

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **Hesperides** (1648)

Robert Herrick (1591-1674)

### *Background*

Robert Herrick was a British Poet and Anglican cleric, renowned especially for his collection of over 2000 poems called *The Hesperides* (*lovely clear voiced guardian maidens in Greek mythology*), brief lyric poems, for the most part dealing with the delights of life, country values, the impermanence of life, the importance of making merry before you die, the flexibility of the English language, and the firm foundation of Christianity.

The background for the tradition in which Herrick works, as he draws on various Germanic and High Mediaeval sources for some of his high flying lyrics, also springs from the work and tradition of the ancient Greek lyric poet, Anacreon (575-495 B.C.). That ancient tradition will make its way into whatever poetries resonate to the notion that you should 'eat drink and be merry, for tomorrow you may die,' or that have left their footprints wherever you meet the exhortation to 'gather ye rosebuds while ye may.'

The pre impression one might get, of an author working the Anacreontic tradition, is of a full blown rake, for whom 'wine women end song are absolutely the highest satisfactions life can offer, 'and who gets himself caricatured in stereotypes like Hogarth's famed set of engravings *The Rake's Progress*.' This stereotype is not at all the bent of Herrick's anacreontic spirit, which he enters at a far gentler and more urbane point than the foregoing adage suggests. The very biography of Herrick supports this point. As a poet he is by turns sensuous and even sexy, especially in his earliest poems, though increasingly subtle and spiritual with the passing of time.

Herrick himself was the well brought up son of a prosperous London goldsmith; his uncle was goldsmith to the king. Herrick was educated at the prestigious Merchant Tailors School, then, at the age of 22, had the good luck to be accepted for matriculation at St John's Cambridge. From there on, as we will see, he tracked out a life of pretty gentle responsibility, The private life of Herrick leaves us few details, but none more interesting than the fact that he never married. That fact, and the accompanying detail, that none of the female names highlighted in his poems can be identified with an individual woman. Whether or not he was a womanizer, it is clear that he worked the disciplined side of the anacreontic tradition. Shall we simply say that Herrick was a pursuer of pleasure and good sense, who did well along the path of fancy and bachelorhood.

A Cavalier Poet, a supporter of the monarchy, Herrick foined a number of contemporaries--Suckling, Lovelace, Carew--whose support of Charles I and the monarchy meshed with their readiness for art that highlighted style and grace. The work of these elegant gents, who for the most part--not the case with Herrick-- clustered around the court, resembled that of Herrick in his soft anacreontic tenor. That tenor, we might well add, clashed sharply with the poetry of the Metaphysicals--Donne, Marvell--who were at the same time dominant figures on the intellectual scene in London, but who probed in language into dark and complex issues of the human condition.

### *How Herrick's poems work*

1

In his poetry Herrick, like a good lover, is all about play. Sometimes he plays with words, making the material of a poem into the substance of that poem, as in the following monometer:

*Thus I pass by / and die / as one / unknown and gone*

Herrick tries here to transform the oral into the visual, and enables us in that way to revel in a dual and progressive experience. The sound repetition in 'I pass by and die' gives us the flip instantaneous one off, a mere tune heard at the window. The last five words give a negative substantiality to the I, which has the distinctive double nature of being 'unknown and gone, 'that is having the 'reality of nothing.' This kind of airy existentialism plays into the 'gather ye rosebuds theme,' in so far as it presses for the unexamined enjoyment of life.

2

*Whenas in silks my Julia goes.  
Then, then (methinks) how sweetly flows  
The liquefaction of her clothes.*

*Next, when I cast mine eyes, and see  
That brave vibration each way free  
O how that glittering taketh me!*

Once again we take a fast ride into the poem on the back of the oral. The rhythm flows along as does Julia, identical to the clothes she is wearing. The effect of acceleration is enhanced by the briskly muttered-to-oneself cadence of 'then, then (methinks)' which then so softly internalizes the rapidity of the sweetness takeover.

When the notion (or commotion) has stormed past, the author observer 'casts his eyes'; stabilizing the fluidity. There is a moment of tension when the brilliance of the scene coagulates then goes in each way free, unbindable by sight. In a then unusual turn the author rushes *himself* onto the scene. The 'me' thereby reintroduced allows himself to be held by this glittering. The glittering acquires almost a holy dimension here, as though the author had been holding up a baroque monstrosity in front of himself.

