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## Ardelia, Orinda, and . . . Ke\$ha: Teaching #Me Too and the Gendered Sphere of Poetry

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## Ardelia, Orinda, and . . . Ke\$ha: Teaching #Me Too and the Gendered Sphere of Poetry

### Abstract

This article addresses the way in which the teaching of Anne Finch and Katherine Philips can be enhanced with classroom discussion of a surprising modern parallel: the sometimes coercive artistic and personal constraints placed on contemporary female pop artists by male producers. Focusing on Kesha, my class compares her recent struggles for autonomy and justice to the peculiar creative conditions which Anne Finch and Katherine Philips had to endure, inviting students to use their popular culture knowledge to gain a more nuanced insight into the historical gendering of creative cultures.

### Keywords

Kesha, Anne Finch, Katherine Philips, Me Too, Pop Music

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*“You’re the party girl, you’re the tragedy”  
But the funny thing’s I’m fucking everything  
—Kesha, “My Own Dance”*

*True judges, might condemn their want of wit,  
And all might say, they’re by a Woman writ.  
Alas! a woman that attempts the pen,  
Such an intruder on the rights of men  
—Anne Finch, “The Introduction”*

In this essay, I discuss the ways that my teaching strategy invokes the very much twenty-first-century artist Kesha in the classroom to broach issues of female authorial identity and the gendered politics of publication in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>1</sup> In 2014, the pop artist Ke\$ha dropped the pivotal dollar sign from her nom de plume. In an equally uncharacteristic gesture for this defiantly flamboyant performer, she changed her Twitter handle from @ke\$hasuxx to @kesharose. For Ke\$ha, the dollar sign represented the excess—visceral, material, and sexual—that she flaunted in her music; as she told *Esquire* in 2009, “I feel like my music stands for the ultimate statement of irreverence” (qtd. in Sullivan). The video for her early hit “Tik Tok” shows her rising like a hungover phoenix out of an unfamiliar bathtub, brushing her teeth with Jack Daniels, walking downstairs to interrupt a suburban family’s breakfast, and then partying in the clothes she slept in. And since she “suxx,” she was rolling her eyes with indifference at any potential critics. But Kesha’s lived situation devolved rapidly: she came to require treatment for an eating disorder, and she was also deeply embroiled in a drawn-out lawsuit against her former producer Lukasz Gottwald, aka “Dr. Luke,” claiming a wide variety of sexual harassment. The shifts in her chosen titles were indicative of struggles that played out publicly and a narrative that was reckoned with in the wake of #MeToo.

By attending to Kesha, her music, and the conditions under which it is created, disseminated, and interpreted, we can ask similar questions about the female voices that often exist on the margins of the early modern literary tradition, given much less space in far-ranging anthologies than their more prominent male peers. While many modern female pop stars spark striking comparisons, I focus on Kesha in this short piece because she publicly addressed her abuse and became a key figure during #MeToo. Below, I describe how I bring attention to the careers of Katherine Philips (1631/2-1664) and Anne Finch (1661-1720), recognizing both suggestive connections to contemporary pop icons well known to students and the means by which the classroom can illuminate and contest institutional

imbalances then and now through those comparisons. I like to talk about Kesha to my students because her story provides a particularly vivid example of how the circumstances surrounding female artists affect their creative production and autonomy, rendering visible the institutional histories of misogyny in three centuries.

### **The path to Kesha's rainbow**

Between her 2013 album *Warrior* and 2017's *Rainbow*, Kesha did not release a single recording. Reporting myriad forms of harassment by Dr. Luke, Kesha worked tirelessly to be released from her contract with Sony so she would not have to work with her abuser. She claimed that *Warrior* was produced and publicized with heavy, unwanted intervention from Dr. Luke, who (among other acts) refused to delay release of her untimely song "Die Young" in the wake of the 2012 Newtown Massacre. The lawsuit has its own exhaustive Wikipedia page that characterizes the exhaustion and indignity that she faced. The page is documented with sixty footnotes, and features many verbs of negation: "dismiss," "drop," "refused," "denies," "ruled against," "retract" ("Kesha v. Dr. Luke").<sup>2</sup> As the proceedings were captured by the media, there was a tendency to refer to Kesha as defiant and sexually aggressive, an artist whose lyrics asked paramours to "put a little love in my glovebox" ("Blah Blah Blah"). This depiction was in marked contrast to the traumatized, weeping, seemingly broken young woman who was captured leaving courthouses where judges claimed—as *Wikipedia* pertly summarizes it— "that Dr. Luke's alleged abusive behavior would have been foreseeable" ("Kesha v. Dr. Luke"). Kesha's dark narrative, and the August 2017 release of *Rainbow*, an angry and often sad but powerful album that had the indignity of being produced on Dr. Luke's label, preceded the groundswell of #MeToo that emerged later in the year. As that movement fomented, Kesha, her songs, and her experiences became a sort of emotional soundtrack to its progress. This was most rousingly evident when she was joined by a choir of women wearing white at the 2018 Grammys as she sang "Praying," a song that addressed her anger at her unrepentant abuser ("Kesha—Praying").

