

Classic Poetry Series

Abraham Cowley

- poems -

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Abraham Cowley (1618 - 1667)

Cowley was born in London, the posthumous son of a bookseller. He was educated at Westminster School and Trinity College, Cambridge. In 1640 he was named Fellow at Trinity but was ejected in 1644 because he was a royalist who had even written a play performed for the King's entertainment two years earlier. He went to live at Oxford, a stronghold of the royalists, before fleeing the Civil War to join the group of exiles in Paris, France. He served as secretary to Lord Jermyn, the Queen's chamberlain. He also undertook various diplomatic missions at the bidding of the Queen, Maria Henrietta, whom he officially served as cipher secretary. He returned to London in 1654, possibly on a mission, and was arrested and briefly imprisoned. Having written his first poem, *Pyramus and Thisbe* (1628) when he was just ten, his *Poetical Blossoms* (1633) made him become known as a precocious talent. An established and popular poet, he produced his collected *Poems* in 1656, the same year he decided to study medicine at Oxford. Though he received his medical doctorate in 1657, he never practised. The 1660 Restoration of Charles II brought him great joy and he celebrated the event in one of his best-known odes, *Upon the Blessed Restoration and Return of His Sacred Majesty Charles the Second*. Though he was given back his Fellowship at Cambridge in 1661, he did not receive the royal favours he might have expected. He retired to Chertsey, Surrey, from where he gave continued support to the Royal Society of Science he had helped founded.

So great was his esteem that when he died he was laid to rest next to Chaucer and Spenser at Westminster Abbey.

A Supplication

Awake, awake, my Lyre!
And tell thy silent master's humble tale
In sounds that may prevail;
Sounds that gentle thoughts inspire:
Though so exalted she
And I so lowly be
Tell her, such different notes make all thy harmony.

Hark, how the strings awake!
And, though the moving hand approach not near,
Themselves with awful fear
A kind of numerous trembling make.
Now all thy forces try;
Now all thy charms apply;
Revenge upon her ear the conquests of her eye.

Weak Lyre! thy virtue sure
Is useless here, since thou art only found
To cure, but not to wound,
And she to wound, but not to cure,
Too weak too wilt thou prove
My passion to remove;
Physic to other ills, thou'rt nourishment to love.

Sleep, sleep again, my Lyre!
For thou canst never tell my humble tale
In sounds that will prevail,
Nor gentle thoughts in her inspire;
All thy vain mirth lay by,
Bid thy strings silent lie,
Sleep, sleep again, my Lyre, and let thy master die.

Abraham Cowley

A Vote (excerpt)

...
This only grant me: that my means may lie
Too low for envy, for contempt too high.
Some honour I would have,
Not from great deeds, but good alone;
Th' ignote are better than ill-known,
Rumour can ope the grave.
Acquaintance I would hug, but when 't depends
Not from the number, but the choice of friends.

Books should, not bus'ness, entertain the light,
And sleep, as undisturb'd as death, the night.
My house a cottage, more
Than palace, and should fitting be
For all my use, no luxury.
My garden painted o'er
With Nature's hand, not Art's, and pleasures yield
Horace might envy in his Sabine field.

Thus would I double my life's fading space,
For he that runs it well, twice runs his race.
And in this true delight,
These unbought sports and happy state
I would not fear, nor wish my fate,
But boldly say each night,
To-morrow let my sun his beams display,
Or in clouds hide them; I have liv'd to-day.

Abraham Cowley

Anacreontics, Drinking

THE thirsty earth soaks up the rain,
And drinks and gapes for drink again;
The plants suck in the earth, and are
With constant drinking fresh and fair;
The sea itself (which one would think
Should have but little need of drink)
Drinks twice ten thousand rivers up,
So fill'd that they o'erflow the cup.
The busy Sun (and one would guess
By 's drunken fiery face no less)
Drinks up the sea, and when he 's done,
The Moon and Stars drink up the Sun:
They drink and dance by their own light,
They drink and revel all the night:
Nothing in Nature 's sober found,
But an eternal health goes round.
Fill up the bowl, then, fill it high,
Fill all the glasses there--for why
Should every creature drink but I?
Why, man of morals, tell me why?

