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WOMEN BECOMING POETS: KATHERINE PHILIPS, APHRA BEHN, ANNE FINCH

BY DOROTHY MERMIN

While the almost total absence of women poets from the central literary tradition in England before the nineteenth century can be attributed in very general terms to the cultural suppression of female voices, many women had written and even published poetry, and the few who achieved substantial contemporary recognition clarify both the causes of the prevailing silence and the conditions under which it could be broken. Of these, Katherine Philips, “the matchless Orinda” (1631–1664), Aphra Behn (1640–1689), and Anne Finch, Countess of Winchelsea (1661–1720) were by far the most important.¹ They flourished in literary contexts that gave openings to a female voice: the conventions of amateurism; the revival of neo-Platonism, in which women could use male forms of amatory address; the sexual freedom and gender ambiguities enjoyed during the Restoration, which allowed women to speak as erotic subjects; and above all the artful artlessness and sociable tone valorized in Caroline, Restoration, and Augustan poetry. Each of them inhabited, furthermore, a small social world that could be transformed into a fictional society that provided both context and material for verse.

All three were famous in their lifetimes. Philips’s translation of Corneille’s *Pompey* was performed and published to considerable acclaim, and her poems appeared in a pirated edition shortly before her death and in four authorized editions during the next half century.² Behn was the first Englishwoman to make her living by literature—plays in the bawdy mode of the Restoration, prose tales, a variety of translations, and many delightful and not very ladylike verses. Philips’s unblemished reputation offered singular encouragement to women writers, while Behn’s notoriety survived into the nineteenth century as both example and warning.³ Finch framed her ambition on the model of Philips and Behn.⁴ She published a volume of poems in 1713 and acquired a reputation that soon dwindled, was somewhat revived by Wordsworth, and has been modestly maintained ever since. Much of her best work was not published until this century. Both Philips and Finch feared

publication as a kind of sexual self-display: a fear that Behn's career amply justified.

Despite their different subjects and styles, similar circumstances and strategies enabled these women to write. Their poems are made to appear spontaneous and artless, as if disavowing competition with men. They generally avoid the solemnity of iambic pentameter, formal odes or epics, exalted diction, or (with a few significant exceptions) classical allusion. They prefer lyric, occasional poetry, relatively simple narrative forms such as the fable, an understated, conversational tone, and small and ordinary themes, constructing comfortably unpretentious edifices from what seems a very small stock of materials, making do in a kind of cosy frugality with whatever is at hand. They usually write of, from, and to a small, clearly delimited society, imaginatively enhanced or transmuted: a relatively egalitarian world, remote from politics and power, in which the conventional hierarchy of gender is mitigated or evaded. Renouncing ambition (although not, or not without ambivalence, literary fame), in both form and content they cherish autonomy rather than preeminence and usually speak of themselves in self-deprecating, low-keyed tones. And always the inescapable central term is gender: whereas male poets have imagined their own voices to be genderless, "universal," they never forget that they write, and will be read, as women.

Consciousness of gender was both helpful and debilitating. It could encourage aspiration: Orinda was a less intimidating precursor than, say, Donne or Milton, and Orinda's only precursor was Sappho. Women writers were easily, if condescendingly, praised. The preface and commendatory verses printed with Philips's poems recur in unabated fascination to her sex; some of her poems, says the editor, "would be no disgrace to the name of any Man that amongst us is most esteemed for his excellency in this kind, and there are none that may not pass with favour, when it is remembered [as indeed it always was] that they fell hastily from the pen but of a Woman."⁵ The commendatory verses adumbrate a war for preeminence between the sexes, the men either jestingly asserting or gallantly disclaiming resentment at her success; "We allow'd you beauty, and we did submit / To all the tyrannies of it, / Ah cruel Sex! will you dispose us too in Wit?" (Abraham Cowley, "Upon Mrs. Philips her Poems," 1–3); "In me it does not the least trouble breed, / That your fair sex does ours, in verse exceed" ("The Earl of Orrery to Mrs. Philips," 11–12). Reciprocally, an anonymous

woman exults: “Thou glory of our sex, envy of men, / Who are both pleas’d and vex’d with thy bright pen” (“To the excellent Orinda,” 9–10). Men and women alike take Orinda’s accomplishment as demonstrating female capability—a demonstration every woman writer had to make.

The commendatory verses published with Behn’s poetry are on the whole less pleased, and less surprised, but they use the same language. She is “the Glory of [her] Sex, the Shame of ours,” whose wit and fancy move “our *envy* and our Sons *despair*.”⁶ In this war, however, all victories are Pyrrhic, exceptions only confirming the rule of female incapacity. Cowley eulogizes Philips as the only genuine woman poet known to history, and a century and a half later Keats prefaced his praise of her poems with a nasty snarl at intellectual women.⁷ Anne Finch gets similarly back-handed commendation from Pope: “In vain you boast [female] poetic names of yore, / And cite those Sapho’s we admire no more: / Fate doom’d the fall of ev’ry female wit, / But doom’d it then when first Ardelia writ.”⁸ “Ardelia” is Finch, whose brilliance serves only to show up other women’s dullness; she struck back on behalf of her sex with an elegant warning that the deadly revenge taken on Orpheus by “resenting Heroines” (“The Answer,” 19) might befall Pope too. The burden of representativeness has fallen heavily on women poets, who have had constantly to prove that women could write at all, and even so have been praised at other women’s expense. Not surprisingly, a note of apology or defiance, or both, generally hovers somewhere near the surface of Philips’s and Finch’s work (Behn’s defiance is more overt), and they may owe some of their stiffness and circumspection, their air of being on their very best behavior, to the knowledge that failures of breeding or temper discredit their whole sex.

