

Exploring the poetry of Sir John Suckling and Richard Lovelace

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In his essay 'Thomas Carew, Sir John Suckling, and Richard Lovelace' Corns considers the place of three poets within the Cavalier poet tradition (Corns, 1977). The discussion here will consider whether Corns' arguments reveal how two of these poets, Suckling and Lovelace contribute to the sense of the 'Cavalier' and how they sit within the poetry of sex and seduction.

The Cavalier poets were a school of poets that supported the 17th century English royalist cause. Drawn from the classes that supported Charles I, they not only provided poetry and dramatic works to decorate the court of Charles I, but also demonstrated political, religious and military support for the Royalist cause. Generally highly educated, they 'drew upon the knowledge of Horace, Cicero, and Ovid' (Clayton, 1974) and looked back to the Jacobean secular works of Jonson rather than the metaphysics of Donne (Groot, J., 2011). Their poetry focussed on 'beauty, love, nature, sensuality, drinking, good fellowship, honour, and social life' (Black, 2006). Contemporary views of the Cavalier poet depended much on the viewer. Puritans used the term Cavalier to denigrate and belittle, seeing the Cavalier as 'whoremongering and raping roisterers (Corns, 1977, p. 202). Royalists however lauded the Cavalier as someone who 'was represented as the gilded youth martyred to a cause he served beyond the call of commonplace loyalty' (Corns, 1977, p. 202).

Lovelace and Suckling shared a common experience of being unlucky Cavaliers. Lovelace, financially ruined by his support of the Royalist cause, died in poverty, having seen the defeat and execution of his King (Jokinen, 2003b). Suckling died abroad, fleeing from his Parliamentary accusers, at the early age of 32 (Jokinen, 2003a). Both poets illustrate 'the poignant charm of Cavalier poetry at its best, and both, it must be added, illustrate also the slipshod faults of this poetry' (Saintsbury, 1910, p422).

In Lovelace's 'To Lucasta, Going to the Wars' (Lovelace, 1910, p. 18) the poet defends the soldier's decision to take up his sword and abandon his lover, Lucasta. This is a fine exemplar of the Cavalier as a warrior-poet. The soldier must obey his sense of honour and thus must do his duty and go to war. If he did not go to war, then he would not be honourable, and hence would not be fit to be a lover. Lovelace is in essence saying to Lucasta that the very thing that forces him to leave her, namely his honour, is that which makes him a good lover for her. The poem expresses not only the pain of parting but the pain of the impossibility of continuing the relationship.

Lucasta is presented as a pure and devoted lover. By describing her 'chaste breast' as a 'nunnery', Lovelace conflates ideas of purity and religious devotion. Her 'quiet mind' suggests the tranquillity of peace in stark contrast to the violence and turmoil that Lovelace may expect in the Civil War. In an elegant alliterative pun the 'chaste' Lucas is tellingly replaced by the 'new mistress' Lovelace must now 'chase' – the mistress of war. The mention of 'arms' is used with duality of meaning - the soldier is leaving his lover's arms, only to take up new ones - the weapons of war. Though he does his best to sweet talk her, literally using the word 'Sweet' and the epithet 'Dear', Lucasta remains second best to his duty. The speaker confesses that he embraces war with 'a stronger faith' than the one he showed to Lucasta. While this might be a religious reference, it seems more likely the poet is

unfaithful to Lucasta, and that faith in this case, is his allegiance to his King, a love superior to any love of a mistress. Lovelace's ultimate duty is to glorify Charles I.

When Corns states that Lovelace 'conforms more closely than either [Carew or Suckling] to the notion of the poet-in-arms' (Corns, 1993, p. 213) he is entirely correct in identifying the difference in apparent sincerity between Lovelace and Suckling. This is also the view of others. Markel suggests that Suckling consciously sought to present himself as the epitome of the Caroline Cavalier: 'His pose was that of a highly skilled amateur who would impulsively decide to try his hand at any activity and then, without much trouble, do better than almost anyone' (Markel, 1977, p. 152). Markel identifies a subset of Suckling's poetry with a potentially more serious tone: 'the aloof and objective social commentator becomes the very concerned and introspective lyric poet' (Markel, 1977, p. 152). Nevertheless Markel views Suckling as failing to follow this through: 'But just as we prepare for a view of the man behind the mask, the poems end; their potential for serious analysis remains undeveloped' (Markel, 1977, p. 158). To judge whether this is correct, an examination of Suckling's rather immodest view of his superior poetic skills may be helpful.

