Herrick, Robert, 1591-1674

Definition: **Herrick, Robert** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

English poet, disciple of Ben Jonson. Ordained in 1623, Herrick was ejected from his post (1647) for royalist sympathies. He regained the position after the Restoration. His poems, most notably the collection *Hesperides* (1648), have great lyrical freshness.

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Summary Article: **Herrick, Robert**


The canonical status of Robert Herrick (1591–1674) rests on his 1648 collection *Hesperides*. The title refers only to his secular poems; the divine are called *His noble members* and given their own title page. Herrick's personal supervision of the volume makes it a landmark in the history of authorship and its ostentatiously Royalist frontispiece signals its importance within London's counter-revolutionary literary culture during the Second Civil War. The collection's poetry was composed in the decades between 1610 and 1647 and reflects in its often noted variety the shifting poetic sensibilities of Jacobean and Caroline literature. Herrick was a native Londoner, born in 1591 to a family of prosperous London goldsmiths. His father's suicide in 1592 led to the break-up of his family and Herrick was fostered by his uncle, Sir William Herrick, who subsequently apprenticed him to the same profession, though not before providing him with what was likely to have been a solid grammar school education.

The adolescent apprentice's ambitions exceeded those proposed for him by his uncle, and his skill in composing poetry may have pointed him towards an alternative calling. The most expert poem datable to these years, 'The country life: to his brother Master Thomas Herrick', written in or before 1613, shows the influence of Ben Jonson's 'To Sir Robert Wroth', a poem then circulating solely in manuscript. Jonson, one of the city's leading literary figures, was himself a former apprentice bricklayer, and his literary and personal example is likely to have been formative for Herrick.

When Herrick came of age in 1613, he broke his apprenticeship to attend St John's College, Cambridge, and his entry to university provided him with the audience and the opportunity to consolidate his poetic reputation. The evidence of two manuscript miscellanies (University of Texas at Austin Harry Ransom Research Centre, MS 79, and Beinecke Library, OsbornMSb. 197) demonstrate that his manuscript work was circulating at Cambridge in the 1620s, and was still being read there in the early 1640s. Some of his most frequently circulated poems in manuscript, including 'The farewell to sack', 'The welcome to sack', and 'The curse', were popularized and probably composed during this time, and these and other poems datable to this university period exemplify the sociability and occasionality characteristic of Stuart manuscript poetry. The only extant poem copied in Herrick's own hand also dates from this period. 'Chorus' (British Library, Harley MS 367 f. 154) is Herrick's elegy on John Brown, a fellow of Caius College, Cambridge, who died in 1619.

Herrick, who migrated to Trinity Hall, Cambridge in 1615 ostensibly to study law, obtained his BA in 1617 and his MA in 1620. But he chose to enter the church and was ordained a minister in the Church of England in 1623. The details of his career immediately following ordination are sketchy but he was almost certainly living in London, and though his means of financial support are unknown, he was still writing poetry for and with Cambridge friends like his long-time patron Mildmay Fane, second earl of...
Westmorland, Sir Clipsby Crewe, and his closest friend John Weekes. In 1628 he and Weekes departed on a military expedition to Isle du Rhé as chaplains within the retinue of its leader, George Villiers, first duke of Buckingham. The expedition returned in ignominious defeat but Herrick managed to forge some court connections, perhaps through his friendship with the courtier Sir John Mennes, who was also on the expedition.

The clerical living in Dean Prior in Devon, to which Herrick was presented in 1629, was one that was in the gift of Charles I, and in 1630 there is the first recorded instance of Herrick's poetry being performed at court, the piece in question being a tribute to the birth of the young Prince Charles. Herrick's transfer to his rural Devon parish in the same year produced a mixed poetic response. His poems to and about individuals in the area are complimentary verses reflecting social bonds forged between a minister and the local lawyers and gentry families, but his epigrams on some of his poorer parishioners have a note of amused disdain and he occasionally laments his sojourn in 'dull Devonshire'.

Herrick was not cut off from the capital: at one point a report indicated he was in fact living away from his parish in Westminster in contravention of church regulations stipulating residence in his parish. His poetry continued to circulate in manuscript and in 1641 the publisher Andrew Crooke enters a proposed volume entitled ‘The several poems of Robert Herrick’ into the Stationers’ Register although the proposed volume appears never to have been printed. The first extant evidence of Herrick's attitude to the growing political tensions in England is his signature in 1642 on the House of Commons’ Protestation against the king's over-reaching of his constitutional powers. But the incursion of the Civil War into Devon prompted him to write a series of loyal addresses to the king and queen, and odes to royalist war heroes. Unusually, he was expelled from his living in 1646, probably by the advancing New Model Army. Most Church of England ministers were left in place and Herrick's loss of his home and income and his enforced return to London may have cast him as a Royalist martyr: the publication in early 1648 of Hesperides and His noble numbers, a collection of 1,402 poems by the now 57-year-old poet, bears all the hallmarks of a Royalist literary enterprise. Herrick added to the collection almost up to the last minute; his final poem for it may have been ‘On the king, upon his welcome to Hampton Court’, written after August 1647. Poems like this one introduce a hum of topicality to a collection that for the most part avoids overt political commentary. The collection reflects Herrick's four decades of work (Creaser 2009) but comparisons between the extant manuscript poems and their print equivalents indicate that he did revise each poem sufficiently to distinguish it from the version he composed for manuscript circulation.

