


Anne Finch on the Patio: A Scholarly Eat and Greet

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Recommended Citation

Schoenberger, Melissa () "Anne Finch on the Patio: A Scholarly Eat and Greet," *ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830*: Vol.14: Iss.1, Article 11.

<http://doi.org/10.5038/2157-7129.14.1.1385>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol14/iss1/11>

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Anne Finch on the Patio: A Scholarly Eat and Greet

Abstract

This article recounts an instructional event for English majors held in the central campus library. Students engaged with various materials related to the career and editorial history of Anne Finch. The event offered students an introduction to questions of information literacy, textual history, and literary studies.

Keywords

birdsong, early modern literature, media theory, poetry, social media

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As a teacher of eighteenth-century literature, I find myself returning to a few foundational ideas when thinking about why I would want to continue teaching very old poems in a world whose current problems are so urgent.¹ First, this period has a great deal to teach us about how we arrived at our present moment. After all, as Susan Lanser memorably observed in the opening pages of her monograph *The Sexuality of History*, “It is a truth almost universally acknowledged, that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries gave the West a host of its modern arrangements, from the trivial (eating with forks) to the triumphant (the ‘rights of man’) to the tragic (racial supremacy)” (1). Second, given these complicated inheritances, it is a valuable area for students to explore, especially in light of the crises of historical thinking that continue to emerge in the American educational system. Third, despite the significances of this period, the formal complexity of its literature, which I find intellectually thrilling, can be a hard sell to undergraduates. As a teacher of poems that are often grounded in Latin learning, highly political, and didactic, I am very aware of the fact that today’s students—even the most dedicated English majors—need to be shown why they should spend a semester reading poetry that defies modern expectations about what poetry is and does.

I know this in part because I was one of those students. As an undergraduate, I wanted to study literature, but I was interested in reading British and American modernists. I was eager to study *very* old literature too: Ancient Celtic epic? Fascinating. Horace and Augustine? Spanish picaresque novels? Could not get enough of them. But anything written in English between 1600 and 1900? No thanks. The curricular requirements imposed on me were fairly loose, so no one told me, and it never occurred to me, to take a risk and try, say, a Restoration drama course. But then I attended a literature graduate program with stringent period requirements and enrolled in a seminar on eighteenth-century poetry taught by James Winn. Within days, I was not only fascinated by these writers, but also amazed that it had taken so long to find my way to them. Especially intriguing was Anne Finch, whose proximity to the most urgent political situations of the late seventeenth century, coupled with a talent for a stunningly wide range of poetic genres and modes, made her a writer unlike any I had encountered before.

As a faculty member hired to teach seventeenth- and eighteenth-century poetry at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, I am perpetually searching for ways to ensure that English majors might come to see the value of this period much earlier than I did. Teaching at a liberal arts college rooted in the Jesuit tradition, I benefit from institutional support for student experimentation and faculty work in early periods. Yet I also understand that our students, who tend to be traditionally-aged undergraduates hailing not only from New England

but also the wider U.S. and several other countries, are affected by increasing pressures to specialize early and can sometimes avoid fields of study unfamiliar to them. Although I feel lucky to teach in a department that requires early-period study and grants me the freedom to design upper-level courses with maximum independence, I also know that classes with titles like “Georgic and Pastoral” or “Eighteenth-Century Poetry” will need to be supported by energetic recruiting. I learned this lesson quite clearly when, in my first semester at Holy Cross, only three students enrolled in my Milton course, and one dropped on the first day. The department chair generously allowed the class to run with two students—which turned out to be a wonderful experience for the three of us—but I never again took for granted that courses would simply fill.

So, over the next two years, I attended more closely to the project of attracting students to the major and to older literature, teaching eighteenth-century writers in my 100-level courses, talking with advisees, and encouraging members of my 200-level British literature course to join me in reading more Milton, Pope, and Behn at the upper level. Yet, especially given that prospective majors would likely have read very few texts from this period before coming to college, I sensed that there might be more ways to invite students into the eighteenth century. I decided that I could start by feeding them.