Merely to appear in public—to publish—has generally been held discreditable for women, but the Renaissance tradition of gentlemanly amateurism provided a framework for participating in the literary world without admitting any such intention. A poet who wished to define himself as an amateur, Richard Helgerson notes, “presents himself as having been betrayed into verse by youthful passion and exposed in print by a piratical publisher.”⁹ Following this convention, Philips and Finch (for whom the treacherous passion was the irresistible urge to write) circulated their poems in manuscript, professed reluctance to print, and achieved publication. For women, however, the stakes were higher. “Name” and

“fame” refer to both literary and moral reputation, and until well into the nineteenth century a woman who gained them in the one sense risked losing them in the other, the touch of publicity being assumed to defile female virtue.¹⁰ In the disreputable milieu of the Restoration stage, Aphra Behn could forfeit respectability and go about her business, but Philips was wild with dismay when her poems were printed without her consent, “expos’d to the world with such effronters . . . exposed to play the mountebanks, and dance upon the ropes to entertain all the rabble” (“The Preface,” 490), like female performers displaying their bodies. Philips insisted that she had never written for publication, but “only for my own amusement in a retir’d life” (“The Preface,” 491), and Finch makes similar claims in “Mercury and the Elephant” (42–50) and “The Introduction” (1–2). Of course Finch and Philips, like Behn, prepared manuscripts for publication and thirsted for literary fame; as Finch pointedly remarks, “none have writ (whatever they pretend) / Singly to raise a patron, or a friend” (“To Mr. Pope,” 5–6). But whereas men’s disclaimers are intended to mark them as amateurs and gentlemen, women’s are charged with sexual terror. Philips not unreasonably feared that she would be suspected of “that wretched artifice of a secret consent” (“The Preface,” 490–491), like a woman complaining of rape.¹¹ Finch compares herself to “those imperfect penitents, who are ever relenting, and yett ever returning to the same offenses”: “For I have writt, and expos’d my uncorrect Rimes, and immediatly repented; and yett have writt again, and again suffer’d them to be seen” (“The Preface,” 7). Their position is unavoidably duplicitous, with overtones of sexual coquetry, teasing withdrawal and self-display. Male amateurism gave women a usable model, which became charged with different meanings.

If women are peculiarly shy about having their works “exposed” (the word recurs), it is partly because their works and their selves are so often confused with each other. Their physical person—their beauty, or in the case of Philips, who died of smallpox, its despoiling—is generally the prime object of critical regard. Henry Vaughan says of her: “language *Smiles*, and accents rise / As quick, and pleasing as your *Eyes*, / The *Poem* smooth, and in each line / Soft as *your selfe*.”¹² The poems’ beauties and virtues are those of her own body; so, then, must be their exposure.¹³ Behn’s “Face’s Beauty’s copy’d in her style,” one panegyrist says: he will “the *Wonders* of her *Face* rehearse” to show posterity “how far she

charm'd, / With that bright *Body* with such *Wit* informed" (Cooper; 6:118–19). Your numbers, another tells her, flow "Soft as your Lips, and smooth as is your brow / Gentle as Air, bright as the Noon-days Sky, / Clear as your skin, and charming as your Eye" (Kendrick, "To Mrs. B. on her Poems"; 6:296). Defining her literary prowess as corporeal allure returns the battle of the sexes to the arena of courtly compliment, where men willingly yield because they still retain control. "If you the gentle Passions wou'd inspire, / With what resistless Charms you breathe desire? / No Heart so savage, so relentless none, / As can the sweet Captivity disown: / Ah, needs must she th'unwary Soul surprise, / Whose Pen sheds Flames as dangerous as her Eyes" (J. Adams, "To the Excellent Madam Behn, on her Poems"; 6:120–21). Compliments of this sort are likely to have nasty overtones, since a woman who initiates amorous warfare is, after all, a temptress, feared and despised by men, and when she adds a man's weapons to a woman's she can terrify. "To wound with Beauty's fighting on the square, / But to o'ercome with Wit too is not fair; / 'Tis like the poison'd *Indian* Arrows found, / For thus you're sure to kill where once you wound" (J.W., "To the Excellent ASTRAEA"; 131). In Behn's sexually ambiguous world a man's body can occasionally inform his art too—" [F]rom himself he copyed every Grace, / For he had all that cou'd adorn a Face, / All that cou'd either Sex subdue," Behn says in "On the Death of Mr. Grinhil, the Famous Painter" (6:152)—but only if it is feminized.

Finch, less confident and less aggressive than Behn in the war of the sexes, compares herself in "The Appology" to women who paint their faces, brighten their eyes with a sparkle that comes from drink, or put their aging visages on show. Her point is that writing is better than such bodily display, but to make the comparison is to admit an essential similarity. And in "Upon Ardelia's Return Home" she comically recounts the degradation that follows a woman's pretension to art. The poem tells how she walked in the park, lured by imagination—"By the aluring Muse betray'd / By Fancies light of Nymphs and Faries / Romantick Notions and figary's" (28–30). She called on Apollo to lend her his Chariot or Pegasus, traditional figure for a young man's poetical ambition, to go home in; but Apollo replied that "'twou'd much disgrace him / To lett a female rider" go on Pegasus (70–71), and he sent her home in a humble water cart instead, an ignominious return that shadows her cheerfully self-mocking tone with hints of public humiliation and sexual disgrace. She calls this ride being "Carted" (14): a term stressed in

the introductory section of the poem and defined by the O.E.D. as “public exposure and chastisement of offenders, esp. lewd women.” At the end she goes home in the cart,

Exalted high to all beholders
As Burgesse on ellecting shoulders
On tottering chair in Tumbrill’s middle
And wanting but fore-running Fiddle
To guide the wond’ring Rabble right
And pick their Purses for the sight.

