shrews, suggesting that women needed to be tamed (LeGates 23). Men desired an obedient wife who did not go against the ordinary. This idea stemmed from male-authored literature at the time that set the tone for wifely obedience as the norm, such as Samuel Richardson’s heroine, Pamela in novel Pamela: or, Virtue Rewarded.

Though Finch enjoyed an untroubled marriage and love for her husband, she felt a need to push for female independence (McGovern 35). Her writing style coincided with that of Augustan poetry, but most Augustan poetry referred to women as “more or less unworthy love objects, existing for the amusement of men and never individualized human beings” (Rogers 85). Thus, while Finch’s worth became highly recognized after her death, her disconnect with women as objects put her on the outskirts of typical Augustan writing. She was ostracized by the typical male Augustan poet. Instead of sexualizing women in her poetry, many of Finch’s works laugh at the triviality of a woman’s expected duties in the eighteenth century. One of Finch’s popular poems, “Petition for Absolute Retreat,” speaks to the mindless tasks women were expected to
learn, such as housekeeping and needlepoint. Finch knew that a woman’s mind could handle more than that.

Although Anne Finch did not steer her writing towards the captivity of marriage, many women during this time did write about marriage in a less than admirable way. However, it was not always a poor relationship with her husband that caused a woman to oppose the act of marriage. Mary Wollstonecraft, another prominent woman writer and activist in eighteenth century England, wrote about her views on marriage in her book, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787). Wollstonecraft’s upbringing with a drunken, violent father and absent-minded mother shaped her perspective on masculinity and education, which merges her assertions of women’s rights (McCalman 44). Wollstonecraft observed “many women…marry a man before they are twenty whom they would have rejected some years after” (*Thoughts on the Education* 31). Simply put, the patriarchy owned marriage, and once contracted into a marriage, a husband owned his wife.

A husband’s ownership over his wife exemplifies the lack of rights a woman legally held during this time in England. Women’s rights during the eighteenth century, in a broad sense, did not exist. If a husband and wife had a family business together, the wife was considered to be cheating the man if she took any profits; in other words, she was his “unpaid employee” (Rogers 8). After his death, a husband still reigned over his wife and children unless he had previously made his wife a guardian. It was as though “the mother acted as intermediary between father and child, but had no acknowledged voice of her own” (McCalman 44). This took away from a woman’s
agency so much so that she did not have the authority of a voice; her husband decided when her opinion had relevance. As a business owner, she could not define herself as more than an unpaid employee, and as a mother, she could not define herself as a legal guardian without permission from her husband. So much of a wife’s identity relied on how her husband chose to define her. Even if a husband and wife separated, the woman stayed financially dependent on her ex-husband because she had no choice; it was as though, even when separated from her husband, a woman was employed by him and living only under the means of the salary he intended for her. By removing any form of ownership a woman might have had, including that of her children and finances, marriage makes a woman dependent on her husband. Thus, marriage infantilized women by stripping them of agency and stripping them of humanity by turning a woman reliant on her husband’s rights.

Knowing this helps to narrow down the answer to the question of why women poets needed to find a voice. It was partially because women wanted to own something. They needed one thing that men could not take away from them. Even when birthing a child whose DNA is half her own a woman could not claim custody over the child, and a woman hardly had ownership over her own body once married. However, a woman’s voice was different. A man could try to quiet a voice, but he could not take it away from her. Writing, if a woman knew how, could be kept private and give her a space to express her thoughts and desires should they diverge from the proper, weak thoughts and familial desires attributed to her womanhood. Furthermore, if a woman did choose to publicize her voice, she could use it to try to gain more rights.
In addition financial dependence, a woman relied on her husband for her last name. Jane Cave, another eighteenth century English poet, wrote about her loss of identity when she married because she had to give up her name. To Cave, giving up her name meant giving up her past and her parents who raised her (Doody 497). It was proper during this time that a girl's best friend should actually be her parents (Doody 492), so letting go of the name that connected her to her blood-related family, and best friends, possessed great difficulty for a woman. The husband, of course, did not have to give up his identity in the form of his last name. The women would take on a new identity of her husband an, at least figuratively if not literally, leave her family to join his family. It is not secret that a name holds a lot of meaning. A name is the sound to which someone answers; others identify a person by a name, but more importantly one identifies him or herself by a name.

