

Robert Herrick

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Selected Poems

of

Robert Herrick

**Selected & edited by
Tony Frazer**

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Introduction

Robert Herrick (1591-1674) was born the son of a goldsmith in London, and was apprenticed to his uncle, also a goldsmith, at the age of sixteen. After five years of his apprenticeship he went up to Cambridge in 1613 as a fellow commoner, at first studying at Saint John's College, but transferring later to the cheaper Trinity Hall, and graduating in 1617. In the 1620s he joined the group of young poets in London that gathered around the great poet and playwright Ben Jonson, but took holy orders in 1623.

In 1627 he was appointed chaplain to the Duke of Buckingham and took part in his unsuccessful military expedition to La Rochelle. In 1629, a year after his mother's death, Herrick was appointed to the living of Dean Prior, a village on the southern edge of Dartmoor, about half-way between Plymouth and Exeter, which was worth £21 per annum. His first published poem appeared in 1633, but his work would have been circulated in manuscript for many years before this, and not only amongst his immediate circle, or the followers of Jonson.

In view of his royalist sympathies, he was expelled from Dean Prior in 1647, following the overthrow of Charles I, and returned to live in London. He seems to have subsisted there on the charity of his brother Nicholas, as well as friends and supporters such as Mildmay Fane, a fellow-poet and Earl of Westmorland. In 1648, his collected poems *Hesperides* was published in London, and was sold also through a bookseller in Exeter, Thomas Hunt. After the Restoration, Herrick petitioned the King to be reappointed to his post in Dean Prior, and this was granted. From 1660 until his death there in 1674, he served the parish once again as its Vicar.

Such are the bare bones of Herrick's life. It may seem odd that an up-and-coming poet, respected and moving in the best literary circles, should move to such a remote location – London would have been a week's ride away – and stay there for most of the remainder of his life. The reasons are likely to have been economic, rather than devotion to the cloth. He

certainly visited London from time to time – a curate in the parish would have permitted his absence – but was no doubt somewhat out of the swim of things in poetic terms, perhaps a little old-fashioned. Rose Macaulay – a direct descendant of Herrick – in her novel about him, *They Were Defeated*, made much of the unfashionable style of his work, and she was almost certainly correct. History, however, has been kinder to Herrick than to some of the then more fashionable writers of his era, and this is despite the fact that it was a golden age for poetry – consider the names of some of his contemporaries: Jonson, Donne, Milton, Herbert, Carew, Vaughan, not to mention fine secondary figures such as Cowley, Waller, Lovelace and Suckling.

Until the late 19th century, Herrick's output – more than 1,400 poems – was under-rated, and some of his more risqué poems were looked at askance by Victorian commentators. However, slowly but surely, his talent as a composer of lyrics has been recognised. But there is more to Herrick than a collection of lyrics, over forty of which were set to music by the composers of his time: his sacred poems, while not plumbing the depths of Donne or Herbert, are still under-rated, and his longer elegiac poems offer a great deal more than one would expect from an acclaimed song-writer and lyric miniaturist. And then his humorous poems and epigrams manage to amuse even now, more than 350 years after their publication. His attitude to Devon was mixed – the poems 'Discontents in Devon' (p.16) and 'His return to London' (p.87) prove that he could be irritated by his provincial isolation – but there are also many poems that also attest to his joy in various aspects of his life in Dean Prior, and to his interest in country life. He was an acute and amusing observer of life in the parish.

The selection here includes a number of the poet's acknowledged 'greatest hits', as well as several poems that specifically concern Devon, but it also tries to demonstrate the range of Herrick's work, even while excerpting only a very small percentage of it. The sequence of the poems follows, where possible, that established in the first edition of *Hesperides* in

1648, although, in some cases, shorter poems do appear slightly out of sequence for space reasons. The texts are also based on the 1648 edition, but spelling has been modernised except where this would affect the scansion. The original punctuation – often strange to modern eyes – has been retained, however. The reason for this is that changes can ruin the movement of the verse, and that reading the poems aloud is actually helped by the free-form 17th century punctuation, especially when one compares them with “modernised” editions from the 19th, or early 20th century, which updated the punctuation to then-current norms. The Oxford University Press World’s Classics edition (1902, reset 1933, which follows the first edition), has also been consulted in cases where the facsimile of the first edition of *Hesperides* was not sufficiently clear, and the final two poems in the book are also drawn from that edition, as they were not published during Herrick’s lifetime. Finally, capitalisation in titles follows that found in the first edition, albeit with modern spelling. Connoisseurs of Herrick’s work should note that Oxford University Press has commissioned a two-volume *Complete Poetry of Robert Herrick* for publication in 2010, which is currently being compiled at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. This promises to be the most significant edition of Herrick’s poetry in a very long time.