(96–101)

The Burgesse presumably enjoys his exaltation, but what is triumph for a man is degradation for a woman. A “Tumbrill” was (among other things) a cucking stool: “An instrument of punishment . . . consisting of a chair (sometimes in the form of a close-stool), in which the offender was fastened and exposed to the jeers of the bystanders, or conveyed to a pond or river and ducked,” used mostly for harlots and scolds—women who make public their bodies, that is, and women who talk too much: the nightmare version of the woman writer.¹⁴ Following the bodiless lure of imagination, aspiring like a male poet to superterrestrial flight, she falls back into a woman’s body, courting fame but reaping infamy: for publication, public shame. The poem was not published in Finch’s lifetime.

Anne Killigrew (1660–1685), Finch’s contemporary and companion as Maid of Honor to Mary of Modena, consort of the Duke of York, described the experience of circulating her poems in manuscript—she did not go so far as to have them printed—in similar terms.

What ought t’have brought me Honour, brought me shame!
Like *Esops* Painted Jay I seem’d to all,
Adorn’d in Plumes, I not my own could call:
Rifl’d like her, each one my Feathers tore,
And, as they thought, unto the Owner bore.

(“Upon the saying that my VERSES were made by another,” pp. 45–46)

To send forth one’s poems is first to adorn one’s body, and then to be stripped naked. It is not surprising that Dryden devoted two of the ten stanzas of his great ode for Anne Killigrew to establishing her sexual innocence.¹⁵

The deliberate air of artless spontaneity and careless ease, which was prized equally (although with significant tonal and moral vari-

ations) in Caroline, Restoration, and Augustan poetry, helped women avoid the appearance of writing for self-display. (Finch notes the deliberateness of such a style when she praises a woman's love poem: "So easy the Verse, yett compos'd with such art, / That not one expression fell short of the heart" ["The Circuit of Appollo," 23–24].) "Art she had none, yet wanted none: / For Nature did that Want supply" (V), said Dryden in his ode on Killigrew—an impression Killigrew encouraged by opening a long ode with a formal disavowal of its evident artfulness: "Here take no Care, here take no Care, my *Muse* / Nor ought of Art or Labour use" ("The Discontent," p. 51). Philips's and Behn's lyrics, Finch's iambic tetrameter, and the narrative modes they all used—little pastoral episodes, anecdotes, fables—seemed safely unambitious, uncompetitive with men, humbler than the high literary tradition for which women's lack of classical education as well as their modesty was thought to disqualify them.¹⁶ Women could not speak in the voices of bard, theologian, scholar, or courtly lover of a distant ideal object, but when poets imitated the tones of private life, women could join in. Finch, for instance, is Metaphysical (according to Reuben A. Brower) in her "union of lyricism with the diction and movement of speech."¹⁷ So is Philips. Philips and Finch almost invariably wrote as if for a private audience, on private themes, and Philips pretended to do so even when her actual subject was public and political. "I think not on the State, nor am concern'd / Which way soever the great helm is turn'd," begins the first poem in her volume (which she may or may not have arranged herself) ("Upon the double Murther of King Charles I," 1–2), but the poem is about the greatest political event of her time; regicide, she says, justifies "the breach of Nature's laws" (6) that is her writing.

Effectively precluded from public affairs, Philips, Behn, and Finch, like the male coterie poets before them, wrote in and of small private worlds. For this their personal circumstances were unusually enabling: they were not encumbered by maternity, excessive domestic cares, or repressive husbands. Philips had two children, the first of whom was born six years after her marriage and died soon after birth, and Behn and Finch were childless. Philips married at sixteen a man of fifty-four whose seat in Parliament gave them access to London; but she lived mostly in Wales, creating in person and through correspondence a group of friends, largely although not exclusively female, who provided both subjects and audience for the verses she circulated in manuscript. Behn had

many adventures as traveller, courtier, and spy, quickly lost or mislaid her husband, and found in the Restoration theater, newly opened to women (actresses being allowed for the first time), a loose-living, easy-going setting for her life and her poetry. Finch was too prudent to let herself be known as a poet while she was at court, fearing ridicule; she thought afterwards that she might have stopped writing altogether, had not marriage and then the exile of the royal patrons to whom she and her husband remained loyal relegated her to country seclusion and company that encouraged her verse (“The Preface,” 7–8).

Their lives provided what women poets needed most: not just freedom to write but things to write about, places within the conventions of poetry where a woman could situate herself to speak. Politics, the classics, and the more theological aspects of religion were masculine preserves. Love poetry had been dominated since Sappho’s time by male subjectivity, women appearing as either silent objects of male desire or, in the tradition of Ovid’s *Heroides*, dramatized figures used by male poets to distance and control feelings that no respectable Englishwoman could publically express in any way at all.¹⁸ Philips, Behn, and Finch created imaginative worlds built on different kinds of gender and erotic relationships and based on their own experience—with what degree of factual accuracy scarcely matters—imaginatively transformed. Their experience was usable because it paralleled the kinds of experience that male poets were writing about: it fit existing poetic conventions, although not the dominant social ones.

In Philips’s three cool and respectable poems to her husband, “Antenor” (the only man her speakers address in amatory vein), Orinda assumes a tone of equality or superiority, reassuring, encouraging, and chiding, and—her most important usurpation of male poetic privilege—she initiates both speech and desire. For the rest, her poetic world centers on female relationships. This world is busy and well-populated, providing numerous occasions—visits, partings, courtships, marriages, quarrels, betrayals, and so forth—for verse: “To the Excellent Mrs. Anne Owen, upon her receiving the Name of Lucasia, and Adoption into our Society, December 28, 1651,” for instance, “To Mrs. Mary Carne, When Philaster courted Her,” or “Lucasia and Orinda parting with Pastora and Phillis at Ipswich.” The titles suggest a fluid continuum between reality and fiction, “Mrs. Mary Carne” and “Philaster” inhabiting the same

poem and “Mrs. Anne Owen” becoming “Lucasia.” (This nomenclatural continuum appears throughout her correspondence with Sir Charles Cotterell, *Letters to Poliarchus*, too.) Philips uses female friendship, a frequent theme of seventeenth-century women writers, to tune male convention to female experience and a female voice. In her friendship poems she returns the neo-Platonic amatory conventions of seventeenth-century poetry to their same-sex origins, with revolutionary consequences: she speaks *as* a woman *to* a woman, usurping the position of the male speaker rather than responding to a man or a male tradition that has spoken first.¹⁹

With their aspirations to a perfect, paradoxical union of souls, their canonization of lovers, their Metaphysical hyperbole and wit, and their casual elegance, Philips’s amatory poems recall Donne and the Cavalier poets.