Abraham Cowley

Anacreontics, The Epicure

UNDERNEATH this myrtle shade,
On flowerly beds supinely laid,
With odorous oils my head o'erflowing,
And around it roses growing,
What should I do but drink away
The heat and troubles of the day?
In this more than kingly state
Love himself on me shall wait.
Fill to me, Love! nay, fill it up!
And mingled cast into the cup
Wit and mirth and noble fires,
Vigorous health and gay desires.
The wheel of life no less will stay
In a smooth than rugged way:
Since it equally doth flee,
Let the motion pleasant be.
Why do we precious ointments shower?--
Nobler wines why do we pour?--
Beauteous flowers why do we spread
Upon the monuments of the dead?
Nothing they but dust can show,
Or bones that hasten to be so.
Crown me with roses while I live,
Now your wines and ointments give:
After death I nothing crave,
Let me alive my pleasures have:
All are Stoics in the grave.

Abraham Cowley

Anacreontics, The Swallow

FOOLISH prater, what dost thou
So early at my window do?
Cruel bird, thou'st ta'en away
A dream out of my arms to-day;
A dream that ne'er must equall'd be
By all that waking eyes may see.
Thou this damage to repair
Nothing half so sweet and fair,
Nothing half so good, canst bring,
Tho' men say thou bring'st the Spring.

Abraham Cowley

Davideis: A Sacred Poem Of The Troubles Of David (excerpt)

BOOK I (excerpt)

I sing the man who Judah's sceptre bore
In that right hand which held the crook before;
Who from best poet, best of kings did grow;
The two chief gifts Heav'n could on man bestow.
Much danger first, much toil did he sustain,
Whilst Saul and Hell cross'd his strong fate in vain.
Nor did his crown less painful work afford;
Less exercise his patience, or his sword;
So long her conqueror fortunes spite pursued;
Till with unwearied virtue he subdued
All homebred malice, and all foreign boasts;
Their strength was armies, his the Lord of Hosts.

Thou, who didst David's royal stem adorn,
And gav'st him birth from whom thy self wast born;
Who didst in triumph at death's court appear,
And slew'st him with thy nails, thy cross and spear,
Whilst Hell's black tyrant trembled to behold,
The glorious light he forfeited of old;
Who Heav'ns glad burden now, and justest pride,
Sit'st high enthron'd next thy great Father's side,
(Where hallowed flames help to adorn that head
Which once the blushing thorns environed,
Till crimson drops of precious blood hung down
Like rubies to enrich thine humble crown.)
Even thou my breast with such blest rage inspire,
As mov'd the tuneful strings of David's lyre,
Guide my bold steps with thine old travelling flame,
In these untrodden paths to sacred fame;
Lo, with pure hands thy heav'enly fires to take,
My well-chang'd Muse I a chaste vestal make!
From earth's vain joys, and love's soft witchcraft free,
I consecrate my Magdalene to thee!
Lo, this great work, a temple to thy praise,
On polish'd pillars of strong verse I raise!
A temple, where if thou vouchsafe to dwell,
It Solomon's, and Herod's shall excel.
Too long the Muses-land have heathen bin;
Their gods too long were devils, and virtues sin;
But thou, Eternal Word, has call'd forth me
Th' apostle, to convert that world to thee;
T' unbind the charms that in slight fables lie,
And teach that truth is purest poesy.

...

Abraham Cowley

On the Death of Mr. Crashaw

Poet and Saint! to thee alone are given
The two most sacred names of earth and heaven,
The hard and rarest union which can be
Next that of godhead with humanity.
Long did the Muses banish'd slaves abide,
And built vain pyramids to mortal pride;
Like Moses thou (though spells and charms withstand)
Hast brought them nobly home back to their Holy Land.

Ah wretched we, poets of earth! but thou
Wert living the same poet which thou'rt now.
Whilst angels sing to thee their airs divine,
And joy in an applause so great as thine,
Equal society with them to hold,
Thou need'st not make new songs, but say the old.
And they (kind spirits!) shall all rejoice to see
How little less than they exalted man may be.
Still the old heathen gods in numbers dwell,
The heavenliest thing on earth still keeps up Hell.
Nor have we yet quite purg'd the Christian land;
Still idols here like calves at Bethel stand.
And though Pan's death long since all oracles broke,
Yet still in rhyme the fiend Apollo spoke:
Nay with the worst of heathen dotage we
(Vain men!) the monster Woman deify;
Find stars, and tie our fates there in a face,
And Paradise in them by whom we lost it, place.
What different faults corrupt our Muses thus
Wanton as girls, as old wives fabulous!