In 'A Sessions of the Poets' (Suckling, 1910, pp. 29-32) Suckling attacks fellow Cavalier poet, Thomas Carew, saying that Carew's poetry 'Was seldom brought forth but with trouble and pain' (l. 40). In contrast, he implies his own poetry is written effortlessly as a poet who 'loved not the Muses so much as his sport' (l. 85). Markel rejects this self-effacing posture: 'behind this mask of studied indifference, a disturbing seriousness and even pathos pervades some of the poetry' (Markel, 1977, p. 152) and backs this up by quoting Saintsbury's view that 'everything with Suckling turns to a ripple of merriment... [but] there are poems, and good ones, of his which might pass muster as serious, but one always suspects that they are not' (Saintsbury, 1910, p. 423). Saintsbury regards Suckling as 'neither a refined nor a very passionate writer' (p. 422) and thinks much of Suckling's work is intended to achieve amusement more than deep emotion. Saintsbury gives the example that Suckling's "Love's World" 'reads like, and perhaps is, a designed burlesque of the metaphysical altitudes:

Tis now since I sat down before
That foolish fort, a heart,

is the very triumph of the style' (p. 423). Saintsbury, in contrast, sees greater depth in Suckling: 'The poet is not always quite so frivolous; there are poems, and good ones, of his which might pass muster as serious, but one always suspects that they are not' (p. 423).

Given the above considerations, how should these two poets be viewed? Within their context of their social and military positions, their poetry shows all the requisite Cavalier characteristics: a determined interest in the pursuit and seduction of women as well as a profession of the importance of honour in love and the glorification of the King. Their poetry embodies a sense of joy in life and its pleasures, a 'carpe diem' attitude and the bawdiness, badinage and essential maleness of the courtly club of the Cavalier. Corns says he wants to 'dismantle the origins of that critical orthodoxy' that states that Suckling, Lovelace and others 'constitute a group, often termed 'Cavalier poets' (Corns, 1993, p. 200). While Corns makes a valuable point that the characteristics of these poets change, as does the environment of the Caroline court culture before and after the inception of the Civil War, he fails to offer convincing evidence that Suckling and Lovelace stand outside the Cavalier definition. Corns argues that Suckling treats sex and seduction with a 'jaundiced or jaunty view' saying that 'this, after all, is a poet who enjoys women as much as a good game of bowls' (p. 213). But

this is no reason to regard Suckling as an outlier of the Cavalier poets, as such poetry is exactly what is expected – a view that is commonly supported by other critics, e.g.:

A great deal of “cavalier poetry” ... was subsequently packaged in the 1640s as expressing “Royalist” values. That is, the cavalier mode is in many ways retrospective and nostalgic: it celebrates beauty, love, nature, sensuality, drinking, good fellowship, honor and social life, ... in poetry famous for its urbanity, elegance, and often ironic ease. (Black, 2006, p. 952)

Suckling died before the outbreak of the Civil War but many other poets of the Caroline court adopted a more serious voice, writing explicitly political verse that commented on the conflict. While originally circulated in manuscript Suckling's poems first appeared in published form in 1646 as *Fragmenta Aurea* (i.e. *Golden Pieces*), thus providing a reminder of what might be restored in a ‘posthumous view into that process of royalist lamentation as if through a process of retrospective revision’ (Corns, 1993, p. 201).

Reviewing Lovelace’s first major collection, *Lucasta*, published in 1649, Corns says ‘In the first *Lucasta* a libertine dimension had asserted the maintenance of the spirit of Suckling in an age of Puritan sexual asceticism which far surpassed the modesty of the Caroline court’ (Corns, 1993, p. 216).

Corns notes a marked difference between Lovelace’s output prior to and following the Civil War, stating ‘But in the erotic poems of *Lucasta: Posthume Poems* the voice of the libertine becomes less secure and it is marked by a fragile sleaziness which sharply devalues sexual relationships as a compensation in times of war’ (Corns, 1993, p. 217). Corns sees Lovelace late work as a move away from the earlier forms of Cavalier poetry: ‘The tough invention of the later Lovelace does not tolerate the delicate compliments and the received role of the selfless lover. A new depth of cynicism about interpersonal relationships displaces the Cavalier abandon of Lovelace's first collection’ (p217).

When Corns writes ‘The Cavalier poets ... [the] mere title works to confirm that which I would set aside’ (Corns, 1993, p. 200) he appears to disbelieve that the Cavalier poets merit an accredited grouping. The evidence presented here shows the contrary. Suckling and Lovelace make defined and unique additions to the poetic sense of the Cavalier. Their contribution is part of the Caroline path from the Jacobean Jonson to the more satirical, political poetry of reason and realism of the Restoration poets.

[1657 words]

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Poems

To Lucasta, Going to the Wars

(Richard Lovelace (1642))

Tell me not (Sweet) I am unkind,
That from the nunnery
Of thy chaste breast and quiet mind
To war and arms I fly.

True, a new mistress now I chase,
The first foe in the field;
And with a stronger faith embrace
A sword, a horse, a shield.

Yet this inconstancy is such
As you too shall adore;
I could not love thee (Dear) so much,
Lov'd I not Honour more.

Wits, The; A Session of the Poets

(Sir John Suckling)

A sessions was held the other day,
 And Apollo himself was at it, they say;
 The laurel that had been so long reserved
 Was now to be given to him best deserved.