3

*Droop droop no more or hang the head  
Ye roses almost withered;  
Now strength and newer purple get  
Each here declining violet;  
O primroses let this day be  
A resurrection unto ye  
And to all flowers allied in blood  
or sworn to that sweet sisterhood:  
For health on Julia's cheek hath shed  
Claret and cream commingled;  
And those her lips do now appear  
As beams of coral, but more clear,*

Artifice and the natural flow together here; iambic tetrameters (ll. 2-4) set the dominant tone, but graciously play off against variant pulses, like 'droop, droop,' 'O primroses,' or 'Claret and cream.' (Tetrameters are the pulse of choice, here, but the poet could have elected a pentameter throb, lengthening the dominant strain or cadence. Were we talking Homer or another epic writer we might have found ourselves drifting into hexameters, vastly extending the line and its expressive possibilities, but raising the issue of linguistic filler, of how to make efficient, and effective, use of the intermediary particles in the long line.

Brevity is of course the work principle of Herrick, for he is, as we have already seen above, interested in a frisky depiction of the lady in question, and not with detail. 'The lady in question?' (The fact is that the author, un married and unattached, is un packaging an adroit and boundless name game, with his farrago

of female substitutes--Sylvia, Julia, Perilla, Perenna, Anthea--behind whom he can hide a never tiring set of perspectives onto himself and his world.)

4.

*Those who will not love, do this.  
Learn of me what woman is.  
Something made of thread and thrum.  
A mere botch of all and some.  
Patches, ropes of hair.  
Inlaid garbage everywhere.  
Outside silk and outside lawn.  
Scenes to cheat us neatly drawn.  
False in legs and false in thighs.  
False in breasts, teeth, hair and eyes.  
False in head, and false enough.  
Only true in shreds and stuff.*

We knew from our first example, the monometer, that Herrick, the Cavalier, knew how to be just about language. In that monometer he talked himself out of existence, unborn. Now, in the present *jeu d'esprit*, he returns to the ladies all the bits and pieces of which he has constructed them. Were he not foremost a rhymester he could have been a perfect playmate for the Wittgenstein of *The Philosophical Investigations*. Both men address the mere condition of language, as though it is a raw material available for discussion.

5

*While the milder fates consent  
Let's enjoy our merriment  
Drink and Dance and pipe and play  
Kiss our dollies night and day.  
Crowned with clusters of the vine  
Let us sit and quaff our wine.  
Call on Bacchus, chant his praise  
Shake the thyrses and bite the bays  
Rouse Anacreon from the dead  
And return him drunk to bed.  
Sing o'er Horace for ere long  
Death will come and mar the song.  
Then will Wilson and Gotiere  
Never sing or play more here.*

*Dr. John Wilson; singer and musician to the King.  
Jacques Gautier, French luteist at the court of King Charles*

By introducing two well known masters of music, and tying them nostalgically into the past of pleasure, Herrick manages his own mastery of the art of nostalgia, which always patters along at the side of 'Gather ye rose buds.' As we know, from the emotional mechanics of a revered song like *Auld Lang Syne*, the fond blend of sadness and hopefulness--for the New Year-- can and does bring 'tears of joy.'

*What the Anacreontic Tradition Contributes to the British literary tradition*

The High Middle Ages, say in the tradition of the *Carmina Burana*, are prolific with song tradition. The religious drinking songs of the monks of Beuron, in northern contemporary Wuertemberg, are lusty praises of male conviviality inside a monastic community. (These *Carmina Burana*, which celebrate the beery pleasure of tankards, along with the anticipated joys of Resurrection, came to life again in the work

of the German composer, Carl Orff, who was sharply criticized, during the Third Reich, for creating a mishmash language which was not meaningful to the German Volk.) The darker sides of life were minimized in Herrick's take on the Anacreontic tradition, for he was rather of the 'Gather ye Rose buds school,' but the confluence of diverse hedonisms, which appear in Herrick, opened a wellspring of keen energy into the Elizabethan tradition.

The lusty readiness of the Anacreontic tradition, to plug into a past of joy and high spirits, aligns totally with the bond between music and the Anacreontic spirit in literature. Herrick himself, and no wonder, has found himself repeatedly set to music, both during his own lifetime and then, repeatedly, in our own century. Both the joyful high spirits and the strain of cautious anxiety, as we have made them our cultural trademarks, know where to put the classical Herrick fare. One of the finest poems in recent American poetry, John Crowe Ransom's *Blue Girls*, urges the beauties of his moment to 'practice their beauty while they may...'

'for I could tell you a story which is true,  
I Know a lady with a terrible tongue,  
Blear eyes fallen from blue,  
Yet she was once more beautiful than any of you.'

There you have it all: the exhortation to play while possible; the inevitability of breakdown; the long sleep of Wilson and Gotiere, the two master musicians met earlier.