I did not live until this time
 Crown’d my felicity,
 When I could say without a crime,
 I am not thine, but Thee.

.....

No bridegroom’s nor crown-conqueror’s mirth
 To mine compar’d can be:
 They have but pieces of this Earth,
 I’ve all the World in thee.

(“To My Excellent Lucasia, On Our Friendship,” 1–4, 17–20)

Her celebrations of love usually lack, however, the dramatic tension between flesh and spirit that imparts nervous urgency to Donne’s amatory verse. They are asexual, respectable, and despite their quasi-Sapphic themes did not give rise to scandal. Shielded by what appears to have been general blindness to the possibility of female homosexuality, Orinda speaks the language of courtly love without, apparently, hearing any unseemly overtones: “Yet I’ll adore the author of my death, / And kiss the hand that robs me of my breath” (“*Injuria Amicitiae*,” 51–52).²⁰

Sometimes, however, gender identity heightens poetic tension, as in “*Injuria Amicitiae*”:

Lovely Apostate! what was my offence?
 Or am I punish’d for obedience?

.....

Of what thy most ingenious scorns could do,

Must I be subject and spectator too?

.....
While wounded for and by your power, I
At once your Martyr and your Prospect die.

(1–12)

The traditional paradoxes of amatory compliment are doubled and transformed: the speaker not only experiences contradictory feelings but, more radically, is both subject and object of consciousness and desire. She simultaneously suffers and watches herself suffering (“subject and spectator”), and dies both by and for the beloved (“your Martyr”), for whom—the object becoming subject in her turn—she is both the “Prospect” seen and a prospective self. But desire makes itself felt most powerfully when Orinda speaks from a specifically female position in the beautiful “Orinda to Lucasia”.

Observe the weary birds ere night be done,
How they would fain call up the tardy Sun,
With feathers hung with dew,
And trembling voices too,
They court their glorious planet to appear,
That they may find recruits of spirits there.
The drooping flowers hang their heads,
And languish down into their beds:
While brooks more bold and fierce than they,
Wanting those beams, from whence
All things drink influence,
Openly murmur and demand the day.

(1–12)

Orinda compares herself to nature awaiting the fecundating sun, the image most frequently used by women poets for male sexual force.

Where Philips constructs a world without sexual difference, Behn creates a free pastoral realm, mostly heterosexual, in which gender distinctions are blurred by episodes of bisexuality and sexual hierarchy is to some extent suspended. Behn found contexts for lyric both in the libertine ethos of her plays and in an imaginative recreation of her own life. Like Philips, she combines real and literary names in the same poems, using real names or initials in the titles and pastoral names in the text; she herself is “Astraea.” As with Philips, female desire and female speech predominate: the speakers are usually women, or take a woman’s point of view. But

while Behn's poetic world is more shocking to conventional morality than Philips's, it departs less radically from literary tradition. Men generally initiate speech and desire, the typical dramatic situation being a woman's response to male seduction—in literary terms, to the male tradition of amatory poetry—such literary seductions often being defined with beguiling specificity: “On a Copy of Verses made in a Dream, and sent to me in a Morning before I was Awake” (6:174), for instance, or “To Lysander, on some Verses he writ, and asking more for his Heart than ‘twas worth” (6:202). The replies, however, often express sexual responsiveness rather than the chaste disdain anticipated by courtly lovers, and female solidarity sometimes displaces heterosexual love: one speaker finds her rival too good for the faithless lover (“To my Lady Morland at Tunbridge” [6:175–77]), and two shepherdesses turn a jealous quarrel about a similarly errant lover into a celebration of their own friendship (“SELINDA and CLORIS, made in an Entertainment at Court” [6:375–78]).

Behn's response to poetic tradition appears most obviously in revisionary versions of others' works that blur the traditional distinction between male subject and female object of desire. “The Disappointment” gleefully narrates the mortification of a youth and the indignation of his coy but willing mistress when seduction ends in impotence. Behn changes the French original by shifting her sympathy to the woman, by removing it from a sordid context of urban intrigue to the kind of pastoral setting that serves as a background for female sexual freedom in her other poems, and by leaving the youth still impotent and frustrated at the end: for in the original, the young man returns and achieves consummation.²¹ Her stanzas “In Imitation of Horace” (6:195–96) offer an even more radical revision. Whereas Horace's speaker (in *Odes* I.v) chides a beautiful woman for leading young men astray, Behn's is a woman struggling to resist the seductions of a beautiful man. She describes him first as a physical object, with the same charms that men have seen in women: “Amorous Curles of Jet,” “Wanton Tresses,” “vast Store of Beauties,” “Starry eyes,” “Coral Lips,” “Amber Breath.” He employs both male weapons—“words of Melting Love,” “Sighs and Touches”—and the killing glances that are the chief armory attributed to women by the hyperbole of courtly love: the dangerous doubling of wit and beauty that alarmed Philips's and Behn's admirers. In courtly love poetry there is normally one person ca-

pable of passionate love, the male poet-lover, and one whose beauty inspires unreciprocated passion, the silent woman; but in Behn's poetry men are also beautiful and women also desire and speak, and so there are two beloveds and two lovers: not a reversal of roles, like Orinda's with Antenor, but a doubling of them.

