

It's a Girl!: A Winchester Poetic Manuscript of c. 1719

In 1821 the Rev. Peter Hall gave a small red octavo notebook containing miscellaneous hand-written poems to Winchester College Fellows' Library. The date of the manuscript seems to be around 1719. He must at least have flicked through it, as the short preface he wrote on one of the blank pages at the front notes that the writer 'was of the circle of William Somerville', signs some of the poems with an elaborate 'FC', and 'appears to refer to himself on p. 6 as 'yr Parson'. A man in holy orders, he concludes, called F. Cross, and possibly part of the household of Lady Anne Coventry, whose name also appears on one of the pages.

I now know, however, that it is the property of a woman, called Mrs. Frances Cross. She entered a Prize Oenigma competition in the Ladies Diary, an endearing publication, mainly consisting of mathematical conundrums, founded by John Tipper in 1702 with the express design of proving that women were as mentally agile as men. By 1720 the editorship had been taken over by Henry Beighton, the renowned surveyor who produced the first proper map of Warwickshire, and illustrated the second edition of William Dugdale's *Antiquities of Warwickshire*¹ but who also found time to write to Frances Cross, care of Lady Anne Coventry in Marlborough Street, thanking her for the 'excellency' of her entry. 'Madam!' he writes, 'Had the Prize in ye: Lady's Diary been allotted to the Best (or First) answer, your Title had been indisputable'. He begs her to write for the magazine again—'yr: admirable First rate Muse prompts me to beg you'd please to continue your favours'—but she never does.

So who is Frances Cross? Lady Anne Coventry 'rarely left her country estate',² which was in Snitterfield, Warwickshire (though as we'll see in examining one of the poems, she was in London in 1719, so it made sense to go looking for Frances Cross in Warwickshire. Snitterfield is also less than five miles from Wootton Wawen, home of William Somerville, (1675-1742), who settled on his Warwickshire estate in 1708, and wrote a number of well-received poems including *The Chace* (published 1735), a cheery didactic poem in Miltonic blank verse about hunting, some of whose poems appear in the manuscript. But there is no Cross family in Dugdale's *Antiquities of Warwickshire*, which I read in the volunteer-staffed library of Henley-in-Arden, tucked behind the Methodist church and full of balloons to encourage children to take out books for the holidays. There is no Frances Cross in the right period in the archives available through the 'Access to Archives' ('A2A') resource either, nor in the genealogical recesses of the internet. In the Last Will and Testament of John Harwell of Wootton, dated 8 April 1505 (also discovered in the Henley public library), there is a reference to 'John Crosse, my servant', who is owed five marks of his wages, and in the Hearth Tax records of Warwickshire there are a scattering of Cross households in the same area, none of which owns more than one or two hearths.³

It seems clear, therefore, that her family could not have been noble, and so I went on reading tombstones in the rain, trying to accept the extent to which a woman with no connections leaves no mark at all for posterity. One of the surviving local big houses is Charlecote, home of the Lucy family, about two miles from Snitterfield, and to my joy, in the graveyard of Hampton Lucy there are indeed some Cross gravestones, including two which come almost in reach of 'my' Frances Cross: a remarkable pair of siblings, Martha and William, who were born in the 1740s, and both lived for over 90 years, meaning that their surviving nineteenth-century gravestones touch the eighteenth century, which turns out to be so much more distant than I had originally thought it. And in the record of the Quarter Sessions of Warwickshire, Epiphany 1694, there is a tantalising reference to a poor man, John Crosse, who with his wife and child was settled at Binton, seven miles from Snitterfield. Could she have been that child?

¹ 'With the addition of several Prospects of Gentlemen's Seats, Churches, Tombs, and new and correct Maps of the County, and of the Several Hundreds, from an Actual Survey made by HENRY BEIGHTON F.R.S.'

² Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell: An Early English Feminist* (Chicago, 1986).

³ *Warwick County Records: Hearth Tax Returns* (Warwick, 1957-), vol. 1.

