

EVERYMAN'S  
BOOK *of* ENGLISH  
LOVE POEMS



*Edited by*  
JOHN HADFIELD

Everyman's Book  
of English Love Poems



75

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Book of English  
Love Poems*

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John Hadfield

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### Erratum

The date of publication of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* is given as 1830 instead of 1850, and the poems are therefore misplaced in the sequence of the book. The date is also incorrectly given in the introduction on page 28 and in the biographical note on page 381.



### *The Triple Fool*

I am two fools, I know,  
For loving, and for saying so  
In whining poetry;  
But where's that wise man that would not be I,  
If she would not deny?

Then as th' earth's inward narrow crooked lanes  
Do purge sea-water's fretful salt away,  
I thought, if I could draw my pains  
Through rhyme's vexation, I should them allay.  
Grief brought to numbers cannot be so fierce,  
For he tames it, that fetters it in verse.

But when I have done so,  
Some man, his art and voice to show,  
Doth set and sing my pain,  
And, by delighting many, frees again  
Grief, which verse did restrain.

To Love and Grief tribute of Verse belongs,  
But not of such as pleases when 'tis read;  
Both are increas'd by such songs:  
For both their triumphs so are publish'd,  
And I, which was two fools, do so grow three;  
Who are a little wise, the best fools be.

John Donne





## Introduction

This book has a two-fold purpose: first, to provide a representative selection of the lyric poetry of love; and, second, to illustrate through poetry the different attitudes to love adopted by English men and women during the past four hundred years.

The success or failure of the book in its first purpose is a matter of opinion and subjective judgment. Lyric poetry is – with the English country house and the English garden – among the most notable contributions made by the English people to Western culture. And love was, from the sixteenth to the late eighteenth century, the chief theme of the lyric poets. To express preferences within the huge output of lyric verse during that period is to invite argument. Who is to decide with any finality which of Shakespeare's or Spenser's sonnets is to have the preference? How does it come about that such great English poets as Milton, Shelley and Wordsworth are so scantily represented in the book, whereas minor writers like Sir Charles Sedley and George Granville are represented by five and seven poems respectively? The answer to this question, setting aside editorial prejudice, is that the great writers mentioned wrote very little lyric verse about love, whereas Sedley and Granville wrote about little else.

I have made no conscious attempt to include or to exclude love poems that have achieved common acceptance through repetition in other anthologies. Nor have I included the work of outstanding poets simply because they are outstanding. It may seem surprising that so eloquent a lyric poet as Keats is not represented at all. But Keats was far more interested in other aspects of life and nature than he was in love: the very titles of his odes and sonnets are evidence of this. And perhaps the finest poet produced by America, Emily Dickinson, hardly wrote at all in personal terms about human love.

Readers may well disagree with me over the omission of this or that poet, or my preference for one poem over another. What I think can be claimed for this book, in the pursuance of the first of its aims, is that it presents quite a large number of authors – such as Fulke Greville, William Cavendish, Richard Leigh and Soame Jenyns – whose work is little known today, and a number of poems of anonymous authorship which have been seldom reprinted. Quantitatively, also, this volume contains a much more extensive collection of English love poems than has appeared in any other recent anthology.

The second aim of the book is one that emerged almost accidentally from the assembly of a vast amount of love poetry. Placing the poems in roughly the chronological order in which they were written and published it became evident to me that, regardless of their literary merits, they were of significant interest as reflecting the amatory and sexual *mores* of the differing societies that produced them. There are always exceptions to any classifications, but I have deliberately grouped my selection under the headings of Elizabethan (1558–1603), Jacobean and Cavalier (1603–60), Restoration (1660–1714), Georgian (1714–1830), Victorian (1830–1901) and Modern (1901 onwards). I suggest that in broad terms these periods were distinguished not only by political, aesthetic and social changes, but also by changing attitudes to love and sex, attitudes which are reflected in the lyric poetry they produced.

Before attempting to indicate the differing attitudes which characterized these periods I should perhaps point out one constant factor that ran through almost the whole of the four hundred years under review, though it has been less evident latterly. This is the close relationship between love poems and music. Much of the best of the poetry was set to music, to be sung. Many of the poems of the Elizabethan and Restoration periods originated as songs interpolated into plays. And the printed sources of many of the Georgian lyrics have no titles other than the single word ‘Song’.

The musical element was less predominant in those Victorian poems which are worthy of reprinting, but it should not

be forgotten that throughout Victoria's reign one of the most popular recreations was listening to 'songs at the piano' in drawing room or parlour. The theme of most of these ballads was love, though death, disaster and military activity were also favourite subjects. In the twentieth century, moreover, the chief form of expression of love and sexual attraction has been the popular song, whether from a musical play or the dance floor. For this reason I have included, in the final section of the book, a few examples of love lyrics – and one satirical cabaret song – that have had wide musical popularity and show some originality and finesse in verbal expression. It is unfortunate that so many of the best tunes of today are accompanied by words of total banality.