Behn's amatory innovations were not repeated by Finch, who was held back from writing or even translating love poetry, she said, by the fear of giving scandal—Aphra Behn's having become a name of obloquy in the reaction against Restoration licentiousness—and also by the praise she had heard bestowed on the “great reservednesse of Mrs. Philips in this particular” (“The Preface,” 10). Fortunately she had a husband to provide blameless occasions for verse. Her charming lines to him respond both to his love (“With such return of passion, as is due, / Daphnis I love” [“A Letter to Dafnis,” 7–8]) and to his words (“No sooner, FLAVIO, was you gone, / But, your Injunction thought upon, / ARDELIA took the Pen” [“To Mr. F. Now Earl of W.,” 1–3]). The relationship between Ardelia and Daphnis/Flavio has a comfortably egalitarian tone; but as with Behn the primary locus of desire and the justification of female speech remain with the man. The woman takes the initiative, however, in Finch's epistolary verses to friends, especially women, which she did not include in her published volume or in the one she later prepared for publication. These are for the most part blandly complimentary, not her best or most serious work. But a curious *jeu d'esprit* entitled “The white mouses petition to Lamira the Right Hon^{ble} the Lady Ann Tufton now Countess of Salisbury” addresses a friend in conventional amatory vein while doubling the female roles, presenting both speaker and addressee as beautiful objects, and playing on themes of similarity, difference, and erotic identity.

With all respect and humble duty
And passing every mouse in Beauty
With far more white than garden lillies
And eyes as bright as any Phillis
I sue to wear Lamira's fetters
And live the envy of my betters
When I receive her soft caresses
And creeping near her lovely tresses
Their glossy brown from my reflection
Shall gain more lustre and perfection
And to her bosom if admitted

My colour there will be so fitted
That no distinction cou'd discover
My station to a jealous Lover.²²

This suggestive playfulness is Finch's closest approach to Orinda's erotics of female friendship, Behn's sexual ambiguities, or the doubling of subject and object that characterizes her two predecessors' most interesting work.

What is at stake is priority: who desires, who speaks first, who initiates and controls the literary situation. Philips, Behn, and Finch follow the old convention of assuming literary names to transform themselves into women fit for verse. "Orinda," "Astraea," and "Ardelia" are neither the poets' fathers' names nor their husbands'—not their "real" names, but genuinely their own. Philips was "Orinda" to posterity; Behn was "Astraea" in an early epistolary flirtation, as a secret agent, and on her tombstone in Westminster Abbey.²³ And they incorporated others into their literary worlds by renaming them. Naming and being named are highly charged matters, as Finch's "Adam Pos'd" demonstrates: the ostensible theme is female folly, but it depicts Adam's bafflement as bestower of identity, namer of women, initiator of speech. Women poets prefer to name themselves: to speak first.

But establishing themselves as speaking subjects flies in the face not just of Adamic authority but of essential poetic convention. In "To my Lady Elizabeth Boyle, singing Now affairs, &c.," Philips first addresses in the old male rhetoric of amatory warfare (darts, arms, sieges, chains) a woman who has conquered her heart by singing Philips's own song, and then asserts the superiority of the singer to the song; woman as performer to woman as artist and creator. Lady Elizabeth is not fully absorbed into the egalitarian world of friendship, class lines being less permeable here than gender ones: she is not renamed, and the speaker addresses her not from the chosen and transitory subjection of the male lover, but from the enduring inferiority of the middle class to the aristocracy and of the woman artist to the woman as beautiful object: "By this my verse is sure to gain / Eternity with men, / Which by your voice it will obtain, / Though never by my pen" (21–24). This assertion that words sung will last longer than words written is part of the poem's paradoxical language of compliment, but it also reminds us that women are properly immortalized not by creating art but by attracting male desire.

Such paradoxes sometimes—paradoxically—prove enabling, even as they remind the woman poet of the frustrations that limit her scope. Finch too—like her contemporary, Pope’s *Belinda*—knows that woman’s beauty is her proper art, the source of art in others.

Persuade me not, there is a Grace
Proceeds from *Silvia’s* Voice or Lute,
Against *Miranda’s* charming Face
To make her hold the least Dispute.

Musick, which tunes the Soul for Love,
And stirs up all our soft Desires,
Do’s but the glowing Flame improve,
Which pow’rful Beauty first inspires.

Thus, whilst with Art she plays, and sings
I to *Miranda*, standing by,
Impute the Music of the Strings,
And all the melting Words apply.

(“A Song”)

Here a man is speaking. In another song a woman speaks, paradoxically, to assert the priority of (female) beauty over (male) poetic language. “Beauty, teaches you to write, / Your flames are borrow’d from our Eyes, / You but speak, what they endite” (“A Song: Melinda to Alcander”).

Finch’s “Melinda on an Insippid Beauty” boldly asserts the opposite: while bodily beauty dies, “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.” And yet bodily beauty (polish, brightness) is still the measure of value: men’s eyes still judge. Anne Killigrew speaks with similar doubleness of Orinda, who

Ow’d not her Glory to a Beauteous Face,
It was her Radiant Soul that shon With-in,
Which struk a Lustre through her Outward Skin;
That did her Lips and Cheeks with Roses dy,
Advanc’t her Height, and Sparkled in her Eye.

(“Upon the saying that my VERSES were made by another,” p. 46)

She was not poetically eminent because she was beautiful; and yet she could not be a poet—be in a poem—without being beautiful. In poetry, beauty belongs to the object, not the artist; to the silent

beloved, not the speaking lover. But what place is there for a woman in a love poem if she is not beautiful, except as the butt of such cruel laughter as Restoration comedy especially enjoyed? And how can she proclaim her own beauty?

