

The Lyrical Poems Of Robert Herrick

by

Robert Herrick

Web Book Publications

The Lyrical Poems Of Robert Herrick

The Lyrical Poems Of Robert Herrick.....	2
Preface.....	3
Poems No. 1-50.....	16
Poems No. 51-100.....	56
Poems No. 101-150.....	96
Poems No. 151-200.....	117
Poems No. 201-261.....	131

Preface

ROBERT HERRICK - Born 1591 : Died 1674

Those who most admire the Poet from whose many pieces a selection only is here offered, will, it is probable, feel most strongly (with the Editor) that excuse is needed for an attempt of an obviously presumptuous nature. The choice made by any selector invites challenge: the admission, perhaps, of some poems, the absence of more, will be censured:--Whilst others may wholly condemn the process, in virtue of an argument not unfrequently advanced of late, that a writer's judgment on his own work is to be considered final. And his book to be taken as he left it, or left altogether; a literal reproduction of the original text being occasionally included in this requirement.

If poetry were composed solely for her faithful band of true lovers and true students, such a facsimile as that last indicated would have claims irresistible; but if the first and last object of this, as of the other Fine Arts, may be defined in language borrowed from a different range of thought, as 'the greatest pleasure of the greatest number,' it is certain that less stringent forms of reproduction are required and justified. The great majority of readers cannot bring either leisure or taste, or information sufficient to take them through a large mass (at any rate) of ancient verse, not even if it be Spenser's or Milton's. Manners and modes of speech, again, have changed; and much that was admissible centuries since, or at least sought admission, has now, by a law against which protest is idle, lapsed into the indecorous. Even unaccustomed forms of spelling are an effort to the eye;--a kind of friction, which diminishes the ease and enjoyment of the reader.

These hindrances and clogs, of very diverse nature, cannot be disregarded by Poetry. In common with everything which aims at human benefit, she must work not only for the 'faithful': she has also the duty of 'conversion.' Like a messenger from heaven, it is hers to inspire, to console, to elevate: to convert the world, in a word, to herself. Every rough place that slackens her footsteps must be made smooth; nor, in this Art, need there be fear that the way will ever be vulgarized by too much ease, nor that she will be loved less by the elect, for being loved more widely.

Passing from these general considerations, it is true that a selection framed in conformity with them, especially if one of our older poets be concerned, parts with a certain portion of the pleasure which poetry may confer. A writer is most thoroughly to be judged by the whole of what he printed. A selector inevitably holds too despotic a position over his author. The frankness of speech which we have abandoned is an interesting evidence how the tone of manners changes. The poet's own spelling and punctuation bear, or may bear, a gleam of his personality. But such last drops of pleasure are the reward of fully-formed taste; and fully-formed taste cannot be reached without full knowledge. This, we have noticed, most readers cannot bring. Hence, despite all drawbacks, an anthology may have its place. A book which tempts many to read a little, will guide some to that more profound and loving study of which the result is, the full accomplishment of the poet's mission.

We have, probably, no poet to whom the reasons here advanced to justify the invidious task of selection apply more fully and forcibly than to Herrick. Highly as he is to be rated among our lyrists, no one who reads through his fourteen hundred pieces can reasonably doubt that whatever may have been the influences, --wholly unknown to us,--which determined the contents of his volume, severe taste was not one of them. *PECAT FORTITER*:--his exquisite directness and simplicity of speech repeatedly take such form that the book cannot be offered to a very large number of those readers who would most enjoy it. The spelling is at once arbitrary and obsolete. Lastly, the complete reproduction of the original text, with explanatory notes, edited by Mr Grosart, supplies materials equally full and interesting for those who may, haply, be allured by this little book to master one of our most attractive poets in his integrity.

In Herrick's single own edition of *HESPERIDES* and *NOBLE NUMBERS*, but little arrangement is traceable: nor have we more than a few internal signs of date in composition. It would hence be unwise to attempt grouping the poems on a strict plan: and the divisions under which they are here ranged must be regarded rather as progressive aspects of a landscape than as territorial demarcations. Pieces bearing on the poet as such are placed first; then, those vaguely definable as of idyllic character, 'his girls,' epigrams, poems on natural objects, on character and life; lastly, a few in his religious vein. For the text, although reference has been made to the original of 1647-8, Mr Grosart's excellent reprint has been mainly followed.

