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**'Poore broaken Propertyes': Rochester and the crisis of aristocratic authority**

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## ABSTRACT

**‘Poore broaken Propertyes’: Rochester and the crisis of aristocratic authority**

**Gillian Woodford**

This study is an exploration of the socio-economic implications of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester’s libertine poetic expression in the context of his function as a Restoration court poet at the junction of the incipient economic revolution and the final decline of the political and ideological influence of the aristocracy. This is achieved by locating his place in literary history through comparison with earlier Renaissance writers and his interpretation of established literary forms, especially those traditionally associated with court literature. The specific topics explored are Rochester’s use of Augustan wit as a function of aristocratic authority, and his transformation of the pastoral idiom in light of the changing perception of property in the late seventeenth century.

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>Introduction:</b>	<b>Rochester: socio-economics and literary history</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1:</b>	<b>Spending &amp; spewing: Rochester's social, economic, and sexual expression of wit</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Chapter 2:</b>	<b>'This all-sin-sheltring grove': social upheaval and Rochester's mock-pastoral vision</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>Conclusion:</b>	<b>Artemiza and Chloe: Women, town and country, and the problem of wit</b>	<b>99</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>		<b>106</b>

## INTRODUCTION

### *Rochester: socio-economics and literary history*

Writing for the reopening of the Drury Lane Theatre in 1747 Samuel

Johnson offered this assessment of Restoration literature:

The wits of Charles found easier ways to fame,  
Nor wished Jonson's art, or Shakespeare's flame;  
Themselves they studied; as they felt they writ;  
Intrigue was plot, obscenity was wit.  
Vice was always a sympathetic friend;  
They pleased their age, and did not seek to mend.  
Yet bards like these aspired to lasting praise,  
And proudly hoped to pimp in future days.  
Their cause was general, their supports were strong,  
Their slaves were willing, and their reign was long:  
Till Shame regained the post that Sense betrayed,  
And Virtue called Oblivion to her aid.<sup>1</sup>

With these words, Johnson gathers up and magnifies the frailties of the Restoration period, reading them negatively against the English literary tradition, finally tossing them on the scrapheap of 'Oblivion.' He could not overlook the startling shift that had taken place between the Renaissance and the Restoration; the former, with its sense of value and its transcendent scope, had given way to a literature of painstaking yet seemingly superficial self-examination, where a dignifying tragic vision was replaced by comic sophistication. Johnson, lamenting the state of the stage in his own day, is sensitive to the corruption of 'Jonson's art and Shakespeare's flame' which he attributes to the Restoration writers. He acknowledges that the 'vice' they 'pimp' is symptomatic of a larger social and historical movement, which he indicates in his allusions to the 'cause' of the Restoration writers, referring obliquely to their transformation of the Good Old Cause of the Civil War into a 'general cause' of immorality, and the 'post' betrayed by Sense, which evokes the issue of patronage politics. But Johnson will not accept that these changes represented serious issues in their own right, because he needs to eradicate their corrupting influence, which was

still fresh in his day. Nevertheless, these same issues did consciously rage in the period's literature, and since it was an age dominated by cynicism and irony, they found their greatest expression in comic idioms like satire and comedy of manners. The literary authority of courtly writers was restored with the monarchy in 1660, and the basis of both these reconstitutions was belief in the potency of the realm and the value of the restored lands. However, the Puritan radicals (like the revolting peasants of the fourteenth century and the renouncers of land enclosure in the sixteenth century) had shown them that England's land could be the basis for a very different authority, proved explicitly by the forty years of interregnum that preceded them. Even more problematic was the foothold gained by the commercial classes which was further throwing the traditional notions of property and authority, and related courtly concepts like wit and honour, into question. In light of these disruptions, for an aristocratic libertine poet like John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, '*obscurity was wit*' (to revert to Johnson's definition) because he knew that, in an abstracted sense, *wit was obscenity* – that literature was being corrupted as much as it was corrupting. It is this paradox in Rochester's work that forms the crux of the present study.

Rochester has long been a figure of controversy and fascination. A product of the English Revolution, he was the son of the royalist general Henry Wilmot who was created the first Earl of Rochester for service rendered to the king-in-exile Charles II, and Anne St John Lee, a fiercely Protestant royalist who fought hard to keep her son's Oxfordshire estate intact during the Commonwealth. Despite her efforts, the estate left to their son was small and poor. But though his father died when he was no more than five, the general's relationship with the king enabled Rochester to arrive at Whitehall after his grand tour in 1664 full of promise for a successful court career; such a bond with the king could prove as valuable as a fortune. Rochester's handsome looks and sparkling wit made him popular with court and king, but his ingrained sense of the traditional independent authority of the aristocracy, which found expression in



court lampoons and libellous impromptus, did not, and he was frequently banished. In his own day, he scandalised observers and delighted his friends with his outrageous poetry and pranks, and his legendary amours. He was rewarded by the king with an annuity and an appointment as Gentleman of the Bedchamber, but his salary and the annuity were in constant arrears and he was chronically in debt.<sup>2</sup>

His famous deathbed conversion, transcribed by his equally famous confessor Gilbert Burnet, became a classic tale of penitence, and was widely read for the next two centuries. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Rochester myth was sustained and expanded, and he appeared as a stock character in various plays and novels, representing both the archetypal debauchee and reformed sinner.<sup>3</sup> Among his peers, he was esteemed a brilliant wit, and although Dryden considered him an amateur, his poetry provided an important model for Augustans like Alexander Pope and Matthew Prior. Until the middle of the eighteenth century Rochester was firmly ensconced in the canon of English literature, but it is only in the last thirty years that his work has begun to reappear.

The shift in Rochester's reputation was due in part to Samuel Johnson's cool appraisal of his poetic ability in *Lives of the English Poets* (1779), which contains some discussion of the poems, but in the end reduces him to his wasted potential:

In all his works there is a sprightliness and vigour, and everywhere may be found tokens of a mind which study might have carried to excellence. What more can be expected from a life spent in ostentatious contempt of regularity, and ended before the abilities of many other men began to be displayed?<sup>4</sup>

William Hazlitt could afford to be more generous, writing many generations later and in an age that saw the revival of a new kind of romantic libertinism; he remarked that Rochester's "contempt for everything others respect, almost amounts to sublimity."<sup>5</sup> Rochester's reputation was really only rescued from

infamy in the twentieth century. New editions of his poems began to appear in the 1920s, but he did remain an object of censorship and these editions were either bowdlerized or they omitted the obscene works altogether. It was not until the publication of David Vieth's *Complete Poems of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester* in 1968 that Rochester criticism was effectively revived, and it has been building steadily ever since. Studies of Rochester's work complement those of Restoration drama – especially comedy – which embodies the world in which he thrived. He is a living representation of the libertine rake, a member of the diminished aristocracy, and a sometimes brilliant poet and clear-eyed recorder of his society's idiosyncrasies. Much of the more recent criticism has focused on the erotic elements of Rochester's poetry, the sexual anxiety expressed, and his nihilism, uncovering new complexity in his work, and is finally moving on from the myth of vainglory and indulgence of 'the wicked earl' that has persistently overshadowed his work.<sup>6</sup>

Taking my cue from Richard Braverman's work on the socio-economic implications of the Restoration comic idiom, I will examine the underlying economies (moral, sexual, as well as financial) that inform Rochester's work, as well as the relation of these economies to the court society he functioned within and the crisis of the aristocracy, in its late stages during the Restoration. These issues are fundamentally connected to property – the way it was perceived, the way it was exchanged, and the authority it yielded – and Rochester's reactions reflect this link. The first chapter of this study explores his use of wit as a signifier for aristocratic authority and how this is problematised by both the rising tide of commercial economics and Rochester's personal cynicism about the courtly ethos. The second chapter analyses his pastoral output, assessing it in terms of his manipulation of the form's tradition and as an expression of the growing schism between the interests of the town and the country. Rochester adhered to a libertine aesthetic, and again and

again he uses sexual and obscene imagery and powerful voracious female characters to highlight the degradation of traditional aristocratic authority, and he sexualises wit as a property of generous excess that combats what he sees as the dull meanness of the encroaching bourgeoisie. But literature was already moving out of the confines of courtly patronage, and the hint of wit as a representation of mobile property – money – appears as a source of anxiety in many of Rochester's poems. Through both his conception of wit and his use of pastoral, Rochester contributes to the Restoration expression of anxiety about these economic and social changes, and his own situation as an impoverished but undoubtedly privileged courtier adds nuance to his critical expressions of defiance framed in satires and lyrics that are virulent portrayals of a diseased society crumbling under the weight of hypocrisy and greed.

Richard Braverman provides a socio-economic framework for delineating the ideology that fuelled the negotiations of Restoration comedy, which has clear relevance for Rochester's body of work. At the centre of Braverman's reading is the Restoration rake figure, who is described as a social parasite who with utter disregard breaks the laws of exchange essential to his culture's communication whereby he "asserts an alternative economy of desire to fit his sovereign ego" in order to maintain his requisite aristocratic independence.<sup>7</sup> The libertine rake pays for what he takes only with words, quite literally living by his wit: "as the 'courtly' medium of exchange, wit signals the accommodation of the verbal economies of sovereign will and word to the social sphere, where the courtier exercises correlative personal powers."<sup>8</sup> Wit also controls sexual exchange, being the currency in the trade of women, an empty currency paid to the cuckolded husband and to the woman herself, in an act which had less to do with sexual desire than it does with social and economic anxiety. The gentry "are cuckolded because the actual powers they possess, as members of the class they represent, limit the libertine's potency to the social sphere. And it is there that the

libertine parasites marital commerce – the bonds between men ensured by the circulation of women, a transaction of central importance to gentry authority.”<sup>9</sup>

The upheavals that accompanied the shift from a property-based to a credit economy are reflected in the literature of the Restoration through the expression of anxiety about changing power bases and the corresponding rise of independence in the literary sphere itself, with professional writers living less by the service of aristocratic patronage and more by the direct earnings of their pen, implying their ideological shift toward the individualist movement successfully propounded by the bourgeoisie. The political philosopher J. G. A. Pocock argues in *Virtue, Commerce, and History* that the conflict was based in new questions about the understanding of property and authority, questions raised in the debate surrounding the renewal of patronage politics by the crown in the 1670s. As Pocock's analysis forms an important part of the background to the discussion in the proceeding chapters, I will briefly summarise his views here.