And

Therefore the wits of the Town came thither;
 'Twas strange to see how they flocked together:
 Each, strongly confident of his own way,
 Thought to carry the laurel away that day.

There was Selden, and he sat hard by the chair;
 Wenman not far off, which was very fair;
 Sandys with Townsend, for they kept no order;
 Digby and Chillingworth a little further;

And

There was Lucan's Translator, too, and he
 That makes God speak so big in's poetry;
 Selwin and Waller, and Berkeleys, both the brothers;
 Jack Vaughan and Porter, with divers others.

The first that broke silence was good old Ben,
 Prepared before with Canary wine,
 And he told them plainly he deserved the bays,
 For his were called Works, where others were but plays;

And

Bid them remember how he had purged the stage
 Of errors that had lasted many an age;
 And he hoped they did think The Silent Woman,
 The Fox, and The Alchemist outdone by no man.

Apollo stopped him there and bad him not go on;
 'Twas merit, he said, and not presumption
 Must carry it; at which Ben turned about
 And in great choler offered to go out;

But

Those that were there thought it not fit
 To discontent so ancient a wit,
 And therefore Apollo called him back again,
 And made him mine host of his own New Inn.

Tom Carew was next, but he had a fault.
 That would not well stand with a laureate:
 His muse was hard bound, and th' issue of's brain
 Was seldom brought forth but with trouble and pain;

And

All that were present there did agree,

A laureate's muse should be easy and free,
 Yet sure 'twas not that; but 'twas thought that his grace
 Considered he was well he had a cup-bearer's place.

Will Davenant, ashamed of a foolish mischance
 That he had got lately travelling in France,
 Modestly hoped the handsomness of's muse
 Might any deformity about him excuse;
 And
 Surely the company would have been content,
 If they could have found any precedent;
 But in all their records, either in verse or prose,
 There was not one laureate without a nose.

To Will Berkeley sure all the wits meant well,
 But first they would see how his snow would sell;
 Will smiled and swore in their judgements they went less
 That concluded of merit upon success;
 So
 Sullenly taking his place again,
 He gave way to Selwin, that straight stepped in;
 But alas! he had been so lately a wit
 That Apollo himself hardly knew him yet.

Tobie Mathew (pox on 't! how came he there?)
 Was busily whispering somebody i' th' ear,
 When he had the honour to be named i' the court:
 But sir, you may thank my Lady Carlisle for 't;
 For
 Had not her Character furnished you out
 With something of handsome, without all doubt
 You and your sorry Lady Muse had been
 In the number of those that were not to come in.

In haste two or three from the Court came in,
 And they brought letters (forsooth) from the Queen;
 'Twas discreetly done, too, for if they had come
 Without them, they had scarce been let into the room.
 This
 Made a dispute, for 'twas plain to be seen
 Each man had a mind to gratify the Queen;
 But Apollo himself could not think it fit;
 There was difference, he said, 'twixt fooling and wit.

Suckling next was called, but did not appear,
 And straight one whispered Apollo in's ear,
 That of all men living he cared not for 't,
 He loved not the Muses so well as his sport;
 And
 Prized black eyes, or a lucky hit

At bowls, above all the trophies of wit;
 But Apollo was angry, and publicly said
 'Twere fit that a fine were set on his head.

Wat Montagu now stood forth to his trial,
 And did not so much as suspect a denial;
 Wise Apollo then asked him first of all
 If he understood his own pastoral;
 For
 If he could do it, 'twould plainly appear
 He understood more than any man there,
 And did merit the bays above all the rest;
 But the Monsieur was modest, and silence confessed.

During these troubles, in the crowd was hid
 One that Apollo soon missed, little Sid;
 And, having spied him, called him out of the throng,
 And advised him in his ear not to write so strong.
 Then
 Murray was summoned, but 'twas urged that he
 Was chief already of another company.

Hales, set by himself, most gravely did smile
 To see them about nothing keep such a coil;
 Apollo had spied him, but knowing his mind
 Passed by, and called Falkland that sat just behind;
 But
 He was of late so gone with divinity,
 That he had almost forgot his poetry,
 Though to say the truth (and Apollo did know it)
 He might have been both his priest and his poet.

At length, who but an alderman did appear,
 At which Will Davenant began to swear;
 But wiser Apollo bad him draw nigher,
 And when he was mounted a little higher
 He
 Openly declared that 'twas the best sign
 Of good store of wit to have good store of coin,
 And without a syllable more or less said
 He put the laurel on the alderman's head.

At this all the wits were in such a maze
 That for a good while they did nothing but gaze
 One upon another: not a man in the place
 But had discontent writ in great in his face.
 Only
 The small-poets cleared up again,
 Out of hope (as 'twas thought) of borrowing;

But sure they were out, for he forfeits his crown
When he lends any poet about the Town.