Abraham Cowley (1618–67) was a poet, translator, and essayist. He was renowned in his lifetime for his lyric poetry, and for his adaptations and imitations of Pindar, Anacreon, Horace, and Virgil. His posthumously published essays also found a wide audience. He was revered in his own lifetime, and by the succeeding generation of poets, but his reputation has declined steadily since the eighteenth century. His work is playful, complex, and unusually rich in metaphor.

Cowley was born in London and attended Westminster School as a king's scholar. A precocious child, he wrote later in his essay ‘Of myself’ that he had read all of Edmund Spenser’s work before his twelfth birthday, and ‘was thus made a poet as irremediably as a Child is made an Eunuch’. He published his first collection of poems, Poetical blossomes, in 1633, while he was still a pupil at Westminster. An expanded edition was published in 1636. He won a scholarship to Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1637, subsequently becoming a minor fellow. While at Cambridge he wrote three plays: the Latin comedy Naufragium ioculare and the pastoral comedy Loves riddle (both 1638), and the Jon-sonian comedy The guardian, which was performed for Charles, prince of Wales when he visited the university in 1641. Cowley was to revise The guardian as The cutter of Coleman Street after the Restoration.

In March 1643 Cowley was – like many scholars with broadly Royalist sympathies – forced to leave Cambridge, and took up residence at St John's College, Oxford. Two political poems date from the later stages of Cowley’s time at Cambridge. The first, which circulated in manuscript as The Puritans lecture before being published in 1642 as A satyre against separatists, describes a meeting of tedious, hypocritical, and gluttonous Puritan ministers. The second, The Puritan and the papist, is purportedly an attack on religious extremism in all its forms. Its major objective, though, is to point out the hypocrisy of the Puritans, whose positions often stray close to those of Roman Catholics ('Three Kingdoms thus ye strive to make your own/And like the Pope usurp a triple Crowne'). The poem shifts in its final third to a breathless attack on the Parliamentarian cause more generally. This poem must have been substantially complete by the time Cowley left Trinity, but was probably further revised at Oxford before its publication later in 1643. While at Oxford, Cowley became acquainted with members of the Great Tew circle, centred around Lucius Cary, second Viscount Falkland. He wrote, while staying in Oxford, a historical epic poem entitled The Civil War. Cowley wrote more or less contemporaneously with the events he describes, versifying reports from the Royalist Mercurius aulicus. He abandoned the poem following the Royalists’ defeat, and Falkland's death, at the first battle of Newbury in September 1643. The elegy to Falkland with which the poem closes is one of his most moving passages of verse. Cowley later claimed to have destroyed the manuscript, but the first book...
was published in 1679, and a further two books were discovered in the Hertfordshire County Record Office and published in 1973. Curiously, Cowley records the decision to abandon the project within the poem itself: ‘The troubled Muse fell shapelesse into aire / Instead of Inck dropt from my Pen a Teare.’

In 1644 Cowley travelled to France to join the exiled court of Queen Henrietta Maria. There he associated with the circle that surrounded Thomas Hobbes and William Davenant, and worked as a spy for the royal party. An apparently unauthorized edition of his collection *The mistresse* was published by the royalist bookseller Humphrey Moseley in 1647. The love lyrics contained in it are frequently concerned with clandestine affairs, and it has been suggested that this interest in secrecy (also manifest in his later work) stems from Cowley’s involvement with espionage. Thomas Corns (1992) points to the ‘libertine eroticism’ of the poems, and suggests that (like Richard Lovelace’s *Lucasta*, 1648) the collection ‘assiduously rehearses the values and enthusiasms of the Caroline court’. For many readers, Cowley’s fertile and elastic wit, which can lead him to describe his beloved’s hymen as the ‘slight, outward Curtain to the Nuptial Bed!’ (‘Maidenhead’) represents the worst excesses of metaphysical poetry. Indeed, it was in his *Life of Cowley* (1779) that Samuel Johnson initiated the idea of ‘a race of writers who might be termed the metaphysical poets’, producing a kind of verse in which ‘the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together’. Christine Rees (1980) has made a strong case for the unity and the symmetry of the collection, but does not attempt to rescue Cowley from the charge of insincerity. This failing cannot be attributed entirely to the poems’ metaphysical nature. Cowley looks back to the Petrarchan tradition and the love poetry of Edmund Spenser and Philip Sidney as much as he draws on John Donne. Several poems from *The mistresse* were subsequently set as songs by, among many others, John Blow and Henry Purcell; the scores for these settings are given in a recent collection of Cowley’s works (Calhoun et al. 1993).

