

Classic Poetry Series

Edmund Waller

- poems -

Publication Date:

2004

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

Edmund Waller (1606 - 1687)

Born in Buckinghamshire as the eldest son of a wealthy landowner, Edmund Waller was educated at Eton and Kings College, Cambridge. He left Kings College without gaining a degree and instead went to Lincoln's Inn in order to study law. He was elected to parliament at the early age of sixteen, and wrote his first verse at the age of nineteen. In his political career he gained a reputation for brilliance as an orator. Although he was committed to remaining politically moderate in the troubled 1640's, by 1643 he had become a convinced Royalist and was involved in a plot to seize and secure London for Charles the first. The plot was uncovered and despite an eloquent appeal in his own defence, Waller was fined, imprisoned and finally exiled from Britain. He was eventually allowed back into the country in 1652 and returned to parliament. Much of Waller's verse consisted of praise for 'Sacharissa', a name he used for Lady Dorothy Sidney whom he courted unsuccessfully in the 1630's; the most well known of these writings today are *On a Girdle* and *Go Lovely Rose*. Waller's writing was praised by Dryden for its "sweetness," and his style is marked by its smoothness and order. Despite enjoying great fame and esteem in his lifetime, Waller's reputation declined with criticisms of blandness. His work did influence the literature of the Eighteenth Century, with his most remembered achievement being the perfection of the 'heroic couplet'.

A Panegyric

[To my Lord Protector, of the Present Greatness, and Joint Interest, of His Highness, and this Nation.]

While with a strong and yet a gentle hand,
You bridle faction, and our hearts command,
Protect us from ourselves, and from the foe,
Make us unite, and make us conquer too;

Let partial spirits still aloud complain,
Think themselves injured that they cannot reign,
And own no liberty but where they may
Without control upon their fellows prey.

Above the waves as Neptune showed his face,
To chide the winds, and save the Trojan race,
So has your Highness, raised above the rest,
Storms of ambition, tossing us, repressed.

Your drooping country, torn with civil hate,
Restored by you, is made a glorious state;
The seat of empire, where the Irish come,
And the unwilling Scotch, to fetch their doom.

The sea's our own; and now all nations greet,
With bending sails, each vessel of our fleet;
Your power extends as far as winds can blow,
Or swelling sails upon the globe may go.

Heaven, (that has placed this island to give law,
To balance Europe, and her states to awe)
In this conjunction does on Britain smile;
The greatest leader, and the greatest isle!

Whether this portion of the world were rent,
By the rude ocean, from the continent;
Or thus created; it was sure designed
To be the sacred refuge of mankind.

Hither the oppressed shall henceforth resort,
Justice to crave, and succour, at your court;
And then your Highness, not for ours alone,
But for the world's protector shall be known.

Fame, swifter than your winged navy, flies
Through every land that near the ocean lies,
Sounding your name, and telling dreadful news
To all that piracy and rapine use.

With such a chief the meanest nation blessed,
Might hope to lift her head above the rest;
What may be thought impossible to do
For us, embraced by the sea and you?

Lords of the world's great waste, the ocean, we
Whole forests send to reign upon the sea,
And every coast may trouble, or relieve;
But none can visit us without your leave.

Angels and we have this prerogative,
That none can at our happy seat arrive;
While we descend at pleasure, to invade
The bad with vengeance, and the good to aid.

Our little world, the image of the great,
Like that, amidst the boundless ocean set,
Of her own growth has all that Nature craves;
And all that's rare, as tribute from the waves.

As Egypt does not on the clouds rely,
But to her Nile owes more than to the sky;
So what our earth, and what our heaven, denies,
Our ever constant friend, the sea, supplies.

The taste of hot Arabia's spice we know,
Free from the scorching sun that makes it grow;
Without the worm, in Persian silks we shine;
And, without planting, drink of every vine.

To dig for wealth we weary not our limbs;
Gold, though the heaviest metal, hither swims;
Ours is the harvest where the Indians mow;
We plough the deep, and reap what others sow.