### *The Elizabethans*

The continuing musical popularity of the madrigal and part song has, I fancy, caused many people to suppose that most Elizabethan love poetry is of an Arcadian artlessness, expressing sentiments of pastoral simplicity to an accompaniment of hey-nonny-nonnies and fal-la-las. There was much of that sort of thing – the equivalent of the Edwardian musical comedy song or the pop music of today – though curiously, it did not reach its zenith until the Stuart period (the age of metaphysical poetry!) But the best of Elizabethan verse, even in its purely lyrical moods, is by no means simple in style, and is far from unsophisticated in sentiment.

It has been interesting, in arranging this selection, to see how two elements – the singing note and the intellectual conceit – run side by side through the period, gradually merging in the best of the songs set by Campion, Dowland, and – the musician with the most metaphysical tastes of any of them – Robert Jones.

The singing note, of course, had sounded through the Middle Ages, and there is nothing specifically Elizabethan about 'Fain would I have a pretty thing' or 'Love me little, love me long'. As early as 1572, however, we find George Gascoigne

making an odd marriage of simplicity and sophistication in his 'Lullaby of a Lover'. With Sir Philip Sidney, whose poems were mostly written ten or more years before their appearance in print, a complex, highly civilized intelligence enters the poetic field. At the same time his friend Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke, was composing metaphysical love poems which are the unmistakable predecessors of Donne's.

The love poetry of the 1580s and 1590s, until the lutenists entered the field, was largely dominated by the sonnet form, by sentiments and ideas derived from foreign sources such as Petrarch and Desportes, and by the baroque conventions of the Court. 'As we read' – I quote what C. S. Lewis has said of *Arcadia* – 'we must have in mind the ruffs, the feathers, the tapestries, the rich earrings, the mannered gardens, the elaborate courtesies.' Typical of the courtly lover's vision of his loved one are Thomas Watson's lines:

I saw the object of my pining thought  
    Within a garden of sweet Nature's placing,  
Wherein an arbour, artificial wrought,  
    By workman's wondrous skill the garden gracing,  
Did boast his glory . . .

Much of the love poetry is merely 'artificial wrought', but even the most elaborate structures of verbal antithesis, embroidered metaphor and fulsome compliment, are apt to be lit by brilliant shafts of purely lyrical sunshine.

Genius apart – and twenty years which saw the writing of the sonnets of Sidney, Spenser and Shakespeare, and the love poems of Donne, carried no inconsiderable freight of genius – the Elizabethan love lyric is the consequence of fresh appetites and eager tempers discovering for the first time the stylistic and intellectual vistas of the Renaissance. 'Its inspiration', wrote Sir Edmund Chambers, 'is in the lust of the eyes and the pride of life. It hymns the splendour of a palace, and passes in like spirit to dwell on the simpler felicities of the Spring.' Because life in the palace was fraught with hazard, rivalry and treachery, and because Winter and death were no less real to

the poets than love and Spring, there was a singular lack of sentimentality even in the most anguished outpouring of tender sentiment.

The metaphysical element reached its apogee in the love poems of John Donne. Although most of these were not published until 1633 I have included them in the Elizabethan section since they were all written between 1598 and 1602. It is to be assumed that most of them were addressed to Ann More, niece of Sir Thomas Egerton, Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, to whom Donne was secretary from 1598 to 1602. Donne's secret marriage to her in 1601 cost him his post. Some of the more tender poems, such as 'Love's Infiniteness', were almost certainly written after his marriage.

Donne's poems heralded the high noon of English love poetry. They have none of the artless charm of early Elizabethan verse, and their artificiality is not merely decorative, as was that of such predecessors as Thomas Watson or the Earl of Oxford, but the result of artifice working upon complex thoughts and emotions. As Sir Herbert Grierson wrote, in the Introduction to his edition of Donne's poems: 'Hot-blooded and passionate he was, with a passion in which body and soul are sometimes inextricably blended . . . Not sensual nor sensuous but passionate is the note of the young Donne and his verse, an intense susceptibility to the fascination of sex, a fascination that at once allures and repels, enthralls and awakens a spirit of scornful rebellion. He ranges through the whole gamut of passion from its earthliest to its most abstractedly detached moods.'

But Donne, although the most profound of the Elizabethan love poets, was not representative of his period. Poetically his place is amongst the metaphysical writers (many of them inspired by religion, as Donne was in his later years) of the mid-seventeenth century. Meanwhile, as the Elizabethan age drew to its close, song book after song book issued from the presses, and England became, to its musical glory, 'a nest of singing birds'.

To save the harbour of artifice from becoming, as it might

have done in an increasingly self-conscious age, a temple of metaphysics, a musical discipline was imposed by the lutenists, who filled their song books with such lyrics as lent themselves to the singing voice. Lyrics which were to be sung had to retain some of the simplicity, directness and spontaneity of the Arcadian age. The singing note struck from their lutes and orpharions by Dowland, Campion, Jones and their fellows continued to sound through English love poetry for over a hundred years.

