Lovelace, Richard (1618–1658)

Definition: **Lovelace, Richard** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

English cavalier poet. A flamboyant and ardent royalist, he was imprisoned in 1642 and 1648, during which time he wrote *To Althea, from Prison* and *To Lucasta, Going to the Wars*. Another collection, *Lucasta: Posthume Poems*, appeared in 1659.

Summary Article: **Lovelace, Richard**


Richard Lovelace (1618–57) is still, as one critic puts it, 'the first name to come to mind when we think of Pope’s mob of elegant gentlemen or hear the phrase cavalier poet, with all its overtones of the amorous and the amateurish' (Hammond 1985). Several of Lovelace's lyric poems, such as 'To Althea, from prison' and 'To Lucasta, going to the wars', have long been synonymous with the 'Cavalier spirit' of love, wine, and royalism – even though most of the poems published in *Lucasta* (1649) were written in the 1630s, before the outbreak of the Civil War. But it is becoming increasingly apparent that Lovelace was a more complex personality and poet than this representation has allowed. If the early lyrics invoke the example of John Donne and defiantly celebrate drinking and friendship in reaction to the perceived dominance of Puritan moralism and the social fractures of the Civil War, the final poems in *Lucasta*. Posthume poems (1659/60) anticipate Augustan satire in their disillusioned scorn for the money-grabbing attitudes of the postwar poet.

Lovelace was born in 1618, the eldest son of Sir William Lovelace, who was a member of the Virginia Company and a substantial landowner in Kent. Sir William was killed in action in Holland in 1627 and his eldest son would follow in the family tradition of European military service. Richard was educated at Charterhouse, where Richard Crashaw was a fellow pupil, and then at Gloucester Hall, Oxford, to which he was admitted in 1634, and where he received a master of arts degree two years later. Lovelace's lost play *The scholars* was performed before Charles I and Henrietta Maria at Oxford in 1636, and secured his entrance to the Caroline court in its last days. The surviving prologue and epilogue of *The scholars* reveal it to have been performed at Whitefriars by Henrietta Maria's company; a later play from around 1640, a tragedy entitled *The soldier*, is also lost. Lovelace was in Cambridge by October 1637, and it may be at this point that he first became acquainted with future friends and fellow poets at Cambridge at the time, including Andrew Marvell and Thomas Stanley, who was Lovelace's cousin.

Much of our sense of Lovelace as the flower of Cavalierism comes from Anthony a Wood's portrait of Lovelace at Oxford and at court in *Athenae Oxonienses* (1691), in which Lovelace is depicted as 'the most amiable and beautiful person that ever eye beheld, a person also of innate modesty, virtue and courtly deportment ... he became as much admired by the male, as by the female, sex ... his common discourse was not only significant and witty, but incomparably graceful'. In Wood's account, Lovelace becomes a personification not only of the glory of Stuart court culture in the late 1630s but of its tragic decline and disintegration in the 1640s and 1650s: 'After the Murther of K. Ch. [arles] I', Lovelace, having 'consumed all his Estate' in the Royalist cause, 'became very poor in body and purse, was the object of charity, went in ragged Cloaths (whereas when he was in his glory he wore Cloths of gold and silver) and mostly lodged in obscure and dirty places, more befitting the worst of Beggars'.

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If Wood's account sounds exaggerated, the picture of Lovelace as the quintessential Cavalier is not out of line with contemporary images of Lovelace as handsome lover, courageous warrior, and consummate lyricist, for whom the term *sprezzatura* might have been invented. In a poem written sometime before 1645, urging Lovelace to return to England from Holland, John Tatham addresses Lovelace as ‘lov'd Adonis’ who left England because he was ‘sated with the Spoil/ of so many Virgins Hearts’; since his departure ‘not one lasse keeps Holi-day. / They have chang'd their Mirth for Cares./ and do only sigh thy Airs.’ The commendatory poems to both the 1649 Lucasta and the elegies attached to Lucasta. *Posthumous poems* repeatedly emphasize Lovelace's facility with both sword and pen. John Hall of Durham's lines in the 1649 volume, addressed to ‘Colonel Richard Lovelace’, are superior in execution but representative in theme:

If the desire of Glory speak a mind
More nobly operative, & more refin'd,
What vast soule moves thee? Or what Hero's spirit
(Kept in'ts tradition pure) dost thou inherit,
That not contented with one singe Fame,
Dost to a double glory spread thy Name?
And on thy happy Temples safely set
Both th' Delphick wreath and the Civic Coronet?

The chivalric valour praised by Hall and other contemporaries, and with which Lovelace associates himself in lyrics such as ‘To Lucasta, going to the wars’ (‘I could not love thee (Deare) so much/Lov'd I not Honour more’), does not, however, seem to have been displayed on English soil during the 1640s. Lovelace had left Cambridge in 1639 to serve in George Goring's regiment in the Bishops' Wars in Scotland; the truce at Berwick in June 1639 that was really a defeat for the king is commemorated in the 1649 Lucasta by the defiant sonnet ‘To Generall Goring, after the pacification at Berwick’. Lovelace then appears to have retired to Kent, where he inherited his father's estate at the age of 24. In 1642 Lovelace was confined to the Gatehouse at Westminster for seven weeks after marching from his family estate in Kent, at the head of several hundred Kentish men, to present a petition to parliament in support of episcopacy and attacking the Parliamentary assumption of arbitrary power in passing laws without royal assent. It was probably, although not certainly, during this period that Lovelace composed his famous lyric ‘To Althea, from prison’, in which the imprisoned speaker finds liberty in successive stanzas in women, wine, and the glorious idea of allegiance to his king: certainly the poem was circulating extensively in manuscript before 1645 (Beal 1993).