Pocock argues that the two major strains of opposition in the late seventeenth century reassessment of these matters were the classical agrarian view which saw property “as the basis of independence and virtue,”<sup>10</sup> an idea bound up with notions about patriotism and civic duty; the second force came from a mobile conception of property which saw itself as connected to “the mobility of the individual in an increasingly commercial society as teaching him the need for free deference to authority.”<sup>11</sup> Crucially, both sides represent “explicitly post-feudal ideals.”<sup>12</sup> The former group was traditionally suspicious of money as a medium of exchange, fearing that it begot relationships between people and government that, because of the nature of credit, were far from independent, and there was a fear that “these relationships could be owned, and could be means of owning people.”<sup>13</sup> Pocock points out that “once political virtue was declared to have an agrarian base, it was located in the past; and the movement of history toward credit, commerce, and the market was defined as a movement toward culture but away from virtue.”<sup>14</sup> As a result, by the Restoration

period the once-central ideology honour had become “a social value rather than a transcendent virtue, and is no longer rewarded as it once was.”<sup>15</sup> Issues of class in Rochester’s poems – mainly metaphorical representations of the struggle for power between the gentry, bourgeois, and aristocratic interests – point us to an underlying narrative about the concerns about property, land, expenditure, and honour. The basic and deep-seated assumptions “that land, or real property, tended to make men independent citizens, who actualised their natural political capacity, whereas mobile property tended to make them artificial beings, whose appetites and powers could and must be regulated by a sovereign” were being challenged by the reality of the changes occurring.<sup>16</sup>

Along with these pressures of history, Rochester also struggled under a literary anxiety of influence from the smooth Cavaliers, the intense Metaphysicals, and the great court writers of the Renaissance. Despite Johnson’s conclusions about the period, the writers of the Restoration were versed in the literary history that preceded them, and Rochester fully understood the implications of the coded court language he inherited. He played with their forms and expressed them in the distorted voice of his historical moment. There was a continuity in the education of seventeenth century courtiers that was reflected in the poetic language, but in earlier court literature there was an attempt at universality and historical transcendence that libertine Restoration literature often rejected or undermined. What was it that specifically led the latter writers to shy away from universality in their subject matter, yet attracted them to the great transcendent forms of classical literature? What made them different from the writers who came before? Braverman offers a useful analysis:

the literary inheritance that had for so long supported both the ideology and substance of a sovereign – or in literary terms, heroic – order was severely strained. Courtly modes celebrating sovereign power through public, heroic actions of princes and courtiers – dramatic romance and tragedy, for example – were undermined by alternative generic expressions such as the comedy of manners and, eventually, the novel, genres that rejected heroic patterns for

more private, 'domestic' activities such as marital courtship and contact, the conveyance of property, and husbanding of both wife and estate – in short, activities of the gentry rather than the king's courtiers.<sup>17</sup>

It is apparent that the same anxieties that accompanied the overwhelming scientific and new world discoveries that were responsible for, among others, the scepticism of Donne's circle, never went away but were in fact accentuated by the revolutionary political events of the middle and late seventeenth century. While the Renaissance writers were bold in developing styles and philosophic flourishes, the Restoration writers used the oldest of forms as arenas for dissecting a magnified vision of their own special concerns. Both led to a great deal of free play with ideas and form, as well as inviting distortions, deliberate and otherwise. Donne's age was a time when poets clung to language, twisted and shaped it, as something they hoped they could still believe in; by the Restoration that hope was hanging in the balance. With their exclusive coterie dissolving in the face of an expanding authorship, the shared vernacular that had attempted to keep wit confined was proving unviable – new words, new worlds, and new social, historical, and economic realities were taking over and the faith in language, "nourished by the Stoic doctrine of the Logos and by the traditional Christian contemplation of God as mirrored in His Creation," was severely shaken.<sup>18</sup> The neo-classical movement was both a symptom and an attempted cure for this, an anchoring in the greatness of Western civilisation when so much of their recent beliefs were being questioned. In France neo-classicism was concerned with adhering to or quietly subverting the awesome authority of Louis XIV's *ancien régime*; in England the writers adopted ancient styles to frame their vignettes of contemporary life in a stylised realism that had never been seen before. The contradictions of the age are illustrative of the problems: the age obsessed with nature that is highly artificial, the age obsessed with ornament and appearance that despised foppery, the age that valued regularity of verse but yet seemed ruled by chaotic forces beyond themselves.

The progression was also influenced by the difference in the regime the Restoration writers lived under. The court system of England had by the late seventeenth century become a willing host to a great number of parasites, from the power-hungry aristocrat to patronage-seeking poets and musicians. The legacy of the Tudor and early Stuart courts was a culture of interdependence between the courtiers and the revered monarch, with the former paying symbolical tributes in an elaborate dance of flattery and fealty to the latter. This system limited the aristocracy's power by producing a code of honour wherein there is no end to the cyclical relationship between debtor and benefactor. The monarch attempted to control his aristocrats and their access to real power by ensuring that they were in a constant state of obligation to him. The emerging party system in England was beginning to put an end to this, but the Stuart rulers and aristocrats alike were naturally resistant because it meant a large portion of their power was being transferred to the monied gentry class. In his seminal study of the court systems of early modern Europe, *The Court Society*, Norbert Elias describes the irresistible lure of the court, that drained the resources and authority of the nobility but also provided them their only means of actualisation. Elias notes that the court reality was slightly different in England, and cites the London season, when the 'good families' of the aristocracy and upper gentry met in London, as a defining factor:

The member families, the 'good' families of the nobility and of the wealthier bourgeois 'gentry,' while usually spending part of their year at their country houses scattered across the country, resided for several months, during the 'season,' in their town houses in London.... Here, constituting with their wealth of personal contacts the 'good society' of the country, Society with a capital S, a market of opinion, they mutually passed muster and, in a constant round of social diversions interspersed with the great dramas of the inter-party parliamentary struggles, their individual market value, their reputations, their prestige, in a word their personal social power – in keeping with the code of 'good society' – were exalted, abased, or lost.<sup>19</sup>

The London season was also a mating season for the aristocracy, where the great families communed to enlarge their fortunes through 'good matches.' This aspect forms the basis for the comedy of the Restoration, which reproduces the tensions of the aristocracy through the "idiom of manners, an idiom that mediates the discourse of honour through a revised value system that prizes verbal acuity, sexual potency, and theatrical presence."<sup>20</sup> Rochester, too, embodies these anxieties in his irreverent court satires and mock-heroic obscene poetry written within the disruptive comic idiom. He moved in that world, migrating back and forth between country estate and court intrigues, cursing each when he was away from the other. He was a theatrical figure famous for his debauchery who was used as a model for libertine characters such as Dorimant in his friend George Etherege's *Man of Mode*. He engaged in literal aristocratic struggles in high-profile quarrels with his younger contemporaries Sir Carr Scroope and the Earl of Mulgrave based ostensibly in poetic legitimacy but having more to do with status at court. And his famous masquerades usually had him playing the role of a lower-class trickster, such as the doctor's advertisement he issued as Alexander Bendo the Italian mountebank, or the more spurious legend of the village tinker who put out the bottoms of the pots he was commissioned to repair.

In the Rochester myth, he is reckoned a man between two worlds, an urbane man of parts and the literary country husbandman. He is reputed to have done most of his writing while convalescing at his country homes after frequent bouts of debauchery at Court, and in Aubrey's classic rendering "He was wont to say that when he came to Brentford the Devill entered into him and never left him till he came into the Country again."<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, his other country retreat, Woodstock Lodge, was famously used as a playground for pastoral lewdness. He reputedly had erotic murals painted on the walls, and engaged in scandalous activities like nude bathing and naked sylvan frolics in the company of fellow courtiers escaping the grind of courtly duty. In his letters from the country he often expresses disdain for the very intrigues that



consumed him when he was at court. He remarked to his friend Henry Savile in London, in part of an elaboration on friendship (“w<sup>ch</sup> as it is the most difficult & rare accident in life, is allsoe the Best, nay perhaps the only good one”) that this thought has soe intirely possest mee since I came into the Country (where only one can think, for you att Court thinke not att all or att least as if you were shutt up in a Drumme, you can thinke of nothing but the noise is made about you) y<sup>t</sup> I have made many serious reflections upon it and amongst others, gather’d one Maxim w<sup>ch</sup> I desire should be communicated to our freind Mr Guye that wee are bound in morallity and common Honesty to endeavour after competent riches, since it is certain that few (if any) uneasy in their fortunes have prov’d firme & clear in their freindshipps; a very poore fellow is a very poore freind, and not one of a thousand can bee good natur’d to another who is nott pleas’d within himself.<sup>22</sup>

Like the parasite, Rochester is a man “between two worlds: he is the dissonance blocking the symbolic communication of a new social formation, while at the same time he is the catalyst assisting its articulation.”<sup>23</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Johnson, "Prologue Spoken by Mr. Garrick, At the Opening of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, 1747," ll. 17-28.

<sup>2</sup> Ken Robinson's article "Rochester's Income from the Crown" details the history of Rochester's royal pensions. To supplement their incomes, Rochester and his mother drew loans from various sources, including the family's Ditchley estate, which had been left to Rochester's elder half-brother Henry Lee, from his mother's previous marriage to Sir Edward Lee. On Henry's death, Ditchley passed to the infant grandson who was under Rochester's mother's care, and the Countess Dowager retained control of the estate until he reached maturity (see Jeremy Treglown's Introduction to Rochester's *Letters*, and Germaine Greer's biographical sketch in *John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*).

<sup>3</sup> Among these is Charlotte Brontë's characterisation of Mr Rochester as a former libertine in *Jane Eyre*.

<sup>4</sup> In *Rochester: The Critical Heritage*, ed. David Farley-Hills, p. 207.

<sup>5</sup> *Lectures on the English Poets* (1818), in *Rochester: The Critical Heritage*, p. 214.

<sup>6</sup> Germaine Greer, commenting on the absence of a decent critical biography of Rochester, observes that "Writers attracted to Rochester's life have been unable or unwilling to brush away the accretion of speculation and opinion that has rendered their subject so glamorous in order to arrive at something truer to his life and circumstances." (*John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, p. 7).

<sup>7</sup> "Libertines and Parasites," p. 76. Braverman's ideas about the parasite are drawn from the work of Michel Serres, particularly his analysis of Molière's use of the Don Juan figure.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>10</sup> *Virtue, Commerce, and History*, p. 68.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>15</sup> "Libertines and Parasites," p. 81.

<sup>16</sup> Pocock, p. 68.

<sup>17</sup> "Libertines and Parasites," p. 78.

<sup>18</sup> Emile Audra and Aubrey Williams, Introduction to *An Essay on Criticism* from the "Pastoral Poetry and *An Essay on Criticism*" volume of *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, p. 220.

<sup>19</sup> *The Court Society*, p. 96.

<sup>20</sup> "Libertines and Parasites," p. 77.

<sup>21</sup> *Brief Lives*, p. 481

<sup>22</sup> *Letters*, p. 93

<sup>23</sup> "Libertines and Parasites," p. 77.

## Chapter 1

### *Spending and spewing:*

#### Rochester's social, economic, and sexual expression of wit

Just as the vagaries of canonisation have been recognised in our time as being dictated as much by social and historical contingency as notions of transcendent 'genius,' the literary debates during the Restoration period about critical value have been in recent discussions increasingly examined in terms of class and gender. Our understanding of the central Restoration concept wit is benefiting from such analyses, though it remains an under-explored aspect of late seventeenth century literary history. Today no one would question whether or not Rochester was a wit – for students of the period, his reputation and his work are the virtual embodiment of the term. But in his own day the fact was far from secure: his wit was questioned, he questioned the wit of others, and even in poems where wit (and its deformed sibling, foppery) would seem to have no place conceptually – his 'love' poems for instance – it crops up over and over, never appearing quite the same twice, always intangible yet integral. This had something to do with the gradual redefinition of wit throughout the seventeenth century, from its earlier meaning as 'intellect' or 'wisdom,' to the later addition of key elements like surprise, paradox, and quickness. But when we begin to examine the signification of Augustan wit beyond these general characteristics, in the minds of contemporary thinkers, it is quickly apparent that their understanding is no more solid than our own – that wit, central as it is to Augustan literature, was never a unified concept, but because its implications were always understood to reach far beyond poetics, more was at stake than its literary definition.