Things of the noblest kind our own soil breeds;
Stout are our men, and warlike are our steeds;
Rome, though her eagle through the world had flown,
Could never make this island all her own.

Here the Third Edward, and the Black Prince, too,
France-conquering Henry flourished, and now you;
For whom we stayed, as did the Grecian state,
Till Alexander came to urge their fate.

When for more worlds the Macedonian cried,
He wist not Thetis in her lap did hide
Another yet; a world reserved for you,
To make more great than that he did subdue.

He safely might old troops to battle lead,
Against the unwarlike-Persian, and the Mede,
Whose hasty flight did, from the bloodless field,
More spoil than honour to the victor yield.

A race unconquered, by their clime made bold,

The Caledonians, armed with want and cold,
Have, by a fate indulgent to your fame,
Been from all ages kept for you to tame.

Whom the old Roman wall so ill confined,
With a new chain of garrisons you bind;
Here foreign gold no more shall make them come;
Our English iron holds them fast at home.

They, that henceforth must be content to know
No warmer region, than their hills of snow,
May blame the sun, but must extol your grace,
Which in our senate has allowed them place.

Preferred by conquest, happily o'erthrown,
Falling they rise, to be with us made one;
So kind dictators made, when they came home,
Their vanquished foes free citizens of Rome.

Like favour find the Irish, with like fate,
Advanced to be a portion of our state;
While by your valour and your courteous mind,
Nations, divided by the sea, are joined.

Holland, to gain your friendship, is content
To be our outguard on the continent;
She from her fellow-provinces would go,
Rather than hazard to have you her foe.

In our late fight, when cannons did diffuse,
Preventing posts, the terror and the news,
Our neighbour princes trembled at their roar;
But our conjunction makes them tremble more.

Your never-failing sword made war to cease;
And now you heal us with the arts of peace;
Our minds with bounty and with awe engage,
Invite affection, and restrain our rage.

Less pleasure take brave minds in battles won,
Than in restoring such as are undone;
Tigers have courage, and the rugged bear,
But man alone can, whom he conquers, spare.

To pardon willing, and to punish loath,
You strike with one hand, but you heal with both;
Lifting up all that prostrate lie, you grieve
You cannot make the dead again to live.

When fate, or error, had our age misled,
And o'er these nations such confusion spread,
The only cure, which could from Heaven come down,

Was so much power and clemency in one!

One! whose extraction from an ancient line
Gives hope again that well-born men may shine;
The meanest in your nature, mild and good,
The noble rest secured in your blood.

Oft have we wondered how you hid in peace
A mind proportioned to such things as these;
How such a ruling spirit you could restrain,
And practise first over yourself to reign.

Your private life did a just pattern give,
How fathers, husbands, pious sons should live;
Born to command, your princely virtues slept,
Like humble David's, while the flock he kept.

But when your troubled country called you forth,
Your flaming courage, and your matchless worth,
Dazzling the eyes of all that did pretend,
To fierce contention gave a prosperous end.

Still as you rise, the state, exalted too,
Finds no distemper while 'tis changed by you;
Changed like the world's great scene! when, without noise,
The rising sun night's vulgar light destroys.

Had you, some ages past, this race of glory
Run, with amazement we should read your story;
But living virtue, all achievements past,
Meets envy still, to grapple with at last.

This Cæsar found; and that ungrateful age,
With losing him fell back to blood and rage;
Mistaken Brutus thought to break their yoke,
But cut the bond of union with that stroke.

That sun once set, a thousand meaner stars
Gave a dim light to violence, and wars,
To such a tempest as now threatens all,
Did not your mighty arm prevent the fall.

If Rome's great senate could not wield that sword,
Which of the conquered world had made them lord,
What hope had ours, while yet their power was new,
To rule victorious armies, but by you?

You! that had taught them to subdue their foes,
Could order teach, and their high spirits compose;
To every duty could their minds engage,
Provoke their courage, and command their rage.

So when a lion shakes his dreadful mane,
And angry grows, if he that first took pain
To tame his youth approach the haughty beast,
He bends to him, but frights away the rest.

