

## XII

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**‘A perticuler sort of Christaline Glasse’: A taste of politeness and politics in the early eighteenth century**

This paper examines and compares two artefacts of the early eighteenth century; a heavy baluster wine glass c.1700 - 1710 and the poem *Glass* by Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea (1661-1720) first published as a separate verse in her *Miscellany of Poems on Several Occasions* in 1713. From her unique position as a female aristocrat, once at the centre of court as maid of honour to Mary of Modena, and then for many years an internal political exile, Finch’s poem explores how the humble wine glass and its contents can embody an external and internal form of politeness and the division between the temporal and spiritual condition.

In 1674, George Ravenscroft was granted a patent for the English manufacture of ‘a perticuler sort of Christaline Glasse...not formerly exercised or vsed in this our Kingdome’.<sup>1</sup> Whilst the patent itself is silent on the raw materials used in production, presumably to prevent competition, contemporary evidence suggests that it was substantially different in composition to existing glass manufacture.<sup>2</sup> This initial composition was prone to ‘crizzling’; a form of glass corrosion which renders blown glass cloudy and eventually causes breakage.<sup>3</sup> The defect was later corrected with the addition of lead oxide and as John Houghton, writing at the turn of the seventeenth century notes, Ravenscroft’s modified metal became known as ‘flint glass’- the term synonymous with colourless lead-based glass.<sup>4</sup>

This new brilliant English crystal, which mimicked naturally found rock crystal, had an extraordinary ability to refract light and was heavy, ‘hard, durable and whiter than any from Venice.’<sup>5</sup> Whilst knowledge of producing coloured domestic glass was also

<sup>1</sup> Albert Hartshorne, *Old English Glasses: An account of glass drinking vessels in England from early times to the end of the eighteenth century* (London, 1897), p. 240.

<sup>2</sup> Christine Macleod, ‘Accident or Design? George Ravenscroft’s Patent and the Invention of Lead-Crystal Glass’, *Technology and Culture*, 28, (1987) pp. 776 – 803.

<sup>3</sup> Dr Robert Plot, writing in 1677, noted that Ravenscroft’s glasses were ‘subject to that unpardonable fault called crizzling...a Scabrities or dull roughness irrecoverably clouding the transparency of the glass’. He went on to note that problem had been corrected and that a new glass had been perfected that ‘...will not Crizel, but endure the se verest trials whatever, to be known from the former by a seal set purposely on them.’ *The Natural History of Oxford-shire, Being an Essay toward the Natural History of England* (Printed at the Theater in OXFORD and in London at Mr.S.Millers, at the Star near the West-end of St. Pauls Church-yard, 1677), para 93, p. 258.

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Hurst Vose (1980) *Glass*, (London, Collins, 1980), pp. 198-199.

<sup>5</sup> Plot, *The Natural History of Oxford-shire*, at para 93, p. 258.

readily available there appears to have been little or no demand for it in England in the first half of the eighteenth century, suggesting that consumers prized the qualities noted above.



Figure 1: Lead glass wine goblet with heavy baluster stem, unknown maker, c.1700-1710, English (London), object number C.233-1912, Height: 17.2 cm, Diameter: 8.5 cm, Wilfred Buckley Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum, © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The discovery of this flint glass gradually replaced the lighter, rather dull, Venetian-type soda-glass and the Northern European potash-glass. Its development was adapted for use in high-quality tableware which dominated the market in Britain and abroad for at least a century. Certainly by 1700 the previously admired Venetian influence had disappeared altogether from English stemware, giving way to a mode known as 'heavy baluster', produced until 1720. These early glasses, shaped from heavy flint were so-named after their large, bold stem. Often the part most susceptible to changing fashions in the eighteenth century, the stem was baroque in style and incorporated large, proportioned knobs which resembled furniture legs and candlesticks of the period. The remainder of the vessel encompassed the simple and solid shape of a conical, funnel-shaped bowl and workmanlike feet with folded rimmes to guard against accidental chipping (fig. 1). In this example, the smaller basal knob with the narrow tear would have trapped a sliver of light, spotlighting it upwards into the larger ball knob above it. The air bubble in turn would have captured the candlelight around the dining table and glowed; highlighting the brilliance of the crystal and showcasing

the sparkling body of its contents. This was a familiar technique of the period. Heavy baluster glasses relied on the vast use of a material that was enhanced by internal air bubbles rather than depending upon elaborate ornamentation for their attractiveness like their Venetian counterparts. It cannot be said that such glasses were never decorated, but the addition of diamond-point or wheel-engraving was so rare in this period that Bickerton asserts that it is safe to assume that manufacturers and consumers alike were completely satisfied with them.<sup>6</sup>