Martha and William Cross can't be direct descendants, of course—marriage also makes a woman vanish—but they gave me permission, I thought, to form a tentative theory, based on what we know about Lady Anne Coventry. She was one of a rather remarkable group of High Church, High Tory, highly intellectual women in the early eighteenth century (as Joan K. Kinnaird says⁴, once again giving the lie to the casual assumption that all literary women are rather raffish and rebellious) who became extremely interested in female education. Mary Astell was their most significant protégée, and it was in Ruth Perry's biography of Astell that I came across the following exciting sentence: 'Each of these women (Lady Anne Coventry, Lady Elizabeth Hastings, Lady Catherine Jones) maintained a web of connections with many women—including *the relatives of their personal servants* [my italics]—and each manifested an impulse to support, encourage and educate other women in a variety of ways, whether by teaching servants how to read, interesting herself in the schooling of a favourite niece, giving money to poorer women, or taking in homeless women and spinsters⁷—one of whom, perhaps, was the daughter of a long-standing local family, called Frances Cross.⁵

So what about the poems? Their variety certainly suggests a wide range of intellectual stimulation, which also fits the idea of someone temporarily introduced into a literary circle, trying out the different forms of verse, and copying the models she most admires. If she had access to Lady Anne Coventry's extraordinarily rich library she certainly had no shortage of intellectual stimulus: this huge collection of books contains not only the devotional and philosophical works we might expect – and some collections of poetry by women—but also a staggering 128 plays.⁶ There is clearly a mixture here of original and transcribed material—as seems to have been common: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu also kept commonplace manuscript books which combined her own and other people's writing; in particular, as in Frances Cross's book, writing to which she wished to respond. Isabel Grundy, in her biography of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, refers to 'her favourite reactive mode: in answer to poems by men' (of which my personal favourite is her response to Lord Lyttelton's 'Advice to a Lady': 'Be plain in Dress and sober in your Diet; / In short, my Dearee, kiss me and be quiet.')

Frances Cross tries her hand at a marriage poem, some friendship poems, formal and informal, a reasoned answer to the problem of melancholy, the prize riddle, of course, and most interestingly, some political and ecclesiastical satire. She transcribes two of Somerville's poems, and a popular song by Robert Motteux (who had himself set up the model of the eighteenth-century polite magazine in 1692, called the *Gentleman's Journal*), which, sent 'by a Lady to her absent Officer—her Lover—occasion'd ye following.—', which seems to be a private response which she admires, and copies out. There are, however, no poems addressed to members of her family, unlike the manuscript collection of the Tixall coterie of the mid-seventeenth century, for example, or *The Whims of EA, afterwards Mrs. Thomas*, (Elizabeth Amherst), a very similar MS commonplace book (copied by one of her relations, in fact, in 1798) of poetry circulated in the 1740s, which may reinforce the suggestion that Frances Cross is at any rate temporarily cut off from her family, or that they are not in her assessment sufficiently literary or literate to appreciate a poem.

It is the satirical poems that seem to me most intriguing, and most telling in establishing the difference between the MS and print culture of the time. Women don't publish their satires,⁸ sticking instead to the safe topics of love, friendship and the countryside, but astonishing though it seems, it does appear that a long and vivid ballad about the great christening row of 1717⁹ was

⁴ Joan K. Kinnaird, 'Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution to English Feminism', *Journal of British Studies* 19 (1979), pp. 53-75.

⁵ Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Appendix B

⁷ Isabel Grundy, *Lady Mary Wortley Montague: Comet of the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 1999).

⁸ I used the poems of Miss Whateley, another Warwickshire resident, though a little later in the century, for comparison.

⁹ For an historical account, see Ragnhild Hatton, *George I* (London, 1978).

in fact written by a single woman in the depths of Warwickshire: in all my searches I've found it only twice, once in a MS in the library of Yale University, and once in print, in the *Scots Magazine* for December 1795. The accession of the Hanoverians brought about an explosion of street ballads for and against the Act of Succession,¹⁰ and Frances Cross seems to have been in a pocket of rural non-jurors, who were perfectly aware of the new political situation, and didn't approve.¹¹ Some of them were Roman Catholics—there is some epistolary evidence that Lady Anne Coventry herself was one, and the Throckmortons of Coughton Court (again, just a stone's throw away) are famous for being one of the longest-standing Roman Catholic families in the country, and have a double priest-hole to prove it—and plenty were quietly sympathetic to the Old Pretender, and certainly willing to be amused by the absurdities of Brunswick family life.