Just a century earlier the famous playwright William Shakespeare wrote Romeo and Juliet. Romeo and Juliet are two forbidden lovers because of their last names. Romeo, desperate to connect with his forbidden love asks her “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet” (Romeo and Juliet 2.2 43-44). He means to tell Juliet that regardless of her last name she is the same person to him, a woman who he loves. However, Juliet’s last name is what keeps Romeo and her apart. It may be true that Juliet, like Jane Cave and any other woman who married, did not physically change when she took on a new last name. However, this is irrelevant, because a last name is how a woman identified and how others identified her.
This idea that blood relation and last names hold a women’s identity originates with the famous eighteenth century philosopher Adam Smith. Smith believed that a relationship between brother and sister was strongest, but that ultimately relationships must be measured by blood connection (Doody 493). This connection, according to Smith, originated with the father. Thus, a woman was set up for failure. Not only did blood-relation hold the strongest bond a person could have in a relationship, it started with the father (Doody 493). A woman would marry, release her connected name, and then start a family that she was meant to care for, all the while the father would still hold the key to the family connectedness no matter what role the woman played in the family.

Despite her loving relationship with her husband, Finch struggled to find her identity as a poet (McGovern 142). Anne Finch happily married her husband, but she still felt a loss of identity. An outlier in this case, Finch did not necessarily care about giving up her familial relationship when releasing her maiden name, as she was orphaned at a young age; she tried to take on her new identity by connecting her new last name with nature. “Nocturnal Reverie” by Anne Finch illustrates two women meeting in a landscape, a scene that represents “natural dynamism free from male control” (Doody 499). Finch had more freedom than most women of her time due to her functional marriage and status as the Countess of Winchilsea, but it is works like “Nocturnal Reverie” that show even women like Finch understood the need for women to have a voice. Poetry was an outlet and an outcry.
Finch wrote about her connection to nature in much of her poetry, focusing on her last name, which also the name of a bird. It was common during the eighteenth century for men to write poetry about women and birds, sexualizing them, but when Finch wrote about birds she used contrasting imagery to the poetry that men wrote (Doody 500). In her poem "The Bird in the Arras," Finch wrote:

By neer resemblance see that Bird betray'd
Who takes the well wrought Arras for a shade
There hopes to pearch and with a chearfull 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.
All she outstrip's and with a moments pride
Their understation silent does deride
Till the dash'd Cealing strikes her to the ground
No intercepting shrub to break the fall is found
Recovering breath the window next she gaines
Nor fears a stop from the transparent Panes.

But we degresse and leaue th' imprison'd wretch
Now sinking low now on a loftyer stretch
Flutt'ring in 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.

The Bird in the Arras, Anne Finch Countess of Winchilsea

Here Finch describes a trapped bird. The bird tries to escape once, aiming high with pride, but is shot down, then the bird tries once more but is pushed back by a window that was seemingly invisible-- she didn't see it until it was too late. The symbolism she uses here, telling of a frightened, trapped bird to describe herself as a woman, juxtaposed the typical way men wrote about women and birds to offer
eroticism. Moreover, Finch uses this poem to find a voice and describe her desire for more freedom and mobility. Finch challenges the exploitation of women and suggests they should be more than what society and the patriarchy confine them to by relating herself to a bird, a commonly sexualized animal when used by male poets.

To many readers during this time, which given the education system probably consisted of mostly males, “women poets' treatment of animals [was] disturbing” (Doody 502); although, women may have meant for this to be the case. In order to get attention as a woman writer one needed to make a statement, because “the virtuous and obedient woman was praised, of course, but it appears that her unruly sister attracted more attention” (LeGates 23). To make a statement a woman might have to do something out of the ordinary, or even a bit disturbing.