Much like the cases of Harvey Weinstein and Les Moonves, Kesha's sexual predator was empowered by his status as a figure who controlled and ultimately closed the avenues of her artistic production.<sup>3</sup> According to her lawsuit, Kesha "wholly believed that Dr. Luke had the power and money to carry out his threats; she therefore never dared talk about, let alone report, what Dr. Luke had done to her" (qtd. in Johnston). Dr. Luke responded by accusing her of extortion and through his lawyers made vindictive efforts to keep her from producing music with anyone but him. Rebecca Traister describes the fallout from the exposure of

protective cultures surrounding powerful men as “the shock of the house lights having been suddenly brought up” (“We Are All Implicated”).<sup>4</sup> The early moments of the #MeToo outcry particularly illuminated the way women often had to submit to sexual predators to establish anything approaching a working relationship in which their work could see the light of day. Perhaps this is why Kesha’s story continues to resonate and stands as a stark example of the wrongs that must be addressed through constant attention and exposure.

### **Ardelia, Ordelia, and Kesha**

While it is admittedly unexpected to compare any early modern women to Kesha, there are few more ostensibly dissimilar than Anne Finch and Katherine Philips. Kesha is public, urban, exuberant, immodest, and irreverent; Finch’s “Ardelia” and Philips’s “Orinda” are private, pastoral, restrained, fervently moral, and religious. Finch received encouragement for her verse as a Maid of Honour in the close-knit coterie of Queen Mary of Modena, the Italian wife of the unpopular James II. With James’s ouster during the Glorious Revolution in 1688, Finch and her husband Heneage refused to take allegiance to the new monarch, William of Orange, which would lead to a brief political exile that haunted her reputation and become a key theme for her poetry. Partly because of this complex political past, her verse suggests an impulse to eschew controversy: it is witty, fashionable, polite, and frequently inspired by classical models. If her work occasionally takes on a subversive hue, it is through mechanics and a canny manipulation of literary conventions (McGovern 5).

Philips’s poetry is often very political, in one case admiring the executed (and very unpopular) Stuart king Charles I in a poem titled “Upon the Double Murther of K. Charles, in Answer to a Libellous Rime Made by V.P.,” and critics have noted that her poems to female friends often convey homoerotic desire.<sup>5</sup> It is for this reason, as I discuss further below, that Philips saw her poetry as confidential, or only for its recipients or select audiences, even as she developed a complicated fame as her male peers promoted her as a contemporary icon of feminine poetics. In both Finch and Philips, there is a tension regarding poetic accomplishment between private sentiment and public reception. When Kesha sings about wanting to do “my own dance,” she insists on the kind of integrity that these early modern women also saw as essential.

The historical and conceptual gulf between Ardelia and Orinda and Kesha is vast, because Kesha performs her identity for large audiences and constructs it through interviews, social media, and music videos. Yet as readers, we encounter in both

Kesha and early modern women projections of a private, unknowable self that is protected through elusive symbols and private language.

### **In the classroom**

In the classroom, this observation leads to productive discussion about pseudonyms that at once shield and tempt. For instance, we discuss the use of pseudonyms such as Philips's "Orinda" or Finch's "Ardelia" and how they differ considerably from later, more familiar examples such as George Eliot or Currer Bell. Margaret J. M. Ezell argues that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century pseudonyms are essentially private but playful, meant not so much to disguise as to participate in a clandestine mythos cheekily inconsiderate of outside audiences that "permitted the happy interplay of the worlds of fiction and reality" (23). Pseudonyms, she argues, hide not out of fear of exposure but, rather, empower, ensuring a rich and imaginative poetic identity that combines what is on the page with the person who writes it. For instance, Deborah J. Kennedy explains that Finch's "Ardelia" has an "ardent quality" (20) that reflects her poetic voice, while Elizabeth Singer Rowe's tragic "Philomela" recalls the haunted song of the nightingale (61). Nonetheless, some students struggle to understand what was at stake when women did decide to publish and the way a pen name can be a wry allusion to a private world unknown to public readers.