The 'Xtning Ballad'—as it is titled in the Cross MS—takes us through the whole story, from the heir's rudeness to the Duke of Newcastle ('Captain Tom' in the ballad) over his unexpected appearance as godparent, to the King's angry banishment of the Prince of Wales and his entourage from the Palace. The exchanges between George I and his son are particularly vividly characterised: indeed, for a poem clearly designed to mock the new King, she awards him an enjoyably powerful turn of phrase:

He mocks me sure old Brunswick cries
Forgive him—Rebel rot him.
The Spightful World might Judge Amiss
And fancy I begot him.
But since Confinement Piques ye: Lubber
Who bully'd late, and now can blubber
I give him timely warning
('Tis Night indeed, but Nights are long)
That he and all his factions strong
Depart the Court e'er Morning
A Lodging in a private house
Is large enough for him and Spouse
To solace in alone
And for his Lumber—Maids and Grooms
The Town has store of upper Roomes
Unfurnish'd like his own.

The poem is written as it were in real time: the author invents a pleading letter from the Prince to his father, but leaves the conclusion of the business up in the air, while giving an unmistakable personal interpretation to the whole affair:

Thus wrote ye: Pr[ince] with what success
I dare not yet presume to guess
Or judge 'twixt Sire and Son
But sure I am we boast in vain
Our native breed of Wolves are slain
By foreign whelps o'r run.

¹⁰ 'The range and variety of dissident and treasonable literature that was readily available to all citizens was astonishing to contemporaries ... Pro-Stuart verses, doggerel, ballads and slip songs were legion in the aftermath of the succession: one scholar has counted at least ninety treasonable verses produced between 1714 and 1720, and many additional verses and ballads, printed as broadsides, can be discovered in collections of Jacobite ephemera in twentieth-century libraries.' Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People—Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785* (Cambridge, 1995), ch. 2.

¹¹ The official list of Catholic Non-Jurors in 1715 has a very long entry for Warwickshire, of every size of household.

So why, unlikely as it seems, do I think this provocative poem is the work of Frances Cross, rural spinster, far from the thrusting world of London print and politics? Chiefly, I suppose, because of where I found the only other MS copy. I took heart, too, from this phrase in the Grundy biography, which suggests that there was no particular restriction on the topics that a woman might write about in private, and circulate in MS form only: 'Many of Lady Mary's poems that have vanished were ballads: topical, often personal. They gave short-term pleasure, and sometimes made long-term enemies.' The MS copy in Yale is apparently part of a collection of anti-Hanoverian poems, all written in the same neat hand. The possible connection with Warwickshire, and thus perhaps Frances Cross, comes just inside the front cover, where there is the bookplate of someone called W. Pigott L.L.B., and the signatures of Edward Pigott, a few scribbles, and Mrs. Frances Pigott. For one glorious moment I thought I'd cracked that impossible question of what happened next: she married a Pigott and lived a slightly seditious and amused poetic life ever after. But unfortunately there is no evidence of the marriage, Frances is a very common name at the time, and as with Mrs. Frances Cross, the form of the name suggests a spinster.

There is however a fascinating possibility, and one that reinforces my growing perception of the political and religious connections in this part of Warwickshire. It seems likely that the Pigotts implicated here are not the family of Robert Pigott, MP for Huntingdonshire, though his dates fit—1665-1746—and he owned property in Warwickshire, because he was a supporter of the new regime.¹² I think the solution is much more local: that the 'Xtning Ballad' was seen, in MS, at Coughton Court, home of the Roman Catholic Throckmortons, by Nathaniel Pigott (1661-1737), the Roman Catholic lawyer of the Throckmortons and of Alexander Pope, who, though chiefly resident in Twickenham, also had property in Beoley, Warwickshire, as we see in the 1715 list of non-jurors, about eighteen miles from Snitterfield, and nine from Wootton Wawen. He might well, I think, have been sufficiently amused to copy it out for his private pleasure; his friend, Pope, wrote a scurrilous ballad about tensions in the new Royal Family in 1717.¹³ He also, of course, had a great-grandson called Edward (1753-1825), the astronomer.