Ultimately, the use of a relationship with animals in poetry defies Adam Smith’s approved circle of affection (Doody 502). While women began to refer to themselves and their own self-love through animals in poetry during this time, it was even more unsettling to readers when a women described a relationship with an animal and did not mean for the animal to represent herself, “as she is independent of the sanctioned human affections that ought to be earned by her in society...through marriage and motherhood” (Doody 502). Thus, the using animals in poetry, while seemingly harmless, made a statement. It was as though they spoke a language in their writing only they could understand. When men read of such relationships to nature that were appalled, but women wrote with deeper meaning. “What to some critics… seems like failure, weakness, and inappropriateness may offer keys to the women writers' invention of new
social, psychological, and aesthetic definitions and categories” (Doody 495). Writing about nature and animals, and more so writing about a connection to such things, was the beginning of a new genre for women.

An aspiring poet at the time, Helen Maria Williams, also wrote in the code of nature. Her poem, “Elegy on a Young Thrush,” suggests misplaced and abortive affection, but on the surface only describes a bird. In this poem Williams equalizes herself, the poet, to the bird (Doody 504). This took the new genre a step further. Not only did Williams show affection for a non-human being, but she put herself on the same level as the bird. A crucial point in this poem is that this bird is not a pet bird, which means this bird is not domesticated. It is in the wild nature of the bird that Williams finds its beauty. She wrote, “Soon as thy strengthened wing could mount the sky,” while Finch wrote that her bird got hit down by the ceiling. Therefore, Finch’s bird was a domesticated bird in a house, but Williams’s bird is outside in nature. Williams continues, writing:

MISTAKEN Bird, ah whither hast thou stray’d?
My friendly grasp why eager to elude?
This hand was on thy pinion lightly laid,
And fear’d to hurt thee by a touch too rude.

Is there no foresight in a Thrush’s breast,
That thou down yonder gulph from me wouldst go?
That gloomy area lurking cats infest,
And there the dog may rove, alike thy foe.

I would with lavish crumbs my bird have fed,
And brought a crystal cup to wet thy bill;
I would have made of down and moss thy bed,
Soft, though not fashion’d with a Thrush’s skill.

Soon as thy strengthen’d wing could mount the sky,
My willing hand had set my captive free;
Ah, not for her who loves the Muse, to buy
A selfish pleasure, bought with pain to thee!

The vital air, and liberty, and light
Had all been thine; and love, and rapt'rous song,
And sweet parental joys, in rapid flight,
Had led the circle of thy life along.

Securely to my window hadst thou flown,
And ever thy accustom'd morsel found;
Nor should thy trusting breast the wants have known
Which other Thrushes knew when winter frown'd.

Fram'd with the wisdom nature lent to thee,
Thy house of straw had brav'd the tempest's rage,
And thou through many a Spring hadst liv'd to see
The utmost limit of a Thrush's age.

Ill-fated bird!-and does the Thrush's race,
Like Man's, mistake the path that leads to bliss?
Or, when his eye that tranquil path can trace,
The good he well discerns through folly miss?

Elegy on a Young Thrush, Helen Maria Williams

Williams uses synonyms for independence often in this short poem with words such as “free,” “liberty,” and “flight.” She wants the reader, who again is most likely male, to understand the vitalness of a woman’s independence, and that keeping her captive is a “selfish pleasure.” She is not a domesticated animal, she is wild; domesticating a wild animal is unnatural, but suggesting that domesticated a woman is unnatural goes against the customs of eighteenth century England.

Charlotte Smith, another woman poet of the eighteenth century who chose to write under her real name, also follows the theme of birds in her sonnet “To a Nightingale.” Smith packs a lot into the fourteen lines, and even the form of the sonnet plays a role in Smith’s commentary on the injustice woman faced. It is standard in a
sonnet that the octave of the sonnet, containing the first eight lines, typically reads with a more stereotypically masculine tone, and the sestet, which contains the last six lines, typically reads with a more stereotypically feminine tone. Line nine, the volta, represents the poem’s turning point. In “To a Nightingale” Smith frames a projection of femininity and masculinity in her shift from the octave to sestet:

Poor melancholy bird—that all night long
Tell’st to the Moon thy tale of tender woe;
From what sad cause can such sweet sorrow flow,
And whence this mournful melody of song?