Bringing students into the library, and into the eighteenth century

Early in the Fall of 2017, I worked with the librarians Alicia Hansen (Assistant Director and Head of Research, Teaching, and Learning) and Monica Locker (Assessment, Teaching, and Learning Librarian), to offer a collaborative learning event for current and prospective English majors. We called it a scholarly “eat and greet,” where students would mingle with one another on the sunny patio attached to the primary campus library. In addition to enjoying snacks and mocktails—such as the “Purple Finch” and “The Countess,” concocted by our very creative library staff—participants would learn a few things about eighteenth-century literary culture, information literacy, and the significance of editorial work. In considering which works to feature, I chose the poetry of Anne Finch: with its complicated publication and editorial history, it would surely offer a memorable lesson on how dynamic eighteenth-century texts can be. Rather than sitting idly on dusty shelves, these poems continue to generate new intellectual questions and answers, and as a result make visible the valuable work of editors, librarians, and scholarly commentators, who continually refine our understanding of literature and culture.

The intellectual core of our event was drawn from my upper-level course on eighteenth-century poetry, which includes frequent discussion of textual history: we talk about why writers such as John Dryden and Alexander Pope have had a great deal of editorial attention and are accessible in relatively affordable print editions for students, whereas other poets are more readily and fully available through online resources such as the [Thomas Gray Archive](#), open-access sections of the British Library's digital collections, Google Books, or *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*, sometimes with little or no scholarly apparatus to support our reading of them. In the course, we conclude with an editorial project, in which students use the catalog and indexes in David Foxon's *English Verse 1701–1750* to select a lesser-read poem, locate it in *ECCO*², produce their own annotated edition of it, and publish it on a class website available to the public (see appendix for the full assignment). Our study of Finch in the course sets up the project well: we consider her *Miscellany Poems, on Several Occasions* of 1713, and then discuss her later reception, followed by investigation of Myra Reynolds's edition of 1903. We then turn to modern digital options for reading Finch, exploring sites such as *A Celebration of Women Writers* and the student editions created by Jack Lynch, culminating in consideration of *The Anne Finch Digital Archive*,³ which now complements the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Anne Finch*, edited by Jennifer Keith with Claudia Thomas Kairoff.⁴

In many ways, however, this event marked a departure from my usual pedagogical methods, which tend to focus most intensively on poetic language and political history. I teach Finch regularly in three courses: "Poetry and Poetics," an introductory requirement for English majors; the eighteenth-century poetry course already noted here; and a seminar on Alexander Pope. In each context, we draw something different from Finch. Students in "Poetry and Poetics" encounter her briefly when they consider some lines from the "Enquiry after Peace"—included in a letter to the Countess of Thanet—on a handout that teaches different manifestations of the couplet. In this poem, Finch's trochaic tetrameter couplets indicate clearly the sense of urgency and insistent searching that characterizes the poem, and we emphasize the stressed syllables as we read together: "**Peace!** where **art** thou **to be found?** **Where,** in **all** the **spacious Round,** **May** thy **Footsteps be pursu'd?**"

In "Eighteenth-Century Poetry," one of my central goals is to introduce students to Finch's broad generic range. We read such poems as "The Spleen," "A Nocturnal Reverie," "A Tale of the Miser and the Poet. Written about 1709," "Adam Pos'd," and "Jupiter and the Farmer: A Fable." We attend especially to the formal differences among these poems, exploring, for instance, the Pindaric, shape-shifting structure of "The Spleen," and the stakes of literary translation in

“Jupiter and the Farmer,” which Finch rendered from the French of Jean de La Fontaine. Finally, in the Pope seminar we turn to Finch early in the course, during a week devoted to the political events of 1713. I encourage these advanced students to read as much of *Miscellany Poems, on Several Occasions* as they can, alongside Pope’s *Windsor-Forest*, a chapter on the end of the War of the Spanish Succession in Winn’s *Queen Anne: Patroness of Arts*, and John Richardson’s essay “Alexander Pope’s *Windsor Forest*: Its Context and Attitudes toward Slavery.” In each iteration of the seminar, students put these materials into conversation in different ways, such as making connections among Finch’s “The Petition for an Absolute Retreat,” Pope’s *Windsor-Forest*, and the challenges of peacemaking described in *Queen Anne*.