The Restoration abounded with pamphlets, treatises, and essays on the subject; it is apparent that the period was preoccupied with the definition of wit and the function it should fulfil in society. Wit is the affirmation "of an all-embracing social ideal"<sup>1</sup> and is tied directly to the era's larger concerns of Nature and Order, which in

turn were the driving forces behind the adoption of both a simpler more colloquial literary diction and in the advocacy of plain English by the Royal Society that rose out of the scientific revolution ongoing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This chapter endeavours to investigate the role of wit in Rochester's poetry and time, with a view to examining how it was both a product and a cause of the class and gender struggles so evident in the poetry and drama of the day, and how key elements of this prescient struggle anticipate the economic revolution of the 1690s. To this end I will investigate the role of wit in Rochester's works as a currency and as an expression of self, masculinity, and class, and attempt to come to terms with why so central a trope was so clearly fraught for the poet.

Before delving into the role of wit in Rochester's work, it would first be useful to mention some of the writings that played a part both in the understanding and promotion of wit, and its fall into disuse in the second half of the eighteenth century. First a look at Thomas Hobbes, whose writings, building on Francis Bacon's work, in many ways dictated the direction of philosophical debate into the next generation; then a passage from Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and finally a brief look at Pope's ambiguous representations of wit in the *Essay on Criticism*. These last writings post-date both Rochester and the heyday of wit's real eminence on stage and in poetry, but in their conscious back-glancing at the Restoration literary debates they shed a great deal of light on the events, and their interpretations (along with those of other influential early eighteenth century figures like John Dennis, Joseph Addison, and Richard Steele) have indelibly shaped our understanding of Restoration wit.

Hobbes's ideas were extremely influential at court<sup>2</sup> and his keen interest in describing the world around him was trained as well on his contemporaries, and he included discussions of wit as an element of human nature in several of his treatises. His view of wit began with the belief that "both fancy and judgment are commonly comprehended under the name of wit, which seemeth a tenuity and agility of spirits, contrary to that restiveness of the spirits supposed in those that are dull."<sup>3</sup> Gradually,

however, his work began to contain a split between fancy and judgement, as he became concerned that wit was being identified with fancy only, and in negative opposition to judgement. By 1650 when the *Leviathan* appeared he was making distinctions between the functions of the two, writing that “In a good poem... both judgment and fancy are required; but the fancy must be eminent, because they please for the extravagancy, but ought not to displease by indiscretion.” He qualifies this a few paragraphs later, saying that “where wit is wanting, it is not fancy that is wanting but discretion. Judgment therefore without fancy is wit, but fancy without judgment not.”<sup>4</sup> Discretion, like wit, is a virtue that embodies a union between fancy and judgement, but in the end the equality of that union was unbalanced by judgement’s seemingly naturalised connection with discretion. Hobbes wrote that

those that observe their similitudes, in case they be such as are but rarely observed by others, are said to have a *good wit*, by which, in this occasion, is meant a *good fancy*. But they that observe their differences and dissimilitudes, which is called distinguishing and discerning and judging between thing and thing, in case such discerning be not easy, are said to have a good judgment; and particularly in matter of conversation and business wherein times, places, and persons are to be discerned, this virtue is called DISCRETION.<sup>5</sup>

Hobbes emphasises over and over in the discussion that fancy, though an important element in the construction of wit, is subordinate to judgement and that judgement and discretion are interdependent and essential properties of wit. The preface to one of Hobbes’s last works, his translation of Homer’s *Odyssey* (1675), reflects the moralistic element often present in the debate raging in the satires and pamphlets of the day about the prominent use of wit as a signifier of honour and power. In the preface he observes with regret that “men more generally affect and admire Fancie than they do either Judgment, or Reason, or Memory, or any other intellectual Vertue; and for the pleasantness of it, give to it alone the name of Wit, accounting Reason and Judgment but for a dull entertainment.”<sup>6</sup> These worries about the possibility of ‘indiscretion,’ which Hobbes compared to a kind of madness, became, especially in Locke, a deep-held anxiety about wit/fancy’s ability to deceive people’s senses and their morals.

Moralists of the Restoration – from the powerful statesman Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon to the theatre controversialist Jeremy Collier – had always viewed the expression of Restoration wit with distaste, linking it causally with the religious scepticism and general decline in decency they perceived in their contemporaries.<sup>7</sup> Locke took these concerns out of the realm of morality and into his discussions of epistemology, and with reason and force anxiously questioned wit's currency, and in many ways wrote its death warrant. In Locke's view, wit takes an

assemblage of ideas, and putting those together with quickness and variety, wherein can be found any resemblance or congruity, thereby to make up pleasant pictures, and agreeable Visions in the Fancy: Judgment, on the contrary, lies quite on the other side, in separating carefully one from another, Ideas wherein can be found the least difference, thereby to avoid being misled by similitude, and by affinity to take one thing for another. This is a way of proceeding quite contrary to Metaphor and Allusion, wherein, for the most part, lies that entertainment and pleasantry of Wit, which strikes so lively on the Fancy, and is therefore acceptable to all people.<sup>8</sup>

Where similitude, encompassing metaphor and allusion, had once been perceived as a positive linguistic form, a pleasurable enhancement married to judgement, it had now become the means by which fancy led judgment (our faculty for detecting and illuminating dissimilarities) astray.

Although Pope defends the role of wit in *An Essay on Criticism*, despite its best intentions, the poem essentially begins wit's relegation to historicity, rather than prove its relevance, through its failure to define it concretely in any context past or present. Pope observes that "wit and judgment often are at strife,/Though meant each other's aid, like man and wife" (ll. 82–3). He describes the rift as it arose from a misreading of the ancient Greeks' "useful rules" a few lines later:

The generous critic fanned the poet's fire,  
And taught the world with reason to admire  
Then criticism the Muse's handmaiden proved,  
To dress her charms, and make her more beloved:  
But following wits from that intention strayed,  
Who could not woo the mistress wooed the maid. (ll. 100–105)

Pope is referring explicitly to the Restoration wits, implying that their ‘wantonness’ and lack of respect resulted in the degradation of wit.<sup>9</sup> The *Essay* wants to rescue wit from its Restoration ignominy, and as part of this project Pope attempts a reunification between fancy and judgement. By this time, however, it was too late and Pope’s knowing wit ends up embodying the very schism he is trying to correct – the *Essay* is littered with references to wit, nature, and judgement, but the meanings are so multifarious that the conflict ends up being internally reinforced. Perhaps the greatest legacy of the *Essay* is that though wit was not resurrected, it was redeemed for posterity, and it is Pope’s smooth epigrammatic style that is remembered as the definition of true wit. But by the age of Johnson wit was already an historical phenomenon understood to have been practised by now pejorative ‘men of leisure’ from whom the professional writer wished to distance himself.

After the many upheavals of the seventeenth century, one last revolution occurred on the eve of the next century, the financial revolution of the 1690s. The bloodless revolution of 1688 brought England a new king and queen and ushered in a new economic outlook for the country which included the establishment of the Bank of England and the concept of public credit, a wholly new system of treasury which meant that “individuals and companies could invest money in the stability of government and expect a return varying in proportion to the success of the government’s operations.”<sup>10</sup> This led to a transformation in economic thought and gave rise to what Pocock describes as “an ideology and a perception of history which depicted political society and social personality as founded upon commerce: upon the exchange forms of mobile property and upon modes of consciousness suited to a world of moving objects.”<sup>11</sup> Locke’s and Pope’s portrayals of wit anticipate this shift by showing us that wit had become, so soon after the precedence of the “Court Wits” in the Restoration, an object of suspicion liable for the deceptions of Charles II’s reign, and that the eighteenth century’s floundering belief system was born of a century of intense crisis, where

‘accepted’ concepts like wit had far-reaching cultural, political, and economic implications.

In an epilogue he wrote for younger courtier Sir Francis Fane’s play *Love in the Dark*, Rochester constructs a witty critique of the literary concern with mobile property by associating the new craze for theatrical spectacles such as painted moveable sceneries and ‘machines’ that could create magical effects like flight and storms and the debasement of wit on the London stage: “Now to machines and a dull masque you run,/ We find that wit’s the monster you would shun” (ll. 5-6).<sup>12</sup> The moveable stage props are a kind of mobile property that is dazzling the audiences who are unaware and uncaring of the damage Rochester believes the devaluation of wit is doing. He goes on to make the class division of the economic debate explicit, with the mercenary theatre managers cursing the “men of wit” (l. 60) who are figured here as prophets telling the witless “merry citizens” (l. 54) what they do not want to hear: that “’tis all damned stuff” (l. 58);

They cry: ‘Pox o’ these Covent Garden men,  
Damn ’em, not one of them but keeps out ten.  
Were they once gone, we for those thundering blades  
Should have an audience of substantial trades,  
Who love our muzzled boys and tearing fellows. (ll. 48-52)

The managers would prefer to be rid of the critical noblemen in exchange for an audience of stolid men of trade who pay at the door without expectations of finding wit on the other side. Rochester’s formulation essentially reflects the reaction of many noblemen to the economic changes that were beginning to privilege mobile concepts of property like currency and credit over their own land-based interests.

Restoration comedy was one of the main forums where the battle over wit was played out, and the economic debates of the period were tacitly present in the principle plot devices, marriage negotiations and cuckoldry. In the plays, fops tended to be members of the gentry who ‘aped’ their betters in fashion, language, and behaviour, but usually got it wrong through excessive application of what they have learned, ie



lack of 'discretion' – as Rochester's Artemiza put it, "God never made a Coxecombe worth a groate/ We owe that name to Industry, and Arts."<sup>13</sup> The cuckold was often a country gentleman or an urban merchant, though fops were frequently the victims of cuckoldry as well. William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* is one of the classic and most compelling representations of these characters: Horner the wit cuckolds both the country gentleman, Pinchwife, and the city merchant, Sir Jasper Fidget, while his friend and fellow wit Harcourt cuckolds the play's fop, Sparkish. Eve Sedgwick has dissected the function of what she has termed homosocial desire in the play; she describes

the special position of wit as a token of class membership or mobility, especially as these are associated with sexual status. In *The Country Wife*, to be a wit, a gamester (at the expense of 'rooks' or 'bubbles'), a spendthrift, and a cuckold, are all associated with aristocratic gentlemen of the town. Lack of wit, conversely, goes with being a cuckold and with the urban bourgeoisie or the insufficiently urban gentry."<sup>14</sup>

Wit, then, is an urban quality that is reinforced by the traditional (land-based) authority of the aristocracy; money is dispensed in wilfully 'useless' ways – on gambling, trifles, and mistresses – which were in fact strictly necessary as part of the requisite 'conspicuous consumption' of the nobility. Sedgwick notes that:

The hidden, or uprooted, relation between these urbane yet noncommercial young men and their landed economic and political base is already rather precarious and slippery in capitalist Restoration England. ... One consequence of their sublimation of that relation – the sublimation that is signified in this play by 'wit' – is that a share of the prestige that belongs to their economic and political position can also be achieved by men who cultivate the signifier 'wit' even in the absence of its economic and political grounding.<sup>15</sup>

The mobility of both wit and the non-status men who aspire to it is dependent upon "a discipline of transcendent renunciation as well as of ambition. As the examples of Pinchwife and Sir Jasper show, to appear to be concerned about material accumulation or conservation is fatal to the 'wit' even of wealthy aristocrats."<sup>16</sup> When Alithea advises her brother Pinchwife at the end of the play that "Women and fortune are

truest still to those that trust 'em," the true sense is that Horner would not have cuckolded him had he *seemed* less concerned about his property, his country wife.<sup>17</sup>

The fop was usually represented as a sexually passive, feminised character who was nevertheless extremely popular with women.<sup>18</sup> His energies were occupied with courting the wits, who were self-actualising, active characters, which reinforced the notion of aristocratic independence the wits cultivated, especially (in the literary realm) critically. The fops in the plays were blissfully unaware of the 'battles' being waged, which on the literary battlefield were made up of armies each fighting under a self-defined banner of wit. But although it was a mock epic war made up of hyperbolised mud-slinging, in its scope and effect – the ruination of reputations – it could prove devastating. The wit's entire existence was in fact wrapped up in his definition against foppery, but there is always the chance that he could cross that line into excess, or be cuckolded and made a fool – a wit's power was in his language and in his sexuality.