The contemporary poet with whom Cowley had perhaps the closest relationship was Richard Crashaw. The two men met at Cambridge, and probably renewed their acquaintance in Oxford and in France. They worked together on ‘On hope’, a collaborative poem in which Cowley’s verses against hope are answered by Crashaw’s in favour. The poem was first printed in Crashaw’s *Steps to the temple* (1646), but the arrangement of verses is faulty in this version, as the poets’ arguments do not properly address each other. Cowley’s contribution was reprinted in *The mistress*, to which he added his own defence of hope. David Trotter (1979) has looked more broadly at the way in which the two poets influenced one another. Cowley wrote an elegy ‘On the death of Mr Crashaw’, in which he stresses that their friendship transcended religious difference:

  his Life, I’m sure was in the right
And I a Catholick will be,
So far at least, great Saint, to pray to thee.

As David Hopkins and Tom Mason (1994) observe, it is entirely characteristic of Cowley to quibble on the word ‘Catholick’ at so solemn a moment.

Cowley returned to England in 1654, and was briefly gaoled by the parliamentary authorities. His £1,000 bail was guaranteed by Dr Charles Scarborough, to whom he addressed a poem drawing a parallel between the nation weakened by civil war and the human body ravaged by disease. His collected *Poems* were published by Moseley in 1656. This folio volume contained a slightly revised version of *The mistresse*, alongside three new sections: *Miscellanies* (including the famous translations from poems wrongly attributed to Anacreon), the *Pindarique odes*, and the *Davideis*.

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The Davideis, a sacred poem of the troubles of David was envisaged as a poem in 12 books, though Cowley completed only the first four. It anticipates Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) in casting biblical subject matter into the form of Virgilian epic. Cowley writes in the preface that he initially planned 12 books 'after the *Pattern of our Master Virgil*', and even goes so far as to imitate the accidental half-lines of the *Aeneid*, which Virgil left incomplete on his death (he had also done this in *The Civil War*). Criticism on the poem has focused on the question of whether Cowley's biblical subject matter represents a retreat from political events, or whether it functions (like John Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel*, 1681) as an allegory; might the young prince David, for example, stand for the exiled prince of Wales?

According to his friend and biographer Thomas Sprat (whose 'An account of the life and writing of Mr Abraham Cowley' was included in the posthumous 1668 *Works*), Cowley began reading Pindar in the early 1650s when he was ‘in a place, where he had no other Books to direct him’. This place was probably Jersey, where he travelled on behalf of Henrietta Maria in 1651. Cowley described the Pindaric mode as 'the noblest and highest kind of writing in Verse', and regretted its disappearance, remarking also that it might ‘be put into the list of Pancirollus, among the lost Inventions of Antiquity’. He translated two of Pindar's poems for the 1656 *Works*, and offered a series of original poems taking Pindar as his model. His preface promises a free translation, recognizing that 'if a Man should undertake to translate *Pindar* Word for Word, it would be thought that one *Mad-man* had translated another'.

Cowley's translations, metrically loose where Pindar's are highly regular, sparked an interest in the poet that extended well into the following century; when Dryden, Alexander Pope, and Thomas Gray imitate Pindar, their imitation is mediated through Cowley. Even if Cowley disregards (or, some readers have felt, misunderstands) some formal aspects of his model, there is a genuine affinity between the two poets, both of whom shift rapidly from topic to topic and from metaphor to metaphor. Thus in 'The muse', a poem which describes the power of poetry to preserve, he compares (over the course of 12 lines) the function of poetry to the halting of a river's flow, to the stiffening of a slithering snake (with echoes of Moses' miracle in Exodus), to the preservation of fruit in sugar, to the magical transformation of a sheet of melting ice to a mirror, and finally to the transformation of ‘this one short Point of Time, / To fill up half the Orb of Round Eternity’. Trotter (1979) draws a connection between Cowley's interpretation of the Pindaric ode, with its particular emphasis on swift movement and arbitrary connections, and his interest in Hobbes's 'radical psychology' and the free association of ideas. One of the original poems in the collection is addressed to Hobbes, and is marked (as all of Cowley's Pindarics are) by the rapidity with which the poet moves from one metaphor to another, while hailing the addressee as representing the 'living soul' of philosophy.

Stella Revard (1993) points to the poems’ potential political application, and suggests that Cowley found in Pindar’s famously obscure style a means of covertly expressing his unwavering Royalist sympathies. Certainly the translation of Pindar's second Olympian ode, with its emphasis on parricide, revenge, and return, anticipates the subject matter of Cowley's ode 'Upon his majestie's restoration and return' composed in 1660. Cowley was, however, keen to stress his newly apolitical stance, and wrote a preface for the volume in which he declared himself reconciled to the defeat of the royal cause and suggested that former Royalists 'lay down our Pens, as well as our Arms'. This sentiment may have been responsible for his relative fall from favour after the Restoration – as may his inclusion in the volume of the Pindaric poem 'Brutus', which celebrates the actions of the Roman tyrannicide (though the poem can in fact be read as anti-Cromwellian). After the king's return, Cowley strove to show his loyalty, publishing not only his Restoration ode, but also *The visions and prophecies concerning*
England, Scotland, and Ireland (1661), an account of Cromwell's funeral, together with an extremely negative account of his character. His post-1656 verse was collected in Verses, written upon several occasions (1663). The volume contains a poem, 'The complaint', in which Cowley appears to bemoan his lack of royal patronage.