And to that edition this book is indebted for many valuable exegetical notes, kindly placed at the Editor's disposal. But for much fuller elucidation both of words and allusions, and of the persons mentioned, readers are referred to Mr Grosart's volumes, which (like the same scholar's 'Sidney' and 'Donne'), for the first time give Herrick a place among books not printed only, but edited.

Robert Herrick's personal fate is in one point like Shakespeare's. We know or seem to know them both, through their works, with singular intimacy. But with this our knowledge substantially ends. No private letter of Shakespeare, no record of his conversation, no account of the circumstances in which his writings were published, remains: hardly any statement how his greatest contemporaries ranked him. A group of Herrick's youthful letters on business has, indeed, been preserved; of his life and studies, of his reputation during his own time, almost nothing. For whatever facts affectionate diligence could now gather. Readers are referred to Mr Grosart's 'Introduction.' But if, to supplement the picture, inevitably imperfect, which this gives, we turn to Herrick's own book, we learn little, biographically, except the names of a few friends,—that his general sympathies were with the Royal cause,—and that he wearied in Devonshire for London. So far as is known, he published but this one volume, and that, when not far from his sixtieth year. Some pieces may be traced in earlier collections; some few carry ascertainable dates; the rest lie over a period of near forty years, during a great portion of which we have no distinct account where Herrick lived, or what were his employments. We know that he shone with Ben Jonson and the wits at the nights and suppers of those gods of our glorious early literature: we may fancy him at Beaumanor, or Houghton, with his uncle and cousins, keeping a Leicestershire Christmas in the Manor-house: or, again, in some sweet southern county with Julia and Anthea, Corinna and Dianeme by his side (familiar then by other names now never to be remembered), sitting merry, but with just the sadness of one who hears sweet music, in some meadow among his favourite flowers of spring-time;—there, or 'where the rose lingers latest.' But 'the dream, the fancy,' is all that Time has spared us. And if it be curious that his contemporaries should have left so little record of this delightful poet and (as we should infer from the book) genial-hearted man, it is not less so that the single first edition should have satisfied the seventeenth century, and that, before the present, notices of Herrick should be of the rarest occurrence.

The artist's 'claim to exist' is, however, always far less to be looked for in his life, than in his art, upon the secret of which the fullest biography can tell us little--as little, perhaps, as criticism can analyse its charm. But there are few of our poets who stand less in need than Herrick of commentaries of this description,--in which too often we find little more than a dull or florid prose version of what the author has given us admirably in verse. Apart from obsolete words or allusions, Herrick is the best commentator upon Herrick. A few lines only need therefore here be added, aiming rather to set forth his place in the sequence of English poets, and especially in regard to those near his own time, than to point out in detail beauties which he unveils in his own way, and so most durably and delightfully.

When our Muses, silent or sick for a century and more after Chaucer's death, during the years of war and revolution, reappeared, they brought with them foreign modes of art, ancient and contemporary, in the forms of which they began to set to music the new material which the age supplied. At the very outset, indeed, the moralizing philosophy which has characterized the English from the beginning of our national history, appears in the writers of the troubled times lying between the last regnal years of Henry VIII and the first of his great daughter. But with the happier hopes of Elizabeth's accession, poetry was once more distinctly followed, not only as a means of conveying thought, but as a Fine Art. And hence something constrained and artificial blends with the freshness of the Elizabethan literature. For its great underlying elements it necessarily reverts to those embodied in our own earlier poets, Chaucer above all, to whom, after barely one hundred and fifty years, men looked up as a father of song: but in points of style and treatment, the poets of the sixteenth century lie under a double external influence--that of the poets of Greece and Rome (known either in their own tongues or by translation), and that of the modern literatures which had themselves undergone the same classical impulse. Italy was the source most regarded during the more strictly Elizabethan period; whence its lyrical poetry and the dramatic in a less degree, are coloured much less by pure and severe classicalism with its closeness to reality, than by the allegorical and elaborate style, fancy and fact curiously blended, which had been generated in Italy under the peculiar and local circumstances of her pilgrimage in literature and art from the age of Dante onwards. Whilst that influence lasted, such brilliant pictures of actual life, such directness, movement, and simplicity in style, as Chaucer often shows, were not yet again attainable:

and although satire, narrative, the poetry of reflection, were meanwhile not wholly unknown, yet they only appear in force at the close of this period. And then also the pressure of political and religious strife, veiled in poetry during the greater part of Elizabeth's actual reign under the forms of pastoral and allegory, again imperiously breaks in upon the gracious but somewhat slender and artificial fashions of England's Helicon: the DIVOM NUMEN, SEDESQUE QUIETAE which, in some degree the Elizabethan poets offer, disappear; until filling the central years of the seventeenth century we reach an age as barren for inspiration of new song as the Wars of the Roses; although the great survivors from earlier years mask this sterility;--masking also the revolution in poetical manner and matter which we can see secretly preparing in the later 'Cavalier' poets, but which was not clearly recognised before the time of Dryden's culmination.

In the period here briefly sketched, what is Herrick's portion? His verse is eminent for sweet and gracious fluency; this is a real note of the 'Elizabethan' poets. His subjects are frequently pastoral, with a classical tinge, more or less slight, infused; his language, though not free from exaggeration, is generally free from intellectual conceits and distortion, and is eminent throughout for a youthful NAIVETE. Such, also, are qualities of the latter sixteenth century literature. But if these characteristics might lead us to call Herrick 'the last of the Elizabethans,' born out of due time, the differences between him and them are not less marked. Herrick's directness of speech is accompanied by an equally clear and simple presentment of his thought; we have, perhaps, no poet who writes more consistently and earnestly with his eye upon his subject. An allegorical or mystical treatment is alien from him: he handles awkwardly the few traditional fables which he introduces. He is also wholly free from Italianizing tendencies: his classicalism even is that of an English student,--of a schoolboy, indeed, if he be compared with a Jonson or a Milton. Herrick's personal eulogies on his friends and others, further, witness to the extension of the field of poetry after Elizabeth's age;--in which his enthusiastic geniality, his quick and easy transitions of subject, have also little precedent.

If, again, we compare Herrick's book with those of his fellow-poets for a hundred years before, very few are the traces which he gives of imitation, or even of study. During the long interval between Herrick's entrance on his Cambridge and his clerical careers (an interval all but wholly obscure to us),

it is natural to suppose that he read, at any rate, his Elizabethan predecessors: yet (beyond those general similarities already noticed) the Editor can find no positive proof of familiarity. Compare Herrick with Marlowe, Greene, Breton, Drayton, or other pretty pastoralists of the HELICON--his general and radical unlikeness is what strikes us; whilst he is even more remote from the passionate intensity of Sidney and Shakespeare, the Italian graces of Spenser, the pensive beauty of PARTHENOPHIL, of DIELLA, of FIDESSA, of the HECATOMPETHIA and the TEARS OF FANCY.

Nor is Herrick's resemblance nearer to many of the contemporaries who have been often grouped with him. He has little in common with the courtly elegance, the learned polish, which too rarely redeem commonplace and conceits in Carew, Habington, Lovelace, Cowley, or Waller. Herrick has his CONCETTI also: but they are in him generally true plays of fancy; he writes throughout far more naturally than these lyrists, who, on the other hand, in their unfrequent successes reach a more complete and classical form of expression. Thus, when Carew speaks of an aged fair one

When beauty, youth, and all sweets leave her, Love may return, but
lovers never!

Cowley, of his mistress--

Love in her sunny eyes does basking play,
Love walks the pleasant mazes of her hair:

or take Lovelace, 'To Lucasta,' Waller, in his 'Go, lovely rose,'--we have a finish and condensation which Herrick hardly attains; a literary quality alien from his 'woodnotes wild,' which may help us to understand the very small appreciation he met from his age. He had 'a pretty pastoral gale of fancy,' said Phillips, cursorily dismissing Herrick in his THEATRUM: not suspecting how inevitably artifice and mannerism, if fashionable for awhile, pass into forgetfulness, whilst the simple cry of Nature partake in her permanence.