In her song "Aura," Lady Gaga provides modern insight as she teases her listener:

Do you wanna see me naked, lover?  
Do you wanna peek underneath the cover?  
Do you wanna see the girl who lives behind the aura, behind the aura?

As the rest of the song refuses this access, Gaga enforces the divide between a knowable self (for instance, her given name, Stefani Germanotta, that few casual fans know) and the performed icon (who wore a dress made of raw beef at the MTV Music Awards). Gaga has also used public staging to further destabilize assumptions about who she truly is, performing in drag and appearing in several magazine spreads in the Jo Calderone persona. The expectation is that the personas of Lady Gaga and Ke\$ha will control the cover that hides whatever or whoever is behind it, offering vulnerability only in brief glances. In removing the dollar sign, Kesha essentially foretold the more personal music that comprises *Rainbow* and its 2020 follow-up *High Road*, in which the aura of performativity is often lifted to reveal a more vulnerable and honest voice. Students often have experience following the careers of pop stars who deploy similar alter egos that both invite and deflect deconstruction: David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust; Marshall

Mathers's Eminem and Slim Shady; Nikki Minaj's Roman Zolanski; and Beyoncé's Sasha Fierce.

In teaching Finch and Philips, students recognize that the connection to contemporary pop musicians occurs less in tone and substance than in the way these women had to exist in milieus dominated by men. When students encounter Philips and Finch as part of a survey, few have heard of these prominent early modern female poets before. Then, when so many students discover that they find both highly engaging, this leads to questions about their place in an anthology: why, for instance, are only two of Finch's poems ("Nocturnal Reverie" and "The Introduction") included in the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, while the entirety of John Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel*, Alexander Pope's "Windsor Forest," and Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* are included amid several more of their works? Or, as a more skeptical student might ask, why are Finch and Philips included at all, if in such a limited way?

This critical question leads us to unravel the conditions through which women poets made their way into the public sphere and their contemporary currency in the canon. For instance, even though Finch was receiving flattering letters and tribute poems from Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift, she had no interest in pleasing the male critics of her day, which affected her enduring popularity. In class, I draw on the excellent chapters in Laura Runge and Jessica Cook's collection *The Circuit of Apollo: Eighteenth-Century Tributes to Women* to explain what's at stake in these tribute poems. Philips, in contrast, became known to a wider audience partly because of the intervention of men: her supportive husband James Philips, the predatory publisher Richard Marriott, and the prominent Royalist poet Abraham Cowley, who took it upon himself to formulate her identity for posterity. Taking students from text to context illuminates the desire for autonomy and a personal poetry that both women see themselves engaged in. As Michael Gavin documents, Finch was concerned that modern poetry, with its stifling emphasis on satisfying an "ill-natured urban readership," successfully "engendered a culture of mutually assured detraction" (644). The same could be said for Philips, who withheld publishing her work until the last years of her life.

In "Mercury and the Elephant," which strategically opens the only collection of poems published in her lifetime, Finch cleverly rewrites the fable about the folly of desiring the gods' approval to conclude: "'Tis for our Selves, not them, we Write" (line 44). Defiant gestures flourish in early modern women's poetry, and in some cases they are wrenchingly and brutally honest. Philips's poem written "On the Death of my First and Dearest Child, Hector Philips," finds her speaking to an



audience who expects her to turn her grief into the generic conventions of poetic elegy. Instead, she can only offer “thy unhappy mother’s verse” and states, “Tears are my muse, and sorrow all my art / So piercing groans must be thy elegy” (lines 20, 11-12). Rejecting poetic convention, Philips refuses to turn what is private and personal into something for public consumption. That such moves persist in popular music show female artists openly battling, and rendering visible, unfair expectations. Students know a recent song by Kesha, “My Own Dance,” which finds her rhythmically repeating, “Hey, I don’t do that dance . . . I only do my own dance” in describing the expectations that internet critics have (“We get it that you’ve been through a lot of shit / But life’s a bitch, so come on, shake your tits and fuck it”).