The “Eat and Greet”

For the library “eat and greet,” however, it would not have been practical—or even advisable, if I was hoping to attract more students into early-period courses—to attempt a pop-up close reading session for students with virtually no familiarity with eighteenth-century poetry. A change of approach was in order. I worked with Monica Locker and Alicia Hansen to bring Finch’s poetry more immediately and urgently to life, expanding the conversations about textual history that had framed some of my classroom teaching in ways that would ideally achieve three central aims: introduce students to the various materials available in the library; invite them into the world of eighteenth-century studies; and offer opportunities to practice evaluating and categorizing resources. The librarians very generously created materials for our collective use, including a handout on how to access *ECCO* through the Dinand Library system. They also compiled and printed citations for primary sources, scholarly articles, monographs, and digital archives, and prepared notes on how to explain their features and differences to undergraduates. We planned to divide the event into two parts: first, a general lesson on information literacy, followed by a more specific research discussion and interactive activity grounded in consideration of Finch’s poetry.

After our attendees had arrived and made their way through the mocktails and snacks, we began our conversation by introducing library resources. The librarians noted the central search portal, the library catalog, and the many research databases available to support student research. Monica Locker also explained why we were encouraging students to use these institutional resources, when anyone could simply Google anything from the comfort of their dorm rooms. By pointing to issues of accuracy and credibility, she made clear to our

attendees that not all websites have equal claims to scholarly legitimacy. We looked at the example of PoemHunter.com, a commercial website that boasts a massive “library,” but which cannot be trusted to offer reliable texts. Monica Locker discussed with students the problems that might stem from the site’s general proclamation that “you [anyone in the reading public] are the editor,” and noted that the “About Us” page not only lacked any institutional affiliations or editors’ names, but also had typos and errors. The site appears to have been updated since the time of our event, but its basic weaknesses remain.

We then turned to the [Anne Finch Digital Archive](http://AnneFinchDigitalArchive.com). Monica Locker asked the students what they noticed. She pointed out the details listed at the bottom of the homepage, where we could all see scholarly names and institutional affiliations. Even better, she observed, was the “About” page, which offered extensive information about the project and its funding, as well as information about scholarship that had made reference to the archive.

This second example also worked as a bridge into the discussion of Finch: following these comments, I offered a brief summary of Finch’s life and career, followed by an account of how her poems had moved from manuscript books, to the printed *Miscellany Poems, on Several Occasions*, and ultimately into modern editions. To show the implications of editorial decision making, I then turned to one of the citations we had prepared for the event: Keith’s essay “Anne Finch’s Aviary: or, Why She Never Wrote ‘The Bird and the Arras.’” This article offers a clear and accessible account of how

‘The Bird and the Arras’ was never constructed as a discrete poem by Finch...Reynolds extracted these lines, without acknowledging them as extractions, from two sections (lines 1–15 and 30–35) of a longer poem by Finch titled ‘Some occasional Reflections Digested (though not with great regularity) into a Poem.’ This longer poem appears in Finch’s folio manuscript, mostly transcribed in the middle and late 1690s when the poet was in her thirties. (78)

The essay works well as a central case study for a session like this one because it develops several lines of thought: it draws out the interpretive implications that emerge when lines are restored to their original context; it presents the print publication of the longer manuscript poem from which the artificial poem was taken; and it articulates the complicated relationships between manuscript and printed poetry. Also valuable for working with the students, who are themselves developing as writers, are the ways in which the essay shows how Finch revised

her work when moving from manuscript to print, as well as in relation to shifts in her own larger creative aims as a “socially and politically bold” (95) writer.

Fundamentally, Keith’s essay offered a valuable point of access as our attendees began to consider what it means to ask research questions about poetry. That is, the findings in the article make clear the fact that although a poem—especially one written centuries ago—might seem like a coherent, almost elemental object, in fact it can be rife with instabilities and uncertainties. In this way, the article helped point the conversation toward an array of other sources that we then shared with the students. Some of these further illuminated its arguments: for instance, we returned to Reynolds, reconsidering the implications for her edition, and then discussed how to access Finch’s *Miscellany Poems, on Several Occasions* in *ECCO*. We then moved to other relevant resources, such as scholarly monographs on women writers, and the *Anne Finch Digital Archive* (the necessity of which had now become clearer to attendees).