Richard Braverman writes in "Libertines and Parasites" that

the libertine's prodigality issues from his most characteristic social expenditure, his wit. Wit is more than a social skill; it is a revised expression of the prevalent Renaissance trope, arms and letters. A figure of eloquence and a cavalier, the libertine-parasite testifies to the power of the Word in a double sense: socially, he survives by his eloquence, and politically, his wit embodies the aristocratic virtues he values.<sup>19</sup>

These aristocratic values are what Braverman refers to as 'sovereignty' of will, ego, and word, an independent vision of the nobility that is older and more potent than courtiership (service to the king), and one which emphasises the arms aspect of 'arms and letters,' albeit metaphorically, and very often sexually. Braverman goes on to say that

The heroes are spendthrifts in love, too, their libidinal economy, in which all vigour is expended in the purchase of pleasure, being homologous to the monetary one. In both cases, spending is undertaken not only to maintain social status but to sustain the libertine's very being, continuous expenditure being the visible evidence of his power.<sup>20</sup>

In Rochester, the rants against fops and women usually followed the same lines, and are bound up in the same issues, never far from questions of sexual and social potency. The restored aristocrats who were not able to make the leap of faith or imagination to the changing tide occupied themselves with this fantasy conflict, while their real opponents were busy usurping their power base. In a sense the power base had already gone, and they were busying themselves with a poetic battle because there was nothing else for this once warrior-based group to do to show their potency, and because it deflected the real issue of what was at stake.

The same tendency is evident in the behaviour of the shockingly violent banished cavaliers in Aphra Behn's *The Rover*: unable to accept their military defeat, they continue warring amongst themselves and chiefly against women in the name of a glorified lost cause. Behn slyly connects the warring critic and the defeated cavalier in the Epilogue:

That mutinous Tribe less Factions do beget,  
Than your continual differing in Wit;  
Your Judgment's (as your Passions) a Disease:  
Nor Muse nor Miss your Appetite can please (ll. 7-10)

It was a shadowy war, however, where it was often difficult to tell one side from the other. Behn, like Pope after her, is commenting on the debasement of the debate itself – that the war has lost its purpose, and fallen not to its (imaginary) foes but to a disease of virulence and inefficacy. She uses the sexualised connection to wit differently than Pope – to him the maid had been replaced by a harlot, but to Behn the point is that no woman, neither the heavenly muse nor the earthly miss, can satisfy the now-depraved appetites of the critic/wit/rake. Rochester, and most of the male Restoration writers, stood by their vision of wit, whose weapon is manifested in his stronger social and sexual potency – the images of witty speech, repartee and sharpness, have marked militaristic connotations, and it is this that in the end separated the wits from the fops. While much of the rhetoric surrounding the intricacies of the wit and foppery are valid, with foppery representing form without content, and

unnatural and excessive application of the ornaments of wit, they are really restatements of rules of taste about good and bad poetry.

These contradictions are at the centre of the sexual negotiations in George Etherege's *The Man of Mode*. The play's star is the consummate wit/rake figure, Dorimant, famously taken to be modelled on Etherege's good friend Rochester. The representation of the potent rake is unsettled from the beginning – the title refers to the play's principal fop and the play is subtitled in his honour: *Sir Fopling Flutter*. John Dennis affirmed the Rochester characterisation in his 1722 “Defense of *Sir Fopling Flutter*”:

Now I remember very well that upon the first acting this comedy, it was generally believed to be an agreeable representation of the persons of condition of both sexes, both in court and town; and that all the world was charmed with Dorimant; and that it was unanimously agreed that he had in him several of the qualities of Wilmot Earl of Rochester, as his wit, his spirit, his amorous temper, the charms that he had for the fair sex, his falsehood, and his inconstancy; the agreeable manner of his chiding his servants...; and lastly, his repeating on every occasion the verses of Waller, for whom that noble lord had a very particular esteem.<sup>21</sup>

Hobbesian naturalism was interpreted by the court wits to allow that men should not be afraid to indulge their natural impulses. Rochester himself reported to Burnet that

the two *Maxims* of his *Morality* then were, that he should do nothing to the hurt of any other, or that might prejudice his own health: and he thought that all pleasure, when it did not interfere with these, was to be indulged as the gratification of our natural Appetites. It seemed unreasonable that these were put into a man only to be restrained, or curbed to such narrowness: This he applied to the free use of Wine and Women.<sup>22</sup>

In the *The Man of Mode* Dorimant masquerades as a fop named Courtage in order to be with Harriet, the witty heiress he is courting, whose mother disapproves of his wild reputation as “the prince of all the devils in the town – delights in nothing but in rapes and riots.”<sup>23</sup> The mother, Lady Woodvill, is charmed by Dorimant's foppish alter-ego, and Harriet, who has contrived the hoax herself, plays with the implications of the dual personality in Dorimant's presence:

HARRIET: Lord, how you admire this man!

LADY WOODVILL: What have you to except against him?

HARRIET: He's a fop.

LADY WOODVILL: He's not a Dorimant, a wild, extravagant fellow of the times.

HARRIET: He's a man made up of forms and commonplaces, sucked out of the remaining lees of the last age.<sup>24</sup>

On one level she is merely teasing him, but more profoundly, Dorimant, despite being an 'extravagant fellow of the times,' *is* 'sucked out of the remaining lees of the last age' – especially in his love affairs where he spews forth the conventions of courtly love and woos with borrowed lines from Waller's poems; his utterances are devoid of any metaphysical meaning because of their basis in the physical and thus become mere 'form,' as empty as foppery. Significantly, while Harriet utters her ironic assessment of Courtage, Dorimant, in an aside, frets over a conflicting rendezvous with another of his mistresses: "The hour is almost come I appointed Bellinda, and I am not so foppishly in love here to forget. I am flesh and blood yet."<sup>25</sup> Although he seems to have ignored Harriet's words, he is directly reacting to them, asserting his masculine power as a wit and rake by re-transforming into Dorimant. He departs immediately afterward for a sexual tryst with Bellinda (who derives little pleasure because she is betraying her friend Loveit, his former mistress) – this is his way of proving that he is 'flesh and blood yet,' and not 'made up of forms,' by supplementing 'foppish' love with a loveless sexual exchange.

The inherent difficulties in coming to terms with the paradoxes of the wit debate are ever-present in Rochester's work. Though he often tried to assert through sheer force of (sexual) will that the best poet was he who has the most power – that wit was an inherited virtue like honour and property – such ideas were ultimately unviable in the changing climate of late seventeenth century society. Now anyone with the education, intelligence, and ambition could be accepted as a wit. Rochester was also forced to accept the unavoidable fact that far from all aristocrats were wits, a fact powerfully reinforced in his feud with fellow courtier John Sheffield, Earl of

Mulgrave. The anxiety caused by these contradictions is notably explored in poems like “The Imperfect Enjoyment,” in which the male sexual will fails, with tragic consequences; or “A Letter from Artemiza in the Towne to Chloe in the Countrey,” in which wit is shown to have turned tyrant, just as Behn predicted. As aristocratic honour was demystified it led to a protracted criticism of the aristocratic order from the increasingly articulate commercial classes, as well as its own ranks especially via the satires of the Restoration court. Just as these economic notions began to give way to a dialogue between landed and mobile property especially after the Glorious Revolution, the violence of the war of the wits and fops abated and gave way to the resettlement described in Braverman’s analysis of *The Way of the World* as a new era based on economic trust rather than aristocratic honour. Rochester’s subtle and critical explorations of the ongoing economic and philosophical exchanges, framed variously in court satires, sexual metaphors, and literary feuds, are eloquent records of a vain but passionate aristocratic resistance.

### *I      Class struggle and the battle of the wits*

Among the most overt expressions of the interconnection between aristocratic consolidation and the question of wit in Rochester’s poetry are the literary feuds in which he was involved, notably with John Dryden and John Sheffield, Earl of Mulgrave. Rochester employs the common Restoration practice of reducing his satiric subject to a sexual allegory, but the subject’s social status becomes a factor in how the satire is executed; accusations of sexual deficiency are freely levelled at Dryden, levelled at his general bourgeois frugality, while in the direct attacks on Mulgrave sexual excess is the preferred target, as well as a marked inclination for the use of scurrilous barbs, which in their grossness represent the debasement of his social position.

Rochester’s attack on Dryden and a host of minor Restoration playwrights in “An Allusion to Horace” is perhaps the best known example of the flood of exchanges

of varying degrees of quality between the rival poets of the day. Rochester's quarrel with Dryden seems to have begun after Rochester lampooned the laureate in "An Allusion to Horace," written probably in the latter part of 1675. Animosity smouldered between the two for about four years, culminating in the December 1679 attack on Dryden in Rose Alley by a band of thugs believed by many at the time to have been hired by Rochester.<sup>26</sup> Rochester had been Dryden's patron when his comedy *Marriage a la Mode*, dedicated to Rochester, appeared in March 1673. About three years after the circulation of "An Allusion to Horace" Dryden published with *All for Love*, his 1678 adaptation of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, a Preface that contained thinly-disguised attacks on Rochester and fellow courtier George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, who was the leader of a group of courtly writers who had lampooned Dryden in the 1671 play *The Rehearsal*. The years that lapsed between the attacks and Dryden's counterattacks seem to be the result of Dryden taking the time to consolidate his court connections before launching against two influential courtiers who were at this time very close to the king. As an example of the complications of family and friendship connections among this group, *All for Love* was dedicated to Thomas Osborne, Earl of Danby who was the Lord Treasurer during this period. The Secretary of the Treasury was politician and erstwhile poet Sir Robert Howard, who had not only been knighted for saving the life of Rochester's father Henry Wilmot, but had been immortalised as the foolish Sir Positive At-all in Shadwell's *The Sullen Lovers*. Howard had also been usurped by his brother-in-law Dryden as the primary target of satire of *The Rehearsal*. During the time of the feud Rochester was seeking the aid of both Danby and Howard in having the arrears of his crown annuities paid.<sup>27</sup> Rochester's petitions were successful, and around 1676 he wrote a scene, probably in gratitude, for a play called *The Conquest of China* that Howard was planning to write.<sup>28</sup> In his dedication of *All for Love* to Danby, Dryden praises the Lord Treasurer's success in sorting out the "the Incomes of [the king's] Treasury, which You found not only disordered but exhausted." Alliances at court were notoriously

changeable, so Rochester's attack on Dryden in the same year he was himself seeking the political patronage of Dryden's kinsman is not unusual, and virtually without peril for Rochester because of his status.<sup>29</sup>

In his dedication to *Marriage a la Mode*, Dryden claims to be much indebted to Rochester not only for his financial support and his promotion of the play to the King (which assured it a good reception) but also for his emendations to the text. Dryden's public dedication and a private letter probably written just after the play's run, appear on the surface to offer sycophantic praise to Rochester, a necessary and acceptable, if degrading, convention of the system. However, on closer examination they reveal a marked arrogance in his attitude toward his patron. In the dedication, Dryden coyly alludes to Rochester's poetic amateurism, writing that "people of my mean condition are only writers, because some of the nobility, and your Lordship in the first place, are above the narrow praises which poesy could give you."<sup>30</sup> He goes on to suggest that if Rochester chose to take poetry seriously, "from the patron of wit, you may become its tyrant; and oppress our little reputations with more ease that you now protect them."<sup>31</sup> Dryden's flowery prose purports to affirm Rochester's superior wit and his princely benevolence, a benevolence that he implies is born of contained power. But Dryden is also commenting on the nature of the patron/poet relationship, suggesting that it is potentially tyrannical and apt to oppress the wit of the poet-client through autocratic appropriation, as well as suppression of the poetic voice by withholding financial support. Dryden's defiance cloaked in deference would have been easily detectable to Rochester who seems to have responded with his own reaffirmation of propriety of the patron/poet relationship with "An Allusion to Horace."