The idea of MS circulation being common in this circle is reinforced by the evidence of poetic interaction between Frances Cross and William Somerville. She not only transcribes his 'Lamentation of David over Saul and Jonathan' (in a slightly different form from the published version), but also responds to his epistolary poem, 'The Hyp', with a poem suggesting her own cure for melancholy, and gives us a brief, intimate glimpse of 'our Somerville who had been confind to his Elbow chair', with a fragment of her own 'chair poetry'.¹⁴ This last shows that she must have seen *The Wicker Chair*, one of Somerville's early poems, written in about 1708/9, but not published until re-jigged as *Hobbinol, or, The Rural Games* in 1740. She uses blank verse (uniquely, in this MS), as he does, and links his elbow chair, about which he publishes his own poem¹⁵ with the idea of the 'humble Osier':

Low bending, like the humble Osier
Of which my homely Wicker's framd, uncouth,
Shall it approach that Lordly seat, where you
In Damask or in Velvet loll Majestick,
And with manly grace, the Flights repeat
Of Pope's, or of your own Superior Muse.

¹² Flexible though political alliances clearly were for some people: the ballad is printed in the *Scots Magazine* of 1795 as a companion piece to a ballad to the traditional Chevy Chase opening, just as rude, if not ruder, and written apparently by the Earl of Chesterfield, a man whose political success depended on the Hanoverians, but of whom his *ODNB* entry (John Cannon) says, that he 'did not allow himself to be inhibited by consistency'.

¹³ Edgar E. Estcourt and John Orlebar Payne, eds., *The English Catholic Nonjurors of 1715, being a summary of the register of their estates, with genealogical and other notes, and an appendix of unpublished documents in the Public record Office* (London, 1885).

¹⁴ Anticipating Cowper's sofa (Book I, *The Task*, 1785).

¹⁵ 'Address to his Elbow Chair, new clothed'.

Her response to 'The Hyp'¹⁶ is interesting. Somerville wrote the poem to his cousin, William Colmore, MP for Warwick, lamenting his absence:¹⁷

Where shall a wretched Hyp retreat?
What shall a drooping Mortal do
Who pines for Sunshine and for you?

He longs for the moment when 'thy brisk Wit, and hum'rous Vein / Restore me to myself again' and concludes 'The best Elixar, is a Friend'. Charming though this is, Cross gives a rather sterner solution. She urges thoughts of heaven beyond the stars, rather than his Hamlet-like perception of their 'horrid luster bright', and concludes:

A well chose Friend (and yours is such)
The Cure may forward very much,
But by experience I am taught
The best Elixar is true Thought.

The idea that a woman, in particular, can find space and freedom in her own mind, is one that crops up quite often in this period. Mary Astell writes persuasively in favour of a single life as the only honest possibility for an intelligent woman¹⁸—how can she faithfully promise to obey her intellectual inferior?—and Lady Mary Chudleigh claims in her dramatized marriage debate poem, *The Ladies Defence* (1703):

To You I'll leave the being Rich and Great:
Yours be the Fame, the Profit and the Praise;
...
'Tis in our Minds that we would Rule alone.

Frances Cross's contribution to the huge corpus of poetry about the comparative benefits of single life for women is a more ordinary one, couched as 'A Song in a Letter from a Lady long married, to a young, unmarried Lady'.¹⁹ It pursues the conventional line—familiar, for example, from the Wyf of Bath—that women lose all power the moment they agree to become wives, but the last verse possibly anticipates a future Warwickshire borrowing, though it must be conceded that the image is a standard one. She says,

Fear Apes in Hell! There's no such thing,
Those tales are made to fool us;
But there we'd better hold a string,
Than here let Monkeys rule us.

And a couple of decades later, William Shenstone, literary friend of William Somerville and Lady Anne Coventry in the 1730s and '40s, writes, in 'Stanzas—to the Memory of an agreeable Lady, buried in marriage to a Person undeserving her':

¹⁶ OED glosses this excellent word 'hypochondria, morbid depression of spirits 1705-1825'.