Thy poet’s musing fancy would translate
What mean the sounds that swell thy little breast,
When still at dewy eve thou leav’st thy nest,
Thus to the list’ning night to sing thy fate?

Pale Sorrow’s victims wert thou once among,
Tho’ now releas’d in woodlands wild to rove?
Say—Hast thou felt from friends some cruel wrong,
Or diedst thou—martyr of disastrous love?
Ah, songstress sad! that such my lot might be,
To sigh and sing, at liberty—like thee!

To a Nightingale, Charlotte Smith

On the surface, the sonnet questions the sad song of a nightingale, which is a very conventional way of writing about the bird. Her focus on the nightingale’s melancholy sound gives the sonnet a similar melancholy tone. She breaks the fourth wall slightly by mentioning poets in her poetry, suggesting that most poets would translate the bird’s song, but she, instead, is asking why the bird sings such a sad song in the first place. However, it is the sestet of her sonnet that offers her impression as a woman poet during the eighteenth century in contrast to the despotism that men exercised.
Smith’s use of the word fate feels very intentional. Fate refers to a future that is out of one’s control. As a woman during this time, Smith had little control over her path in life. If she wanted to survive in terms of status and income, she would have to rely on a male counterpart. Thus, the irony in “To a Nightingale” is that the song of the nightingale is sung by a male at night during breeding season. Thus, when mentioning fate here Smith could also be speaking to the expectation of an English woman during the eighteenth century to marry and “breed.” Returning to the octave, Smith writes “poor melancholy bird,” but she knows that the bird only sounds sad. Really, it is a male nightingale looking for a female companion. This gives the octave a sarcastic tone. She questions not what the bird sings, but why it is sad. What could the bird have to be sad about when it is a free male?

Line nine, meant to contain a turning point in the poem, references Sorrow’s victims. Smith wants the reader to ask him or herself who are Sorrow’s victims? Sorrow is the sad song sung by the nightingale, the male looking to breed. Thus, Sorrow’s victims could be women. This too begins the sestet, which means it should be the more feminine part of the sonnet; further evidence that Sorrow’s victims may represent women. She says the nightingale in the sestet is “released,” which means it was not always free; someone had to give it permission to leave. What’s more is that the bird is released to “rove,” so it has no final destination in mind. This could mean the nightingale has no obligations to anyone and is free, or it could mean the nightingale feels lost with no family or home to which to tend. She questions if the nightingale feels wronged by its friends or if it was released because of a disastrous love. By referring to the bird as a
“martyr” of disastrous love Smith eludes that whomever released the bird would not have agreed with the love.

While the entire poem builds an image of the nightingale as a very forlorn creature who is not satisfied with how his life is going, Smith still ends the sonnet yearning for the freedom of the bird. She acknowledges that the bird sings a sad song, but also that the bird has the freedom to rove and sing; a freedom that a woman lacked. This lack of freedom applies to women’s rights over their fates and bodies, and it also applies to women’s rights as a writers. Smith took an unconventional route in her application of despondent tones in the sonnet, but towards the end of the century, because women like Smith were making strides with sonnets it was said that men had to “reclaim” them. Smith does not shy away from boldness. By placing herself in traditions in her writing she claims the traditions and “emphasizes the power of poetry” (Backsheider 320). Essentially, Smith’s writing questioned the past and present political aesthetic in England and its lack of inclusivity. Therefore, Smith leaves an invisible question at the end of all her works asking what the future of England holds.