Dryden is the first poet to be lampooned, and the only one whose work is evaluated at length:

Well sir, 'tis granted I said Dryden's rhymes  
Were stol'n, unequal, nay dull many times.  
What foolish patron is there found of his  
So blindly partial to deny me this? (ll. 1-4)



The ‘foolish patron’ is Mulgrave to whose camp Dryden had defected by the time the “Allusion” was composed. There is some self-mockery here, as Rochester had himself been Dryden's patron for some years, as well as patron or promoter to the other victims of the satire, John Crowne, Elkanah Settle, Thomas Otway, and Nathaniel Lee. But the insult to Mulgrave goes further than just foolishness for an unwise choice of poetic herald; he is specifically targeted with the words ‘blindly partial,’ which are a reminder of the correct hierarchy of such a relationship, that though a patron might defend and support a protégé, any partiality should be on the part of the poet and not the patron. This sentiment is reinforced several lines later when Dryden’s literary criticism is being discussed:

But does not Dryden find ev’n Johnson dull?  
 Fletcher, and Beaumont, uncorrect, and full  
 Of Lewd lines as he calls em? To his owne the while  
 Allowing all the justnesse that his Pride,  
 Soe Arrogantly, had to these denyd?  
 And may not I, have leave Impartially  
 To search, and Censure, Drydens workes, and try,  
 If those grosse faults, his choyce Pen does Commit  
 Proceed from want of Judgment, or of Witt.  
 Of if his lumpish fancy does refuse,  
 Spirit, and grace to his loose slatterne Muse? (ll. 81–92)

These lines bring together the issues of patronage and the role of wit and criticism in a system that had implications far beyond Restoration poetics. The words ‘owne’ and ‘allow’ echo the opening lines where the speaker claims with heavy irony to “freely owne” that Dryden’s plays “Plays, Embroider’d up and downe,/ With Witt, and Learning, justly pleas’s the Towne” but adds the interdiction “Yet haveing this allow’d, the heavy Masse,/ That stuffs up loose Volumes must not passe” (ll. 7, 5-6, 7-8). In the face of Dryden’s rather radical assessments of Renaissance literature – which were not particularly well-received when he appended them to the published versions of his plays – the speaker is demanding the right to the same ‘ownership’ of opinion, alluding to Dryden’s ‘owne’ poetry, which has been connected to characterisations of ‘pride’

and ‘arrogance’ which are pretensions beyond Dryden’s station. Dryden’s Jonsonian assertion of the ownership of his poetic voice are threatening, especially in terms of patronage which predates copyright as a stamp of ownership on the poet’s words. It also reflects on Rochester’s conception of the ownership of his critical voice, which has as its authorising foundation the land-based power of the aristocracy, while Dryden’s belongs to the realm of mobile property, propped up on the fragile stilts of popular opinion. Rochester tries to annul the issue altogether with the denial in the poem that Dryden has any wit to own, but this assertion is never proved with literary examples, but by the series of strategically placed innuendoes about Dryden’s torpid and miserly sexuality.

The forum of criticism is being figured in terms of a justice that Dryden has arrogantly ‘denyd’ the earlier playwrights. There is reason for Rochester to take some personal offence as his adaptation of Fletcher’s *Valentinian* was composed around this time. The speaker asks ‘And may I not, have leave Impartially’ to critique Dryden’s work by the same unjustness, referring ironically to his role as an aristocratic patron.<sup>32</sup> He proceeds with a sexualised representation of the principal tenets of Augustan poetry, wit mediated through judgment and fancy, in the lines that follow. These lines again bring an echo from the opening of the poem, particularly the ‘loose slatterne Muse’ and Dryden’s ‘loose Volumes.’ The sense of sexual looseness is accentuated by the context of the preceding lines where the speaker praises his chosen coterie in specifically sexual terms. Prominent courtier and poet Sir Charles Sedley, who

... has that prevailing gentle Art,  
That can with a resistlesse Charm impart,  
The loosest wishes to the Chastest Heart (ll. 64-6)

The use of ‘loose’ here again suggests loose morals identical to Dryden’s ‘slatterne Muse’ but the shift in context to free libertine seduction puts the looseness in its proper place – the verse must not be loose, but the sentiments should be. In addition, Dryden’s passivity in the seductive ‘looseness’ is contrasted to Sedley’s ‘resistlesse

Charm', which clearly casts Dryden in a feminine role and Sedley in a masculine one. In maintaining the balance between masculine sexual excess and poetic discipline, Lord Buckhurst is counted exceptional:

For Songs, and Verses, Mannerly Obscene,  
That can stirr Nature up, by Springs unseene,  
And without forceing blushes, warme the Queene" (ll. 61-3)

His verses exemplify the proper balance of this libertine poetic ethos in the oxymoronic achievement of being 'Mannerly Obscene.' Their natural command of "this nice way of Witt" (l. 71), so clearly and irrevocably connected to their sexual potency, is contrasted to Dryden's own embarrassing attempts: "For he, to be a tearing Blade thought fit,/ But when he wou'd be sharp, he still was blunt" (ll. 72-3). The 'resistlesse Charm' of Buckhurst and Sedley is coercion painted as seduction, which reinforces their aristocratic power dressed up with courtly elegance but still drawing its potency from their traditional power source, might. In this representation of events Dryden does not reject their ways, but attempts and fails their 'nice way of Witt' – this is 'nice' not in the modern sense of kindness or conventionality, but as 'appropriateness,' which highlights again the connection to propriety so important to wit. The 'blushes' inspired by Buckhurst's obscenities are not 'forced;' Dryden lacks this 'natural' propensity for unforced forcefulness equally because of his lack of verbal acuity and social power. Dryden was clearly unsuccessful at performing this balancing act, as an anecdote related by Shadwell shows:

"At *Windsor*, in the company of several persons of Quality, Sir G[eorge] E[therege] being present... When ask'd how they should spend the Afternoon... *Let's Bugger one another now by G—d...* was [Dryden's] smart reply."<sup>33</sup>

Dryden's forced attempt at the lewd wit commonly practised by the courtiers was met with derision – as Rochester remarked in a letter to Savile, 'the blunt' is Dryden's "very good weapon in wit."<sup>34</sup> Buckhurst's "Mannerly" ways also puns on "manly," alluding to the requisite virility of the aristocratic rake; in contrast to Buckhurst, Dryden is stingy with sexual pleasure: "To frisk his frolic fancy, he'd cry, 'Cunt, '/

Would give the ladies a dry bawdy bob” (ll. 74-5). The dry bob, intercourse without ejaculation, is a metaphor for the perception of middle class financial conservatism, as well as poetic conservatism and imaginative infertility. The implication is that Dryden is not willing to amass a debt, sexual or otherwise – he is fiscally careful in that he will not spend what he cannot afford, in direct opposition to the aristocratic economy of expenditure and consumption. Rochester attacks him from both sides, saying his verse is not tight enough, but with regards expending he is far too tight-fisted. By making his attack via sexual inadequacy Rochester is implying that Dryden’s attempt at critical reform is a pursuit that will not bear fruit. Rochester lampoons the opposite characteristic of noblemen who spend all over the place, and often prematurely, in his “Imperfect Enjoyment.” Generosity and virility are aristocratic virtues which are associated with the warrior culture from which the nobility arose. His first biographer, Bishop Gilbert Burnet notes that even Rochester “thought it necessary to begin his life with ... Demonstrations of his Courage [during the Dutch wars] in an element and way of fighting, which is acknowledged to be the greatest trial of clear and undaunted Valour.”<sup>35</sup> This is echoed in the finale of the drama between the two poets: the attack on Dryden at the pub in Rose Alley, which may or may not have been arranged by Rochester but everyone believed it was. It marks a return to old-style strong arm tactics of the aristocratic warrior culture, both a last resort for Rochester and a brutal reminder to Dryden of the vestiges of power of the nobility.

The portrayal of Dryden’s sexual inadequacies are inextricable from his textual ones. Rochester chooses his final coterie along class lines, naming his fellow court wits as the great critical authorities of the age: Etherege, Wycherley, Buckhurst, Sedley, Shepherd, Godolphin, and Buckingham were all courtiers. A philosophical context for this blatant partisanship is supplied by Hobbes in his equation of wit with power, which is in turn connected with honour: “All Actions, Speeches, that proceed or seem to proceed from much Experience, Science, Discretion, or Wit, are Honourable; For all these are Powers. Actions, or Words, that proceed from Errour,

Ignorance, or Folly, Dishonourable".<sup>36</sup> To look at this from another angle, Pocock reminds us that under the Restoration system, by strict understanding, there could be no authority without property, and no honour without authority. The poem tries to assert that under such a system lack of wit or foppery is associated *by definition* with the dishonourable, non-noble classes.

In his assessment of the issue of amateurism as "an aesthetic and a system of literary production in its own right, which as late as the generation of Rochester still exercised a considerable influence on the work of professionals and was itself capable of giving rise to verse of high distinction," Harold Love observes that "[i]t was premised on the notion of the inherent superiority of an upper-class culture which validated its writing skills by reference to the art of spontaneous, polished conversation and natural elegance...yet by the late 1670s that authority was showing signs of erosion: thus the "Allusion.""<sup>37</sup> When Rochester dismisses the non-courtly writers in the "Allusion" on this basis he is depending as much on the remnants of this authority as on the validity of his criticisms, for instance when Dryden is ridiculed for "that Tallent.../ That can divert the Rabble and the Court" (ll. 16-17). The court and the rabble are dismissed as equally undiscerning audiences; this alignment highlights Rochester's larger agenda of reinforcing the traditional independent authority of the aristocracy, outside of the king's jurisdiction. This is echoed in the final lines when the authorities of taste are named:

I loath the Rabble, 'tis enough for me,  
If Sidley, Shadwell, Shepherd, Witcherley,  
Godolphin, Buttler, Buckhurst, Buckingham,  
And some few more, whom I omit to name  
Approve my Sense, I count their Censure fame. (ll. 120-4)

The phrase 'I loath the Rabble' lacks the companion 'court' from the earlier verse, and what is unspoken rings loud at the end of the poem, and echoes Rochester's famous and dangerous declaration "I hate all Monarchs, and the Thrones they sit on." But in the end all that is left is a band of witty courtiers without a court to serve, their belief

system and self-image severely in crisis, despite Rochester's best attempts to reinforce their authority sexually.