This is part of a larger problem: that when women write, what is conventional or figurative in men's writing can seem awkwardly real. Sometimes this leads to intolerable tensions (expressed, perhaps, in women poets' censoriousness about women who forge or overvalue beauty), and sometimes it vitiates what in other contexts would be enlivening paradox. Spiritual calms forged in despite of passion are less arrestingly paradoxical when sexuality is apparently out of the question, and women's renunciations of worldly ambition go smoothly with the grain of social expectation, not interestingly against it: rather than making a real choice, they seem to be accepting their inevitable lot. Most debilitatingly in the long run, the elegant simplicity that allowed Philips, Behn, and Finch to join in the poetic discourse of their age has been taken literally—at face value, so to speak—and used to diminish them. *Ars celandi artem* is a celebrated virtue; but when women concealed their art, few readers found it. Readers don't think, for instance, to look beyond the apparent inconsequence of Philips's low-keyed anecdotal account of the small adventures of travel in "A Sea-Voyage from Tenby to Bristol, begun Sept. 5, 1652, sent from Bristol to Lucasia, Sept. 8, 1652"—what the speaker modestly calls "tediousness" (56), but we may find proleptic of Elizabeth Bishop's great travel poems—to the pattern of fairy tale and quest-romance it brilliantly plays against. Similarly, Finch's "A Nocturnal Reverie" is a splendid evocation in rhymed iambic pentameter of the mysteries of darkness, moving from simple classical allusion through such homely matters as owls and cowslips and the horse "Whose stealing Pace, and lengthen'd Shade we fear, / Till torn up Forage in his Teeth we hear" (31–32), to "Something, too high for Syllables to speak" (42). The fact that the poem's fifty lines are all one sentence, the grammatical suspension and development mimicking the long suspended interval until morning breaks the spell, shows a virtuoso's skill; but shows it so modestly that most readers don't see it at all.²⁴

Although the literalizing effect of the female voice often flattens or disguises innovation and complexity, it can also give sharp contours to stories rubbed by long usage into featureless clichés. Most notably, the laurel wreath with which poets are metaphorically

crowned is revived by women who recall its mythic origins in the story of Daphne pursued by lustful Apollo and turned into a tree. As Behn says,

I, by a double right, thy bounties claim,
Both from my sex, and in Apollo's name.
Let me with Sappho and Orinda be,
Oh ever sacred nymph, adorned by thee.
And give my verses immortality.²⁵

In a feminist moment of a somewhat different sort, the nymph in Behn's "The Disappointment" abandons her impotent lover like Daphne running from Apollo (XIII), the joke being that she flees not from violation but from incapacity: like the lines about Daphne quoted above, this is Behn's addition to a translation of a poem by a man.

A male tribute to Behn uses the story of Daphne to pay a perfunctory compliment: " 'Twas vain for Man the Laurels to persue, / (E'en from the God of Wit bright *Daphne* flew") (J. Adams; 6:120). But "Philo-Philippa," the female author of commendatory verses to Orinda, draws forth a fuller meaning, exultantly rejecting the "male Phoebus" of "male poets" (1):

He could but force a branch, Daphne her tree
Most freely offers to her sex and thee,
And says to verse, so unconstrain'd as yours,
Her laurel freely comes, your fame secures;
And men no longer shall with ravish'd bays
Crown their forc'd Poems by as forc'd a praise.

("To the Excellent Orinda," 3-8)

Daphne becomes an image of release from the reification of women in men's poems and the sexual intimidation of women poets enacted in Philips's terror of publication.

To Anne Killigrew, disappointed in hopes which made every tree seem "*Apollo*s transform'd *Daphne*," when "ev'ry fresher Branch, and ev'ry Bow / Appear'd as Garlands to empale my Brow," the sexual price seems worth paying.

So Deathless Numbers from my Tuneful Lyre
Do ever flow; so *Phebus* I by thee
Divinely Inspired and possest may be;
I willingly accept *Cassandras* Fate,
To speak the Truth, although believ'd too late.

("Upon the saying that my VERSES were made by another," p. 47)

Killigrew reads back like the others to the literal level of the myth, but she accepts male sexual dominance as the means by which women enter into art.

Killigrew's literalizing imagination is not always so defeatist and compliant, however. "HERODIAS Daughter presenting to her Mother St. JOHN'S Head in a Charger, also [like Killigrew's picture of St. John in the wilderness] Painted by her self" is an astonishing twelve-line poem:

Behold, dear Mother, who was late our Fear,
Disarm'd and Harmless, I present you here;
The Tongue ty'd up, that made all *Jury* quake,
And which so often did our Greatness shake;
No Terror sits upon his Awful Brow,
Where Fierceness reign'd, there Calmness triumphs now;
As Lovers use, he gazes on my Face,
With Eyes that languish, as they sued for Grace;
Wholly subdu'd by my Victorious Charms,
See how his Head reposes in my Arms.
Come, joyn then with me in my just Transport,
Who thus have brought the Hermite to the Court.

(pp. 27–28)

Salome subdues male force to matriarchal power, misogynist fierceness to the feminine world of the court. She ties her enemy's tongue so he cannot speak, and forces him to respond to her desire. His severed head "reposes" in her arms like a spent lover's or a sleeping child's. Literalizing conventional images of amatory combat, she claims victory with terrifying gentleness. Spoken by one woman to another in a polite, conversational, rather affectionate tone, the poem celebrates female desire, will, and solidarity—mother and daughter united in "just Transport"—summing up with startling directness and in a cool, strange key the essential innovations of Philips, Behn, and Finch.