That translucency was the quality most prized in this technical innovation can be seen in Anne Finch's poem *Glass*. The poem appears to be an apostrophe to "Man" for the invention of glass and its subsequent adaptation into objects such as the 'Shash' (sash) window, 'Flakes of solid Ice' (mirror) and 'Vessels blown' (wine glasses). The reader is invited to attend to the materiality of these objects and to consider how a sensory encounter with a material object is conveyed within a mediating text:

O Man! what Inspiration was thy Guide,  
 Who taught thee Light and Air thus to divide;  
 To let in all the useful Beams of Day,  
 Yet force, as subtil Winds, without thy Shash to stay;  
 T'extract from Embers by a strange Device,  
 Then polish fair these Flakes of solid Ice;  
 Which, silver'd o'er, redouble all in place,  
 And give thee back thy well or ill-complexion'd Face.  
 To Vessels blown exceed the gloomy Bowl,  
 Which did the Wine's full excellence controul,  
 These shew the Body, whilst you taste the Soul.  
 Its colour sparkles Motion, lets thee see,  
 Tho' yet th'Excess the Preacher warns to flee,  
 Lest Men at length as clearly spy through Thee.<sup>7</sup>

The final three couplets are devoted solely to the wine glass, presumably the heavy baluster glass of this period, which contrasts with and 'exceeds' the opacity of the 'gloomy' bowl – alluding to its superior status by virtue of transparency. The fine translucency of the wine glass allows you to see the robust 'Body' and character of the wine, whose excesses the 'Preacher' warns against. However, Finch recognises that a glass of wine is more than simply a vessel containing fermented grape juice. She encourages her reader to see beyond the secular drinking ritual and consider the question: what does it mean to be able to see the contents of a wine glass?

<sup>6</sup> L.M Bickerton, *Eighteenth Century English Drinking Glasses, An Illustrated Guide* (London, 1986), p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> Anne, Countess of Winchelsea, *Miscellany of Poems on Several Occasions* (London, Printed for J.B and Sold Benj. Tooke at the Middle-Temple-Gate, William Taylor in Pater-Noster-Row and James Round in Exchange Alley, Cornhill, 1713) at p. 264. *Glass* originated as part of a larger manuscript poem 'Some occasional Reflections Digested (though not with great regularity) into a Poem'. For her *Miscellany Poems*, Finch extracted the lines to make a separate composition (Jennifer Keith, *Philological Quarterly*, 88 (2009), pp. 79-80, 77-102).

Finch articulated a different literary and political authority to the overtly public and political poetry of Dryden, Pope and Swift in an era in which the culture of politeness was at its apex.<sup>8</sup> Born Anne Kingsmill, to a family noted for Royalist sympathies, she began her adult life amongst the coterie of wits in Charles II's court by serving as maid of honour to Mary of Modena, wife of the future James II in 1682. In 1684, she married Colonel Heneage Finch, a courtier later appointed to Groom of the Bedchamber to James II.