The poems against Mulgrave further problematise Rochester's courtly position. Unlike Dryden, Mulgrave was a social equal and one of Rochester's chief rivals at court. He supported the Duke of York, and was thus not welcome in the ranks of the 'merry gang' that surrounded the Duke of Buckingham. He was notoriously ambitious and greatly enlarged his estate in the accepted way, with three very beneficial marriages to heiresses, and attempted to enlarge his poetical reputation in a manner not quite so acceptable, publication.<sup>38</sup> The relationship between Rochester and Mulgrave is an interesting enactment of an internal aristocratic struggle, and the central elements in their rivalry are wit and cowardice. Mulgrave challenged Rochester twice to duels, both of which were prevented by the King's intervention. Mulgrave reportedly attempted to taint Rochester's reputation by interpreting the unfought duels as evidence of Rochester's cowardice. He also took profit from Rochester's dishonourable behaviour in the Epsom affair where a friend was killed by a watch who had been provoked by Rochester's belligerence, and Rochester was rumoured to have run away and left the friend to die. At court one's reputation was everything and Rochester's was in tatters after this incident, to Mulgrave's delight – he used the incident to substantiate his earlier 'evidence' of Rochester's cowardice. Rochester hit back with lampoon after lampoon shattering Mulgrave's literary reputation, lampooning his sexual conquests and emasculating him by severing his link to wit, the language of the court. This trading in reputations is illustrative of the courtier's larger conflicts; as Richard Braverman puts it,

Wit is his instrument, and is itself emblematic of the duel, that weapon of defence of personal honor or reputation a true honor culture.... The courtier's form of verbal expenditure, [wit] is the means of 'credit' by which he debauches a reputation to gain a living.<sup>39</sup>

There was certainly an element of competition between Rochester and Mulgrave, and there was more at stake than one-upmanship in an exchange of verse. Norbert Elias

stresses in *The Court Society* that among the aristocrats the struggle for place and advancement was crucial, and comments that “the agitation of a courtier over an impending rise or fall in his rank and prestige was no less intense than that of a merchant over an imminent loss of capital.”<sup>40</sup> He also points out that “[t]he probability is slight that an individual could stand completely aloof, without participating in any way in the competition for opportunities that he thinks or feels are valued by others, without seeking fulfilment of his striving in a way that secures him an assurance of his value by the behaviour of others.”<sup>41</sup> These concepts go a long way to helping our understanding about what was inspiring such virulent exchanges about wit, that were often themselves, ironically, neither very inspired nor very witty.

In the poem “An Epistolary Essay,” Rochester appropriates Mulgrave’s voice to compose a letter, possibly to Dryden, that lampoons both the laureate and his patron, and touches on many of the issues raised in the “Allusion.”<sup>42</sup> In the “Epistolary Essay” Mulgrave’s voice is characterised by the arrogance and pomposity for which he was known, peppered with patronising afterthoughts of praise for his addressee. The mode of attack is subtly different from the one Rochester used against Dryden in the “Allusion,” using Mulgrave’s own bloated voice to express the crimes against discretion committed by his overgrown ego. The poem plays with Mulgrave’s role as a courtier who held attitudes about the notion of courtiership and cultivated allegiances very different from Rochester’s own. Mulgrave’s understanding of ‘nobility’ and ‘honour’ was bound up almost entirely in duelling and militarism. Duelling was an outlawed and outmoded (in all but symbolic value) remnant of the chivalric code, while militarism was increasingly being debased and impoverished by Charles II’s policies of procrastination which fed his very secret and effectively treasonous negotiations with Louis XIV (involving payment of French funds into Charles’s coffers in exchange for the reintroduction of Catholicism in England).<sup>43</sup> However, in Rochester’s satires against Mulgrave, like those on the King, most of which focus on his flagrant sexuality as a substitute or distraction from the business of ruling, the basic virility/power of the

aristocracy is still being tacitly promoted. The king degrades his realm with his scores of mistresses and diluting bastards, but there remains a shabby pride in the power of the 'prick' if not in the 'sceptre.' The same inability to deal the final blow is evident in the poems against Mulgrave; this inability eventually undermines the lackwit designation Rochester tries to pin on him, and Mulgrave is left in the end with his de facto wit intact.

"An Epistolary Essay" draws much of its inspiration from Mulgrave's poetic dependence on Dryden, and his arrogant refusal to bow to the critical dictates of anyone but himself. The Mulgrave figure describes the "Rule" he lives by:

T'avoyd with care, all sort of self denyall.  
Which way soe're desire and fancy leade  
(Contemning Fame) that Path I boldly tread;  
And if exposeing what I take for Witt,  
To my deare self, a Pleasure I beget,  
Noe matter tho' the Censring Crittique fret. (ll. 15-20)

The opening lines sound rather like the credo quoted earlier which Rochester told Burnet he followed, but where Mulgrave is content to follow 'desire and fancy,' Rochester's own path was a Hobbesian indulgence of his 'natural' urges, but tempered by discretion in the assurance that no one else got hurt. Mulgrave's boastful claim that he 'condemns fame' refers both to accolades and reputation, and the pleasure he 'begets' by 'exposing' his wit to his 'deare self' has masturbatory connotations. Rochester creates a portrait of narcissism for Mulgrave that would be impossible to equate with wit – the wit's 'sovereign ego,' to use Braverman's term, is outward looking, it expends sexually on women or boys, and uses wit as both language and currency to achieve his ends. The Mulgrave Rochester portrays is interested only in the reproduction of his "Prostituted Sense," not in the "musty Customes" of "this sawcy World" (ll. 85, 86, 83). He draws the conclusion that "Grace is not soe hard to get as Witt" (l. 29), and goes on to muse that:

Perhaps ill Verses, ought to be confin'd,  
In meere good Breeding, like unsav'ry Wind;



Were Reading forc'd, I shou'd be apt to think  
 Men might noe more write scurvily, than stinke:  
 But 'tis your choyce, whether you'll Read or noe,  
 If likewise of your smelling it were soe,  
 I'd Fart just as I write, for my owne ease,  
 Nor shou'd you be concern'd, unlesse you please:  
 I'll owne, that you write better than I doe,  
 But I have as much need to write, as you. (ll. 30-9)

Bad poetry is compared with "unsav'ry Wind" both of which are best kept inside by the constraints of "good Breeding," and writing is tied up with the two opposing conditions of ease and need. There is a sense of the foul hot air inflating Mulgrave's ego, and his rejection of the societal confines of 'good Breeding' is let out as much in his writing as his farting, presumably with the same effect. The tone shifts in the next two couplets, easing into defiance:

What though the Excrement of my dull Braine,  
 Runns in a harsh, insipid Straine,  
 Whilst your rich Head, eases itself of Witt?  
 Must none but Civet-Catts have leave to shit? (ll. 40-3)

The last line refers to the civet, a cat-like animal with an anal sac that secretes a musky scent. He is questioning the idea that only those whose output is pleasing should be allowed to write, but it goes deeper than that. The civet, an Asian animal associated with rich perfume is a powerful image of the aristocrat – powerful, exotic, sexual, adorned with wealth. But the reduction of the civet's musk to 'shit' reinforces the lines above, where Mulgrave's poetry is equated with running excrement that is 'harsh' and 'insipid,' while the addressee's head "eases it self of Witt." His faulty critical judgement has misattributed the smell of perfume for the smell of excrement, in other words, he mistakes wit for shit, and vice versa. In another attack on Mulgrave, "My Lord All-Pride," Rochester contends that Mulgrave's "starv'd Fancy" is forced to feed on "the Excrements of others Witt" (ll. 8, 9). The excremental language is an inversion and degradation of the more usual sexual spending of Rochester's poetry; but whereas the sexual encounters represent fertile circulations of wit, the act of excretion is a loss without value. In psychoanalytic terms, excrement represents money, and in

this poem there is a suggestion that Mulgrave's degradation is a smear on his rank as well as himself. As Hobbes said, the wit must practice discretion, and Rochester affirms that discerning beneficial excess from harmful excess is a necessity.

The poem momentarily questions the sumptuous excesses of courtly life when the speaker observes:

The World appeares like a great Family,  
Whose Lord opprest with Pride, and Poverty,  
(That to a few, great Plenty he may show)  
Is faine to starve the Num'rous Train below (ll. 56-9)

Given the layers of voice in the poem, Rochester is able to keep the target of his satire slippery and indefinite. These lines appear to be a repudiation of the artificial pomp of the nobility, and again there is an echo of the famous "Satire on Charles II" where the English king is likened to "the french Foole who wanders up and downe/ Starving his People, hazarding his Crowne" (ll. 6-7). However, 'Mulgrave' continues his speech and makes explicit his understanding of wit's currency:

Just soe seemes Providence, as poor and vaine,  
Keeping more creatures than it can maintaine.  
Here 'tis profuse, and there it meanly saves,  
And for One Prince, it makes Ten Thousand Slaves:  
In Witt alone, it has beene Magnificent,  
Of which, soe just a share, to each is sent  
That the most avaricious are content. (ll. 60-66)

He proves his lack of sense by claiming to see wit everywhere, and the view is in opposition to Rochester's – he portrays lack of wit as a grotesque creation, and places Mulgrave in the Bartholomew Fair freakshow in "My Lord All-Pride" ("When all his Brother-Monsters flourish there" (l. 21)). Mulgrave's warped conception of what nature has bestowed is an extension of his overweening pride, which he expresses in his dismissal of the critics, calling them mere 'men who censure,' proclaiming "Borne to my self, my self I like alone,/ And must conclude my Judgment good, or none" (ll. 73-4), and resolves to "keepe at home, and write" (l. 100). His individualist vision of criticism is a far cry from the one Rochester promotes in "An Allusion to Horace," in

which he proudly submits to the judgement of the elite group of enlightened men he admires. Rochester's version of criticism is one of baronial power dictating standards of taste and behaviour to the lower orders; Mulgrave communes only with his paid poets such as Dryden, and his false wit is a property that yields benefit to only himself.

When lampooning Mulgrave's sexual excesses directly, however, Rochester's satire is less certain in its attack. The "Very Heroicall Epistle in Answer to Ephelia" features Mulgrave as an Oriental Don Juan character (again, like the civet-cat), with a corresponding appeal and arrogance. The poem is a response to a satirical epistle by George Etherege, "Ephelia to Bajazet," and both are burlesques inspired by Ovid's *Heroides*, letter poems from abandoned lovers and responses by their abandoners. The two poems combine to create an image of Mulgrave as a distasteful but successful courtier, whose sexual liaisons leave him only slightly tarnished but imbued with a power fuelled by an untapped source. And though Bajazet's ego is massively inflated, the regard of his lover is proportional, and we end up with a lampoon of an arrogant man much loved. He seems to earn a grudging acknowledgement of his successful transition – he is a successful courtly presence, unliked, unwitty, but admirable in a way his enemies seemed not to understand themselves – his end bears it out, he died very old and very rich. And considering Rochester's customary sexualisation of wit, the result is an ambiguous residue in the reading of Mulgrave – just as Dryden's talent was diminished by his lack of sexual finesse, Mulgrave's lack of wit is obscured by his unsavoury but undeniable sexual will.

