

Robert Herrick (1591 - 1633)
Herrick by the consensus of critical opinion enjoys the highest status among the Cavalier poets. This is the status which Douglas Bush also gives him in English Literature in the Earlier XVIIth Century. However Geoffrey Walton in his essay on the Cavalier poets in vol. II of the Pelican Guide to English Literature would place Carew above him. Herrick was the only Cavalier who was not a courtier. He was the first of the "Sons of Ben" who came under his influence. Hardin Craig observes in *A History of English Literature*: "He became Jonson's greatest disciple and actually realized a greatness in the field of the classical lyric superior to that of Jonson himself". Along with Jonson, Herrick took for his model and inspiration the clear, objective, spirited but perfectly ordered and lucidly worded

poetry of the Latin poets like Ovid, Horace, Catullus, Martial and the Greek poet Anacreon. He does not seem to have paid much attention to Elizabethan lyricists before him. But his first guide was "Saint Ben" whose aid he invoked in his poem "Prayer to Ben Jonson".

Herrick was perfectly convinced of his immortality as a poet and therefore very assiduously he preserved each and every scrap of his writing. His only book Hesperides : or the works both Humane and Divine of Robert Herrick, Esq. which appeared in 1633 contains about twelve hundred poems few of which extend beyond a hundred lines most of them are of the "occasional" type or of the nature of epigrams. Herrick is a poet of moods and moments and is perhaps incapable of sustained poetic expression. But he is seldom frivolous, indegent, or

unsophisticated. As F. H. Mooreman observes, "He reveals lyrical power of a high order: fresh, passionate and felicitously exact, but at the same time meditative and observant." However, we have to agree with Geoffrey Walton that Herrick is "a poet of a charmingly fanciful but simple sensibility." His moods and themes have variety but no complexity. The true metaphysical manner is beyond him. He sings mostly of woman, love, wine and song. But he also exhibits a refreshing love for trees, plants and flowers and often looks at them as emblems of human predicament, as for instance in "Divination by a Daffodil":

"When a daffodil I see,
Hanging down his head
towards me,
guess I may what I must
be.

First, I shall decline my

Lead;

Secondly I shall be dead
lastly safely buried.

or, again, see the last
stanza of "To Blossoms".
But you are lovely leaves
where we
may read how soon things
have

Their end, though ne'er
so brave

And after they have shown
their pride
like you, a while, they
glide

into the grave"

But Herrick has not one but
protean moods and is equally
dextrous in the expression of
them all. "Cherry Ripe", "To
Julia" and are some of his
best known poems. He is, inde-
ed, the delight of all antholog-
ists.

The end. //

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