

Abraham Cowley Biography

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Contents

Abraham Cowley Biography.....	1
Contents.....	2
Biography.....	3

Biography

The English writer Abraham Cowley (1618-1667) was among the first to use the Pindaric ode form in English poetry. He contributed importantly to the development of the familiar essay in English.

The posthumous son of a merchant, Abraham Cowley was born in London and educated at Westminster and Trinity College, Cambridge, where he became a fellow in 1640. Like Richard Crashaw, he left Cambridge in 1643, when Oliver Cromwell's occupation of the city threatened the continuance of his fellowship, and joined the court at Oxford. He served the English court in Paris in 1646 and spent the next years on royal business. Returning to England in 1654, he was arrested the following year but after his release made his peace with Cromwell. He returned to Oxford to study medicine and earned a doctor of medicine degree in 1657.

With the Restoration in 1660 Cowley regained his fellowship together with some land whose rent provided a livelihood somewhat less than what he had hoped for from the court. For the rest of his life he lived in retirement studying botany and writing essays. He was one of the first to be nominated for membership in the Royal Society. His contemporary reputation as a poet was greater than it has been since, and his funeral at Westminster Abbey in 1667 was the most magnificent that had yet been afforded a poet.

Cowley's earliest volume, *Poetical Blossoms* (1633), published when he was only 15, comprises a schoolboy's imitations of Edmund Spenser and other Elizabethans. At Cambridge he wrote some plays, including *The Guardian* (1642), which was produced after the Restoration as *The Cutter of Coleman Street*. In 1647 he published *The Mistress*, a collection of poems, included with revisions in the *Poems* of 1656, which contained other poems as well, including his odes and the unfinished *Davideis*, a biblical epic. His odes made this form the vehicle for grandiose invention and influenced poetry for the next century. More verses appeared in 1663, and in 1668 his posthumous *Works* made additional poetry and his essays available.

The lyrics of *The Mistress* were influenced by metaphysical and cavalier traditions. They lack the virtues of the poetry they imitate, however, and thus served Dr. Johnson well in the next century when he chose them to illustrate the shortcomings of the metaphysical school. Cowley's religious epic, however, is the work of a man of common sense and rationality.