Etherege's poem contains some internal question marks that render the project of the satire slightly skewed: first there is the mention of the lover Ephelia's status as a mistress:

For him my Duty to my Friends forgot,  
For him, alas, what lost I not!  
Fame, all the valuable things in life  
To meete his Love, by a lesse name than Wife! (ll. 22-5)<sup>44</sup>

This breaks the essential pretence of the courtly love poem of 'lovers' who exist on a plane beyond the moral constraints of the secular world. This is done frequently and with more force by Rochester in his many poems against women, who are usually referred to as whores. Ephelia further reminds Bajazet that she had given her "Virgin Innocence, and freely made,/ My love an Off'ring to your Noble Bed," his present coldness cannot "Suite with the Generous heate you once did shew!" (Etherege, ll. 42-3, 49). Rochester's Bajazet answers these allegations of meanness with typical heartlessness:

The boasted favour you soe precious hold,  
To me's noe more, than changeing of my Gold;  
What e're you gave, I paid you back in Blisse!  
Then where's the Obligation pray of this? (ll. 24-7)

There is a satirical play on the fact that Mulgrave's mistress (possibly a prostitute) is more noble a creature than him. But his behaviour and response is far from surprising, and echoes the ideal aristocratic love, adultery. The lover's prostitution, literal or otherwise, is acknowledged in the vulgar commercial diction, and devalues the ideal. But though Bajazet's overt equation of sexual pleasure with money further drives the currency down, the scenario, if not the language, of rejection is familiar from Rochester's other libertine output, such as "Against Constancy" where the speaker mocks those "duller fools" who "Despairing higher to advance" are left to "be kind to one alone" (ll. 5, 7, 8). It is the sentiment more than the act, again like Dryden's misplaced 'looseness' – the idea that "There's something Genrous in meer lust" ("A Ramble in St James's Park," l. 98) holds true. Bajazet, however, quantifies the pleasure he has had and has given, without subtlety and without generosity. He accuses Ephelia of being "Beggar-like," like all women who "still haunt the Doore,/ Where they've receiv'd a Charity before." (ll. 30-1). Though the distinction between this and libertine lust is slight, and for the women concerned, academic, for Rochester it is the spirit of sexual expenditure that is important.

Mulgrave's proud membership in the Order of the Garter, whose insignia is a star, is mocked in these same terms:

My Blazing Starr, but visits, and away:  
As fatal too, it shines, as those in' th' Skyes,  
Tis never scene, but some great Lady dyes. (ll. 21-3)

The insignia is translated into a blazing phallus, which is always fatal, delivering 'death' (orgasm) whenever it is seen. Mulgrave invests all his sexual power in a designation of courtly puissance – which Rochester, in his anti-courtly poetic persona, purports to reject – but he accepts membership in a chivalric order without adhering to the chivalric code. As we shall see in "The Imperfect Enjoyment," such debasement of the weapon of love and wit (the phallic pen) can have tragic consequences. Rochester ultimately depends on the image of doomed tyranny and hubris derived from the figure of Bajazet, the Turkish sultan defeated by Tamburlaine, as his satiric weapon against Mulgrave. But Bajazet retains his potent sexuality despite the reference to his future fall, and though it is not motivated by higher ideals, neither was most libertine sexual expression, exemplified in the cruel underside of wit. In the context of wit and aristocratic finances, Rochester buckles when drawn into a critique of his own group through his compulsion to satirise a foe of equal status – the unevenness of the satires against Mulgrave indicate an anxiety that transcends the possible strictures of the lampoon (speed, topicality) and produces an inherently fragile satirical vein that in its potential to mirror Rochester's own situation becomes unsustainable beyond a few couplets at a time. Mulgrave, on the other hand, was well able to sustain the rivalry well into his own old age, publishing another attack on Rochester two years after his death which inspired a flurry of poetic defences from young admirers of the dead poet, and repeating the tales of Rochester's cowardice to anyone who would listen.<sup>45</sup> For Mulgrave, the rivalry with Rochester was his *raison d'être*, and just as the wit formulation was unsustainable in the Restoration without a foppish other to give it meaning, Mulgrave tried to use the ashes of Rochester's reputation as the foundation

for his own poetical ambitions, only to have them swallowed up first by the imaginative force of Rochester's deathbed conversion, and finally by the indifference of his *œuvre*.

## II *Engendered wit: reproduction, honour, and aristocratic crisis*

As we have seen, in Rochester's poems the debate about wit is never extricable from the concept of libertine sexuality. Richard Braverman, in a discussion of *The Man of Mode*, remarks that "Wit pervades not only the verbal but the sexual economies of this and other libertine plays, and it is the men of wit who control the libidinal commerce, taking without giving in return."<sup>46</sup> Braverman goes on to ask "If it is by wit – the sign of social potency – that the parasite gets something for nothing, who are his providers and what does he take?"<sup>47</sup> For Restoration comedy, the answer lies in the economy of cuckoldry, exemplified most forcefully by Horner in *The Country Wife*, but in Rochester's poetry the language of exchange works in a different way. For him, libertine heterosexuality paradoxically defines aristocratic masculinity but is also the source of its potential destruction. Again and again Rochester attempts to revoke this sense of a loss of power with violent misogynistic proclamations, indicating a deep-seated fear of women's sexuality. The poems that reject women work in dialogue with several of Rochester's lyrics that deal with the notion of female honour, which is usually reduced to a kind of mean-spirited chastity that is seen as an infringement on the male seducer's sexual will – though, as we shall see in the next section, the male libertine has equal difficulty coming to terms with *female* sexual libertinism. Taken together these poems reveal how Rochester subtly transforms the conception of wit, in order to preserve it in a state of fecund but asexual masculine individualism.

In many of his poems Rochester uses representatives from the lower classes as satirical tools with which to either attack the inner sanctum of court life or defend it from encroaching groups. He uses a combination of these approaches as a direct

expression of aristocratic anxiety in the well-known lyric “Love a Woman! y’are an Ass.” The conventional premise of this drinking song – a misogynist rejection of women in favour of the bottle and male companionship – is attended by a complex subnarrative about class and reproduction that forms a part of Rochester’s larger reaction to the transformation of honour and male identity during this period. Though it begins conventionally, the poem works allusively toward a rejection of a conventional future, moving through various strata of society, from the newly-forming ideal of feminine virtue, to intellectual pursuit and male friendship, and a final embrace of the classical ideal of love, homosexuality. In order to reach that point, the speaker makes a choice against the physical survival of what his social group has become, forsaking conventional reproduction and investing all in the word of wit and the old values of honour, reread as libertinism enriched with debauchery. The physical barrenness of the noble sort of aristocracy in the poem, those who have not sold out, is a vision of the social, political, and especially economic barrenness that would be their fate – but there is a defiant though forlorn pride in the fact of their having *chosen* this fate, as it is at least something that differentiates them from those at the opposite end of the social spectrum, and saves them from being swallowed up by the parvenus.

The poem is formed as an answer addressed to a woman, responding at first directly to a question about emotion, but eventually re-interpreting the question sexually. The speaker violently rejects the idea of loving a woman:

Love a Woman! y’are an Ass,  
 ’Tis a most insipid Passion,  
 To choose out for your happiness  
 The idlest part of Gods Creation! (ll. 1-4)

The reference to choosing one’s happiness is akin to larger concerns about will in the poem, and the allusion to the creation of women as a secondary act of God’s Genesis foreshadows the importance of creation and procreation in the poem’s central manifesto.<sup>48</sup> By the second stanza Rochester has shifted the focus from happiness resulting from emotional love to the subject of sex with women, which is overtly

associated with hard labour in a rejection of the utilitarian approach to sexuality adopted by the Puritans, where intercourse was for procreation only. We are introduced to characters the speaker considers better suited for the job:

Let the Porter, and the Groome,  
Things design'd for dirty Slaves,  
Drudge in fair Aurelias Womb,  
To get supplies for Age and Graves. (ll.5-8)

The porter and the groom's particular place in the household was out-of-doors, at the gate and in the stables, and as such they are marked with the unsavoury stigma of manual labour which gives them a bestial presence. We do not know the social position of the poem's female addressee; she represents a generic womanhood thoroughly and directly rejected, but she is probably from his own class. Homosocial negotiations are turned upside down by this gesture – the speaker is disrupting the system, and enacting a rejection of women as property because property is becoming 'supplies' more than the physical manifestation of aristocratic honour it had previously represented. This action attempts to block the encroaching bourgeoisie, whose new ideas about honour and expenditure are anathema to the existing elite, by effecting an unnatural union between aristocratic women and lower class men, cutting the middle classes out of the exchange.

Crucially the second stanza offers the view that as "supplies for Age, and Graves" children have become a redundant and futile creation, which implies the disintegration of the importance of blood lines for this group. This idea is expressed in commodious terms, and gives the impression that procreation is seen as a market exchange in futility. 'Supplies' dehumanises the offspring, highlighting how aristocratic progeny are used as pawns in power and financial games, married off for profit to merchants or in land mergers with other noble families, exposing the 'dishonourable' nature of the system, and implying the existing similarity with the despised acquisitive class who were gaining power. Rochester obliquely critiques the 'marriage market,' so thoroughly explored in Restoration comedy, and he suggests



that on the one hand the commercial classes are performing another cheap imitation of the aristocracy, while also acknowledging that the avaricious nature of the marriage exchange of the aristocracy offered material inspiration for those of an acquisitive bent, despite protestations of honour and noblesse oblige. Women represented property, but property has become tainted by dishonourable greed. When this system Rochester himself participated in had its central ideologies of honour and generosity exposed as a sham, it was no longer worth supporting. 'Age' represents old age as well as posterity, which is no longer as attractive to the carpe diem libertines, and 'Graves' are empty images because libertine sceptics like Rochester no longer believed that they were the entrances to paradise.

The speaker bids her farewell and voices his intention  
Henceforth, ev'ry Night to sit,  
With my lewd well-natur'd friend,  
Drinking, to engender Wit. (ll. 10-12)

Wit is his only desired offspring, but unlike human progeny it is not ephemeral – its path is pure intellectuality and pleasure, and thus its connection to the larger concept of the reason renders it immortal. In this construction "Drinking, to engender Wit" is an inversion of human procreation in which conception takes place in the female womb; in the poem the speaker, a wit, drinks wine and conceives wit in a perversion of God-given procreation. He has salvaged the qualities he values from the elite and forged a new identity, that of the libertine rake, partly out of the classical Greek principle of the 'good life' that embodies poetics as well as economics. This is a specifically civic phenomenon, an extension of the private household that held that property was a means to "power, leisure, and independence" but not "to engage in trade, exchange or profit."<sup>49</sup> In reality, the way this political neo-classicism worked, according to Pocock's model, was the conservative and agrarian side of the post-Restoration power struggle, but their country bias was not attractive to the libertine rake. In this poem and in the way he is represented in Rochester's other poems and in the drama of the period, this figure was effecting a divorce of the conventional

reproduction of power, rejecting the links the aristocratic order was making with commerce, and this was essentially accomplished through the misogyny (that is, refutation of their honour), and by extension cuckolding their rivals. Just as lack of wit is associated with cuckoldry, wit is an extension of sexual power itself, and the libertine speaker's declaration endows wit with the power of its own reproduction which is a powerful assertion of the power of both the logos and masculinity.

