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Herrick's Wild Civility

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When one reaches for a book to take on a trip there might be any number of reasons for making a choice, but undoubtedly preeminent for me is company. I find that more often than not I take Herrick. And I have wondered why this is. Part of the reason is that he is at once familiar, and so I bring the familiar with me as one might a friend, but he remains somewhat enigmatic. I have been reading his Hesperides for longer than I care to recall, and it is not as if I haven’t finished reading it so much as it seems never to have finished. Part of this is the haphazard way I read, but a lot must be laid at the feet of Herrick and his idiosyncratic book, which meanders and restarts, and even seems to end a good many times before it runs out of poems. Titles appear and reappear, he famously bids a solemn “farewell to sack” and perhaps less famously welcomes it back thirty pages later without a hint of contradiction. He acknowledges the great (clearly in a civil war era his dedications to the King are a political statement) as well as the unknown, the historical alongside the fictional. His works wander...
from bawdy Anacreontics to scurrilous Martialian epigrams to heartbreaking Jonsonian elegies. It is the most inclusive of books, and the most unruly. It is delightfully disordered, and as such it remains endlessly expansive, ever open, always new. In short it is great company.

Herrick is well known today as a minor poet, a cavalier poet, one of the self-elected “sons of Ben,” though now he is perhaps as often read as his master Ben Jonson, and certainly as anthologized. His standing is secure, though not perhaps significant compared to his abilities. Swinburne considered him “the greatest songwriter—as surely as Shakespeare is the greatest dramatist—ever born of English race,” though he suffers now perhaps due to the influential opinions of F. R. Leavis (“trivially charming”) and T. S. Eliot who saw the “inspired frivolity” in parts but found the whole to contain “no… continuous conscious purpose” and no “unity of underlying pattern,” and conferred upon him the title of minor poet in comparison to Herbert whom he saw as great. Neither Leavis nor Eliot were fools, but both obviously read with agendas significantly other than Swinburne’s. And both have had more critical influence than the eccentric Victorian or other supporters of Herrick. If one considers the phenomenon of the canon, with the nomenclature and pomp of canonization that takes place, it does seem that the lyrics of Herrick might suffer in comparison to the grand bombast of a Milton, or even the taut personal struggles of Donne (or the brilliant deconstructive wit of Marvell). The twentieth century may have started as a haven for Herrick’s undoubted charms, but it did not end as one. His style is willfully inconsistent, his silliness is unforgivable, his dances and frills, even his playful seductions seem hopelessly naïve and out of keeping with modern life, as outdated as the festivals and countryside idylls he describes. But perhaps it was always so. And Herrick is not as frivolous in his lyricism as it might appear. He is crafty; that is, he is an exquisite craftsman, something that the son of a goldsmith, and a trained goldsmith himself, would have seen as the highest compliment, but he is also crafty. His message is subtle, as subtle as it needed to be in a time of great political unrest. And his task in creating the most simple of lyrics is to continue a craft that he sees as being as vital to culture and country as it is to soul and man.
The title *Hesperides* refers to both the nymph daughters of Hesperus (the evening star Venus) and the garden they protect. The garden is the orchard of Hera, where the nymphs protect her wedding gift from Gaia, a tree bearing golden apples. Speculations as to the whereabouts of the garden vary, though it seems the location is often “to the west,” giving the position the poignancy of the setting sun (think of the end of the Monarchy as the sun going down). The garden brings echoes of Eden and Elysium, and might also reflect Herrick’s own status as an “exiled Ovid” in the west county of Devon. The rest of the title, “or THE WORKS both Humane and Divine” purports to offer a translation, so that we see *Hesperides* as a collection of the poetical fruits of Herrick’s labours. The title conflates the work with the guarding of that work, seeing the task of poetry as both making the work and jealously guarding a divine gift. It’s important to remember that Herrick is both the creator and the custodian.