As I noted above, the librarians also supported our discussion by compiling, printing, and passing around copies of citations to the participants. They included library call numbers where applicable, for ease of access later if the students wished to explore the library building. Here are a few samples of what students received on paper slips:

Finch, Anne Kingsmill, Countess of Winchilsea. *The Poems of Anne, Countess of Winchilsea, from the Original Ed. of 1713 and from Unpublished Manuscripts*, edited by Myra Reynolds. Chicago, The University of Chicago press, 1903. – Call no. PR 3765 W75p 1903

Finch, Anne Kingsmill, Countess of Winchilsea. *Miscellany poems, on several occasions. Written by a lady*. London, 1713. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale. College of the Holy Cross. 14 Aug. 2017

Backscheider, Paula R. *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and Their Poetry: Inventing Agency, Inventing Genre*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005. – Call no. PR555.W6 B33 2005

Ferguson, Moira. *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets: Nation, Class, and Gender*. Albany: State University of New York Press, c1995. SUNY series in feminist criticism and theory. – Call no. PR555.W6 F47 1995

Anne Finch Digital Archive: <http://library.uncg.edu/dp/annefinch/>

After circulating the citations, we asked the students to work together to tell their own story about Anne Finch: how might they arrange the slips to show movement and development across time? Other options for this exercise might include asking students to categorize the citations in various ways, either according to type—primary source, edition, scholarly article, and so on—or according to other criteria they determine relevant. Throughout the session, conversations were lively and the students appeared to be highly curious and engaged in the work of sorting through and organizing their sources. These outcomes were especially encouraging given the fact that the event was not connected to a specific course running at the time, but rather was intended to foster interest in the various ideas, questions, and forms of hands-on work that the major can offer.

Ultimately, we were hoping to achieve several interlocking goals during this session: to invite current and prospective English majors into the library early in the fall semester, to show them what they might find there, and to find ways of bringing the library holdings to life. Moreover, the librarians and I wanted to invite students into the processes by which materials are vetted and made available to them, as well as to demonstrate the various purposes, origins, and transformations of those materials. Finally, in encouraging consideration of a high-quality online resource like the *Anne Finch Digital Archive*, we wanted students to leave the session with a clear sense of how and why not all texts on the internet are of the same quality. In a related way, we hoped to help them see how different editions of a poet's work are not merely copies of one another, but rather acts of scholarly interpretation and argument that reflect larger shifts in academic fields of study.

Future iterations

This event was designed to be a low-stakes introduction to library research, but it could quite easily be integrated into a semester-length course as an in-house field trip. In organizing it as a standalone event outside of a course, however, I was attempting to create an opportunity for undergraduates to find a fun, accessible way into eighteenth-century studies—and to the library itself—with the hope that they would come away with greater interest in both.

In the time that has elapsed between the original version of this event and now, two important shifts have taken place, which would need to be accounted for in

any future sessions modeled on the one I have described here. First, the COVID-19 pandemic put a stop to gatherings like this one, and although most of us have returned to a relatively normal state of affairs, I and many of my colleagues continue to find that in the wake of pandemic isolation students need additional support in developing the adult social skills necessary for succeeding in college and beyond. If I were to organize a session like this again, I would plan more opportunities for conversation among attendees, with additional structures in place to ensure that they talk to and work with people they do not already know. For instance, midway through the categorization exercise, each group might be encouraged to split up, find a partner from another unit, and share ideas and questions.

On a happier note, any version of this event organized now would be able to incorporate the Cambridge edition. I could imagine a productive conversation about how to use the online *Archive* alongside a print or digital version of the two-volume edition, as well as a discussion grounded in a series of comparative examples working between Reynolds's volume and those of Keith and Kairoff. Students might also be invited to reflect on some of the materials discussed in "A Reception and Transmission History of Finch's Work: Illustrative Cases from the Eighteenth, Nineteenth, and Early Twentieth Centuries," which appears in Volume 2 of that edition.