The task of the woman poet has been to redefine woman's position in poetry: to become the subject who desires and speaks. Success in this enterprise seems to have required the availability of a poetic tone suitable for a woman's voice, subjects to write about that both fit current literary conventions and could accommodate a woman's point of view, and a social situation in which she could imagine herself as a poet and disseminate her poems. Philips, Behn, and Finch were fortunate enough to find both social circum-

stances and poetic conventions in which women could work. As Killigrew's *Salome* makes eerily clear, the enabling factors included a community of women who could be addressed in verse, a feminized social world to displace rigidly masculine values as poetry's setting and theme, and the opportunity to express female desire and evade the domination of men. Consciousness of gender was inescapable both on the poets' part and on their readers', sometimes making them seem timid or stilted; differences produced by gender inhibited readers' ability to respond to, or even accurately perceive, what was new or strong in their verse. The male-dominated classical tradition, the Romantic exploration of male poets' relation to female nature, the traditional subject-object divisions of amatory verse, and the chains of respectability have all contributed to narrowing women's scope. But where Metaphysical neo-Platonism, Restoration sexual freedom, and above all the socially refined and feminized tones of Caroline, Restoration, and Augustan verse opened an unprecedented space, women wrote poetry, published, and were read. Still, because they wrote and were read specifically as women, they did not become part of the main stream of English poetry.

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NOTES

¹ Most of the generalizations in this essay apply also to Anne Bradstreet [1612?–1672], who wrote in America and was not widely recognized or influential until this century. Elizabeth Hampsten notes an outbreak of published poetry by women at the turn of the eighteenth century, tentatively attributing it to the “loosening of social structures” after the Glorious Revolution, “general prosperity and widening literacy” during the Restoration “a temper in court and in public life which, though infamous for its profligacy, in many ways gave new prominence to women,” and the reign of two queens in a row; “Petticoat Authors: 1660–1720,” *Women's Studies* 7 (1980): 21. Hampsten reviews the history of the equation of good poetry with masculinity, 22–25. On the difficulties attending women's writing at this time see Germaine Greer, Susan Hastings, Jeslyn Medoff, and Melinda Sansone, *Kissing the Rod: An Anthology of Seventeenth-Century Women's Verse* (London: Virago, 1988), 1–31. Margaret J. M. Ezell disputes the feminist assumption that Renaissance women were silenced and silent: like many men, they circulated their writings in manuscript and published works of religious and topical concern that were soon forgotten; *The Patriarch's Wife: Literary Evidence and the History of the Family* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1987). This makes the fact that so few women found any place, however tenuous or temporary, within the main tradition of English poetry all the more worthy of attention.

² Lucy Brashear, “The Forgotten Legacy of the ‘Matchless Orinda,’” *Anglo-Welsh Review* 65 (1979): 69.

³ The known facts of Behn's life (as distinguished from the legends) are set forth by Sara Heller Mendelson in *The Mental World of Stuart Women: Three Studies*

(Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1987). Virginia Woolf probably overestimated the degree to which she was remembered: "For now that Aphra Behn had done it, girls could go to their parents and say, You need not give me an allowance; I can make money by my pen. Of course the answer for many years to come was, Yes, by living the life of Aphra Behn! Death would be better! and the door was slammed faster than ever." *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1929; 1957), 67. In 1857 Elizabeth Barrett Browning was outraged when a reviewer compared her to Behn; Dorothy Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989), 222.

⁴ "Some of the first lines [she] ever writt" recorded Apollo's warning: "Nor shalt thou reach Orinda's prayse, / Tho' all thy aim, be fixt on Her"; "The Preface," *The Poems of Anne Countess of Winchelsea*, ed. Myra Reynolds (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1903), 7. All citations of Finch's works are to this edition. Of Behn, Apollo said that "amongst Femens was not on the earth / Her superiour in fancy, in language, or witt, / Yett own'd that a little too loosly she writt" ("The Circuit of Appollo," 12–14).

⁵ Katherine Philips, *Poems*, vol. I of *Minor Poets of the Caroline Period*, 3 vols., ed. George Saintsbury (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), 492. All citations of Philips's works and of the commendatory writings published with them, unless otherwise stated, are from this edition.

⁶ J. W., "To the Excellent ASTRAEA," *The Works of Aphra Behn*, 6 vols., ed. Montague Summers (London: William Heinemann, 1915), 6:131; J. Cooper, "To Mrs. BEHN on the publishing her Poems," 6:118. All citations of Behn's poetry and of the verses published with it are from this edition.

⁷ Abraham Cowley, "On the Death of Mrs. Katherine Philips," 49–68 (Philips, *Poems*); *The Letters of John Keats, 1814–1821*, 2 vols., ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958), 1:163.

⁸ Alexander Pope, "Impromptu To Lady Winchelsea," *Poetical Works*, ed. Herbert Davis (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), 11. 1–4.

⁹ Richard Helgerson, *Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton and the Literary System* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1983), 30.

¹⁰ See Angeline Goreau, *Reconstructing Aphra: A Social Biography of Aphra Behn* (New York: Dial Press, 1980), 144–158.

¹¹ Critics have indeed harbored such suspicions; see Greer et al. (note 1), 7. There is suspiciously little difference between the pirated and the authorized editions. Prefeminist critics generally took such disclaimers at face value, proof of the careless amateurism that made women acceptable if unimportant as writers. Katharina M. Wilson suggests that Philips was distressed at having lost control of her work; *Women Writers of the Renaissance and Restoration* (Athens, Ga.: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1987), 578–79. Ezell takes the disclaimers as merely conventional, noting that many women were unafraid of publication, even without anonymity, and that Philips had already printed her translation of *Pompey*. She argues that Philips objected not to publication but to a badly produced edition (83–89). But Philips also fussed about the publication of *Pompey*, agreeing to it (she said) only to avoid a pirated edition, and was greatly distressed at the idea of putting her name to it; *Letters from Orinda to Poliarchus*, ed. Sir Charles Cotterell, 2d ed. (London: Bernard Lintot, 1729), 122–23. Ezell is clearly right to stress the conventionality of such disclaimers, but she does not fully account for their persistence or explain Philips's frenzied tone and its sexual overtones. On male amateurism, see Helgerson (note 9), 25–35.

