Poem of the week: To Althea, from Prison by Richard Lovelace

The imprisoned poet's poignant evocation of an imaginary visit from his fiancee blends Cavalier flair with Puritan toughness

- Carol Rumens
- *The Guardian*, Poem of the Week blog

Are you a Roundhead or a Cavalier? The distinction is alive and well in modern Britain. It's not entirely about class or wealth. There are working-class Cavaliers and aristocratic Roundheads. Temperament is more significant. In public life, the distinction becomes sharper. Winston Churchill was a Cavalier, Clement Attlee a Roundhead. Ken Livingstone is surely a Roundhead, Boris Johnson a Cavalier. I imagine Queen Elizabeth II would be a Cavalier. The term originally denoted an equestrian, after all. Among writers, the supreme Cavalier is Dickens.

I'm partly joking, of course. Most people combine elements of both. I was a Cavalier at the beginning of this blog, but now I'm going to consult with my inner Roundhead.

The author of this week's poem, To Althea, from Prison, is properly assigned to the Cavalier school of poets. Richard Lovelace was a passionate supporter of Charles I, taking up arms for his king abroad, and risking enmity nearer home. This poem recalls his first spell in prison.

Parliament had ousted the Anglican bishops and Lovelace's crime was to have presented a petition in their defence. There was a second, longer sentence in 1648, which ended when the king was executed the following year. Lovelace's personal fortune was exhausted, and he died in poverty. But the saddest thing in his story, as usually told, is that his fiancee Lucy Sacheverell ("Lucasta") married someone else, having been wrongly informed of Lovelace's death.

Sacheverell, honoured in the title of Lovelace's two collections Lucasta and Lucasta: Postume Poems, is generally identified with Althea too. The name derives from the Greek, Althaia, mother of Meleager. She's not an unblemished heroine, not the "pure light" (lux casta) intimated by the name "Lucasta".

The poem's simple elegance suggests Ben Jonson rather than any Metaphysical influence. But the first stanza is more oddly complex in thought than it first seems. Althea's imaginary prison visit, courtesy of the free-ranging Cupid, gives rise to images of captivity, immuring the poet in deeper imprisonment. Althea's hair entangles him; he lies "fettered to her eye". The paradox is not simply that the idea of love is liberty to an imprisoned lover, but that love itself is a prison: nevertheless, "the birds that wanton in the air/ Know no such liberty".

Some editions substitute "gods" for "birds", which is also plausible, though perhaps less likely, in view of the way the poem progresses. Each stanza ends by summoning a species or element that seems to enjoy perfect
freedom. It makes sense to begin with birds rather than gods, especially as this will allow the angels of the final stanza to blaze in their full significance.

This is to be a serious poem about true freedom, the freedom of conscience. But there's another postponement, as the second stanza strays into the genre of Anacreontics. Anacreon of Teos lived in the sixth century BC. His poems celebrating "love, wine and song" were translated by another Cavalier poet, Abraham Cowley. Lovelace, perhaps, is remembering a lavish royalist symposium in this part of the poem. It moves with delightful ease from "flowing cups" to tippling fishes, as pledges are made to the king in wine unadulterated by the addition of water ("no allaying Thames").

This is hardly in keeping with the classical spirit of moderation. The Greeks considered it vulgar to drink unwatered wine. The stanza envisions a state in which there's no price to be paid for supporting the king, an intoxication so advanced that the drinkers are oblivious to consequences. The third stanza seems to continue the celebrations without the alcohol: the poet promises to raise his voice all the louder, like a linnet, now that he is caged.

The imagery of the refrain-lines, despite the rhetorical predictability, invariably reflects the stanza's previous "action" in an interesting way. Lovelace's list of kingly virtues ("sweetness, mercies, majesties … and glories") in stanza 3 is conventional enough. But there's an unexpected development in the idea that the king's goodness should and will expand. The image of the "Inlarged winds, that curle the flood" is wonderfully, if incidentally, expressive of the king's evolving greatness.

"Stone walls doe not a prison make, /Nor iron bars a cage …". These much-quoted lines herald a stanza in which the thoughts expressed seem to adhere, in the broad ethical sense, to a puritan ideal, favouring self-denial and the emphasis on the inner light of personal conscience. The imagery of "hermitage" and "angels" confirms, at least, a meditative and deeply Christian turn of mind.

Lovelace's poem, while displaying considerable arts of rhetoric, never preens or becomes bombastic. It's elegant and graceful, but conveys a passion that is more than style. It combines a Cavalier flair and a Puritan toughness of conscience. It has the best of both worlds.
To Althea, from Prison

I.
When love with unconfinèd wings
Hovers within my gates;
And my divine Althea brings
To whisper at the grates;
When I lye tangled in her haire,
And fetter'd to her eye,
The birds, that wanton in the aire,
Know no such libertie.

II.
When flowing cups run swiftly round
With no allaying Thames,
Our carelesse heads with roses bound,
Our hearts with loyal flames;
When thirsty griefe in wine we steepe,
When healths and draughts go free,
Fishes, that tipple in the deepe,
Know no such libertie.

III.
When (like committed linnets) I
With shriller throat shall sing
The sweetnes, mercy, majesty,
And glories of my King.
When I shall voyce aloud, how good
He is, how great should be,
Inlargèd winds, that curle the flood,
Know no such libertie.

IV.
Stone walls doe not a prison make,
Nor iron bars a cage;
Mindes innocent and quiet take
That for an hermitage;
If I have freedome in my love,
And in my soule am free,
Angels alone that soar above
Enjoy such libertie.