### *Jacobean and Cavalier*

The first few years of the seventeenth century were a fertile age for the drama, and it is not surprising that many of the best love lyrics of the time were introduced as songs in plays by Ben Jonson, Thomas Heywood and lesser writers such as Nathaniel Field and Peter Hausted. These inevitably tended to be literary trifles, to fill gaps in the dramatic action or allow changes of scene or cast. But some of them, especially those written by Ben Jonson, such as 'Drink to me only with thine eyes', have achieved lasting fame.

Meanwhile, the output of song books continued, and yielded some of the most beautifully conceived and finely turned love lyrics in our literature. It is extraordinary that the authorship of so many of them has never been discovered. The credit for their survival must go entirely to the lutenists. Thomas Campion is known to have written his own words, but 'Anon' is the author of most of the songs set to music by John Dowland, Francis Pilkington and Robert Jones, whose *Musical Dreame* (1609) and *The Muse's Gardin for Delights* (1610) are rich quarries for lyric verse.

The poets who wrote for publication in print rather than performance with music came into their own with the accession of Charles I. It is perhaps dangerous to link the personality of a monarch with the poetic attitude of his or her reign, but there is little doubt that much of the love poetry written in Court circles during the reign of Elizabeth I was deliberately intended to refer to the Virgin Queen. And the

personal image created by Charles I undoubtedly coloured the general outlook of what may be called, as a group, the Cavalier Poets of his reign – Thomas Carew and Sir John Suckling (who were close friends) and Richard Lovelace. All were connected with the Court, of which the head was a monarch of high purpose and natural dignity, a man of culture and a connoisseur of the arts. The Court poets represented, as it were, an aristocracy of elegant refinement, with total belief in themselves, just as their monarch believed in the divine right of kings.

Their poetry reflected this self-confidence. It is characteristic that one of Carew's poems is entitled 'Mediocrity in Love Rejected' and another 'Boldness in Love'. As most of his and his friends' poems were concerned with love, and all three of them were very talented versifiers, it is hardly surprising that this period has been described as the Golden Age of the love lyric. One poem, 'A Rapture', here reprinted in full, has come to stand beside Donne's 'Going to Bed' as a classic of erotic poetry.

Lovelace, the rather younger contemporary of Carew and Suckling, added to the Cavalier characteristics of boldness and style a soldierly recognition that only martial duty or loyalty to a cause can claim greater allegiance than love.

Meanwhile, down in Devon, the pastoral tradition was being 'nobly' maintained by the Reverend Robert Herrick. Not only did he

Sing of brooks, of blossoms, birds and bowers  
Of April, May, of June and July flowers

but he also celebrated unashamedly his delight in the physical charms of his younger female parishioners.

The reign of Charles I also saw the emergence of another Royalist whose adventures in politics were paralleled by adventures in love. Edmund Waller's polished love lyrics included 'Go, lovely rose'. Abraham Cowley, a younger man, who was for a time cipher-secretary to Queen Henrietta Maria in exile, published *The Mistress* in 1647; and another supporter of the Royalist cause, William Cavendish, paid court to, and



married, a maid-in-waiting to the Queen, and wrote a collection of exquisite love-poems for her, which remained in manuscript for over three hundred years.

This Golden Age of love poetry was brought to a violent end with the execution of Charles I in 1649 and the triumph of the Puritans. Carew had died a debauchee in 1639, Suckling had fled to France and was said by John Aubrey to have committed suicide in Paris. Lovelace was twice imprisoned and died a bankrupt in 1658. Henry King, who had written pleasant love lyrics early in the reign of Charles I and a moving Exequy on his dead wife, was deprived of the Bishopric of Chichester by the Parliamentarians.

During the period of the Commonwealth the only two poets of consequence who had official recognition were Milton, whose single lyric poem about personal love was the touching tribute to his dead wife written in 1658, and Andrew Marvell, who became tutor to Cromwell's ward.

Herrick and Cowley were still alive, but the only poet I have discovered who published a volume of love lyrics of any merit during the Commonwealth was the obscure Nicholas Hookes, whose delightful verses in praise of Amanda (1653) seem to have been ignored by most literary historians. The effect of the Puritan régime during the 1650s was as disastrous to the Art of Love, and its celebration, as it was to the interior decoration of innumerable churches throughout Britain.

### *The Restoration Wits*

'This morning, before I was up,' wrote Samuel Pepys in his diary on 30 January 1659/60, 'I fell a-singing of my song, "Great, good and just, &c.," and put myself thereby in mind that this was the fatal day, now ten year since, his Majesty died.' Meanwhile clerks and apprentices, setting about their day's work, were quoting lewd doggerel about the Grandees of the Rump. London was restive and ill at ease. From lip to lip was passed the significant couplet:

'Tis hoped before the month of June  
The birds will sing another tune.