¹² "To the Most Excellently accomplish'd Mrs K. Philips," *The Complete Poetry of Henry Vaughan*, ed. French Fogle (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1965), 11.1–11.

¹³ In his verses published with Killigrew's poems Dryden notes that Orinda, like Killigrew, had been "deface[d]" by smallpox: "As equal were their Souls, so equal

was their Fate.” “To the Pious Memory of the Accomplisht Young Lady, Mrs Anne Killigrew, Excellent in the two Sister-Arts of Poësie, and Painting”; *Poems (1686) by Mrs. Anne Killigrew, a Facsimile Reproduction*, ed. Richard Morton (Gainesville: Scholars’ Facsimiles & Reprints, 1967), (VIII). All citations of Dryden’s ode and Killigrew’s poems are from this edition, identified by page number. A woman writer puts her face on show and at risk. “The stock in trade of a literate woman became more negotiable as the century drew to a close, but its value was inseparable from her readiness to exhibit herself”; Greer et al., 27.

¹⁴ The definition is from the O.E.D. D. E. Underdown finds evidence that in at least one district scolds supplanted harlots as the main victims of the cucking stool; “The Taming of the Scold: The Enforcement of Patriarchal Authority in Early Modern England,” in *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England*, ed. Anthony Fletcher and John Stevenson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), 124.

¹⁵ Stanzas 4 and 5. Not recognizing the point at issue, critics have sometimes read these necessary defensive praises as condemnations, as Ann Messenger points out; *His and Hers: Essays in Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Literature* (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1986), 24–25. Kristina Straub reads “Upon the Saying” as a metaphor of rape; “Indecent Liberties with a Poet: Audience and the Metaphor of Rape in Killigrew’s ‘Upon the saying that my Verses’ and Pope’s *Arbuthnot*,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 6 (1987): 27–45.

¹⁶ Margaret Anne Doody notes that Augustan women poets tended to write in iambic tetrameter, a suitable meter for casualness, individuality, and originality, and one not associated with classical learning or rule over the world; *The Daring Muse: Augustan Poetry Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), 241–42. What seemed unaggressive was of course not always so. Fables, for instance, were used subversively against political repression; see Annabel Patterson, “Fables of Power,” in *Politics of Discourse: The Literature and History of Seventeenth-Century England*, ed. Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1987), 277.

¹⁷ Reuben A. Brower, “Lady Winchilsea and the Poetic Tradition of the Seventeenth Century,” *Studies in Philology* 42 (1945): 63. Brower is interested in what he assumes to be her “status as an amateur and the ease with which she lent herself to diverse influences” (62) and makes no mention, except in incidental derogation, of gender.

¹⁸ See Lawrence Lipking, *Abandoned Women and Poetic Tradition* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988).

¹⁹ She speaks, that is, like Sappho. Joan deJean suggests that masculine tradition, from Ovid on, has striven to disguise the fact that Sappho portrayed her poetry as an exchange among women, placing herself as desiring subject and controller of the objectifying gaze; “Fictions of Sappho,” *Critical Inquiry* 13 (1987): 787–805. “This female bond,” deJean writes “can be considered in purely literary terms as an attempt to bypass male literary authority” (790). Greer et al. note that “the rediscovery of Sappho, which roughly coincided with Behn’s career, followed the same declining curve from recognition into obloquy” (26)—but this was Ovid’s Sappho, who died for heterosexual love. On female friendship in seventeenth-century women’s writings, see Ezell, 121–26. Aemelia Lanyer’s volume of religious poems, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611), creates a community of good women through its dedications and imagines an Eden without men; see Barbara K. Lewalski, “Of God and Good Women: The Poems of Aemelia Lanyer,” in *Silent But for the Word: Tudor Women as Patrons, Translators, and Writers of Religious Works*, ed. Margaret Patterson Hannay (Kent, Ohio: Kent State Univ. Press, 1985), 203–224.

²⁰ According to Lilian Faderman, “the Restoration rage for pederasty apparently put an end to [the Renaissance] unselfconscious view of appropriate behavior between male friends, for female friends it continued during the next three hundred

years"; *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow, 1981), 67. Philip Webster Souers traces Philips's Platonic same-sex friendships to Cartwright; *The Matchless Orinda* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1931), 260–63. But Cartwright's (male) Platonic friends exist in a heterosexual context, such as Philips's ignore or deplore.

²¹ See Richard E. Quaintance, "French Sources of the Restoration 'Imperfect Enjoyment' Poem," *Philological Quarterly* 42 (1963): 196–99, and Judith Kegan Gardiner, "Aphra Behn, Sexuality and Self-Respect," *Women's Studies* 7 (1980): 75. A translation more faithful to the original appears as "The Lost Opportunity recovered" in *Wit and Drollery: Jovial Poems: Corrected and Amended, with New Additions* (London: Obadiah Blagrove, 1682), 1–17.

²² Unpublished; printed by permission of The English Poetry Collection, Wellesley College. The poem continues with sixteen more lines of courtly compliment.

²³ See Mendelson (note 3), 120, 122.

²⁴ Even so sympathetic a feminist critic as Katharine Rogers, intimately familiar with Finch's work, says that in "A Nocturnal Reverie" Finch "aims simply to convey her response to a beautiful setting as accurately as she can"; "Anne Finch, Countess of Winchelsea: An Augustan Woman Poet," in *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*, ed. Sandra Gilbert and Susan M. Gubar (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1979), 45.

²⁵ These lines are inserted in Behn's translation of Cowley's *Sex Libri Plantorum*; quoted by George Woodcock, *The Incomparable Aphra* (London: T. V. Boardman, 1948), 211.