As the vexed world, to find repose, at last
Itself into Augustus' arms did cast;
So England now does, with like toil oppressed,
Her weary head upon your bosom rest.

Then let the Muses, with such notes as these,
Instruct us what belongs unto our peace;
Your battles they hereafter shall indite,
And draw the image of our Mars in fight;

Tell of towns stormed, or armies overrun,
And mighty kingdoms by your conduct won;
How, while you thundered, clouds of dust did choke
Contending troops, and seas lay hid in smoke.

Illustrious acts high raptures do infuse,
And every conqueror creates a muse.
Here, in low strains, your milder deeds we sing;
But there, my lord; we'll bays and olive bring

To crown your head; while you in triumph ride
O'er vanquished nations, and the sea beside;
While all your neighbour-princes unto you,
Like Joseph's sheaves, pay reverence, and bow.

Edmund Waller

Go Lovely Rose

Go lovely rose,
Tell her that wastes her time and me,
That now she knows,
When I resemble her to thee,
How sweet and fair she seems to be.

Tell her that's young,
And shuns to have her graces spied,
That hadst thou sprung
In deserts, where no men abide,
Thou must have uncommended died.

Small is the worth
Of beauty from the light retir'd:
Bid her come forth,
Suffer herself to be desir'd,
And not blush so to be admir'd.

Then die, that she
The common fate of all things rare
May read in thee;
How small a part of time they share
That are so wondrous sweet and fair.

Edmund Waller

Go, lovely Rose

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Edmund Waller

Of My Lady Isabella Playing on the Lute

Such moving sounds from such a careless touch,
So unconcerned herself, and we so much!
What art is this, that with so little pains
Transports us thus, and o'er the spirit reigns?
The trembling strings about her fingers crowd
And tell their joy for every kiss aloud.
Small force there needs to make them tremble so;
Touched by that hand, who would not tremble too?
Here love takes stand, and while she charms the ear,
Empties his quiver on the listening deer:
Music so softens and disarms the mind
That not an arrow does resistance find.
Thus the fair tyrant celebrates the prize,
And acts herself the the triumph of her eyes.
So Nero once with harp in hand surveyed
His flaming Rome, and as it burned he played.

Edmund Waller

Of the Last Verses in the Book

When we for age could neither read nor write,
The subject made us able to indite.
The soul, with nobler resolutions deckt,
The body stooping, does herself erect:
No mortal parts are requisite to raise
Her, that unbodied can her Maker praise.

The seas are quiet, when the winds give o'er,
So calm are we, when passions are no more:
For then we know how vain it was to boast
Of fleeting things, so certain to be lost.
Clouds of affection from our younger eyes
Conceal that emptiness, which age descries.

The soul's dark cottage, batter'd and decay'd,
Lets in new light through chinks that time has made;
Stronger by weakness, wiser men become
As they draw near to their eternal home:
Leaving the old, both worlds at once they view,
That stand upon the threshold of the new.

Edmund Waller

Old Age

The seas are quiet when the winds give o'er;
So calm are we when passions are no more.
For then we know how vain it was to boast
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Edmund Waller

On a Girdle

That which her slender waist confin'd,
Shall now my joyful temples bind;
No monarch but would give his crown,
His arms might do what this has done.

It was my heaven's extremest sphere,
The pale which held that lovely deer,
My joy, my grief, my hope, my love,
Did all within this circle move.

A narrow compass, and yet there
Dwelt all that's good, and all that's fair;
Give me but what this ribbon bound,
Take all the rest the sun goes round.

Edmund Waller

On Tea

Venus her myrtle, Phoebus has her bays;
Tea both excels, which she vouchsafes to praise.
The best of Queens, and best of herbs, we owe
To that bold nation, which the way did show
To the fair region where the sun doth rise,
Whose rich productions we so justly prize.
The Muse's friend, tea does our fancy aid,
Repress those vapors which the head invade,
And keep the palace of the soul serene,
Fit on her birthday to salute the Queen.

