

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers*, May 30, 1891 to February 6, 1892)

## Robert Herrick

Upon opening any one of several current editions of Robert Herrick's poems the title page confronts us with the poet's heavy countenance, sensual features and puffy, lecherous eyes. These go with us through the book, pursuing us from verse to verse, refusing to be banished from the page or mind. They obtrude themselves upon the most delicate sentiments and mar almost perfect lines. When we read some of his lines to Julia,

“Do thou but this

Bequeath to me one parting kisse

one wonders what manner of woman Julia must have been to suffer herself to be kissed by such a face as his. The poet was born at Cheapside and the register of the Church of St. Nicholas Vedast shows that he was baptized on August 24th, 1591.

His ancestry is traced back into the fifteenth century and his forefathers are early identified with the Corporation, Leicestershire. His father died within a year after Robert's birth and there is reason to suppose that he committed suicide in a fit of melancholia. A taint of which melancholy can sometimes be discovered beneath some of the poet's sprightliest verse. That he had two older brothers is known and also that he had a younger brother, a posthumous son of his father. One of those older brothers, Thomas, was a small farmer of whom the poet was very fond and to him are addressed the lines on “A Country Life.”

“Thrice, and above, bless'd, my soule's half, art thou

In thy both last and better vow :

Could'st leave the city, for exchange, to see

The country's sweet simplicities.”

The other elder brother married one, Susanna, to whom a number of Herrick's verses are addressed. The verses “To This dying Brother” were addressed to his younger brother.

Not much is known authentically about the poet's early life, perhaps the best source of information is his own lines where, in his “Tears to Thamysis” he thus expresses his regret at leaving the scenes of his youth:

“Never again shall I with finny oar

Put from, or draw unto the faithful shore:

And landing here, or safely landing there,

Make way to my beloved Westminster,

Or to the golden Cheapside, where the earth

Of Julian Herrick gave to me my birth.”

From this it is inferred that his youth was passed in London and that he attended school at the famous Seminary of Westminster. Herrick's father left what for those times was a moderate little fortune – about 5000 pounds, to an uncle, in trust, and the poet's education as a boy he was not neglected. There are a number of Herrick's letters extant, mostly requests for remittances, written to his uncle from St. John's in Cambridge, in one

of which he asks for a sum of ten pounds “and that with as much celerity is you maye, though I could wish chardges had leaden wings and tortice feet to come upon me.”

He remained at St. John's three years and then removed to Trinity-Hall with the intention of studying law, but the Anglo-Saxon bluntness which compelled Herrick to call things by their real names, was ill calculated to make the worse appear the better reason; and we find him leaving Trinity, taking his degree in the Arts. Like many other bright, scholarly but dilettante men of his time and indeed to this time, for want of avocation he took holy orders and in 1629 the King presented him to the vicarage of Dean Prior in Devonshire.

Thomas a Wood tells us that “here he passed nineteen years and he here exercised his muse as well in poetry as in other learning and became much beloved by the gentry in those parts for his florid and witty discourses.” Here it is that Herrick caught that sweet contagion which George Sand has so deftly called “the fever of the fields.” Here it is that his muse burst into some of the purest and most musical lyric strains known to the English tongue. In the argument of the Hesperides, he says:

I sing of brooks, of blossoms, birds, and bowers,  
Of April, May, of June, and July-flowers.  
I sing of May-poles, hock-carts, wassails, wakes,  
Of bridegrooms, brides, and of their bridal-cakes.  
I write of youth, of love, and have access  
By these to sing of cleanly wantonness.  
I sing of dews, of rains, and piece by piece  
Of balm, of oil, of spice, and ambergris.  
I sing of times trans-shifting, and I write  
How roses first came red, and lilies white.  
I write of groves, of twilights, and I sing  
The Court of Mab, and of the Fairy King.  
I write of hell; I sing (and ever shall)  
Of heaven, and hope to have it after all.

And in this strain he poured forth a long succession of such gems as “Corrinia's gone a marrying” “The Mad Maids Song”, “The Bag of the Bee,” “To Violets” “To Daffodils,” a perfect stream of Lyric and Bucolic poetry. He sings of Amaryllis and Corydon, of Doris and Chloris, Anthea, Electra, Diamine and, and of the Three Dainty Destines who weave his Amulet then leaving the classic he sings in golden rhymes of Julia, Cerinna, Parrilla and even Providence Baldwin.