Donne and Marvell, stronger men, leave also no mark on our poet. The elaborate thought, the metrical harshness of the first, could find no counterpart in Herrick; whilst Marvell, beyond him in imaginative power, though twisting it too often into contortion and excess, appears to have

been little known as a lyricist then:-- as, indeed, his great merits have never reached anything like due popular recognition. Yet Marvell's natural description is nearer Herrick's in felicity and insight than any of the poets named above. Nor, again, do we trace anything of Herbert or Vaughan in Herrick's NOBLE NUMBERS, which, though unfairly judged if held insincere, are obviously far distant from the intense conviction, the depth and inner fervour of his high-toned contemporaries.

It is among the great dramatists of this age that we find the only English influences palpably operative on this singularly original writer. The greatest, in truth, is wholly absent: and it is remarkable that although Herrick may have joined in the wit-contests and genialities of the literary clubs in London soon after Shakespeare's death, and certainly lived in friendship with some who had known him, yet his name is never mentioned in the poetical commemorations of the HESPERIDES. In Herrick, echoes from Fletcher's idyllic pieces in the FAITHFUL SHEPHERDESS are faintly traceable; from his songs, 'Hear what Love can do,' and 'The lusty Spring,' more distinctly.

But to Ben Jonson, whom Herrick addresses as his patron saint in song, and ranks on the highest list of his friends, his obligations are much more perceptible. In fact, Jonson's non-dramatic poetry,--the EPIGRAMS and FOREST of 1616, the UNDERWOODS of 1641, (he died in 1637),-- supply models, generally admirable in point of art, though of very unequal merit in their execution and contents, of the principal forms under which we may range Herrick's HESPERIDES. The graceful love-song, the celebration of feasts and wit, the encomia of friends, the epigram as then understood, are all here represented: even Herrick's vein in natural description is prefigured in the odes to Penshurst and Sir Robert Wroth, of 1616. And it is in the religious pieces of the NOBLE NUMBERS, for which Jonson afforded the least copious precedents, that, as a rule, Herrick is least successful.

Even if we had not the verses on his own book, (the most noteworthy of which are here printed as PREFATORY,) in proof that Herrick was no careless singer, but a true artist, working with conscious knowledge of his art, we might have inferred the fact from the choice of Jonson as his model.

That great poet, as Clarendon justly remarked, had 'judgment to order and govern fancy, rather than excess of fancy: his productions being slow and upon deliberation.' No writer could be better fitted for the guidance of one so fancy-free as Herrick; to whom the curb, in the old phrase, was more

needful than the spur, and whose invention, more fertile and varied than Jonson's, was ready at once to fill up the moulds of form provided. He does this with a lively facility, contrasting much with the evidence of labour in his master's work. Slowness and deliberation are the last qualities suggested by Herrick. Yet it may be doubted whether the volatile ease, the effortless grace, the wild bird-like fluency with which he

Scatters his loose notes in the waste of air

are not, in truth, the results of exquisite art working in co-operation with the gifts of nature. The various readings which our few remaining manuscripts or printed versions have supplied to Mr Grosart's 'Introduction,' attest the minute and curious care with which Herrick polished and strengthened his own work: his airy facility, his seemingly spontaneous melodies, as with Shelley--his counterpart in pure lyrical art within this century --were earned by conscious labour; perfect freedom was begotten of perfect art;--nor, indeed, have excellence and permanence any other parent.

With the error that regards Herrick as a careless singer is closely twined that which ranks him in the school of that master of elegant pettiness who has usurped and abused the name Anacreon; as a mere light-hearted writer of pastorals, a gay and frivolous Renaissance amourist. He has indeed those elements: but with them is joined the seriousness of an age which knew that the light mask of classicalism and bucolic allegory could be worn only as an ornament, and that life held much deeper and further-reaching issues than were visible to the narrow horizons within which Horace or Martial circumscribed the range of their art. Between the most intensely poetical, and so, greatest, among the French poets of this century, and Herrick, are many points of likeness. He too, with Alfred de Musset, might have said

Quoi que nous puissions faire,
Je souffre; il est trop tard; le monde s'est fait vieux.
Une immense esperance a traverse la terre;
Malgre nous vers le ciel il faut lever les yeux.

Indeed, Herrick's deepest debt to ancient literature lies not in the models which he directly imitated, nor in the Anacreontic tone which with singular felicity he has often taken. These are common to many writers with him:--

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

