

Sir Charles Hanbury Williams

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Sir Charles Hanbury Williams (1708–1759), born in Monmouthshire, Wales, was the fourth son of Major John Hanbury and Bridget Hanbury. The family was among the wealthiest in south Wales, his father having made his fortune as an ironworks owner before serving in parliament. During his life, Hanbury Williams became well-known as a diplomat, poet, and satirist. He was admired by friends for his vivacity and wit. In his later years, however, he was afflicted with scandal, sickness, and insanity. His literary impact was largely forgotten after his death, and he became completely discredited in 1822 upon the publication of most of his poems. These poems included many “uninhibited letters from his fellow libertines”³⁷ (Butterwick-Pawlikowski 6) and it is their sexually promiscuous content that led to the destruction of his reputation as a writer.

Hanbury Williams studied Classical literature at Eton College. Once of age, he took the name Williams after his godfather who had left a large estate to him. He married Lady Frances Coningsby in 1732, and they had two daughters, Fanny and Charlotte. They were very well off financially, but their marriage was unhappy due to his frequent unfaithfulness. It was from his unfaithfulness that he contracted syphilis,³⁸ which eventually infected his wife and ultimately destroyed their marriage. His diplomatic career began when he served as a Member of Parliament for Monmouthshire following his father’s death in 1733. Over the course of his career, he developed a controversial reputation due primarily to his outspokenness and tendency to offend others. His reputation, combined with his compromised health, contributed to his mental downfall. He suffered from a series of mental breakdowns until he was “confined as a lunatic” (Butterwick-Pawlikowski 6). He died on 2 November 1759. In the words of Butterwick-Pawlikowski, “[Hanbury] Williams enjoyed the blessings of good fortune in his youth, and could have led a fulfilled and comfortable life. Instead, he died in misery and madness at the age of fifty-one” (6). He was buried eight days later at Westminster Abbey.

Despite his physical and mental ailments, Hanbury Williams remained a devoted father and friend. He valued his relationship with his daughters and the many others to whom he had acted as a mentor throughout his life and career. He frequently wrote to them, and an extensive collection of his poems, letters, and political correspondence exists today. These indicate the closeness of his relationships and the fondness that he and his daughters

³⁷ *Libertine*: “A person (typically a man) who is not restrained by morality, especially with regard to sexual relations; a person of dissolute or promiscuous habits” (*OED*).

³⁸ *Syphilis*: A sexually transmitted infection which can cause psychosis, mania, depression, anxiety, and personality changes if not treated early.

shared for each other. The record of his written works now serves as a window into “diplomacy, politics, society, literature, manners, sex, friendship, marriage and fatherhood in the middle decades of the eighteenth century” (Butterwick-Pawlikowski 3).

Hanbury Williams wrote many poems dedicated to his family and friends, including “An Ode on Miss Harriet Hanbury at Six Years Old.” It is one of two known poems that he wrote for Harriet Hanbury, who was likely his niece. The poem is written in quatrains of iambic tetrameter rhymed abab, which is one of the common variations of ballad stanza. It is a Horatian Ode, a genre which has a peaceful tone and often conveys themes of love and beauty. The poem is an ode to the beautiful and charming Harriet Hanbury, who, in her young age, the speaker views as being unaware of the power she possesses. This aligns with a common trope in later eighteenth-century English literature in which children were praised for being innocent and pure, while adult women were believed to derive their value from sexual appeal.

Further Reading

“Account of Sir Charles Hanbury Williams.” *The Edinburgh Magazine, or Literary Miscellany*, 1801, pp. 277–81.

Lodge, Richard. “The Life of Sir Charles Hanbury Williams.” *History*, vol. 14, no. 56, 1930, pp. 356–57.

Stewart, Mary Margaret. “Williams, Sir Charles Hanbury (1708–1759), writer and diplomatist.” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford UP January 03, 2008.

References

Butterwick-Pawlikowski, Richard. ““In the Greatest Wildness of My Youth”: Sir Charles Hanbury Williams and Mid-Eighteenth-Century Libertinism.” *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2018, pp. 3–23.

An Ode on Miss Harriet Hanbury at Six Years Old³⁹

I.

WHY shou'd I thus employ⁴⁰ my time,
 To paint those cheeks of rosy hue?
 Why shou'd I search my brains for rhyme,
 To sing those eyes of glossy blue?

II.

The pow'r as yet is all in vain, 5
 Thy num'rous charms, and various graces:
 They only serve to banish pain,
 And light up joy in parents' faces.

III.

But soon those eyes their strength shall feel;
 Those charms their pow'rful sway shall find: 10
 Youth⁴¹ shall in crowds before you kneel,
 And own⁴² your empire o'er mankind.

IV.

Then when on Beauty's throne you sit
 And thousands court your wish'd-for arms;⁴³
 My Muse⁴⁴ shall stretch her utmost wit, 15
 To sing the victories of your charms.

V.

Charms that in time shall ne'er be lost,

³⁹ *A Collection of Poems in Six Volumes. By Several Hands*, edited by Robert Dodsley, Vol. 5. Printed by J. Hughes, 1763, pp. 132-133. *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*.

⁴⁰ *Employ*: "To make use of" (OED).

⁴¹ *Youth*: young men.

⁴² *Own*: recognize, validate.

⁴³ *Thousands court your wish'd for arms*: many will wish to be dominated by her force or to be granted her arms through marriage.

⁴⁴ *My Muse*: a poetic conventional reference to a supernatural force who inspires artists.

At least while verse like mine endures:⁴⁵

And future HANBURYs shall boast,

Of verse like mine, of charms like yours.

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VI.

A little vain we both may be,

Since scarce another house can shew,⁴⁶

A poet, that can sing like me;

A beauty, that can charm like you.



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⁴⁵ *Endures*: lasts, remains read.

⁴⁶ *Shew*: show, “an act of displaying” (*OED*).