Entitling the book “the Works” also hints at a posthumous collection, further endorsed by the frontispiece portrait, a woodcut of Herrick as a funeral bust. The message is that herein lies the worthy remains of our author, his best part. This reading is endorsed by an epigram of Ovid “Effugient avidos Carmina nostra Rogos” (“our songs will escape the greedy funeral pyres”), which is actually a very obvious misquote: Ovid’s original using *sola* instead of *nostra* (most Early Modern editions used the imperfect “effugient,” will, rather than the modern preference for “defugient;” *do*) in his elegy for Tibullus, where his implication is the subtly different “Defugient avidos carmina sola rogos” (“song alone escapes the greedy funeral pyre”). Herrick’s inclusivity highlights the communality of the poetic garden, seeing his own task as guardian as well as practitioner. The songs are “ours” not simply “his.” He allies himself with Ovid, and thus with Tibullus, which alongside the funeral bust, show his poems stretching beyond his mortal span, reaching backwards and forwards in history. This suggests *Hesperides* is an atemporal realm, a poetic Elysium or garden where Herrick and Ovid and Tibullus (as well as his beloved Jonson) can meet to drink heady inspiration from the muse’s cup. Herrick’s modesty (compared to Jonson’s virile self-promotion, or Milton’s self-appointed grandeur) is nonetheless a conscious self-election to the pantheon.
So let's look at one of his most popular lyrics, here in full:

A SWEET disorder in the dress
Kindles in clothes a wantonness:
A lawn about the shoulders thrown
Into a fine distraction:
An erring lace which here and there
Enthrals the crimson stomacher:
A cuff neglectful, and thereby
Ribbons to flow confusedly:
A winning wave (deserving note)
In the tempestuous petticoat:
A careless shoe-string, in whose tie
I see a wild civility:
Do more bewitch me than when art
Is too precise in every part.10

Delight is a pretty 14 line sonnet of rhyming couplets in regular iambic quadnuneter, with each line a complete clause. The meter offers only one “distraction,” which must be pulled out of its usual three syllables, “dis-trac-tion,” into an unusual four “dis-tract-i-on” instead—something of a playful tugging of the word that might prepare us for the erring lace to follow. As is typical of Herrick there is plenty of alliteration (disorder, dress; kindles, clothes; winning wave) and a great deal of consonance and assonance (“A lawn about the shoulders thrown”), with the syllable “in” playing a strong role in holding the whole piece together sonically and visually. Until the final “Do,” each couplet begins with either the article “a” or “an,” with four of the following lines beginning with an “in” or “en” sound, and the other lines at least echoing the “I” sound. Until the final rhyme of “art” and “part” Herrick rhymes a single-syllable word with a three-syllable word (or in one case “thereby” with “confusedly”): a two-syllable word with a four). This has a ravishing effect, producing a sense of effortless flourish at the end of each couplet, almost as if we see the modest single syllable unfurl into extravagance: “dress” becomes “wantonness.” Throughout, the idea of the ribbon or the lace unraveling becomes the play of the syllables, the “es” of “dress” and “wantonness”
reappears in “deserving” and weaves into “tempestuous,” and through “careless” where the “es” becomes “s” and continues through the “shoe-string,” “see” and “civility.” Every “part” rhymes artfully, “ribbon” finds kinship in proximity to “winning” (with the central doubling of consonants), and “enthralls,” where the “on” off rhymes with the “en”. The play of the whole is at once seemingly effortless and intricately precise; the dress of the lover is at once disheveled, and at the same time precisely arranged as such. And as such the poem is an ars poetica. The poem is itself a reframing of a Jonson lyric:

Still to be neat, still to be dressed,  
As you were going to a feast;  
Still to be powdered, still perfumed:  
Lady, it is to be presumed,  
Though art’s hid causes are not found,  
All is not sweet, all is not sound.  
Give me a look, give me a face  
That makes simplicity a grace;  
Robes loosely flowing, hair as free:  
Such sweet neglect more taketh me,  
Than all the adulteries of art:  
They strike mine eyes, but not my heart.11

Both poems shift from a description of a preference for the way a lover might dress to make a declaration on art. The mention of “art” in Jonson appears as the art of seduction, over-played by a woman too obvious in her decoration. But Jonson’s references to “grace” as well as “art,” in a poem about revealing the truth in small details, flags an underlying message. A longer, more showy treatise on his declared preference for simplicity in art would be counter intuitive. Both poems seduce by understatement. Both are deceptively simple. And both lyrics deceive if we under read them. They are, in that, somewhat paradoxical: they argue for simplicity while embodying a hidden subtlety. Jonson’s paradox of “sweet neglect” is not as strident as Herrick’s “wild civility,” but both offer a clue to a shared ideology.