From this side of the pandemic, I feel even more strongly about the value of sharing materials such as those featured in the library event with as many students as possible, and in future versions would likely advertise it to the broader campus community, rather than to English majors only. A one-time session like this can introduce a sense of what humanistic work entails, and could perhaps inspire curiosity even among those with no plans to major or minor in the humanities. As is the case for humanistic scholarship in general, the study of Finch's life and works has been characterized by a continuous unfolding of a conversation, a process that requires humility about what we can know and how we come to know it. That is, knowledge is never static. We had occasion to learn lessons like this in visceral, terrifying ways during the pandemic, when knowledge about an emergent situation shifted and changed in real time. We also saw the broad range of reactions to such a process, some of which were painful to witness and wrought destructive effects. I have come to believe that the study of older poems can be a useful practice space for developing a general willingness to acclimate to uncertainty, engage with ambiguity, and evaluate and integrate new information. Because the stakes of humanistic work are different from those in the natural sciences, we—teachers of literature and culture—have a special opportunity to

teach others what it looks like to follow ideas across time, as they inevitably transform in relation to new discoveries and information.

Appendix: Making eighteenth-century poetry assignment

Note: This assignment has been a central part of my upper-level course on eighteenth-century poetry, taught regularly at the College of the Holy Cross. I include it here as an example of the kind of expanded work possible in the course, which is also grounded in the introductory questions posed by the standalone library event. The assignment has been revised in different iterations of the course, and in future semesters I intend to continue adjusting it to meet the needs of students whose academic experiences and preparation continue to be affected by the interruptions of the pandemic period. This assignment is the culminating project in the course, but it is scaffolded across the semester (see “Due Dates” section below), in the hope that students will come to understand the longer processes that inform high-quality scholarly work.

Making Eighteenth-Century Poetry

POETRY needs you. Especially the poetry written between 1700 and 1799. You are the few, the proud—the people who are about to spend a semester exploring a field of literature that desperately needs more experts. Scholarship in eighteenth-century studies is distinctly weighted toward the novel form, since this period saw important developments in the creation and dissemination of prose fiction. But while the novel was rising, poetry was **exploding**: people were writing across an amazingly broad range of genres, about everything from political intrigue, to dinner-table gossip, to illicit affairs, to the circulation of the blood. Poetry was considered a way to argue, to teach, to persuade, to delight, and to entertain. We can learn a lot from the people who created poems in this century—they wrote about the use and abuse of the natural environment, the problem of slavery, women’s freedoms (or lack thereof), and many other important subjects.

THE PROBLEM faced by this poetry in the twenty-first century, however, comprises two questions, one of access, the other of readability. By **access** I mean the ways in which potential readers can get their hands (and eyes) on these poems. Many poems, although in the public domain, are not available in versions that can readily be used by a wide audience. **Readability** means the problem of understanding and comprehending poetry that is not often easily legible for modern readers, usually because it includes archaic spellings and refers to objects

or events unfamiliar to us now (for instance, in this period, “pencil” often means “paintbrush”). **Your task** is to choose **one** poem by a poet **who does not appear on the syllabus**, and then complete the following steps:

- A. Create an edition for a modern audience
- B. Write an essay interpreting the poem and articulating your choices as an editor. The imagined audience for this poem is **a public one**. How would you address a reader of the *The New York Times*, or an audience member at a lecture held at a major book festival? In other words, how would you convince a person generally interested in books and reading, but not necessarily interested in the eighteenth century, that this poem is worth their time?
- C. Present your work to your classmates during the final full week of class. A separate sheet with guidelines for public speaking will follow later in the semester.

BUT WAIT—THERE’S MORE! We will post the poems and essays to a website open to the public. Together, you will contribute to the active project of preserving and circulating responsibly edited eighteenth-century poems in the twenty-first century.