Edmund Waller

On the Friendship Betwixt Two Ladies

Tell me, lovely, loving pair!
Why so kind, and so severe?
Why so careless of our care,
Only to yourselves so dear?

By this cunning change of hearts,
You the power of love control;
While the boy's eluded darts
Can arrive at neither soul.

For in vain to either breast
Still beguiled love does come,
Where he finds a foreign guest,
Neither of your hearts at home.

Debtors thus with like design,
When they never mean to pay,
That they may the law decline,
To some friend make all away.

Not the silver doves that fly,
Yoked in Cytherea's car;
Not the wings that lift so high,
And convey her son so far;

Are so lovely, sweet, and fair,
Or do more ennoble love;
Are so choicely matched a pair,
Or with more consent do move.

Edmund Waller

The Dancer

Behold the brand of beauty tossed!
See how the motion does dilate the flame!
Delighted love his spoils does boast,
And triumph in this game.
Fire, to no place confined,
Is both our wonder and our fear;
Moving the mind,
As lightning hurled through air.

High heaven the glory does increase
Of all her shining lamps, this artful way;
The sun in figures, such as these,
Joys with the moon to play.
To the sweet strains they all advance,
Which do result from their own spheres,
As this nymph's dance
Moves with the numbers which she hears.

Edmund Waller

The Self Banished

It is not that I love you less
Than when before your feet I lay,
But to prevent the sad increase
Of hopeless love, I keep away.

In vain (alas!) for everything
Which I have known belong to you,
Your form does to my fancy bring,
And makes my old wounds bleed anew.

Who in the spring from the new sun
Already has a fever got,
Too late begins those shafts to shun,
Which Phœbus through his veins has shot.

Too late he would the pain assuage,
And to thick shadows does retire;
About with him he bears the rage,
And in his tainted blood the fire.

But vow'd I have, and never must
Your banish'd servant trouble you;
For if I break, you may distrust
The vow I made to love you, too.

Edmund Waller

The Story of Phœbus and Daphne, Applied

Thyrsis, a youth of the inspired train,
Fair Sacharissa lov'd, but lov'd in vain;
Like Phœbus sung the no less amorous boy;
Like Daphne she, as lovely, and as coy;
With numbers he the flying nymph pursues,
With numbers such as Phœbus' self might use;
Such is the chase when Love and Fancy leads,
O'er craggy mountains, and through flow'ry meads;
Invok'd to testify the lover's care,
Or form some image of his cruel fair:
Urg'd with his fury, like a wounded deer,
O'er these he fled; and now approaching near,
Had reach'd the nymph with his harmonious lay,
Whom all his charms could not incline to stay.
Yet what he sung in his immortal strain,
Though unsuccessful, was not sung in vain;
All but the nymph that should redress his wrong,
Attend his passion, and approve his song.
Like Phœbus thus, acquiring unsought praise,
He catch'd at love, and fill'd his arm with bays.

Edmund Waller

To a Very Young Lady

Why came I so untimely forth
Into a world which, wanting thee,
Could entertain us with no worth
Or shadow of felicity?
That time should me so far remove
From that which I was born to love.

Yet, fairest blossom, do not slight
That age which you may know so soon;
The rosy morn resigns her light,
And milder glory to the noon:
And then what wonder shall you do,
When dawning beauty warns us so?

Hope waits upon the flowery prime,
And summer, though it be less gay,
Yet is not looked on as a time
Of declination and decay.
For with a full hand that does bring
All that was promised by the spring.

Edmund Waller

To One Married to an Old Man

Since thou wouldst needs,
Bewitched with some ill charms,
Be buried in those monumental arms,
All we can wish is, may that earth lie light
Upon thy tender limbs, and so goodnight.