Notes to the poems will be found at the back of the book. This is intended to be a reading edition – hence the decision to update the spelling and to avoid footnotes beneath the poems themselves. A full scholarly apparatus has also been avoided, partly because this would have required a different editor, but also because it would not have been appropriate for a reading edition aimed at a general audience. The notes have been created for the general modern reader, making allowance for the fact that Greek and Roman mythology, and the classical poets, are no longer common currency. My apologies to those who find explanations in the notes for things that they already know far better than I.

Tony Frazer
Exeter, 2007

HESPERIDES:
OR,
THE WORKS
BOTH
HUMANE & DIVINE
OF
ROBERT HERRICK *Esq.*

OVID.

Effugient avidos Carmina nostra Rogos.



L O N D O N,

Printed for *John Williams*, and *Francis Eglesfield*,
and are to be sold by *Tho: Hunt*, Book-seller
in *Exon.* 1 6 4 8.

The Argument of his Book

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.

To his Book

While thou didst keep thy candour undefiled,
Dearly I loved thee; as my first-born child:
But when I saw thee wantonly to roam
From house to house, and never stay at home;
I broke my bonds of love, and bade thee go,
Regardless whether well thou sped'st, or no.
On with thy fortunes then, what e're they be;
If good I'll smile, if bad I'll sigh for thee.

To the Sour Reader

If thou dislik'st the piece thou light'st on first;
Think that of all, that I have writ, the worst:
But if thou read'st my book unto the end,
And still do'st this, and that verse, reprehend:
O perverse man! If all disgustful be,
The extreme scab take thee, and thine, for me.

To his Book

Come thou not near those men, who are like bread
O're-leavened; or like cheese o're-renneted.

The Frozen Heart

I freeze, I freeze, and nothing dwells
In me but snow, and icicles.
For pity's sake give your advice,
To melt this snow, and thaw this ice;
I'll drink down flames, but if so be
Nothing but love can supple me;
I'll rather keep this frost, and snow,
Than to be thawed, or heated so.

To his Mistresses

Help me! help me! now I call
To my pretty witchcrafts all:
Old I am, and cannot do
That, I was accustomed to.
Bring your magics, spells, and charms,
To enflesh my thighs, and arms:
Is there no way to beget
In my limbs their former heat?
Æson had (as poets fain)
Baths that made him young again:
Find that medicine (if you can)
For your dry decrepit man:
Who would fain his strength renew,
Were it but to pleasure you.

To Anthea

If dear Anthea, my hard fate it be
To live some few sad hours after thee:
Thy sacred course with odours I will burn;
And with my laurel crown thy golden urn.
Then holding up (there) such religious things,
As were (time past) thy holy filletings:
Near to thy reverend pitcher I will fall
Down dead for grief, and end my woes withal:
So three in one small plot of ground shall lie,
Anthea, Herrick, and his poetry.

On himself

Young I was, but now am old,
But I am not yet grown cold;
I can play, and I can twine
'Bout a virgin like a vine:
In her lap too I can lie
Melting, and in fancy die:
And return to life, if she
Claps my cheek, or kisseth me;
Thus, and thus it now appears
That our love outlasts our years.

Discontents in Devon

More discontents I never had
 Since I was born, than here;
Where I have been, and still am sad,
 In this dull Devonshire:
Yet justly too I must confess;
 I ne'er invented such
Ennobled numbers for the press,
 Than where I loathed so much.

Cherry-ripe

Cherry-ripe, ripe, ripe, I cry,
Full and fair ones; come and buy:
If so be, you ask me where
They do grow? I answer, there,
Where my Julia's lips do smile;
There's the land, or cherry-isle:
Whose plantations fully show
All the year, where cherries grow.