As an intimate member of court, Finch would have been aware that objects were necessary for polite display and that men, as well as women, were involved in considering and selecting items that helped to construct their identities. Certainly, flint glass drinking vessels of the early eighteenth century were considered to be luxurious commodities and appealed to two distinctive markets with similar aspirations – the emerging affluent middle class who wished to emphasise their gentility and educational refinement and the aristocratic upper class who purchased glass to demonstrate good taste and interest in fine craftsmanship. Politeness was mediated by personal conduct but also by whether one owned items of sufficiently genteel design, was capable of discussing and appreciating their beauty and able to use them in the 'correct' manner.<sup>9</sup> A set of flint glasses and other effects such as ornate clothing, chinaware and literature were all fashionable accessories within a polite culture that Finch's reading audience would have recognised and likely possessed. After all, the successful display of politeness was indicative of individual good taste and taste was a sign of virtue.<sup>10</sup> Luddington notes that this virtue was what gave the post-1688 elite 'the right to rule and simultaneously denied that right to those that had money but poor taste, or more often, those who did not have the means to purchase the objects that would signal whatever taste they had.' This idea of taste was not an entirely new concept, but it acquired prominence in England in the late seventeenth century and quickly became a justification for political power.<sup>11</sup> This performance then was essential in legitimizing authority that was moving away from the Royalist tradition and old aristocratic order to the new space of Tory/Whig party polity.

Following the austerity of the Interregnum, alcohol was consumed at all levels of society to embody new-found liberalism and indulgence. Wine was generally less common and usually more expensive and so tended to generate connotations of exclusivity, as opposed to beer or mead.<sup>12</sup> The English political and cultural elite in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries typically drank wine, at least in the privacy of their own homes. We do not know if Finch herself partook, but wine itself was a key theme in classical antiquity, which in turn was a model for polite culture. Consuming imported wine was an inherently cosmopolitan act, akin to going on the

<sup>8</sup> Lawrence Klein, 'The Political Significance of 'Politeness' in Early-Eighteenth-Century Britain' in Gordon Schochet, ed., *Politics, Politeness and Patriotism* (Washington, DC, 1993), p. 76. Klein suggests that the culture of politeness reached its maturity between 1700 and 1715.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Luddington, *The Politics of Wine in Britain, A New Cultural History*, (London, 2013), p. 96.

<sup>10</sup> Luddington, p. 96.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> For an estimate of the price of drinks, see Stuart Peachey, *The Tippler's Guide to the Mid-17<sup>th</sup> Century* (Bristol, 1992), p. 9.

Grand Tour and therefore an indicator of one's politeness. Moreover, wine could also embrace polite display; chilled in a large engraved silver wine cooler, ceremonially served from a crystal decanter, poured into individual flint baluster glasses and consumed while sitting around a table fashioned from mahogany, imported from the New World.<sup>13</sup> However, even in this 'performance', so fashionable in the grand dining rooms of the early eighteenth century, there were political demarcators. In political discourse emerging from the Restoration, alcohol became a symbolic marker of cultural difference in which Tory and Stuart supporters stood for French claret and Whigs, representing the new mercantile class, became synonymous with Port.<sup>14</sup>

Certainly this was the principle on which the two sides pursued their public drinking and insulted each other in print.<sup>15</sup> For Tories, claret represented geniality, sophistication, wit and good taste. It also stood for loyalty to the crown – a residual effect of the Royalist pledging during the Interregnum. For Whigs, claret characterized their fears. France was viewed as a major source of Catholic threat and French wines became targeted as both culturally popish (presumably an idea bolstered by the role of wine in the Eucharist) and an economic drain which benefitted the coffers of the French treasury.<sup>16</sup> The type of wine you consumed was therefore an indicator of your political loyalties and by extension your patriotism. Centlivre illustrates this in her play *The Wonder: A Woman Keeps a Secret* (1714). Don Felix says to his prospective father-in-law, Don Pedro: 'I have been drinking right French Claret, Sir. But I love my own Country for all that.' 'Ay, ay' responds Don Pedro, 'who doubts it, Sir?'.<sup>17</sup> Centlivre, who often satirized Tories, cynically parallels Don Felix's questionable loyalty to his country with the dubious Tory loyalty to the incoming Hanoverian monarchy.

Given her proximity to court both through her personal role and her marriage, Anne Finch would have undoubtedly been aware of the political divisions represented through alcohol. Her sensitivity to representation and power relations may have developed in part from the drastic changes in her circumstances following the revolution and deposition of James II in 1689. Anne herself was a noted non-juror but it was her husband's refusal to take the oath of allegiance to William and Mary

<sup>13</sup> Klein, 'Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century', *The Historical Journal*, 45, 4 (2002), 869-898, p. 886; Luddington, *Politics of Wine*, p. 96.