Samuel Johnson acknowledged the diversity of Cowley's writing, but felt that 'his power seems to have been greatest in the familiar and the festive'. He here refers specifically to the Anacreontiques, 11 poems in which Cowley celebrates the simple pleasures of love and wine. He describes the poems as having been translated 'paraphrastically' (anticipating Dryden's use of the term), and they often diverge wildly from their Greek models. By contrast, Thomas Stanley had produced faithful and undazzling versions of 55 of the Anacreontea. The most successful, and best-known, of Cowley's Anacreontiques is 'The grasshopper', a poem in which the insect is hailed as a true exponent of the philosophy of Epicurus ('Voluptuous, and wise withal, /Epicurean animal!'). An interest in the transient pleasures and glories is typical of Royalist poetry of the 1640s and 1650s. Lovelace also paid homage to the grasshopper during the 'Cavalier winter' and there are faint echoes of his poem in Cowley's – though whereas Lovelace's insect is a 'verdant fool' whose inevitable fate is to become 'green ice', Cowley's can retire happily once sated. Epicureanism, in fact, informs many of his poems, and such poems should be seen in the context of his broader interest in retirement and seclusion. His posthumously published Several discourses, by way of essays in verse and prose (in the 1668 Works) contains reflections in prose on the advantages of country life and withdrawal from the political arena, incorporating verse translations from Greek and Latin (and one or two original poems) which reinforce this central theme. One of the most enjoyable of these is his rendering of Horace's second Epode, the celebrated poem (beginning 'beatus ille ...') in praise of rural retirement; Cowley bizarrely omits from his version the final four lines – in which the speaker is revealed to be a grasping moneylender. He also includes Horace's tale of the Town Mouse and the Country Mouse in his essay 'Of agriculture'. Other essays include 'Of liberty', 'Of solitude', and the autobiographical 'Of myself'. 'The garden', dedicated to John Evelyn, has been suggested as a possible source for Andrew Marvell's poem of the same name; it draws equally on Edenic and Epicurean language.

Cowley spent the final years of the Protectorate studying botany and medicine, and was admitted to the degree of doctor of physic in 1657. He was not a member of the Royal Society, but took an interest in its activities. His Proposition for the advancement of experimental philosophy was published in 1661, and he contributed a prefatory poem to Thomas Sprat's History of the Royal-Society (1667). His 1663 poem 'On the death of Mr William Harvey', in which he imagines the natural philosopher pursuing Nature through the fibres of a tree and into the human blood stream, is one of his most wildly inventive. His interest in plants resulted in the monumental Plantarum libri sex – the longest neo-Latin work by any English author. The work initially promises to be a compendium of botanical information in verse, and the first two books, which deal with the properties of herbs (published independently as Plantarum libri duo in 1662) are relatively conventional – though they are enlivened by direct addresses from the plants and pseudo-Ovidian transformation tales. As the work progresses (books III and IV are concerned with flowers, V and VI with trees), Cowley becomes less concerned with botany and more politically engaged. There is also a shift in metre, from lyric forms in the first four books to Virgilian hexameters for the grander subject matter of the fifth and sixth. The final book is an exploration of the place of the oak in English history; we hear of the Civil War and regicide, Charles II's escape at Worcester, the Restoration, and the recent (1665) battle of Lowestoft. An English translation of the entire work was published in 1689. Contributors included Aphra Behn (who translated the final book) and

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Cowley died of pneumonia on 28 July 1667, following a brief period of Horatian retirement in Surrey. His literary executor was Thomas Sprat, who oversaw the publication of his 1668 Works, his Essays, and his Poemata Latina. He was buried in Westminster Abbey, next to Chaucer and Spenser. The inscription on his monument declared him to be the English Pindar, Virgil, and Horace. John Denham wrote an epitaph for him in which he said that 'To him no Author was unknown, / Yet what he wrote was all his own'. This sounds like mere commonplace, but gets to the heart of Cowley's achievement; his poetry is always learned and allusive (sometimes off-puttingly so), but he is at his most idiosyncratic while imitating others. His reputation during his lifetime and in the decades following his death was immense, but declined steadily thereafter. The past three decades have seen a modest revival of interest, perhaps owing to the increased scholarly emphasis on classical reception.

SEE ALSO: Cary, Lucius, Lord Falkland; Clinton, Elizabeth; Denham, John; Donne, John; Evelyn, John; Harvey, William; Hobbes, Thomas; Lovelace, Richard; Marvell, Andrew; Milton, John

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS


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