To Anthea

Now is the time, when all the lights wax dim;
And thou (Anthea) must withdraw from him
Who was thy servant. Dearest, bury me
Under that holy oak, or gospel-tree:
Where (though thou see'st not) thou may'st think upon
Me, when thou yearly go'st procession:
Or for mine honour, lay me in that tomb
In which thy sacred relics shall have room:
For my embalming (sweetest) there will be
No spices wanting, when I'm laid by thee.

Of Love. A Sonnet

How love came in, I do not know,
Whether by th' eye, or ear, or no:
Or whether with the soul it came
(At first) infused with the same:
Whether in part 'tis here or there,
Or, like the soul, whole everywhere:
This troubles me: but I as well
As any other, this can tell;
That when from hence she does depart,
The outlet then is from the heart.

To Anthea

Ah my Anthea! Must my heart still break?
(Love makes me write, what shame forbids to speak.)
Give me a kiss, and to that kiss a score;
Then to that twenty, add a hundred more:
A thousand to that hundred: so kiss on,
To make that thousand up a million.
Treble that million, and when that is done
Let's kiss afresh, as when we first begun.
But yet, though love likes well such scenes as these,
There is an act that will more fully please:
Kissing and glancing, soothing, all make way
But to the acting of this private play:
Name it I would; but being blushing red,
The rest I'll speak, when we meet both in bed.

Dean Bourn, a rude River in Devon by which sometimes he lived

Dean Bourn, farewell; I never look to see
Dean, or thy warty incivility.
Thy rocky bottom, that doth tear thy streams
And makes them frantic, ev'n to all extremes;
To my content, I never should behold,
Were thy streams silver, or thy rocks all gold.
Rocky thou art; and rocky we discover
Thy men; and rocky are thy ways all over.
O men, O manners; now, and ever known
To be a rocky generation!
A people currish; churlish as the seas;
And rude (almost) as rudest salvages,
With whom I did, and may re-sojourn when
Rocks turn to rivers, rivers turn to men.

Duty to Tyrants

Good princes must be prayed for: for the bad
They must be borne with, and in rev'rence had.
Do they first pill thee, next, pluck off thy skin?
Good children kiss the rods, that punish sin.
Touch not the tyrant; let the gods alone
To strike him dead, that but usurps a throne.

**A Country life: To his Brother,
Mr. Tho. Herrick**

Thrice, and above, blest (my soul's half) art thou,
In thy both last, and better vow:
Could'st leave the city, for exchange, to see
The country's sweet simplicity:
And it to know, and practise; with intent
To grow the sooner innocent:
By studying to know virtue; and to aim
More at her nature, than her name:
The last is but the least; the first doth tell
Ways less to live, than to live well:
And both are known to thee, who now canst live
Led by the conscience; to give
Justice to soon-pleased nature; and to show,
Wisdom and she together go,
And keep one centre: this with that conspires,
To teach man to confine desires:
And know, that riches have their proper stint,
In the contented mind, not mint.
And canst instruct, that those who have the itch
Of craving more, are never rich.
These things thou know'st to th' height, and dost prevent
That plague; because thou art content
With that Heav'n gave thee with a wary hand,
(More blessèd in thy brass, than land)
To keep cheap nature even, and upright;
To cool, not cocker appetite.
Thus thou canst tearcely live to satisfy
The belly chiefly; not the eye:
Keeping the barking stomach wisely quiet,
Less with a neat, than needful diet.
But that which most makes sweet thy country life,
Is, the fruition of a wife:

Whom (stars consenting with thy fate) thou hast
 Got, not so beautiful, as chaste:
 By whose warm side thou dost securely sleep
 (While love the sentinel doth keep)
 With those deeds done by day, which ne'er affright
 Thy silken slumbers in the night.
 Nor has the darkness power to usher in
 Fear to those sheets, that know no sin.
 But still thy wife, by chaste intentions led,
 Gives thee each night a maidenhead.
 The damasked meadows, and the pebbly streams
 Sweeten, and make soft your dreams:
 The purling springs, groves, birds, and well-weaved bow'rs,
 With fields enamelled with flowers,
 Present their shapes; while fantasy discloses
 Millions of lilies mixed with roses.
 Then dream, ye hear the lamb by many a bleat
 Wooed to come suck the milky teat:
 While Faunus in the vision comes to keep,
 From rav'ning wolves, the fleecy sheep.
 With thousand such enchanting dreams, that meet
 To make sleep not so sound, as sweet:
 Nor can these figures so thy rest endear,
 As not to rise when Chanticleer
 Warns the last watch; but with the dawn dost rise
 To work, but first to sacrifice;
 Making thy peace with heav'n, for some late fault,
 With holy-meal, and spirting-salt.
 Which done, thy painful thumb this sentence tells us,
 Jove for our labour all things sells us.
 Nor are thy daily and devout affairs
 Attended with those desp'rate cares,
 Th' industrious merchant has; who for to find
 Gold, runneth to the Western Inde,
 And back again, (tortured with fears) doth fly,