<sup>14</sup> Fay Banks, *Wine drinking in Oxford, 1640 – 1850: A Story Revealed by Tavern, Inn, College and Other Bottles* (1997), p. 17. Early discourse ascribed ale or beer as a symbol for the Whigs. As Banks explains, between 1640-1850 the type of wine imported largely depended on the political climate of the day. Britain waged periodic wars with France and Spain so that wine from these two countries were at times unobtainable or had high import duties imposed upon them. See also Andre Louis Simon, *Bottlescrew Days: Wine Drinking in England during the Eighteenth Century*, (London, 1926).

<sup>15</sup> See further: Angela McShane Jones, *Roaring Royalists and Ranting Brewers: The Politicisation of Drink and Drunkenness in Political Broadside Ballads from 1640 – 1689*, pp. 69-88; Charles C Luddington, "'Be sometimes to your country true': The Politics of Wine in England, 1660 – 1714", pp. 89-108 in Adam Smyth (Ed), *A Pleasing Sinne: Drink and Conviviality in Seventeenth-Century England*, (Cambridge, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Luddington, p. 79.

<sup>17</sup> Susanna Centlivre, *The Wonder: A Woman Keeps a Secret* (London: Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. Printed for E. Curl and A Bettesworth, 1714), p. 73. Text reproduced on Eighteenth Century Collections Online by University of Michigan 2008: <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/004798029.0001.000>. [accessed on 27 February 2017]

which led to the loss of his government position and virtual exile from political life.<sup>18</sup> The subsequent loss of income forced the Finches into financial hardship and they were forced to take temporary refuge with various friends in London until Heneage's nephew Charles invited them to settle permanently on the family's estate in Eastwell, Kent in 1690. Here they resided for more than twenty-five years where, secluded from the turbulent world of politics, which had seen no fewer than ten elections between 1688 and 1714, they experienced a period of apparent calm and stability.

Perhaps this explains why, despite being a staunch Tory and Stuart supporter, Finch does not distinguish between heavy-bodied claret or port and remains neutral, simply referring to the 'colour' which 'sparkles Motion' (lines 10-12). Court politics, in her bitter experience, had been a source of distress and danger, corruption and calamity. This was exacerbated on 29 April 1690 when Heneage was arrested with several others on charges of treason, allegedly attempting to join James II in France. The charges were later rescinded although accusations of disloyalty appear to have persisted.<sup>19</sup> To avoid further implicating herself or her husband, the ambivalent political stance Finch takes in *Glass* means she neither has to denounce her personal views in favour of the current ruling class, nor expose herself and invite scandal or accusations of treason. This could also have been an effort to support her husband when the couple returned to London and he ran (albeit unsuccessfully) for Parliament during the reign of Queen Anne. It is also arguable that her neutrality aims to promote unity amongst the political parties at the time, following a period of such public and private turmoil. Finch's attempt to moderate party conflict without direct discussion of politics (and religion) could itself be construed as polite behaviour.

The interplay between polite and political display and public and private spheres can be seen in a double-portrait by Sir Godfrey Kneller (fig. 2) of two seated members of the Whig Kit Kat Club, the Duke of Newcastle and the Earl of Lincoln. The subdued brown of their environment stands in stark contrast to the modish vibrancy of their garments. A small window opens on to a partial view of a country house. Lincoln looks directly at his friend and holds a full glass of red wine in his right hand. Newcastle is poised to fill his own identical balustered wine glass in his right hand from the wicker-covered bottle in his left – his action prominently placed in the middle of the painting. Having already served his friend, we can only presume that these two polite, learned gentlemen will now taste and discuss the wine, along with important matters of state. Whether these men are consuming port or, somewhat hypocritically, claret is moot. What matters is what the sitters want to convey to the viewer. Politeness set an aesthetic standard for the hegemonic ideal of elite gendered behaviour in court and town. The concept, especially among men alone was not separate from the idea of honourable drinking that required every man to keep up with the group. By returning the viewer's

<sup>18</sup> Barbara McGovern, *Anne Finch and her Poetry: A Critical Biography* (London, 1992), p. 184.