There is no evidence that Lovelace fought for the king after being released from the Gatehouse on bail in June 1642. In his elegy for Lovelace, Samuel Holland says nothing of any military exploits during the Civil Wars but tells us that ‘Holland and France have known his nobler parts, / And found him excellent in Arms, and Arts’. Most revealingly, in ‘A register of friends’, a poem written in the 1660s, Thomas Stanley writes that Lovelace was ‘During our Civill Wars confin'd to peace,/ Expos'd to Forrein Wars, when ours did cease’. The reference to Lovelace becoming involved in ‘Forrein Wars, when ours did cease’ does not quite make sense, since we know that he returned to England after the end of the First Civil War. Possibly Stanley is referring to military service on the Continent in the early 1650s, when virtually nothing is known of Lovelace's activities. But Stanley's lines -- which were unknown to biographers before the discovery of the manuscript of ‘A register of friends’ in 1957 – confirm that Lovelace did not raise his 'boldly-Loyall' hand, as Stanley puts it, in battle for the king during the Civil Wars (McDowell 2008).
Gerald Hammond (1985) has argued for the ‘awkwardness’ of Stanley’s attempt to deal with Lovelace’s failure to fight on the Royalist side as part of his larger argument that, despite Lovelace’s long-standing image as the archetypal Cavalier hero, the poems in *Lucasta* reveal the adoption of a ‘neutralist’ position after the traumatic experience of imprisonment and submission in 1642. It is not clear where exactly Hammond locates Stanley’s ‘awkwardness’; moreover, the meaning of Stanley’s ‘confined’ might be quite literal. Lovelace’s release in 1642 may have been conditional upon an undertaking that he would not bear arms against Parliament, or even travel in England beyond the Parliamentary lines of communication in London. In the petition Lovelace addressed to Parliament from prison and which apparently led to his release (and which Hammond sees as evidence of a crisis of allegiance), he requests ‘to be admitted to his former Libertie, or if your well-knowne Wisdomes shall conceive this Course more fitt; to be allow’d but a conditional freedome, & for the certaintie of his attendance on your future pleasures he will humbliie offer the ingagement of some able friends as a sufficient bayle’. Lovelace’s bail was set at £10,000, with sureties of a further £5,000 each from two Kentish gentlemen. The poet, who had an annual income from his estate of £500 and is unlikely to have actually paid this huge sum, may have felt he had little choice but to respect the conditions placed upon his freedom lest he and his friends were called upon to pay.

It is now over 20 years since Hammond (1985) provocatively argued that Lovelace ‘developed politically from an instinctive cavalier into one who shares with Andrew Marvell the claim to be the great poet of the most wide-ranging political belief of the 1640s and early 1650s’. His claim for Lovelace as a poet of disillusioned neutralism has not found much favour. If it is accepted that some post-regicide poems in the posthumously published 1659/60 *Lucasta* ‘register loss of idealism and even some degradation of character’, the 1649 volume still tends to be seen as, in the words of Thomas N. Corns (1992), a ‘solidly partisan enunciation of die-hard loyalism’, in which ‘courty love at once validates militarism and is validated by it’ (Rudrum 2001). Yet Corns and others accept that the pastoral narrative ‘Aramantha’, which concludes with Alexis, the Lovelace character, breaking his sword, raises ‘some complications’ in its apparent rejection of military valour and the choice of allegiance (Corns 1992; also Loxley 1997). More recently Robert Wilcher (2001) has suggested that poems in *Lucasta* may indeed reveal ‘fundamental doubts about the viability of the royalist cause’, while Joshua Scodel (2002) has described ‘The grasshopper. To my noble friend Mr Charles Cotton. Ode’ as ‘post-royalist rather than royalist’. If Hammond's revisionist claims about his political identity have hardly destroyed Lovelace's reputation as the epitome of the Cavalier poet, they have encouraged a reconsideration of the complexity of political meaning in several of the major poems in the 1649 collection, which tend to convey less sorrow for the defeat of the king than nostalgia for the lost cultural centre of Stuart court patronage (McDowell 2008).

Some critics have seen the ‘humiliating experience of the Kentish petition’ in 1642 as the ‘climacteric moment of Lovelace’s life, when he realized the futility ... of the whole Royal cause’ (Hammond 1985). However, the recent discovery of a series of indentures signed by Lovelace between 1642 and 1647 indicate the veracity of Wood’s claim that after his release Lovelace gradually ‘consumed all his estate’ in Kent to ‘keep up the credit and reputation of the King’s cause by furnishing men with Horse and Arms’ (Clarke 2004). Disillusionment with and pessimism about the royalist cause are more likely to have been provoked by military defeat and the imprisonment of the king.