The following checklist can help you organize your work for this assignment:

1. Choose a poem held in the database *ECCO*
2. Read the poem several times
3. Figure out what modern readers need in order to approach the poem—a headnote with biographical information or historical context? Line numbers? Footnotes? Modernized spelling or not? What else?
4. Research the author, publisher, historical and/or social contexts of the poem, as well as meanings of words you do not know.
5. Create a Word document that presents the poem, transcribed by you, in a format that modern readers can understand. This document should have all the elements (line numbers, notes, headnote, etc.) that you’ve decided it needs. This is called an **annotated edition** of a poem: it has been edited by an expert (you!).
6. **Write an essay of approximately 10 pages** in which you do the following:
 - a. Discuss and interpret the poem by both reading it closely *and* describing how it relates to relevant historical, biographical, political, or other information.

- b. Account for your choices as an editor. Why did you do what you did? How will those decisions help readers of today?
- c. This essay has a few different jobs to do, so the organization of it is up to you; you may wish to create different sections with subheadings, for instance. Different projects might demand different principles of organization, so I encourage you to discuss your essay with me throughout the process of planning and writing it.

Please also note the following guidelines and requirements:

1. Please provide accurate citation information in a correctly formatted bibliography (MLA or Chicago style), for any sources you use to complete this project, including the *ECCO* poem.
2. Your project should reflect a moderate amount of independent research on your part. I recommend the following resources:
 - a. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*: Dinand Library maintains a print version of this excellent resource, as well as the digital edition. You are welcome to use either one.
 - b. *Cambridge Companion* texts
 - c. *Oxford Reference Online* (a good place to start; use this to look up names, places, objects, etc. that you don't recognize. It is a much safer bet than the open internet)
 - d. *Oxford English Dictionary*
 - e. Dinand Library Search (for books, articles, reference materials). Some helpful publications are the journals *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, *Eighteenth-Century Life*, *Restoration*, *English Literary History*, and *Studies in English Literature*. You might also find helpful materials via these databases:
 - i. *JSTOR*
 - ii. *MLA International Bibliography*
 - iii. *Project Muse*
 - iv. *Literature Criticism Online*
 - f. Dinand Library **research librarians**. They are extremely knowledgeable. Visit them!
 - g. Me: please feel free to discuss the project with me after you have begun your preliminary research work.
3. Your grade will derive in part from your responses to others' work: please submit five one-paragraph responses, each of which evaluates and comments on another classmate's edited poem. Submit each response to me **and** to the classmate.

DUE DATES

Choice of poet and poem: **Friday, 2/2**. Submit hard copy of poem from ECCO at the start of class.

Biography of your chosen poet (the product of your research in the ODNB and other resources): **Monday, 2/26 in hard copy at the start of class** (keep in mind that this is very close to the due date for your first essay in the course, so plan accordingly. I am always willing to accept early submissions)

Scholarly edition of poem: **Friday, 4/27**

Responses to others (**email** to me and editor): no later than 11:59pm on **Friday, 5/4**.

Essay component: **Monday, 5/9, in hard copy at the start of class**

Notes

¹ This essay contributes to Part II of the “Concise Collection on Teaching the Works of Anne Finch,” guest edited by Jennifer Keith, *Aphra Behn Online*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2024. To read the essays in this part, follow this link <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol14/iss1/>. To read essays in Part I, follow this link: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol13/iss2/>.

² For alternative text options, see the Text Creation Partnership’s *ECCO* section (quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ecco), as well as scanned early books available via *Google Books*, the British Library, or *The Internet Archive*.

³ For a discussion of *The Anne Finch Digital Archive* as valuable for both introductory and upper-level literature pedagogies, as well as commentary on some of the larger stakes of digital humanities work in the classroom, see Martha Bowden’s essay, “Using *The Anne Finch Digital Archive* as a Teaching Text” in Part 1 of this Concise Collection.

⁴ This resource was not yet available when the course last ran, but will enhance this unit in future semesters. For other resources, see www.thomasgray.org; www.bl.uk/catalogues-and-collections/digital-collections; books.google.com; digital.library.upenn.edu/women/writers.html; jacklynch.net/18th/etext.html; libresearch.uncg.edu/AnneFinch/Home.

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