In May-time we walk with him and see  
"A present God-like power  
Imprinted in each herb and flower:  
And smell'st the breath of great-eyed kine,  
Sweet as the blossoms of the vine."

The Hesperides consists of a large number of short poems, running from odes and epithalamia of five or six pages to epigrams of a single couplet, all thrown together without any attempt at order or arrangement. All these verses are modeled after the early classic Anthologists and there has been much discussion among critics as to whose versus

Herrick's most resemble and which poet was his model. Mr. Campbell and Thomas A Wood find such a similarity in the tone, spirit and rhythm of Herrick's verses and those of Catullus; while Edmund W Gosse distinguishes, and finds greater similarity in Martial, claiming that Martial is the only one of the Latin poets which Herrick can resemble in the minute picturesqueness of detail and delight in all the small accessories of life.

He was familiar with all antique literature and a general resemblance can be found in his lyrics and bucolic's to Ovid, Virgil, Juvenal and even Horace, but those who are acquainted with Theocritus that fountain head of lyric poetry, will find even greater resemblance in Herrick, "in the sweet liquefaction of his verse" for Herrick was like Keats a natural born Greek.

There is some doubt as to whether Herrick was a Greek scholar, but certainly he was the Greek temperament; and if his lyric studies consisted in studying and following the antique Latin Poets, he read through them, and beyond them to the more perfect model in Theocritus and his own genius contributed the musical liquid flow which we find in this earlier poet.

"About the sweet Bag of a bee" would almost seem a translation from Theocritus. One is not fit to consider or talk about Herrick unless they can find themselves in Herrick's humor and, for as he himself says to his versus

"Take mine advice, and go not near  
Those faces, sour as vinegar;  
For these, and nobler numbers, can  
Ne'er please the supercilious man.

And he would have his verses read  
"But when that men have both well drunk, and fed,  
Let my enchantments then be sung or read."

And yet the reader in ever so festal or bacchanalian humor he cannot but be shocked at some of Herrick's direct bluntness. Herrick nowhere shows any power of insinuation or allusion and does not seem to care for any. He never says "Roma fuit" for "Roma perditur". He plunges his hands into the bowels of his thoughts and holds them up by the entrails. When he has a fine thought and is casting about for an illustration or physical imagery he seems to prefer a gross figure to a chaste one.

This is Herrick's greatest blemish. This has created a prejudice against him, has banished him from polite society and has deprived him of that high mark to which his lyric and poetic excellence justly entitles him. In looking through any of the works on English Literature we find Herrick classed with such minor poets as Waller, Carew, and Suckling. This is manifestly unfair for by a proper estimate of Herrick's chaster numbers, his graceful picturing and harmony of verse, he out ranks them all and owns a place second only to Wordsworth and Shelley.

Get up, get up for shame, the blooming morn  
Upon her wings presents the god unshorn.

See how Aurora throws her fair  
Fresh-quilted colours through the air :  
Get up, sweet slug-a-be"d, and see  
The dew bespangling herb and tree."

This cannot be analyzed, it is not deep enough, it is simple, delicate; if we breathe upon it, it is tarnished; it is very happy. Again he is capable of pathos. Like Shakespeare, Herrick was a rollicking son of his times, improvident and careless; but unlike the great dramatist, whose soul was stirred by passions that would brook no restraint, he knew only the lighter feelings and side of human nature. He was Merry or sad in a broad easy Chaucerean sense. So he never depicts the wild, sweeping, torrent of disappointed love; he never shows throes of passion, but like a morning breeze he bids the "cruell Maid" farewell, he simply says; I'll trouble you no more.

"When you shall see that I am dead,  
For pity let a tear be shed;  
And, with your mantle o'er me cast,  
Give my cold lips a kiss at last; "

Then he tells her to go to his tomb

"And write thereon, this reader know;  
Love killed this man. No more, but so.

We find a higher moral pathos in his "Primroses," "Daffodils," and "Blossoms." Here is a moral pathos, a heart-teaching which opens the moral nature of to the reception of some lesson or truth. When the mind is not engaged, the judgment convinced and reason is not enough to coerce us to generous action, sometimes a gentle picture, the recollection of some forgotten scene, the story of some noble and kindly act, will open the dams of the heart. As one of the Lord's parables would compare with the uncompromising argument of Paul so would Herrick's "Primroses", for instance, compare with some of Pope's didactic lines.