The volume was printed anonymously by John Grismond, and published by the booksellers John Williams and Francis Eglesfield, who sold the volume in London. Thomas Hunt, an Exeter bookseller, also took some copies for the Devon market. The reputation of these men points to the political import of the volume's publication. The most overtly loyalist symbol used in the text, the large image of a crown which adorns its frontispiece, was supplied by Williams. It doubled as an advertisement (the Crown was Williams’s shop) and a statement of political intent since the illustration is that of St Edward's Crown, used for Charles I's coronation. Williams used this ornament very sparingly, and usually for overtly Royalist work like Thomas Fuller's A happy handfull, or green hopes in the blade (1660), written in anticipation of the return of Charles II. Williams, Grismond, and Eglesfield continued to serve the Royalist cause following the regicide and the latter pair participated in the clandestine publication of Charles I's bestselling Eikon basilike (1649). The affiliation of the printer and publishers underscores a likely political motive for their publication of a volume of poetry as large and expensive to undertake as

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Hesperides, and Herrick's dedication of the volume to the young prince of Wales signals the poet's own endorsement of these values. This politicized framing of Herrick's largely apolitical verse proved remarkably successful, and the consolidation of Herrick's reputation as a Royalist poet continued into 1649, when a lyric written by Herrick and set to music by Henry Lawes was included in Lachrymae musarum, a volume of elegies commemorating the death of Henry Hastings, Lord Hastings, the young heir to Ferdinando Hastings, sixth earl of Huntingdon.

This lyric is the last example of a new poem by Herrick but his poetry continued to be reprinted in numerous anthologies and song-books in the 1650s from both manuscript sources and Hesperides; and as John Playford also began to print the musical settings of Henry Lawes and his brother William, Herrick's work maintained a significant presence in 1650s, Royalist literary and musical circles. Herrick himself survived the 1650s, sporadically supported by hand-outs from friends like Fane and the charitable Royalist patron John, Viscount Scudamore. At the Restoration of Charles II he petitioned to be returned to his living of Dean Prior, citing his service of Buckingham in the 1620s in support of his claim. Herrick appears to have served his parish dutifully until his death in 1674 aged 83.

Herrick did not apparently circulate any new work after 1649 and this underscores the impression of comprehensiveness given by Hesperides and His noble numbers, but the volume omits at least seven poems that are reliably ascribed to him in manuscript, including 'Chorus'. The majority of the poems, 1,130 in all, are contained within Hesperides, a deliberately allusive title that both pays an elaborate compliment to the Prince of Wales and advertises the poet's hopes for the volume. The title pays homage to the appearance in the sky for several hours on the day of the prince's birth of the evening star (Hesperus) but the Hesperides were also mythological figures, nymphs whose task was to guard the garden where golden apples, a symbol of immortality, grow.

The legend of this paradisiacal garden and its supposed location on an island in the west was swiftly appropriated by Elizabethan and Jacobean writers to describe the condition of England (Coiro 1988), and in Herrick's presentation of this topos, his secular poems become both the offspring of the evening star enclosed within a western heaven and the fruits that offer the promise of immortality to the poet. The book also has a second title page dividing Herrick's sacred poems, the 'noble numbers' of the title, from his secular work, a relatively commonplace division marking a separation of topic rather than text since the book is printed as a single sequence and not as two separate works. His noble numbers provide a Christian counterpoint to the mythological vision of Hesperides, addressed as they are to a divine monarch and offering hope of another paradise.