In his treatise Orator Cicero outlines the true “Attic” style, which is restrained and plain. Indeed, “the audience... are sure they
can speak in that fashion.” Here we see a description of the ideal style that rhymes with Jonson’s apparent simplicity. But Cicero continues in language that seems even more reminiscent of Herrick when he suggests that speech should “be loose but not rambling; so that it may be seen to move freely but not to wander without restraint.” The ribbons and stomacher offer just such a freedom and restraint in Herrick’s Delight. The restraint is both linguistic and moral: “For the short and concise clauses must not be handled carelessly, but there is such a thing even as careful negligence.” Cicero’s “careful negligence” is Jonson’s “sweet neglect” and Herrick’s “wild civility.” But even more telling is Cicero’s supporting example for this paradoxical neglect: “Just as some women are said to be handsome when undressed—this very lack or ornament becomes them—so this plain style gives pleasure even when unembellished.”

The precedent is well established then to see plain style in language exemplified with a description of a woman’s clothing. And of course there are echoes elsewhere, such as Ovid’s Amores, iv where he describes his waking lover: “tum quoque erat neclecta decens, ut Threcia Bacche” (“even then, in her neglect, she was comely, like a Thracian Bacchante”). The image of the woman appearing to her lover in dishabille allows for her subtle awareness at being noticed. Cicero’s audience is lead to feel the oration is artless, just as the lover is lead to believe the woman’s look is unself-conscious. The truth is that they are artful, without being artificial. The paradox of “neglecta decens” is more natural than any artificial makeup, “imitating that orderly disorder, which is common in nature.” The artifice in Herrick and Jonson is to produce plain-seeming lyrics that address the simple natural beauty of nature and women, but are in fact supremely crafted. Herrick’s Delight is itself exemplary of his “wild civility,” an idea he repeats throughout the Hesperides in “To Musick, to becalme a sweet-sick-youth,” “Art above Nature, to Julia,” and “What kind of Mistresse he would have.” Three of the four poems refer directly to the dress and habits of his lovers, although lovers in Herrick are always idealized figures, possibly the muse and clearly offered as literary tropes. “Wild civility” describes the art by which a lover dresses (and undresses) and at the same time it describes the way an ideal poem might be fashioned.
Of course the concept of "wild civility" is more than classical rhetoric, and the image of a loosely dressed lover appeals to a non-puritanical age, hearkening back to a time before the regime under which Herrick is writing. Delight obviously echoes Jonson, and looks to the time of the Monarchy, nostalgically revising the period as a Golden Age. But the Golden Age is a pastoral convention, a literary device, more than it is any historical period. The tone of the book is often nostalgic, but more often than not the events seem to be literary as much as historical, and the convivial symposiastic references bring Anacreon to life for an evening of drink, as vividly as they bring Jonson back from the dead to inhabit the Apollo Room. The implication of the Hesperides as a posthumous work seems to suggest that more has been lost with the civil war than the King. A link to the court is cut off and poets such as Herrick are now in exile, a fate akin to death. We have a version of the fall of Rome, here and now in England. And it is up to Herrick (the pre-eminent disciple of Jonson) to provide a place, a garden, where poets may still meet. Hesperides is such a meeting place, where Herrick and his poetic forebears mingle and exchange.