<sup>19</sup> See Finch's highly-acclaimed '*The Spleen, A Pindarique Ode. By a Lady*' (London: Printed & sold by H. Hills, 1709). The poem explores the melancholy that Finch experienced as a result of her personal circumstances.

gaze, Newcastle is enticing the individual to join them in polite conversation – the clipped nature of the painting to the right suggests that there is capacity for others to be at the table. Moreover, as long as one drank from fine flint glasses and discussed fine wines, any resulting inebriation could be excused as an excess of good taste. This was typically a manipulation of vice by the ruling class into something sophisticated; they were beyond reproach in their behaviour but could still disparage and subjugate the lower classes. The Preacher’s warning presumably does not apply to them.



Figure 2. Sir Godfrey Kneller, *Thomas Pelham-Holles, 1st Duke of Newcastle-under-Lyne; Henry Clinton, 7th Earl of Lincoln*, oil on canvas, circa 1721, 50 in. x 58 3/4 in. (1270 mm x 1492 mm) © National Portrait Gallery, London

We have explored the external, temporal nature of the wine glass, as part of a polite (and often political) public performance but there is an internal dimension to Finch’s poem. Klein comments that politeness was associated with improvement in the sense not just of refinements of style but of moral and other reform.<sup>20</sup> A deeply committed Anglican and prolific writer, Finch’s religious poetry often connects state politics with the suffering soul and *Glass* is no exception.<sup>21</sup> The sonnet-length poem displays ‘typically Augustan qualities’ in style, namely the ‘characteristic neatness and plainness of verse structure, the social and aristocratic tone, the religious solemnity and high morality and the inevitable fondness for the satirical attitude,’ suggesting her belief that an individual’s spiritual conditions are inextricable from social and political phenomena.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Klein, ‘Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century’, p. 875.

<sup>21</sup> See ‘*Psalm the 137th Paraphras’d to the 7th Verse*’ in the 1713 *Miscellany*, pp. 282-283.

<sup>22</sup> Reuben Brower, ‘Lady Winchilsea and the Poetic Tradition of the Seventeenth Century’, *Studies in Philology* 42, (1945), 61-80, p. 62.

In this regard it is worth noting that by the beginning of the eighteenth century, gender differentiation in religious life increased. Women's virtues were described in family terms, so that to be a good woman was to be a good Christian, while to be a good man was to be a good citizen. In an era that lacked published female authors, a number of well-educated Anglican women managed to gain the respect of their male peers for their piety and learning. Anne Conway, for example, wrote theological treatises which orthodox Anglican divines had admired. In the late 1690s, Mary Astell gained public recognition for her defence of the Anglican Church. In employing religious imagery, it could be argued that Finch is being particularly shrewd in relation to her elite audience; commenting on the masculine political sphere but being careful not to usurp it by adopting a feminine religious tone.

Whilst *Glass* is a complex, multi-layered composition it is striking that Finch arranges a collection of modern luxuries akin to an artist painting a vanitas picture. In sharp contrast to the secular conversation piece at fig. 2, the poem could be interpreted as an attempt to convey the essential meaninglessness of earthly goods and pursuits when compared with the eternal nature of true Christian values. The ephemeral nature of glass, in all its manifestations, is symbolic of the fragile transitory nature of life, the vanity of wealth and the inevitability of death. Finch's personal experience suggests a hollowness in the visual emphasis.

Certainly behind her direct address, there is a sense of irony which questions the value of what 'Man' has accomplished. Finch invites the reader to think about the human condition and sets the tone of in the first two lines. 'Inspiration' suggests divine inspiration but there is a clear play on words. The literal meaning of inspiration is drawing in air the element Man has mastered by creating glass. By controlling nature in its infinite forms, whether by separating the wind from light or creating a vessel which enables an observer to view its contents (and presumably its secrets?), Man is essentially usurping the natural order and function of God, the Divine Creator. Whilst the arrogance of Man has enabled him to conquer the unconquerable, the 'motion' of wine indicates a restless soul - one that can be seen but is trapped, 'controul[ed]' and therefore unable to escape and reach a state of ecstasy. This trope continues in the lines that follow with the image of glass as ice extracted from fire by a 'strange device' suggesting that production embodies some sort of miracle allowing the two elements to co-exist.<sup>23</sup> There might also be a more ominous suggestion, as hell was often depicted as a place of both fire and ice.<sup>24</sup> This narrative of a 'miraculous calamity' essentially challenges some of the very basic assumptions of the Enlightenment. Rousseau had previously argued that rather than promoting morality, the advancement of the arts and sciences had actually had the opposite effect and led to the decline of virtue. In a similar fashion, Finch appears to align the focus on commodities during courtly display with a degeneration of moral character and a decline of 'internal' politeness.

