

# "To the Nightingale"

By Anne Finch

*Transcription, correction, editorial commentary, and markup by Students of Marymount University*

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POEMS  
ON

Several Occasions, *viz.* .

[...] Written by the Right Honorable ANNE .  
Countess of Winchelsea , <sup>author</sup> .

LONDON :

Printed by *J. B.* and sold by *W. Taylor* at the *Ship*  
in *Paternoster-Row* , and *Jonas Browne* at the  
*Black Swan* without *Temple-bar* . 1714 .

*To the* NIGHTINGALE, <sup>nightingale</sup> .

1 EXert thy Voice, Sweet Harbinger of Spring  
2 This Moment is thy Time to Sing,  
3 This Moment I attend to Praise,  
4 And set my Numbers, <sup>numbers</sup> to thy Lays, <sup>lays</sup> .  
5 Free as thine shall be my Song;  
6 As thy Musick, short, or long.  
7 Poets, wild as thee, were born,

8 Pleasing best when unconfin'd,  
9 When to Please is least design'd,  
10 Soothing but their Cares to rest;  
11 Cares do still their Thoughts molest,  
12 And still th'unhappy Poet's Breast,  
13 Like thine, when best he sings, is plac'd against a Thorn.  
14 She begins, Let all be still!  
15 Muse, <sup>muse</sup> , thy Promise now fulfill!  
16 Sweet, oh! sweet, still sweeter yet  
17 Can thy Words such Accents fit,  
18 Canst thou Syllables refine,  
19 Melt a Sense that shall retain  
20 Still some Spirit of the Brain,  
21 Till with Sounds like these it join.  
22 'Twill not be ! then change thy Note;  
23 Let Division, <sup>division</sup> shake thy Throat.  
24 Hark! Division now she tries;  
25 Yet as far the Muse outflies

26 Cease then, prithee, cease thy Tune;  
27 Trifler, wilt thou sing till *June*?  
28 Till thy Bus'ness all lies waste,  
29 And the Time of Building's past !  
30 Thus we Poets that have Speech,  
31 Unlike what thy Forests teach,  
32 If a fluent Vein be shown  
33 That's transcendent to our own,  
34 Criticize, reform, or preach,  
35 Or censure what we cannot reach.

## Footnotes

author Anne Finch, Countess of Winchelsea, was born in April 1661 to Anne Haselwood and Sir William Kingsmill. At age twenty-one she was appointed maid of honor to [Mary Modena](#), the wife of the Duke of York, in the Court of Charles II. During her time in the Court, [Anne Kingsmill](#) was courted by and eventually married to Colonel Heneage Finch. In 1689, after a shift in political power, the Finches faced monetary problems and moved several times, eventually settling in Eastwell with their nephew.

As a woman writer in the [Augustan era](#), Finch was also out of place. [Barbara McGovern's 2002 critical biography of Finch](#) explores these displacements both in her life and her poetry. Finch struggled, as McGovern notes, to define her poetic identity in an era when women were excluded from the conditions that would allow them to cultivate their minds or their voices. The poet was seen as male, and publishing poetry, a masculine, public activity; for a woman to do so was, in the Augustan period, risque and licentious (See Katherine Rogers' essay, "Anne Finch, Countess of Winchelsea: An Augustan Woman Writer," in [Pacheco 227](#)); Finch had to negotiate these competing cultural rules in her poetry.

Finch's poetry from 1701-1714 was wide ranging. She wrote on subjects typically allowed to be feminine, like her love for her husband, but she also wrote about public and political issues, like the succession of power in London. In 1701, Finch anonymously published "*Upon the Death of King James the Second*". Poems such as "[The Spleen](#)" and "[All is Vanity](#)" exemplify the idea of faith despite tribulation, a subject she explored often. Prior to the 1713 publication of *Miscellany Poems on Several Occasions*, Finch circulated private manuscripts of her poems and gained a favorable literary reputation. For more information on women writers and manuscript circulation, see George Justice's introduction to [Women's Writing and the Circulation of Ideas: Manuscript Publication in England, 1550-1800](#) (2002) or Margaret Ezell's *Social Authorship and the Advent of Print* (1999).

[Rogers emphasizes Finch's Augustan roots, highlighting her use of form](#) as well as her love poetry, satirical prose, and ideas on the relationship between man and nature (225). According to Rogers, Finch became one of the few female authors in the Augustan era to successfully master the masculine rules of the literary tradition. During the early modern period, women "frequently found themselves denied opportunities for publication and serious public reception, or had their writings denigrated and trivialized by a patriarchal literary world" ([McGovern 2](#))--as detailed in Finch's poem "The Introduction," which remained unpublished during her lifetime. Finch was able to make her voice heard by working within the masculine restraints of Augustan form.

Finch died on August 5, 1720. According to the [National Poetry Foundation](#) the first recognized modern edition of her work was released in 1903. Since the advent of feminist recovery criticism in the 1970s and 1980s, Anne Finch has gained critical acclaim; she is now regarded as one of the most important English women writers of the 18th century. The image to the right shows a [miniature watercolor portrait of Anne Finch by Peter Cross](#), housed in the National Portrait Gallery, London.

- [JW]

nightingale The nightingale is a small bird native to Europe and Asia, with a population in the United Kingdom as well as Africa. It is known for its beautiful, complex song, characterized by "a fast succession of high, low and rich notes that few other species can match," and for that reason has long been associated with poets and poetry, as poet Edward Hirsch notes in his introduction to *To a Nightingale: Poems from Sappho to Borges* . Often, the nightingale alludes to the classical myth of the rape of Philomela , whose violation is ostensibly recompensed with an unearthly beautiful song. While the nightingale is frequently invoked in lyric poetry as a feminized muse for the masculine poet to draw inspiration from, as Charles Hinnant notes in "Song and Speech in Anne Finch's 'To the Nightingale,'" Finch recasts the bird as an idealized muse for all poets, regardless of gender (504). This poem, is a significant attempt on Finch's part "to master a recurrent problem for the...female poet: how to participate in a discourse in which the poet is defined as a masculine subject" (503). [This video](#) allows you to hear a nightingale singing. The image to the right, via RSPB, shows the nightingale, *luscinia megarhynchos*.

- [TH]

numbers "Numbers" refers to the metrical quality of poetic verse; it also [metonymically](#) signifies poetry in general. In [Alexander Pope's "Epistle to Arbuthnot,"](#) he says that he "lisp'd in numbers, for the numbers came" (128), suggesting that he spoke in poetic form even as a child. Poetry is associated with music because of the metrical quality of both. Finch's use of the word "set" in this line emphasizes musicality, specifically the setting of words to music (see OED "set" v1, 73.a).

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lays According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* , a "Lay" refers to a song or story in song. Finch in this instance is seeking to create a poem that mirrors the song of the Nightingale.

- [JW]

muse According to [A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology](#) , the Muses are "inspiring goddesses of song" who "presid[e] over the different kinds of poetry, and over the arts and sciences." In this poem, Finch positions the nightingale as her muse and rival.

- [JW]

division According to the [Encyclopedia Britannica entry on ornamentation](#), division refers to a technique, popular in early modern music theory, characterized by dividing longer notes into a series of shorter note groupings. This is an early form of improvisation. For more information, please see "simple meter and time signatures" in the [Open Music Theory](#) textbook.

- [JW]