¹⁷ Ellen Moody attributes the poem to Lady Anne Finch, Countess of Winchelsea, averring 'it's very much in her abject vein, manifests the same tone, prosody, attitudes of various kinds. The address indicates the poem is to a man, but the internal references and way of talking suggests [sic] it is rather from one woman to another', but it appears in Somerville's Collected Poems, and William Colmore is both his relation and his neighbour.

¹⁸ In *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1703).

¹⁹ Roger Lonsdale's ground-breaking anthology of *Eighteenth Century Women Poets* (Oxford, 1990) seems dominated by this topic, to the extent that one can't help wondering to what extent he has selected those poems as the most interesting to him, or the ones least in need of contextualisation.

Poor Gratia, in her twentieth year,
 Foreseeing future woe,
 Chose to attend a monkey here,
 Before an ape below.

Friendship is a more certain pleasure than marriage in this collection, not only in the evident connection between Frances Cross and Somerville, and the crucial implicit friendship of Lady Anne Coventry, but in an amusingly contrasted pair of poems, one a joking ballad 'To ye. Tune of ye. Old Man's Wish', 'Sent, by way of Bill of Fare, to a Friend, who oblig'd me to choose a Sunday's entertainments at his house; and who is continually recommending Abstinence—and what he calls Meager Dishes', and the other a formal ten lines of smooth couplets, prefaced by a tag of Horace, and addressed 'To a Poetical Friend, who left a delightful Country Seat, to inhabit on the Thames side, in Norfolk Street—London.' I should love to know who the 'Dear John' of the first poem is, with whom she seems on such excellent teasing terms, but there are more clues—though none incontrovertible—in the second, whose style and range of reference bear a marked resemblance to Cross's 'Oenigma' poem so admired by Beighton. Two poets are referred to, John Denham, whose lines on the Thames²⁰ in *Cooper's Hill* (1642) had probably already passed into poetic cliché, though it wasn't until 1779 that Samuel Johnson said 'almost every writer for a century past has imitated them', and Addison, who was friends with Somerville, and had recently himself bought a country estate at Bilton in Warwickshire. The Addison connection makes it tempting to guess that the absent poet is Thomas Tickell, who worshipped Addison, abandoning his Irish estate at Glasnevin to join Addison in London as under-secretary.²¹ This would make Cross even more *au fait* with the London world than the 'Xtning Ballad' suggests, but is unfortunately undermined by the fact that Tickell seems not to have bought the Glasnevin estate from his brother Richard until 1721. The only other plausible candidate I can hazard is the clueless Richard Verney, thirteenth Baron Willoughby de Broke, who did write some, not very good, poetry; though leaving 'a delightful Country Seat' seems to have little in common with his departure from Warwickshire: disinherited by his father and banished from Compton Verney.²² Perhaps the Denham quotation suggests that she is being satirical at his expense.

That acrid opposite of friendship is a familiar part of our perception of the period which harboured Pope and Swift, but it was still a surprise to find a direct personal attack in the Cross MS, on a clergyman called Robert Pearce, who preached 'a sermon on charity' which seems to have made her very cross indeed. Vice-Principal of 'Edmund Hall Oxon.', he was a particular object of contempt for Thomas Hearne the Oxford antiquary,²³ on account of his Whiggish sympathies and rambling, inconsequential sermons,²⁴ and his political views may have made the Coventry circle particularly unenthusiastic: certainly the poem refers specifically to both Bangor (Benjamin Hoadly, arch-enemy of the non-jurors) and Edmund Curl of Fleet Street, the Whig printer. I have not found a definite text for the sermon itself, which Cross could have heard live (he preached at the Middle Temple in 1719, when Lady Anne's correspondence shows her to have been in London) or read as a pamphlet. There is even a faint possibility that the charity in question could have been Mary Astell's school in Chelsea: there is a reference in a letter to Astell to a sermon preached by George Smallridge, Bishop of Bristol for 'yor. poor Chelsea girls'. Certainly Cross seems to share Hearne's scorn, and expresses it in a number of withering couplets:

²⁰ 'O could I flow like thee, and make they stream / My great example, as it is my theme! / Though deep yet clear, though gentle, yet not dull, / Strong without rage, without o'er-flowing full.'