Turning to the publishing conditions of women like Philips and Finch allows students to understand poetic transmission not as idealized but messy and exclusive, fraught with traumatic circumstance for women who dared to enter its domains. When Finch finally published the only authorized collection of her works in 1713, eight years before her death, it seemed to come with a sigh of exasperation, as Finch revealed in a letter that she was embarrassed to have her name adorn the book (Kennedy 24). After Finch’s death, Kennedy explains, the “story of Finch’s poetry is full of twists and turns” as her husband Heneage was fiercely protective of her work and reputation and only allowed her work to be published much later (25). In another compelling irony, Finch’s work was mostly forgotten in the late eighteenth century until its revival by another influential male poet, William Wordsworth. Wordsworth’s brief praise of her in an essay included in the 1815 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* resurrected a near-forgotten poet for a new audience.

Philips’s work as Orinda exemplified for male observers a sophistication, virtue, and chastity to which all women were expected to aspire. It is this quality that caused her poetry to endure throughout the seventeenth century and into the next, at which point Finch saw herself as placed in unfair competition with Orinda’s legacy.<sup>6</sup> Key to Philips’s legacy was the support of one of the most celebrated poets of her generation, Abraham Cowley. Cowley apparently labeled Philips with the term “matchless,” a qualifier that would follow her in future descriptions: a 1904 edition of her work, a 1931 biography, and even her collected works, produced in the 1990s, bear this identifier in the title.

As with Finch, there had been demand for Philips to publish her private poems. In 1664, that happened without her consent. An unauthorized edition called *Poems by the Incomparable Mrs. K.P.* emerged from the publisher Richard Marriott. Philips complained to her friends, writing in one letter, “this hath so extremely



disturb'd me, both to have my private folls so unhandomly [sic] exposed . . . that I have been on a Rack ever since I heard it.” (Collected Works ii. 142). In an ensuing poem, she would claim her work was “dragg'd maliciously into the light” (Collected Works i. 239). Regardless of the poet's wishes, it is clear that the publication attempted to respond to some form of demand that this “matchless” poet would appear: a handsome edition, complete with Cowley's prefatory poem as stamp of authoritative (rather than authorial) approval.

Kesha's legal and artistic struggles were similarly often at the hands of such gatekeepers. Her career more or less began when Dr. Luke brought her in to record a hook for Flo Rida's song “Right Round” in 2009, and the narratives that describe this moment usually emphasize Luke's brilliant instincts. A *Billboard* article, for instance, states that he “pulled Ke\$ha into the studio” to record the vocals, emphasizing her lack of agency (Werde). To ask students to think about Philips's “matchless” nature alongside Kesha and the narrative of her starmaking is to provoke a conversation about the way women's work is often taken as a performance that powerful men assess, even if those men are not their desired audience. Her complex career also shows the way that approval by powerful men can be a devil's bargain. It is interesting to discuss with students the stakes of a woman being called “matchless”—ostensibly praise—by a man. Cowley and others not only wanted to mark Philips as a representative poet for all women, but also seemed to imply that other women shouldn't even try. This is most clear in Cowley's dedicatory poem affixed to Philips's published works, where he claims in the opening triplet:

We allow'd your Beauty, and we did submit  
To all the tyrannies of it.  
Ah, cruel Sex! will you depose us too in Wit? (lines 1-3)

“Allow'd” does a lot of work here, and throughout the poem Cowley teasingly frames Philips as a usurper to a powerfully poetic “We” and “us.” If beauty—physical or spiritual—gained her entry, she still lacks the wit of the magnanimous Cowleys of English poetry.

In many poems, in fact, Philips bristles against the expectations of her male powerbrokers in ways that resemble Kesha's acts of resistance. Throughout Philips's career, she never aspired to be “matchless” or to be the representative that both her male contemporaries and later readers imagined, even if she at times benefitted from the measured adulation. Rather, she located her work in the integrity of personal and private verse. In Kesha's case, by the time she was working on *Warrior* with Dr. Luke, she wanted to go a different direction than the

earlier party anthems and bubblegum rap that he encouraged. But, as she argued again and again in court, Luke's controlling hand compromised her opportunity to make a similar kind of market transition that Taylor Swift did from country music to pop with her acclaimed *1989*.