One of the unparalleled excellencies of Herrick's verse is in their form. His meters are many of them original, peculiar to himself, graceful and always appropriate. While in many of his verses he follows the approved classic leaders, yet when his thought did not seem to flow easily into any of the standard molds, he did not hesitate to give vein to his muse and let it flow and crystallize into forms that suited it best. Herrick lived at a time when it was fashionable to invent difficult and complicated verse forms with separated and remote rhymes. Herrick has been criticized for his temerity in this regard, but his sufficient apology is the appropriateness of his meters. He does not trim his thoughts to fit his feet but compels his feet to follow his thoughts.

To his bold and erratic genius which brooked no conventionality and which no modesty or delicacy made hesitate to say what came to his heart or mind it would have been folly

to say that lyrics should be in dithyrambs, satire in iambics, elegy in pentameter and didactic in blank verse. To say this would be like conceding to those small souled people who give so much weight to form as to think that those who do not truly mourn do not wear black; and that he is not at heart a priest, whose head is not shaved.

True genius exhibits its trophies as it finds them, or in its own way. And the form is but the seal or trademark of which proclaims them its own. The spirit of poesy travels up and down, taking to itself that which pleases it and expressing itself now in sprightly rhythm, now in gentle cadence and again in even tones of didactic verse. There has been much speculation about the personal identity of Julia, Cerinna, and Perilla. These dear dames of home he so constantly sung.

As to Cerinna and Perilla it is safe to conclude that they are but names given at will to any of a number of persons that came to the poet's notice, today some neat-herd tending her cows upon the hill, some milkmaid skipping with a pail to the wide-eyed kine, some primrose gatherer or shepherdesse, all studies – the unconscious subjects of the poet painter.

No so Julia, however, she is such a real actual personality to the poet, his heart so dwells on her and his continuous and repeated descriptions are so consistent that she must have been the poet's lost love. Herrick, who so sang of love, must, at some time, have known the painful passion. It is possible that Julia was someone he had known at Cambridge because Herrick was thirty-eight years old when he left Cambridge for Dean Prior, and the burning ardors of the youth, by that time must have subsided.

Herrick never wearied of singing Julia's praise and the reader never tires of hearing it sung. He sings of Julia, of her handsome Anger, of her dress with its brave Vibration, of her Illness of her Recovery, of her Voice, her lips which did out-red the cherry, her cheeks like Creame enclaveted, her breath in which all spices of the East are circumfused. He sings of Julia's eyes, her breasts, the nipples on Julia's breasts, of Julia's sweat, her picture, her bed, her legs.

“Fain would I kiss my Julia's dainty leg,  
Which is as white and hairless as an egg.”

The following is also meant for Julia

“Anthea bade me tie her shoe;  
I did ; and kissed the instep too:  
And would have kissed unto her knee,  
Had not her blush rebuked me.”

He writes upon “Julia bathing in the river,” upon “Julia unlacing herself,” her Petticote, “Her ribband,” “Her Bracelet,” her “ring,” upon “Julia's Haire filled with dew” and “Julia's haire bound in a Golden Net.”

His delight in disorder is upon Julia:

“A Sweet disorder in the dress  
Kindles in clothes a wantonness:—  
A lawne about the shoulders thrown  
Into a fine distracti3n,—  
An erring lace, which here and there  
Enthrals the crimson stomacher,—  
A cuff neglectful, and thereby  
Ribbands to flow confusedly,—  
A winning wave, deserving note,  
In the tempestuous petticoat,—  
A careless shoe-string, in whose tie  
I see a wild civility,—  
Do more bewitch me, than when art  
Is too precise in every part.”

He gives us a verse upon Julia’s Fall;

“Julia was careless, and withal  
She rather took, than got a fall,  
The wanton ambler chanced to see  
Part of her leggs sinceritie:”

The rhymes of The “Frozen Zone” or “Julia Disdainful,” of “The Roses in Julia's Bosom,” “To Julia in her dawn or Daybreake, and “Julia’s Churching or Purification,” Thus always Julia, one gets to see Julia, know Julia, love Julia as the poet does himself.

Any talk about Herrick would be incomplete without some allusion to his good house-keeper Prewdence Baldwin.

Thoughtful, kindly Prue, who brought the daily offering of full provisions, such as a store, keeping the poet plentifully supplied with tarts and custards and caring for all his creature comforts.

Prue who though the seasons changed, always to him remained the same. Herrick has since given Prue to us in a number of his verses and she is mentioned in many that are not written directly about her. Two of his verses upon her I will give here.