In the beginning of the eighteenth century, the sonnet was known for its lighthearted, jovial tone. Those who wrote sonnets typically wrote for an audience who wanted to read poems that left them feeling upbeat. Smith wanted to change this. Smith in this sense is similar to Finch. Finch found herself categorized as an Augustan poet, but did not write about the sexualization of women, so she was an outcast within her circle of poets. Smith wrote sonnets, but she changed the typical tone and audience of the sonnet, mainly focusing on keeping the technical parts of the form.
Smith believed that women had a place in politics, which was taboo thinking for her time. She expressed her belief through much of her writing; thus, using sonnets as a way to find a voice and procure rights for herself and other women. Most notable for this expression is her sonnet “Written at Penshurst.” A close reading of “Written at Penshurst” would not reveal Smith’s opinion that women have a place in politics so much as the poem as a whole. Meticulous in her work, Smith studied other poets “but, like most professionals, she attempted some of the great subjects and forms and gave signals that she was self-consciously placing herself within respected traditions” (Backsheider 325). For instance, a reading of her sonnet “Written at Penshurst” connects the sonnet to “the great house’s past political and literary significance” (Backsheider 320). She extends this significance further by proclaiming the private and political are the poet’s sacred domains (Backsheider 320). Given that she herself identifies as a poet, Smith asserts that women not only have a place in the private and political world, but that it has the potential of being their sacred domains.

Furthermore, “Written at Pennshurst” presents “an important moment in demonstrating that the [sonnet] could be used to make the kind of aesthetic and political statements more common in other forms” (Backsheider 324). Smith used her poetry as a place of expression, voice, and identity, but she did not stop there. As a preface to her novel “Desmond” “she wrote a spirited defense of women writing about political issues” (Backsheider 323):

But women it is said have no business with politics—Why not?—Have they no interest in the scenes that are acting around them, in which they have fathers, brothers,
husbands, sons, or friends engaged!—Even in the commonest course of female education, they are expected to acquire some knowledge of history; and yet, if they are to have no opinion of what is passing, it avails little that they should be informed of what has passed.

By writing this in a preface Smith leaves little room for interpretation on whether or not her novel meant to make a statement about women’s rights and role in the political aesthetic. This further backs the concept that Smith did not try to hide her opinions within deeper meanings of her work, but rather Smith wanted her believes on the surface of her writing. Smith always identified herself as a poet (Backsheider 324). Her sonnet, “Written at Pennshurst,” which is found to be tightly wrapped with her identity ends “--the poet tender lay!” reaffirming she identifies as a poet. Her identity cannot be divorced from her writing. She wrote as a tool of resistance, as a tool of agency, and to make a statement that she was here and deserved to be listened to.

Credited with popularizing the sonnet, Charlotte Smith found her identity in the unconventional. By the end of the eighteenth century “the contributions and achievements of women… had set the stage for what Marlon Ross and others have said was a need for men to reclaim the sonnet” (Backsheider 316). This comment, of course, feeds into the patriarchal idea that men owned the sonnet in the first place; thus they had to “reclaim” it from women.

Ultimately this leads back to women expressing their voices through poetry and metaphor. Smith used the sonnet to write like a man. Those first eight lines that make up the octave gave Smith freedom to write with masculinity. Smith did not wish to hide
her name in a pseudonym, she wanted to write like a man under her own name. This way she proved that a woman could write a sonnet. A woman could write and have a voice. She could "write like a man" as well as a man, but not identify as a man. Using metaphor and the traditional form of the sonnet, Smith made a statement.

The ability to write in a masculine tone, or in other words, like a man, gave women writers an authority. In her analysis on eighteenth century women writers, Paula Backsheider suggests that “writing women and writing men are more alike than they are different” (*Eighteenth-Century Women* 32). Women poets in eighteenth century England wanted to be read because they wanted to be heard. The situation became that in order to be heard some poets tried to make a statement, like Charlotte Smith in her work with the sonnet. Others, attempted to write very traditionally at an attempt to show respect. Backsheider quotes Pamela Plimpton saying, “Most . . .realized . . . that in order for their poetry to be recognized as poetry and enter into the aesthetic standard of the day, it needed to conform to certain expected conventions… A woman poet may in fact want very much to prove her command of craft within the masculinist tradition she sees herself writing in” (*Eighteenth-Century Women* 33). Thus, there were many ways in which poetry acted as a metaphor for a woman to be a man so that she may be read like a man and heard like a man might be during this time.