Self-reflection in the light of other women's creative and market successes also takes place among Finch, Philips, and their contemporaries. In "The Circuit of Appollo [sic]," Finch imagines a group of her contemporaries and predecessors—among them Philips's Orinda and Aphra Behn's Astrea—called to compete for the laurel of "she that writt best" (line 6). Apollo struggles to choose between them, and decides, in what can be read as an idealized fantasy, "that they all had a right to the Bay's / And that t'were injustice, one brow to adorn" (lines 64-65). He concludes that the case should "in a councill of Muses, be heard, / Who of their own sex, best the title might try" (lines 74-75). Beyond that imaginative circumstance, though, the Apollos of the Augustan world continue to have their control echoed in figures like Dr. Luke centuries later, as certain powerful men continue to assess and evaluate female artists for their own purposes.

### **Conclusion: Other directions**

About the namesake of this journal, Robert Gould wrote in 1677, "For *Punk* and *Poetess* agree so Pat / You cannot well be *This*, and not be *That*" (qtd. in Todd 208). Drawing on what Janet Todd has called the "whore-poetess conjunction," Gould condemns Aphra Behn for both her celebrity and for inspiring women to say, as Virginia Woolf famously ventriloquizes, "You need not give me an allowance; I can make money by my pen" (70). The sacrifice women have been forced to make for entering with boldness and a noticeable lack of deferral are evident as much in the seventeenth-century world of letters as they are in the fraught state of popular music through the age of Donald Trump. And while Kesha would see no problem being, in modern connotation, both punk and poetess, she has still endured the expectations of those who decide whether she can or cannot.

Writing about experience of Christine Blasey Ford, her courage, her testimony, and yet a tragic inability to keep Brett Kavanaugh from being confirmed, Rebecca Traister still concludes, "it was important, and [her] testimony may be changing the way Americans think about power" ("The Toll of Me Too"). In teaching Kesha alongside early modern women poets, I seek to illuminate networks of power that control artistic and literary production, while celebrating those who emerged through acts of resistance. Yet we are also left to wonder who is left out and why: the Judith Shakespeare of Woolf's critical imagination who "never

wrote a word and was buried at the crossroads [yet] still lives” (122). This points students to feminist scholarly projects of reclamation and recovery, rather than mere admiration and analysis; not a mastery of the authors worthy of inclusion in the literary anthology but attention to and passion for those who have not been selected to live between its covers.

I have limited myself to Finch and Philips, but Aphra Behn’s life and work offers an obviously fitting counterpart, with her notorious reputation, erotic pastoral poems, and participation in the “Imperfect Enjoyment” genre. Margaret Cavendish’s colorful appearance and equally colorful prose are exemplars of the kind of flashiness that Kesha embraces in defiance of assumptions of feminine modesty. And there are many other examples of women in the period who had their reputation secured yet limited by male gatekeepers, including but not limited to John Dryden’s praise of Anne Killigrew, Phillis Wheatley’s forced defense of her poetry as authentic before an audience of Boston gentlemen, and Frances Burney’s tendentious relationship with her famous, constraining father. Using Kesha’s narrative as a continuing example of these challenges renders visible to modern students the political dynamics that have long constrained women as artists and show what #MeToo attempts to eradicate. Or to quote a line from one of Kesha’s most famous songs, “This place about to blow.”

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was primarily written before I was able to access the 2019 edition of Cambridge Edition of Finch’s Early Manuscript Books edited by Jennifer Keith and Claudia Kairoff. I refer instead to the standard Reynolds edition that is often cited in Finch scholarship. This is an important and necessary new edition.

<sup>2</sup> I cite the Wikipedia page here not as an authority but as evidence of the way Kesha’s life and trials have been described in the most public of forums. This is a pedagogical opportunity as well, which asks students to think about what’s at stake when a woman’s trauma is collectively translated and curated into the supposedly objective, narrative language typical of Wikipedia.

<sup>3</sup> See Farrow.

<sup>4</sup> Traister’s reporting in *The Cut*, and her book *Good and Bad: The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Anger*, provide excellent secondary reading that can be assigned to supplement these texts. Particularly when dealing with the trope of the angry woman as a figure in the literature of the period, students can find many parallels to the way Traister chronicles the plight of public women who dare publicly express anger.

<sup>5</sup> See Andreadis; Straub.

<sup>6</sup> See Finch, “The Circuit of Appolo”; Kairoff.

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