Thy spotless Muse, like Mary, did contain
The boundless Godhead; she did well disdain
That her eternal verse employ'd should be
On a less subject than eternity;
And for a sacred mistress scorn'd to take
But her whom God himself scorn'd not his spouse to make.
It (in a kind) her miracle did do;
A fruitful mother was, and virgin too.

How well, blest swan, did fate contrive thy death;
And make thee render up thy tuneful breath
In thy great mistress' arms! thou most divine
And richest offering of Loretto's shrine!
Where like some holy sacrifice t' expire
A fever burns thee, and Love lights the fire.
Angels (they say) brought the fam'd chapel there,
And bore the sacred load in triumph through the air.
'Tis surer much they brought thee there, and they,
And thou, their charge, went singing all the way.

Pardon, my Mother Church, if I consent
That angels led him when from thee he went,

For even in error sure no danger is
When join'd with so much piety as his.
Ah, mighty God, with shame I speak't, and grief,
Ah that our greatest faults were in belief!
And our weak reason were even weaker yet,
Rather than thus our wills too strong for it.
His faith perhaps in some nice tenents might
Be wrong; his life, I'm sure, was in the right.
And I myself a Catholic will be,
So far at least, great saint, to pray to thee.

Hail, bard triumphant! and some care bestow
On us, the poets militant below!
Oppos'd by our old enemy, adverse chance,
Attack'd by envy, and by ignorance,
Enchain'd by beauty, tortured by desires,
Expos'd by tyrant Love to savage beasts and fires.
Thou from low earth in nobler flames didst rise,
And like Elijah, mount alive the skies.
Elisha-like (but with a wish much less,
More fit thy greatness, and my littleness)
Lo here I beg (I whom thou once didst prove
So humble to esteem, so good to love)
Not that thy spirit might on me doubled be,
I ask but half thy mighty spirit for me;
And when my Muse soars with so strong a wing,
'Twill learn of things divine, and first of thee to sing.

Abraham Cowley

On the Death of Mr. William Hervey

IT was a dismal and a fearful night:
Scarce could the Morn drive on th' unwilling Light,
When Sleep, Death's image, left my troubled breast
 By something liker Death possest.
My eyes with tears did uncommanded flow,
 And on my soul hung the dull weight
 Of some intolerable fate.
What bell was that? Ah me! too much I know!

My sweet companion and my gentle peer,
Why hast thou left me thus unkindly here,
Thy end for ever and my life to moan?
 O, thou hast left me all alone!
Thy soul and body, when death's agony
 Besieged around thy noble heart,
 Did not with more reluctance part
Than I, my dearest Friend, do part from thee.

My dearest Friend, would I had died for thee!
Life and this world henceforth will tedious be:
Nor shall I know hereafter what to do
 If once my griefs prove tedious too.
Silent and sad I walk about all day,
 As sullen ghosts stalk speechless by
 Where their hid treasures lie;
Alas! my treasure 's gone; why do I stay?

Say, for you saw us, ye immortal lights,
How oft unwearied have we spent the nights,
Till the Ledaean stars, so famed for love,
 Wonder'd at us from above!
We spent them not in toys, in lusts, or wine;
 But search of deep Philosophy,
 Wit, Eloquence, and Poetry--
Arts which I loved, for they, my Friend, were thine.

Ye fields of Cambridge, our dear Cambridge, say
Have ye not seen us walking every day?
Was there a tree about which did not know
 The love betwixt us two?
Henceforth, ye gentle trees, for ever fade;
Or your sad branches thicker join
 And into darksome shades combine,
Dark as the grave wherein my Friend is laid!

Large was his soul: as large a soul as e'er
Submitted to inform a body here;
High as the place 'twas shortly in Heaven to have,
 But low and humble as his grave.
So high that all the virtues there did come,
 As to their chiefest seat
 Conspicuous and great;

So low, that for me too it made a room.

Knowledge he only sought, and so soon caught
As if for him Knowledge had rather sought;
Nor did more learning ever crowded lie
In such a short mortality.