Edmund Waller

To Phyllis

Phyllis! why should we delay
Pleasures shorter than the day?
Can we (which we never can)
Stretch our lives beyond their span,
Beauty like a shadow flies,
And our youth before us dies.
Or, would youth and beauty stay,
Love has wings, and will away.
Love has swifter wings than Time;
Change in love to heaven doth climb.
Gods, that never change their state,
Vary oft their love and hate.
Phyllis! to this truth we owe
All the love betwixt us two.
Let not you and I inquire
What has been our past desire;
On what shepherds you have smiled,
Or what nymphs I have beguiled;
Leave it to the planets too,
What we shall hereafter do;
For the joys we now may prove,
Take advice of present love.

Edmund Waller

To the King

[Upon His Majesty's Happy Return.]

The rising sun complies with our weak sight,
First gilds the clouds, then shows his globe of light
At such a distance from our eyes, as though
He knew what harm his hasty beams would do.

But your full majesty at once breaks forth
In the meridian of your reign. Your worth,
Your youth, and all the splendour of your state,
(Wrapped up, till now, in clouds of adverse fate!)
With such a flood of light invade our eyes,
And our spread hearts with so great joy surprise,
That if your grace incline that we should live,
You must not, sir! too hastily forgive.
Our guilt preserves us from the excess of joy,
Which scatters spirits, and would life destroy.
All are obnoxious! and this faulty land,
Like fainting Esther, does before you stand,
Watching your sceptre. The revolted sea
Trembles to think she did your foes obey.

Great Britain, like blind Polypheme, of late,
In a wild rage, became the scorn and hate
Of her proud neighbours, who began to think
She, with the weight of her own force, would sink.
But you are come, and all their hopes are vain;
This giant isle has got her eye again.
Now she might spare the ocean, and oppose
Your conduct to the fiercest of her foes.
Naked, the Graces guarded you from all
Dangers abroad; and now your thunder shall.
Princes that saw you, different passions prove,
For now they dread the object of their love;
Nor without envy can behold his height,
Whose conversation was their late delight.
So Semele, contented with the rape
Of Jove disguised in a mortal shape,
When she beheld his hands with lightning filled,
And his bright rays, was with amazement killed.

And though it be our sorrow, and our crime,
To have accepted life so long a time
Without you here, yet does this absence gain
No small advantage to your present reign;
For, having viewed the persons and the things,
The councils, state, and strength of Europe's kings,
You know your work; ambition to restrain,
And set them bounds, as Heaven does to the main.
We have you now with ruling wisdom fraught,
Not such as books, but such as practice, taught.
So the lost sun, while least by us enjoyed,

Is the whole night for our concern employed;
He ripens spices, fruits, and precious gums,
Which from remotest regions hither comes.

This seat of yours (from the other world removed)
Had Archimedes known, he might have proved
His engine's force fixed here. Your power and skill
Make the world's motion wait upon your will.

Much suffering monarch! the first English born
That has the crown of these three nations worn!
How has your patience, with the barbarous rage
Of your own soil, contended half an age?
Till (your tried virtue, and your sacred word,
At last preventing your unwilling sword)
Armies and fleets which kept you out so long,
Owned their great sovereign, and redressed his wrong.
When straight the people, by no force compelled,
Nor longer from their inclination held,
Break forth at once, like powder set on fire,
And, with a noble rage, their King required;
So the injured sea, which from her wonted course,
To gain some acres, avarice did force,
If the new banks, neglected once, decay,
No longer will from her old channel stay;
Raging, the late got land she overflows,
And all that's built upon't, to ruin goes.

Offenders now, the chiefest, do begin
To strive for grace, and expiate their sin.
All winds blow fair, that did the world embroil;
Your vipers treacle yield, and scorpions oil.

If then such praise the Macedonian got,
For having rudely cut the Gordian knot,
What glory's due to him that could divide
Such ravelled interests; has the knot untied,
And without stroke so smooth a passage made,
Where craft and malice such impeachments laid?

But while we praise you, you ascribe it all
To His high hand, which threw the untouched wall
Of self-demolished Jericho so low;
His angel 'twas that did before you go,
Tamed savage hearts, and made affections yield,
Like ears of corn when wind salutes the field.