Lovelace did not return from the Continent permanently until the end of 1646, after being wounded fighting for the French army at Dunkirk. Given that *Lucasta* was originally licensed for publication on 4
February 1648, it seems certain that Lovelace prepared his collection for publication during the course of 1647, when he was a member of his cousin Stanley's London circle at the Inns of Court (McDowell 2008). Many interpretations of specific Lovelace poems have assumed a post-regicide context; but it seems unlikely that poems in the volume were composed later than the date of licensing. We have good reason to assume a terminus ad quem of the final months of 1647 for the completion of the main text of Lucasta. At the same time, several poems evidently postdate Lovelace's return to England after the end of the First Civil War. He contributed a commendatory poem, alongside many other Royalist poets including Stanley, James Shirley, and Robert Herrick, to the folio edition of the court dramatists Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, which was ready for the press by February 1647, while at least one poem – 'To my worthy friend Mr Peter Lilly; on that excellent picture of his majesty, and the duke of Yorke, drawne by him at Hampton-Court' – must have been written sometime after August 1647, when the New Model Army, having put down the attempted Presbyterian counter-revolution, moved the king from Holdenby House to Hampton Court. The Lovelace poem that has attracted most critical attention and has long been central to discussions and definitions of Cavalier verse, 'The grasshopper. To my noble friend, Mr Charles Cotton. Ode', is also generally assumed, although without any certain evidence, to have been composed in the aftermath of military defeat in 1646.

Despite the fact that Lucasta was licensed for publication in February 1648, it was not to be published until May 1649. Lovelace was imprisoned again in October 1648, following a search of his lodgings in connection with a recent uprising in Kent. He was not released until after the regicide, on 10 April 1649. Political interference as well as Lovelace’s imprisonment may have caused the delay in publication. In his commendatory poem, which was probably written in the latter half of 1648, Marvell refers to Lovelace as ‘under sequestration’ and predicts that the ‘barbèd censurers’ – they could be official censors, or moral critics, or both – who ‘begin to look’ at Lucasta (note the present tense) will examine ‘each line’ of the verse and seek to prohibit the volume on political grounds:

Some reading your Lucasta, will allege,
You wronged in her the House's privilege;
Some that you under sequestration are,
Because you write when going to the war;
And one the book prohibits, because Kent
Their first petition by the author sent.

Marvell suggests in his poem that Lovelace will be accused of having illegally assumed a freedom of speech in his poems that the members of the House regard as a parliamentary privilege: the implication is that Parliament abuses the law to gag those who question its authority.

Lucasta was entered in the Stationers’ Register on 14 May 1649, which was the same day Lovelace’s friend and fellow member of Thomas Stanley’s poetic circle John Hall was employed by the Commonwealth’s Council of State as a propagandist. Lovelace did not follow Hall or Marvell in seeking employment from the post-monarchical governments: to that extent his Royalism remained uncompromised. His diminished circumstances are indicated by the sale of the family house in Kent, Lovelace Place, soon after his release. He seems to have stayed mainly in London in the early 1650s, increasingly reliant on the charity of friends such as Charles Cotton the younger, son of the addressee of ‘The grasshopper’. Cotton the younger wrote a prefatory poem for the posthumously published Lucasta of 1659, although the poem that Lovelace addressed to Cotton in 1656, ‘The triumphs of

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Philamore and Amoret’, recalls the image of the frozen grasshopper in Lovelace’s earlier poem ‘The grasshopper’, which was addressed to Charles Cotton senior, in an apparent effort to prick the younger Cotton’s conscience and remind him of his father’s benevolence:

See! I’m Ice;
A numbed speaking clod …
Return those living Fires, Thou who that vast
Double advantage from one-ey’d Heaven hast.

Lovelace would die the following year, in 1657. His bitterness towards former friends who sought employment from the post-regicide regimes may be apparent in the insistent echoes of Marvell’s commendatory poem for the 1649 Lucasta in the long final poem of the posthumous 1659 Lucasta, ‘On Sannazar’s being honoured with six hundred ducats by the Clarissimi of Venice, for composing an elegiac hexastick of the city. A satyre.’ The satire mocks the efforts of Cromwell’s poets, such as Edmund Waller, to represent him as a new Augustus, and may remember Marvell’s poem ironically, as an embodiment of ‘the commitments from which Marvell apostatized by throwing in his lot with the Protectorate’ (Dzelzainis 2000). While Lovelace is usually taught as one of the ‘Cavalier poets’ alongside Thomas Carew, John Suckling, and Robert Herrick, the complexity of some of his verse would repay more individual consideration: Christopher Ricks (1978) has illuminatingly treated Lovelace’s poetic techniques with the intensity that is usually reserved for Marvell.

SEE ALSO: Carew, Thomas; Cotton, Charles, the younger; Clinton, Elizabeth; Donne, John; Hall, John, of Durham; Herrick, Robert; Marvell, Andrew; Shirley, James; Stanley, Thomas; Suckling, John; Waller, Edmund

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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