Whene'er the skilful youth discoursed or writ,
Still did the notions throng
About his eloquent tongue;
Nor could his ink flow faster than his wit.

His mirth was the pure spirits of various wit,
Yet never did his God or friends forget;
And when deep talk and wisdom came in view,
Retired, and gave to them their due.
For the rich help of books he always took,
Though his own searching mind before
Was so with notions written o'er,
As if wise Nature had made that her book.

With as much zeal, devotion, piety,
He always lived, as other saints do die.
Still with his soul severe account he kept,
Weeping all debts out ere he slept.
Then down in peace and innocence he lay,
Like the Sun's laborious light,
Which still in water sets at night,
Unsullied with his journey of the day.

But happy Thou, ta'en from this frantic age,
Where ignorance and hypocrisy does rage!
A fitter time for Heaven no soul e'er chose--
The place now only free from those.
There 'mong the blest thou dost for ever shine;
And wheresoe'er thou casts thy view
Upon that white and radiant crew,
See'st not a soul clothed with more light than thine.

Abraham Cowley

The Given Heart

I wonder what those lovers mean, who say
They have giv'n their hearts away.
Some good kind lover tell me how;
For mine is but a torment to me now.

If so it be one place both hearts contain,
For what do they complain?
What courtesy can Love do more,
Than to join hearts that parted were before?

Woe to her stubborn heart, if once mine come
Into the self-same room;
'Twill tear and blow up all within,
Like a granado shot into a magazine.

Then shall Love keep the ashes, and torn parts,
Of both our broken hearts:
Shall out of both one new one make,
From hers, th' allay; from mine, the metal take.

For of her heart he from the flames will find
But little left behind:
Mine only will remain entire;
No dross was there, to perish in the fire.

Abraham Cowley

The Wish

WELL then! I now do plainly see
This busy world and I shall ne'er agree.
The very honey of all earthly joy
Does of all meats the soonest cloy;
And they, methinks, deserve my pity
Who for it can endure the stings,
The crowd and buzz and murmurings,
Of this great hive, the city.

Ah, yet, ere I descend to the grave
May I a small house and large garden have;
And a few friends, and many books, both true,
Both wise, and both delightful too!
And since love ne'er will from me flee,
A Mistress moderately fair,
And good as guardian angels are,
Only beloved and loving me.

O fountains! when in you shall I
Myself eased of unpeaceful thoughts espy?
O fields! O woods! when, when shall I be made
Thy happy tenant of your shade?
Here 's the spring-head of Pleasure's flood:
Here 's wealthy Nature's treasury,
Where all the riches lie that she
Has coin'd and stamp'd for good.

Pride and ambition here
Only in far-fetch'd metaphors appear;
Here nought but winds can hurtful murmurs scatter,
And nought but Echo flatter.
The gods, when they descended, hither
From heaven did always choose their way:
And therefore we may boldly say
That 'tis the way too thither.

Hoe happy here should I
And one dear She live, and embracing die!
She who is all the world, and can exclude
In deserts solitude.
I should have then this only fear:
Lest men, when they my pleasures see,
Should hither throng to live like me,
And so make a city here.

Abraham Cowley

To The Royal Society (excerpts)

Philosophy the great and only heir
Of all that human knowledge which has bin
Unforfeited by man's rebellious sin,
Though full of years he do appear,
(Philosophy, I say, and call it, he,
For whatso'ere the painter's fancy be,
It a male-virtue seems to me)
Has still been kept in nonage till of late,
Nor manag'd or enjoy'd his vast estate:
Three or four thousand years one would have thought,
To ripeness and perfection might have brought
A science so well bred and nurst,
And of such hopeful parts too at the first.
But, oh, the guardians and the tutors then,
(Some negligent, and some ambitious men)
Would ne'er consent to set him free,
Or his own natural powers to let him see,
Lest that should put an end to their authority.