Thus patience crowned, like Jobs's, your trouble ends,
Having your foes to pardon, and your friends;
For, though your courage were so firm a rock,
What private virtue could endure the shock?
Like your Great Master, you the storm withstood,

And pitied those who love with frailty showed.

Rude Indians, torturing all the royal race,
Him with the throne and dear-bought sceptre grace
That suffers best. What region could be found,
Where your heriolic head had not been crowned?

The next experience of your mighty mind
Is how you combat fortune, now she's kind.
And this way, too, you are victorious found;
She flatters with the same success she frowned.
While to yourself severe, to others kind,
With power unbounded, and a will confined,
Of this vast empire you possess the care,
The softer part falls to the people's share.
Safety, and equal government, are things
Which subjects make as happy as their kings.

Faith, law, and piety, (that banished train!)
Justice and truth, with you return again.
The city's trade, and country's easy life,
Once more shall flourish without fraud or strife.
Your reign no less assures the ploughman's peace,
Than the warm sun advances his increase;
And does the shepherds as securely keep
From all their fears, as they preserve their sheep.

But, above all, the Muse-inspired train
Triumph, and raise their drooping heads again!
Kind Heaven at once has, in your person, sent
Their sacred judge, their guard, and argument.

Edmund Waller

To the King on His Navy

Where'er thy navy spreads her canvas wings,
Homage to thee, and peace to all, she brings:
The French and Spaniard, when thy flags appear,
Forget their hatred, and consent to fear.
So Jove from Ida did both hosts survey,
And when he pleas'd to thunder, part the fray.
Ships heretofore in seas like fishes sped,
The mightiest still upon the smallest fed:
Thou on the deep imposest nobler laws,
And by that justice hast remov'd the cause
Of those rude tempests, which, for rapine sent,
Too oft, alas, involv'd the innocent.
Now shall the ocean, as thy Thames, be free
From both those fates, of storms and piracy.
But we most happy, who can fear no force
But winged troops, or Pegasean horse:
'Tis not so hard for greedy foes to spoil
Another nation, as to touch our soil.
Should Nature's self invade the world again,
And o'er the centre spread the liquid main,
Thy power were safe; and her destructive hand
Would but enlarge the bounds of thy command:
Thy dreadful fleet would style thee lord of all,
And ride in triumph o'er the drowned ball:
Those towers of oak o'er fertile plains might go,
And visit mountains, where they once did grow.

The world's restorer once could not endure,
That finish'd Babel should those men secure,
Whose pride design'd that fabric to have stood
Above the reach of any second flood:
To thee His chosen, more indulgent, He
Dares trust such power with so much piety.

Edmund Waller

Upon the Late Storm

[And Death of His Highness Ensuing the Same.]

We must resign! Heaven his great soul does claim
In storms, as loud as his immortal fame;
His dying groans, his last breath, shakes our isle,
And trees uncut fall for his funeral pile.
About his palace their broad roots are tossed
Into the air: So Romulus was lost.
New Rome in such a tempest missed her king,
And from obeying fell to worshipping.
On Oeta's top thus Hercules lay dead,
With ruined oaks and pines about him spread;
The poplar, too, whose bough he wont to wear
On his victorious head, lay prostrate there.
Those his last fury from the mountain rent;
Our dying hero from the continent
Ravished whole towns, and forts from Spaniards reft,
As his last legacy to Britain left.
The ocean, which so long our hopes confined,
Could give no limits to his vaster mind;
Our bounds' enlargement was his latest toil,
Nor hath he left us prisoners to our isle.
Under the tropic is our language spoke,
And part of Flanders hath received our yoke.
From civil broils he did us disengage,
Found nobler objects for our martial rage:
And, with wise conduct, to his country showed
Their ancient way of conquering abroad.
Ungrateful then, if we no tears allow
To him that gave us peace and empire too.
Princes, that feared him, grieve, concerned to see
No pitch of glory from the grave is free.
Nature herself took notice of his death,
And, sighing, swelled the sea with such a breath
That to remotest shores her billows rolled,
The approaching fate of her great ruler told.

Edmund Waller