For some women it was not just the poem itself that acted as a metaphor, but the name with which she chose to publish her poem. This is true of the Bronte sisters, Emily and Charlotte, who published works under the pseudonyms Ellis Bell and Currer Bell, respectively. As previously stated, when a woman took on her husband’s last name she
not only changed her name, but her identity. By writing under pseudonyms women, such as the Bronte sisters, could take on any identity they chose. A pseudonym can be seen as a metaphor for the woman behind the pen name. Traditional writing forms allowed poets, such as Charlotte Smith, to write like a man, but a pseudonym allowed a woman poet to be a man, at least in the eyes of her readers.

The woman behind a pseudonym is writing in the private domain, but when she identifies as her pseudonym, she is writing for the public. As Lloyd Humberstone put it in his exploration of names and pseudonyms, “The pseudonymist pretends, perhaps along with others involved with the publication of the work, that this work is the product of the pseudonymous character, and pretends that this is the case to the wider public” (Humberstone 501). This idea that the writer is not the only one identifying behind a pseudonym is crucial because it attributes a pseudonym to the team of people behind the publication of woman poets. For instance, Bronte, under pen name Currer Bell, “negotiated the conflict between the embodiment attributed to women and the increasing abstraction of the publishing, advertising, and professional identities she sought to assume” (Marcus 207). Her association with Currer Bell took pseudonymity away from its stereotyped “veiled self-advertisement” and into a plan to disassociate from “the difficulties of female embodiment by exploiting the powers of abstraction” (Marcus 207).

Among these difficulties associated with womanhood in eighteenth century is the education system meant for women. In modern day, to face a crowd of people and voice an opinion typically poses a larger threat than writing. Writing is passive,
especially compared to physically and verbally acting, but it is the education of women during this time that makes writing the more taboo form of action. Not only were women poorly educated, but they were “expected and actually trained to be dull” (Rogers 90). A woman’s education consisted of learning needlepoint and sketching; tasks that numbed the mind. Feminists used education to challenge the “assumptions about women’s natural inferiority” (Jones 98). The main issue with women’s education in England during the eighteenth century was the roundabout nature that it followed. The curriculum, or lack thereof, that a female education followed tiptoed around the delicate nature of women. However, this ‘nature’ was created by the curriculum itself (Fénelon 9).

Educating women in the eighteenth century was highly discouraged, particularly for lower classes. The eighteenth century saw slight progress in the education of women. At its beginning, very few women were given a formal education, but as the century continued “the pressures of an expanding bourgeoisie and competitive marriage market had established some degree of education as the norm for daughters of the middle class” (Fénelon 3). The increasing numbers of educated women heightened England’s “cultural superiority,” yet education was only offered to the upper and sometimes middle class, and even so the education offered was nowhere near scholastic as that of a man’s (Fénelon 8). However, “of all literary forms, poetry was the most respectable for women to write… and cultured women were expected to be able to write a polished verse, just as they were expected to dance and sketch” (Backsheider 29). This gave women an opportunity to write poetry without entirely disobeying their
assumed femininity, but by referring to the act of writing poetry as an expectation of
woman, poetry becomes coupled with the female and wifely duties that writers like Anne
Finch ridiculed. This is a grave irony that pushed women poets to stretch the boundaries
of poetry, such as Charlotte Smith changing the tone of the sonnet.

Ultimately, England faced a turning point in the eighteenth century. Amidst the
political unrest rose a movement by women writers who knew their true potential
stretched far beyond limitations that squandered it. Women wanted to identify as
parents and business owners like their male counterparts (Rogers 8), but this identity
got lost when a woman married and signed her independence over to her husband.
Along with her loss of maiden name she lost her identity. However, poetry was a source
of power for a woman to comment on the inhumane barriers that disallowed her to
learn, own, parent, and live an independent life like a man. If a woman could do these
things with men’s rights, then eventually men and women would both have human
rights. Women poets lived through the metaphors of their poetry. The common poems
about nature and birds during this time suggested that poets, such as Finch and Smith,
wanted the freedom to fly, and that perhaps one day the words within their metaphors
would take flight into a reality.
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