The opening poems of Hesperides are a series of addresses to the book and reader which are composed in imitation of a similar sequence that opens the Epigrammata of the Roman poet Martial. These opening addresses, which form a nine-poem thematic block concerned with the poetry, its reception and circulation, are followed by a collection of striking variety arranged in no particular order, which can be broadly divided into the closely related forms of lyric and epigram. The poems include sonnets, pastorals, elegies, epigrams, and odes, and their themes are of equal variety, consisting of addresses to family and friends, patrons and parishioners, idealized mistresses, flowers, fairies, gods, and fellow poets. Almost all the poems are brief (the longest poem in the collection, an epithalamium, consists of 160 lines) and allude to a wide variety of classical sources. The works of Horace, Martial, Ovid, and Virgil provide models, subjects, personae, and turns of phrase which Herrick uses as the raw materials for his own verses. He also draws extensively on Greek poetry, and particularly on several poems then attributed to Anacreon. The representation in Anacreon of a controlled yet bibulous

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conviviality influences a significant strand of Herrick's poetry, but his allusiveness is wide-ranging, reflecting a sophisticated knowledge of classical and neoclassical Latin as well as Greek poetry. *His noble numbers* borrows passages from John Gregory's *Notes and observations upon some passages of Scripture* (1646) and draws on both early church fathers and proverbial wisdom to construct a series of versified prayers, songs, and moral meditations. Herrick records that four of his religious songs were performed in the king's presence and so, like *Hesperides*, the poems in this much shorter collection are also composed over at least a 20-year period, although his reliance on Gregory suggests that he composed several of its verses late in the 1640s.

Despite the careful interpretive frame erected by the paratext, the collection itself lacks an explicit structuring narrative or form of organization, an omission perceived by T. S. Eliot (1957) as a fundamental weakness that caused him to categorize Herrick's work as 'minor' in its lack of 'pervasive purpose'. Critical attention subsequently focused on the qualities of individual poems within the collection and Herrick's own depiction of his verses as 'jewels' and 'gems' is echoed in analogies drawn between Herrick's early experience as a goldsmith and a literary aesthetic which refines, idealizes, and perfects its subject matter (Semler 1998). Characterizations of Herrick's lyrical ability note that he achieves his effects through a play of wit and allusion distinguished both by concision and harmony of expression (Creaser 2006) and by a poetic persona characterized alternately by amused self-mockery and wry despair (Kimmey 1970).

This convivial tone and the associated emphasis on good fellowship, coupled with Herrick's loyalist associations, has ensured that Herrick's work is most frequently read in the context of other 'Cavalier' poets, particularly those cast as 'Sons of Ben' (Miner 1971). These 'Sons' were a younger generation of poets who regarded Ben Jonson as a poetic mentor and role model Herrick addresses Jonson directly in his work as 'Father Ben' and draws strongly on Jonson's literary and personal example in constructing *Hesperides*. His choice of the term 'works' to describe the volume is a nod to Jonson's own ground-breaking decision to describe his collected plays and poems as such, and *Hesperides* itself bears comparison with Jonson's own volumes of poems, *Epigrammes*, *Underwood*, and *The for rest*.

Criticism that perceived a strong tendency towards ritualism in Herrick's work (DeNeef 1974) was followed by a historicist approach which sought to contextualize this interest within the political and religious factionalism of the period (Marcus 1986; Stallybrass 1986). The prominence of ceremonialism in Herrick's poetry was treated as a complement to the shift in the Church of England's own religious practices under its controversial archbishop William Laud. Laudianism stressed the 'beauty of holiness' and valued ritual in worship to a degree that proved inimical to many Protestants. A similar concern with ceremony as an index of harmonious social order prevailed at the court of Charles I and Henrietta Maria, and some of Herrick's religious and secular verse has been interpreted as supporting these ideals, particularly those poems depicting traditional festivals such as wassailing and maying, events that were explicitly endorsed and encouraged by both James I and Charles I.

This contextualization of Herrick's work within the political and religious debates of Stuart England was followed by a re-evaluation of *Hesperides*’ structural disorder. Critics sought first to establish a model for the whole collection and suggested influences concentrated on unstructured collections such as the *silva*, a collection characterized by spontaneity and random variety, or proposed a more unified structural model based on the classical epigram book (Coiro 1988). Other critics have found resemblances between Herrick's gathering of his poems and a broader collecting impulse during the period expressed both in the vogue for cabinet of curiosities and in the scholarly use of commonplace
books (Swann 2001), or observe a continuity of theme throughout that is developed by a carefully focused use of classical allusion (Pugh 2006). This emphasis on taking the whole book as the unit of analysis has persisted through an increasing interest in the history of reading and in the history of the book, illustrated by a focus on the collection's many addresses to its readers (Ingram 1998) and its printing history (Dobranski 2005). Renewed efforts to date the poems have sought to qualify the claims made for the political import of Herrick's work (Creaser 2009), but it is likely, given the explicitly politicized frame in which the poems are placed, that this contextual interpretive trend will continue. An underlying emphasis of recent criticism is manuscript circulation and the social and literary communities in which Herrick participated.

SEE ALSO: Brome, Alexander; Fanshawe, Richard; Jonson, Ben; Lovelace, Richard; Marvell, Andrew; Mennes, John, and Smith, James; Suckling, John

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

Stallybrass, Peter (1986) 'We feast in our defence': patrician carnival in Robert Herrick's Hesperides. English Literary Renaissance 53, 234-252.

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