²¹ He calls him 'the British Virgil' in *The Spectator*, no. 532.

²² ODNB, s.n. 'Verney, Richard' (F. D. A. Burns).

²³ Thomas Hearne, *Remarks and Collections*, 11 vols. (Oxford, 1885-1921), vol. 6 (1717-1719).

²⁴ 'Tis in the usual strain of Pearce's writing, heavy & dull & strangely affected, without ye least tolerable Judgment, such is the poor Spirit of the Man'.

When Pearse from Isis to Cocytus fell
He sunk so black a shade he darkn'd Hell
Th'Infernal Frogs in shoals around him stood
You're welcome Brother Croaker to our Flood
When Charon saw him loud by Styx he swore
This Dog's so black sure he's been here before
Then Cerberus open'd whilst Hell's concave rung
Pearse e'en when pleased outsnarls my triple tongue
Off with your Wigg the Furies loudly yell
Enough without that Wigg you sadden Hell

This is a powerful contrast with the politeness expressed for example in Miss Whateley's Dedication to her *Original Poems on Several Occasions*, published in 1764, with over 400 subscribers: 'I never studiously rang'd thro' the Regions of Imagination to seek for Paths unexplor'd by former Writers; but sat down content to employ my humble Abilities upon such Themes—as Friendship, Gratitude, and native Freedom of Fancy, presented to my Thoughts'.

What became of Frances Cross? As Roger Lonsdale laconically remarks of Charlotte Brereton (born c. 1720), 'Since nothing has come to light about her later career, it is possible she married'. A letter in the Lucy archive in Warwick, dated 5 August 1728, suggests a gloomy alternative: '...ye Neighbourhood begins to grow very sickly, abundance of People are ill of Fevers, tho not very many Die...'. She makes no appearance in Shenstone's *Miscellany* of 1759-1763, in spite of his enthusiastic Hooverings of all the local scraps of verse. The connection with Lady Anne Coventry tempted me to imagine that having been raised to the status of gentlewoman by company and education, she was employed as a schoolmistress in one of the new schools for girls set up by Lady Anne and her friends. The truth, however, seems to be far less dramatic, though fascinating in its own way: on re-reading Lady Anne's Will I found two mentions of 'Frances Cross' (no title), in 1757, and again in the final codicil of 1763. She appears in a list of what seem to be upper servants, including the chaplain, and is left £20 in 1757, with an additional £10 transferred to her in 1763, when the behaviour of 'Harry Stops' has caused him to be stripped of his legacy. Lady Anne Coventry died aged 90, in 1763; if my conjecture as to Frances Cross's age is correct, she would be 70 or so—a possible forty-five years of companionship, and perhaps, in spite of Shenstone's ignorance of her, a continuing intellectual and literary life.

But why does it matter who she is? Surely, if the poems are any good, that is the only important thing. As the man in the next-door tent on my Warwickshire campsite said, who cares? My answer is, I think, that anything that changes our view of who is entitled to read and write poetry, particularly in an age so apparently dominated by angry men and powerful printers, enhances our perception of literature, and the role it plays in society. This notebook could be seen as precisely the sort of miscellaneous poetic activity described so obnoxiously by Vicesimus Knox in 1784: 'she keeps in her drawers, like haberdasher's wares in a shop, odes, elegies, and epigrams, adapted to every occasion'.²⁵ Two centuries later, however, Bill Overton, clearly less threatened, points out that this sort of writing 'attests to the fact that writing verse was a means of amusement and entertainment for many people'.²⁶ The range of reference and freedom of expression in Frances Cross's poems reinforce the more recent perception of female writing in the period, and the MS form justifies a hope that many more such collections will emerge.

Lucia Quinault
Winchester College

²⁵ Vicesimus Knox, Essay no. LXXXVI: 'On the Ostentatious Affection of the Character of a learned Lady, without sufficient learning, and without judgment', in *Essays Moral and Literary*, 2 vols. (London, 1784), vol. 2, pp. 17-21.

²⁶ Bill Overton, 'The Verse Epistle', in *A Companion to Eighteenth Century Poetry*, ed. Christine Gerrard (Oxford, 2006), part III, ch. 30.