Untaught, to suffer poverty.
 But thou at home, blest with securest ease,
 Sitt'st, and believ'st that there be seas,
 And wat'ry dangers; while thy whiter hap,
 But sees these things within thy map.
 And viewing them with a more safe survey
 Mak'st easy fear unto thee say,
A heart thrice walled with oak, and brass, that man
 Had, first, durst plough the ocean.
 But thou at home without or tide or gale,
 Canst in thy map securely sail:
 Seeing those painted countries; and so guess
 By those fine shades, their substances:
 And from thy compass taking small advice,
 Buy'st travel at the lowest price.
 Nor are thine ears so deaf, but thou canst hear,
 (Far more with wonder, than with fear)
 Fame tell of states, of countries, courts, and kings;
 And believe there be such things:
 When of these truths, thy happier knowledge lies,
 More in thine ears, than in thine eyes.
 And when thou hear'st by that too-true report,
 Vice rules the most, or all at court:
 Thy pious wishes are, (though thou not there)
 Virtue had, and moved her sphere.
 But thou liv'st fearless; and thy face ne'er shows
 Fortune when she comes, or goes,
 But with thy equal thoughts, prepared dost stand,
 To take her by the either hand;
 Nor car'st which comes the first, the foul or fair;
 A wise man ev'ry way lies square,
 And, like a surly oak with storms perplexed;
 Grows still the stronger, strongly vexed.
 Be so, bold spirit; stand centre-like, unmoved;
 And be not only thought, but proved

To be what I report thee; and inure
 Thyself, if want comes to endure:
 And so thou dost: for thy desires are
 Confined to live with private lar:
 Not curious whether appetite be fed,
 Or with the first, or second bread.
 Who keep'st no proud mouth for delicious cates:
 Hunger makes coarse meats, delicates.
 Canst, and unurged, forsake that larded fare,
 Which art, not nature, makes so rare;
 To taste boiled nettles, colworts, beets, and eat
 These, and sour herbs, as dainty meat?
 While soft opinion makes thy genius say,
 Content makes all ambrosia.
 Nor is it that thou keep'st this stricter size
 So much for want, as exercise:
 To numb the sense of dearth, which should sin haste it,
 Thou might'st but only see't, not taste it.
 Yet can thy humble roof maintain a choir
 Of singing crickets by the fire:
 And the brisk mouse may feast herself with crumbs
 Till that the green-eyed kitling comes.
 Then to her cabin, blest she can escape
 The sudden danger of a rape.
 And thus thy little well-kept stock doth prove,
 Wealth cannot make a life, but love.
 Nor art thou so close-handed, but canst spend,
 (Counsel concurring with the end)
 As well as spare, still conning o're this theme,
 To shun the first, and last extreme.
 Ordaining that thy small stock find no breach,
 Or to exceed thy tether's reach:
 But to live round, and close, and wisely true
 To thine own self; and known to few.
 Thus let thy rural sanctuary be

Elysium to thy wife and thee;
There to disport yourselves with golden measure:
 For seldom use commends the pleasure.
Live, and live blest; thrice happy pair; let breath,
 But lost to one, be th' other's death.
And as there is one love, one faith, one troth,
 Be so one death, one grave to both.
Till when, in such assurance live, ye may,
 Nor fear, or wish your dying day.

The frozen Zone; or, Julia disdainful

Whither? Say, whither shall I fly,
To slake these flames wherein I fry?
To the treasures, shall I go,
Of the rain, frost, hail, and snow?
Shall I search the underground,
Where all damps, and mists are found?
Shall I seek (for speedy ease)
All the floods, and frozen seas?
Or descend into the deep,
Where eternal cold does keep?
These may cool; but there's a zone
Colder yet than any one:
That's my Julia's breast; where dwells
Such destructive icicles;
As that the congelation will
Me sooner starve, than those can kill.