That his own business he might quite forget,
They' amus'd him with the sports of wanton wit,
With the desserts of poetry they fed him,
Instead of solid meats t' encrease his force;
Instead of vigorous exercise they led him
Into the pleasant labyrinths of ever-fresh discourse:
Instead of carrying him to see
The riches which do hoarded for him lie
In Nature's endless treasury,
They chose his eye to entertain
(His curious but not covetous eye)
With painted scenes, and pageants of the brain.
Some few exalted spirits this latter age has shown,
That labour'd to assert the liberty
(From guardians, who were now usurpers grown)
Of this old minor still, captiv'd Philosophy;
But 'twas rebellion call'd to fight
For such a long oppressed right.
Bacon at last, a mighty man, arose
Whom a wise King and Nature chose
Lord Chancellor of both their laws,
And boldly undertook the injur'd pupil's cause.

Authority, which did a body boast,
Though 'twas but air condens'd, and stalk'd about,
Like some old giant's more gigantic ghost,
To terrify the learned rout
With the plain magic of true reason's light,
He chas'd out of our sight,
Nor suffer'd living men to be misled
By the vain shadows of the dead:
To graves, from whence it rose, the conquer'd phantom fled;
He broke that monstrous god which stood

In midst of th' orchard, and the whole did claim,
Which with a useless scythe of wood,
And something else not worth a name,
(Both vast for show, yet neither fit
Or to defend, or to beget;
Ridiculous and senseless terrors!) made
Children and superstitious men afraid.
The orchard's open now, and free;
Bacon has broke that scarecrow deity;
Come, enter, all that will,
Behold the ripen'd fruit, come gather now your fill.
Yet still, methinks, we fain would be
Catching at the forbidden tree,
We would be like the Deity,
When truth and falshood, good and evil, we
Without the senses aid within our selves would see;
For 'tis God only who can find
All Nature in his mind.

From words, which are but pictures of the thought,
Though we our thoughts from them perversely drew
To things, the mind's right object, he it brought,
Like foolish birds to painted grapes we flew;
He sought and gather'd for our use the true;
And when on heaps the chosen bunches lay,
He press'd them wisely the mechanic way,
Till all their juice did in one vessel join,
Ferment into a nourishment divine,
The thirsty soul's refreshing wine.
Who to the life an exact piece would make,
Must not from other's work a copy take;
No, not from Rubens or Vandyke;
Much less content himself to make it like
Th' ideas and the images which lie
In his own fancy, or his memory.
No, he before his sight must place
The natural and living face;
The real object must command
Each judgment of his eye, and motion of his hand.
From these and all long errors of the way,
In which our wand'ring predecessors went,
And like th' old Hebrews many years did stray
In deserts but of small extent;
Bacon, like Moses, led us forth at last,
The barren wilderness he past,
Did on the very border stand
Of the blest promis'd land,
And from the mountain's top of his exalted wit,
Saw it himself, and shew'd us it.
But life did never to one man allow
Time to discover worlds, and conquer too;
Nor can so short a line sufficient be

To fathom the vast depths of Nature's sea:
The work he did we ought t' admire,
And were unjust if we should more require
From his few years, divided 'twixt th' excess
Of low affliction, and high happiness.
For who on things remote can fix his sight,
That's always in a triumph, or a fight?

From you, great champions, we expect to get
These spacious countries but discover'd yet;
Countries where yet in stead of Nature, we
Her images and idols worshipp'd see:
These large and wealthy regions to subdue,
Though learning has whole armies at command,
Quarter'd about in every land,
A better troop she ne're together drew.
Methinks, like Gideon's little band,
God with design has pick'd out you,
To do these noble wonders by a few:
When the whole host he saw, they are (said he)
Too many to o'ercome for me;
And now he chooses out his men,
Much in the way that he did then:
Not those many whom he found
Idly extended on the ground,
To drink with their dejected head
The stream just so as by their mouths it fled:
No, but those few who took the waters up,
And made of their laborious hands the cup.

...

With courage and success you the bold work begin;
Your cradle has not idle bin:
None e're but Hercules and you could be
At five years age worthy a history.
And ne're did fortune better yet
Th' historian to the story fit:
As you from all old errors free
And purge the body of philosophy;
So from all modern follies he
Has vindicated eloquence and wit.
His candid style like a clean stream does slide,
And his bright fancy all the way
Does like the sun-shine in it play;
It does like Thames, the best of rivers, glide,
Where the god does not rudely overturn,
But gently pour the crystal urn,
And with judicious hand does the whole current guide.
'T has all the beauties Nature can impart,
And all the comely dress without the paint of art.

Abraham Cowley