<sup>23</sup> See for example, Book of Exodus, 9:23-9:24, and the miraculous imperviousness of ice to fire in the seventh plague: "So there was hail, and fire mingled with the hail, very grievous, such as there was none like it in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation."

<sup>24</sup> See for example, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, (1674), Book II, lines 574-628.

The issue of religion becomes compelling in Finch's use of highly-charged language to describe 'the Wine's full excellence'. In drinking wine at Holy Communion worshippers taste the blood/body of Christ, or a reminder of the two, depending on Catholic or Protestant views. The conflict and animosity between these two denominations was of course the reason behind James II being deposed and in turn the unfortunate situation that Finch found herself in. So the idea of 'taste[ing] the Soul' of wine is a very striking one; it does not quite correspond with Finch's Anglican beliefs about Holy Communion but it certainly suggests some kind of religious experience. By invoking a ritual that is central to both groups, Finch is encouraging her audience to consider the sacrament and what it spiritually means to be able to see the wine you taste when engaged in secular, polite display. There could also be an allusion to the futility of trying to do without God in an age where politeness prevails. Essentially, any temporal constitutions that place human arrangements before the Divine could be construed as false.

The final couplet is instructive in this context. It appears to be a light-hearted admonition that if the reader does not heed the preacher's warning to drink less, there will be empty glasses that people can 'spy through', a clear allusion to spy glasses. An empty glass could also be a symbol of death. An alternative interpretation is that if the reader does not avoid 'Excess' in religion, either via fanaticism, or an overt display of religious sensibilities, he will make himself vulnerable to spying and suspicion. The jarring final lines suggest a real fear on Finch's part for the future of both individual and state. Queen Anne was in declining health and in fact passed away a year after publication of the *Miscellany of Poems*.

Following the political and social chaos of the seventeenth century, luxury objects such as crystal wine glasses and fine wine (with all its connotations to aristocratic, state and church institutions) were exactly what the post-Revolution order required. In an environment where aristocratic lineage no longer provided the fundamental rationale for political rule, having good taste became one of the foundations of political legitimacy for a ruling order that combined both old and new families. Finch accepts that opulent display is an essential part of court and emerging party politics but *Glass* hints at her awareness of the corruption rife in the cultural and political 'body'. Distinguishing between the 'body' of the glass which enables the 'soul' of its contents to be seen - the translucent wine glass is a metaphysical conceit for the 'false' politeness of external courtly politics and the 'true' politeness of the internal, spiritual nature of man, informed by Christ's sacrifice and inner good will.

*Glass* appears to ironically eulogise man for the creation of such inventions but by focusing on sensation mechanisms, the body and self (to create a new spark) the poem grants the glass itself the agency to bring a new 'body' into being. Whilst Finch expresses a real fear for the future following the end of the Stuart line, she also appears to accept that nothing is eternal. In this context she gives rise to hope for the

incoming Hanoverian succession. The heavy baluster wine-glass, whether filled with claret or port or used as a prop for polite performance by the social or body politic, is not yet broken.

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### List Of Illustrations

Figure 1: Lead glass wine goblet with heavy baluster stem, c.1700-1710, unknown maker, English (London), object number C.233-1912, Height: 17.2 cm, Diameter: 8.5 cm, Wilfred Buckley Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum, © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Figure 2: *Thomas Pelham-Holles, 1st Duke of Newcastle-under-Lyne; Henry Clinton, 7th Earl of Lincoln* by Sir Godfrey Kneller, Bt oil on canvas, circa 1721, 50 in. x 58 3/4 in. (1270 mm x 1492 mm) © National Portrait Gallery, London