As we have seen Hesperides is filled with homages to Ovid and Jonson, with allusions to and imitations of poets classical and contemporaneous. Herrick's imitations are not merely exercises of a minor poetaster, the idea of imitation acknowledges the rhetorical teachings of Cicero and Dionysius of Halicarnassus, but more than that it is an instant of recitation and resuscitation. Ovid lives because we read him. Jonson lives in the vivid plain English lines of his songs. Herrick's style is self-consciously imitative, not out of failure of imagination, but out of overwhelming gratitude and humility. But one should not imagine for one minute that Herrick's poems are shallow copies, anymore than one should imagine Leonardo's sketches from Verrocchio limited his own artistic endeavors. All poetry is a balance of imitation and imaginative deviation, or if you prefer a balance between rules and unruliness. It must in someway resemble previous poetry to be read as such. It must differ to be seen as worthy of the title. All poetry moves between these poles, Herrick's "civility" is surely his classical education. His "wildness" is that which breathes freshness and inspiration into and out of the work of his forebears to make his own. Poetry's space is the gap between the paradox of "wild"
and "civil." When Horace describes his poet in Ode xxxiv: "Parcus deorum cultor et infrequens, / insaniens dum sapientiae"21 ("I, a chary and infrequent worshipper of the gods, what time I wandered, the votary of a foolish wisdom") it is a poet Herrick would recognize. His own "wild civility" is such a "foolish wisdom." It is at once learned and lived. His art is crafty in its artlessness, but his peasant dances are as graceful as any courtly masque.

One could argue that for Herrick the passing of the Monarchy, and the passing of courtly patronage must have seemed like the end of a very natural poetic heritage. The pastoral convention of shepherds exchanging songs was perhaps a courtly reality, and certainly it appears Herrick felt part of such an exchange with Jonson and his legendary gatherings. What seems more important in a way is not his purported Royalist leanings (Hesperides contains plenty of ambivalence in terms of the political dedicatees, from the King and Royalist friends to powerful Parliamentarians, none of the poems seeming to beg for political favours in the way one might expect) but his desire to preserve a poetic lineage. He needed a realm where just inheritance might survive untrammeled. But the crown is of laurels not of gold. And the realm is a poetic Elysium, not Whitehall.

Hesperides is deliberate in its political and poetical unruliness. Unlike many of his contemporaries it holds no obvious political agenda, nor one single poetical style. The garden22 he builds is as welcoming as a peasant's dwelling in an Arcadian grove. But with that it is a model of the ultimate poetic demesne. There remains much delight in the disorderly Hesperides, in its "wild civility." The fact that he is still read, still chosen for company shows that he might well outlive more than one or two shifts in political fashion, whether it be Puritanical or Modernist.

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NOTES

1. The book has two titles, followed very closely by nine individual "opening" poems that all describe what the book is, where it should be
read, who it is for, and four hundred pages later it “closes” still offering
five or six culminating poems describing his muse, his book, his fame and
himself.
2. For Herrick poetry is sack, his intoxication, and when he raises his
glass to toast his confreres, he is toasting the history of western poetry.
(London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1898), 1:xi.
4. F. R. Leavis, “The Line of Wit,” in Recaluation (London: Chatto and
Windsor, 1936), 10–41.
Faber and Faber, 1937), 45–47.
6. More compelling to a post-Romantic audience engaged in protracted
self-scrutiny.
7. This is of course no place to risk a description of twentieth-
century poetry, but if one looks at the shift from Victorian verse through
Modernism, and the advent of Free Verse, one can see that the status
of songs as poetry has much declined, and that the merit of joy and of
the delightful has been relegated as well. Disjunction often feels more
appropriate. Beauty seems to embarrassingly ignore catastrophes
and international tragedies.
8. Only Samuel Daniel (1601) and Ben Jonson (1616) had previously
used the name for a collection of poems whilst alive.
9. Ovid, Heroides and Amores, trans. Grant Shoverman (Cambridge, MA:
Harvard University Press, 1963), 482.
10. The Poetical Works of Robert Herrick, ed. L. C. Martin (Oxford:
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ovid, Heroides and Amores, 372.
17. “Lost in the civill Wildernesse of sleep” (Herrick, Poetical Works, 99).
18. “Next, when those Lawnie Filmes I see / Play with a wild civility”
(ibid., 202).
19. “Be she shewing in her dresse, / Like a civill Wildernes” (ibid.,
232).
20. Another rhetorician supporting the claims plain style and of
“art… concealed beneath the semblance of artlessness.” De Lysias 1.16,
http://archive.org/stream/lysiaslamb00lysiuoft/lysiaslamb00lysiuoft_djvu.txt


22. And it is a very English garden in the style of William Kent or Charles Bridgeman, appearing at once natural and cultivated.