Upon Prudence Baldwin Her Sicknesse

“Prue, my dearest maid, is sick,  
Almost to be lunatic:  
Æsculapius! come and bring  
Means for her recovering;  
And a gallant cock shall be  
Offer'd up by her to thee.”

The following is the epitaph written by Herrick over her grave

“In this little urne is laid  
Prewdence Baldwin, once my maid,  
From whose happy spark here let  
Spring the purple Violet.”

Despite the fact that at Dean Prior his muse had so favored him, for nineteen years, during which time he had reveled in song and the fragrance of flowers, had imbued himself with nature's imagery and drunk in their life and fire which breathed into his lines gives him their worth and brilliancy, he does not seem to have found the country and people thoroughly congenial to him.

His life in London and Cambridge had given him a taste for more active scenes and more cultivated companionship. In truth Herrick was never happy when far from the feet of Ben Jonson.

He calls the people of Devonshire currish and churlish, and rude, almost as rudest savages. The very river of Dean-bourn, in which the precious legs of Julia had been laved, he calls “rockie” and “rude”

He gives his own experience and gives vent to his discontent in this locality, in the following lines.

"More discontents I never had  
Since I was born than here,  
Where I have been, and still am sad,  
In this dull Devonshire."

And yet sensible of all he owed to “this doll Devonshire,” a sense of justice compels him to add

"Yet, justly too, I must confess  
I ne'er invented such  
Ennobled numbers for the press,  
Than where I loathed so much."

In 1648 Herrick was relieved of his vicarage when the puritan party became dominant in England, his kind of piety and his loyalty probably being alike distasteful to them.

Though we could ill afford to lose the living of Dean Prior, he seems to have taken his discharge with pleasurable satisfaction and to have sped him back to London and his beloved Ben Jonson.

He spent from 1648 to 1660 in London living in the greatest poverty, sometimes subsisting on charity. His poverty was the cause of his putting his verse into book form; the first edition being published in 1648, containing the Hesperides and Noble Numbers.



of the sex was not partial. He seemed to love them all. At all events he never held matrimony in such high appreciation as to be enticed within its bonds. Evidently what he considered the end of marriage he thought he could get without it, for he says

“I do not love to wed  
Though I do like to woo  
And for a Maidenhead  
I'll beg, and buy it too.”

Perhaps the examples of married life before him in rude Devonshire made him feel more secure in bachelor-dom. He voices his fear of matrimony in the lines

Suspicion, discontent, and strife  
Come in for dowry with a wife.

He lived alone with a pet pig.

Herrick had unlimited conceit and had no doubt as to the perpetuity of his verse. He thought he could pay his friends no higher compliment or do them greater service than to immortalize them in his lines.

He has written epigrams upon all sorts and conditions of people. Those upon his friends are beautiful and their names will live while the world has room for a bright thought and an ear for a musical rhyme.

It is in his epigrams, however, that Herrick spent some of his most caustic wit and keenest satire, and woe to the unlucky man or woman who happened to be the victim of his humor. His epigrams would stick to his victim like a burr. It was in these that he caught up the conceits and follies of his time and held them up to ridicule.

There is one “To a painted Gentlewoman” another “to a Gentle-woman on just dealings,” one “On a perfumed Lady” is as follows:

You say you're sweet; how should we know  
Whether that you be sweet or no?  
From powders and perfumes keep free,  
Then we shall smell how sweet you be.

There are scores of these short verses, pretty, sweet, sharp, funny and dirty.

The rhythm of many of these verses is attested by the fact that they have been set to music by Henry Lawes, Lanieri Wilson and Ramsey and are sung as drinking songs in England to this day. In 1660 when the Loyalist party again came into power, Herrick was restored to his vicarage at Dean Prior where he died.

Of his later years little is known except by tradition among the people of Devonshire where his memory was long cherished. He probably died in 1674.

Austin Dobson holds Herrick in high appreciation and has recently written a most

excellent essay upon him which prefaces a recent edition of the poet's works. There is still much which might be read of Herrick's poetry which would entertain the club and find appreciative ears, but if they have not already done so, they must read it for themselves. The poet's fame as a lyrist is still growing; and truly Herrick, as you hoped, you have immortalized your self for

“Thou shalt not die; for while love's fire shines  
Upon his altar, men shall read thy lines.”

Ferd. Jelke, Jr  
Jan 16th 1892