Braverman asserts that

wit is itself both an extension of the courtier's sexual presence – his sexual will, so to speak – and an affirmation of his being. The courtier's form of verbal expenditure, it is the means of "credit" by which he debauches a reputation to gain a living. As such, wit is the courtier's true offspring, for he constitutes himself through the production of his reputation, his name.<sup>50</sup>

What this becomes in the poem is an expression of a wholly masculine sexuality, freed from bonds to women and reproduction. The speaker says in the final stanza:

Then give me Health, Wealth, Mirth, and Wine,  
And if busie Love, intrenches,  
There's a sweet soft Page, of mine,  
Does the trick worth Forty Wenches. (ll. 13-16)

He has advocated a kind of powerful, logos-driven asexuality in the poem, and in the final lines even the classical sodomy, inspired by Eros, "busie Love", sex is an afterthought, an itch rather than a desire. Significantly his chosen lover is a powerless boy, his personal servant, the masculine version of a handmaid. He has rejected one powerless lover for another – he chooses the page because he is something he owns – "a sweet soft page of *mine*" – and he is commodified as well, he is "*worth* forty wenches." Objectification, or male mirroring, is still taking place but has moved closer to the subject – the 'Page,' with the word's secondary meaning as a sheet of paper, represents a blank page on which anything can be written. Aurelia, too, is a passive presence in the poem – the implied question that sparks the poem is kept outside its perimeters, and her sexuality is made to be inert with her womb being

*drudged in*, and there is none of the rage of Rochester's other rejection poems because of this sense that women, and their power, are being pushed away.

When the speaker cedes reproduction to his servants he expresses contempt for both them and women, emphasising their predestined functionality: women and slaves cannot decide how to live, while choice, or will, defines their masters. The diction highlights the underlying anxieties that surround seemingly commonplace notions about relationships, particularly this concept of 'choice.' And it is at this conjunction of will as choice and will as inheritance that the idea of wit's reproduction becomes vitally tied to the progenitive abilities of the aristocracy. As one of the central concepts both in Christian dogma and political and moral philosophy, will is of great importance, but in its legal meaning of conferring property through primogeniture, along with the new innovation of 'strict settlement,' the poem seems to question the inheritance of the will of one man (the father) as inhibiting the will of another (the son).<sup>51</sup> So, wit is fatherless, self-perpetuating. The speaker takes his rejection of Puritan views of sexuality a classical step further: he takes the concept that sex is only for procreation and rejects it fully – substituting it with sex for pleasure, but with an assurance that the urges invoked will not reproduce, literally and figuratively, since the 'sweet soft page' need not be willing, and their union will not produce any 'supplies for Age and graves.'

Rochester's translation of Anacreon, "Upon his Drinking Bowl," offers a similar androcentric valediction but focuses on rejecting a different aspect of aristocratic masculinity, the warrior culture. The scene the speaker commissions Vulcan to depict on his bowl is a libertine utopia which specifically excludes the aspects of his elite society that he wishes to dispense with. It is a perfect display of the careless elegance required from the courtier, but that image breaks down on examination of the objects he chooses to keep and those he discards in his utopia. The cup is to be richly decorated "As Nestor us'd of old" (l. 2), with generous

proportions that can accommodate “Vast Toasts on the delicious Lake” of sack, compared to “Ships at Sea” (ll. 7, 8). The next stanza, however, commands

Engrave no Battail on his Cheek,  
With War, I’ve nought to do;  
I’m none of those that took Mastrich,  
Nor Yarmouth Leager knew. (ll. 9-12)

The speaker has moved from a celebration of images of war to a repudiation of them.

And it is the direct references to battles of the Dutch wars – trade wars between the English and the Dutch – that are at the root of the shift. The young Rochester participated with distinction against the Dutch in 1665. But the ‘battle’ he took part in was little more than a disastrous attempt to raid the Dutch fleet moored at Bergen; Rochester had hoped to profit in the venture, but returned financially and spiritually depressed. ‘Mastrich’ and ‘Yarmouth’ refer to events in 1673, forming part of the Third Dutch War, and it appears that Rochester, like many courtiers, had become disillusioned with the king’s commerce-friendly policies, and had turned his back on the army. The reference in the opening lines of the poem to Nestor, the wise advisor to Agamemnon in the Trojan War, that could be incongruous (why would Rochester not use a classical figure more appropriate to the libertine spirit of the poem, like Bacchus or Pan as his example, not a man whose name has become synonymous with wisdom?) begins to make sense. In the projected utopian vision to be permanently ‘damasked’ on the bowl Rochester wants the spirit of noble warrior culture of the classical era to form the background, so he can reject the commercial, ignoble, thing it has become. He aligns himself with the nation-building vision of poetry that Homer represents, and unites this with the pleasure principle of Bacchus, creating a poetic of wit that combines libertinism with an older version of nobility, exempt from what he sees as Charles II’s mercantile debasement of England’s navy. The generosity and excess of the “swelling brim” of the cup in congress with those “Ships at Seas” (ll. 6, 8) are contrasted against the ambitions of the ships taking part in the Dutch wars.

Like “Love a Woman! y’are an Ass,” the poem ends with a fulfilment of its anacreontic

message, the ‘sweet soft Page’ in that poem represented here by the “Two lovely Boys” he commissions for his cup who are “The Type of future joys” (ll. 18, 20); in the meantime he is back “to Cunt again” (l. 24), implying another rejection of women – who, again, in this period represented a property Rochester regarded as degraded – is afoot.

The ‘future joys’ of the libertine were the future fears of conservatives, and the anxiety expressed in the period about falling birthrates among the elite became causally connected to the later critique of sodomy.<sup>52</sup> This was rooted in the decline of the aristocracy’s political and civic influence (although they continued to be socially important). Negative notions of aristocratic masculinity, sterility and corruption, were channelled into the figure of the “‘unreproductive’ sodomite” while at the same time the innateness of male aristocratic honour was being questioned, and the idea of honour was more and more transferred to women in the form of chastity and hearth in what Michael McKeon describes as a “radical internalization of male honor”.<sup>53</sup> In *The Court Society* Norbert Elias contextualises the importance of honour, and highlights its role in the maintenance of the aristocratic reputation:

Originally, ‘honour’ was the expression of membership of noble society. One had honour as long as one was deemed a member by the society and so by one’s own consciousness.... If such a society refused to recognise a member, if he lost his ‘honour,’ he lost a constitutive element of his personal identity.”<sup>54</sup>

McKeon emphasises that this was also originally a masculine quality, and argues that the shift of honour to the feminine sphere “may be understood as one consequence of early modern cultural efforts to replace aristocratic notions of value.”<sup>55</sup> There is a revolt against this shift in Rochester’s poetry that goes far beyond the playfulness of Cavalier carpe diem poems – for the Cavalier poets feminine resistance was foreplay and inspired the free-play of their poetic conceits, but for Rochester it has become a darker impediment to threatened masculine selfhood.

Despite his own membership in the leisure classes the speaker of “Love a Woman” sneers at women as ‘idlest’ of God’s creatures in the opening stanza while

boasting about his own chosen work-free lifestyle – in his estimation women’s idleness is of the mind, but his own idleness has the opposite effect, inducing creativity as opposed to procreativity. This exclusionist tactic is reflective of the way the aristocracy assessed honour, “in terms of a specific noble ethos, central to which was the maintenance of everything that traditionally held the lower-ranking strata at a distance, such things being of self-evident value to the aristocracy.”<sup>56</sup> The speaker acknowledges women’s attractiveness, calling Aurelia ‘fair,’ and it is with regret that he rejects something fair. In a literalisation of the association of death with orgasm the speaker expresses a fear of death from female intercourse in rendering the progeny of such a union “supplies for Age, and Graves.” Women are associated with those who are destined to work, his decision to not have his wholly masculine persona tainted by femaleness is a classical notion that also highlights the link between sexual and class anxiety in Rochester’s poetry. In other poems Rochester plays with the old notion that sexual contact with women, particularly during menstruation, was to have direct contact with original sin. In the song which begins “By all Loves soft, yet mighty Pow’rs” the speaker informs his lover that

It is a thing unfit,  
That Men shou’d Fuck in time of Flow’rs,  
Or when the Smock’s beshit. (ll. 2-4)

He ends the poem asking her with mock-gravity to “take to cleanly sinning” since “None but fresh Lovers Pricks can rise,/ At Phillis in foul linnen.” (ll. 14-16). In “Love a Woman! y’are an Ass” Rochester alludes to another superstitious belief, that intercourse took years off one’s life. However, unlike for instance Donne’s “The Canonization,” which makes a similar allusion but defiantly embraces death in both its senses as orgasm and the end of the speaker’s court hopes, Rochester’s poem is not willing to make that leap. His speaker rejects the woman instead, hanging on to courtly virtue while signing his and its death warrant. Donne’s speaker, contrarily,

argues that the love he experiences actually augments the intellectual spirit (figured as alchemy) of the world:

The phoenix riddle hath more wit  
By us: we two being one, are it.  
So, to one neutral thing both sexes fit.  
We die and rise the same, and prove  
Mysterious by this love. (ll. 23-27)

In Rochester's "Love a Woman" death/sex is the wholly negative opposite to wit/intellect, its shadow present in the 'Fair Aurelia's womb' (along with an implied rhyme with 'tomb.') God's curse on Eve after the fall – "In sorrow shalt thou bring forth children, and thou shalt be under thy husband's power, and he shalt have dominion over thee" (Gen. 3:16) – provides the background to his assessment, but he is also rejecting the commandment on Adam that "with labour and toil shalt thou eat thereof all the days of thy life" (3:17). He takes his self-belief as a rational man to what he sees as its logical conclusion – to reject that which is 'unfit,' or indeed only 'fit for Slaves.' This follows on from other statements in Rochester's canon, delivering the final blow. In "Against Constancy," for instance, the speaker rejects constancy as a "frivolous pretence/ Of cold age, narrow jealousy,/ disease and want of sence" (ll. 2-4). Here Rochester echoes the Cavaliers. Suckling's "Loving and Beloved," a poem on the same subject published after his death during the Civil War period, has a similarly dark courtly vein running through it. Suckling denies honesty's place in negotiations of love, saying "kings and lovers are alike in this,/ That their chief art in reign dissembling is" (ll. 5-6), and closes the poem with the conclusion that "Love's triumph must be Honour's funeral" (l. 24). In Rochester's most extreme moments both love and honour are dead, but deserve no funeral because they have become senseless, meaningless, and futile. Only wit remains, the sceptic's last refuge in language.

"Woman's Honour" is a forceful repudiation of honour used as a shield against sexual pleasure. The poem features personifications of both Love and Honour – Love

is the male speaker's champion, while Honour defends Phillis from his lust. Honour is cast in the role of fop, called "huffing Honour," the "Hector" who "dares not shew his Face" when Love, representing the side of wit, offers to "take your part,/ And shew my self the mightier God" (ll. 9, 11, 7-8). The use of the common epithets for fops, 'huffing' and 'hector,' and the imagery of the duel indicate the true nature of the debate, the wit/fop dialectic. But the speaker himself, as much as Phillis, is a passive player in the poem – he utters the words of the courtly lover: "Let me still languish and complain,/ Be most unhumanly deny'd" (ll. 13-14), supplemented by the typical Christian masochism of "I have some pleasure in my pain" (l. 15). Of the two, Phillis possesses more power in her "Pride" (l. 16), though he claims she can take no pleasure in it and "lives a Wretch for Honours sake" (l. 18). His parting shot is heartfelt but resigned:

Consider reall Honour then,  
You'll find hers cannot be the same,  
'Tis noble confidence in Men,  
In Women, mean mistrustful shame. (ll. 21-4)

The language of 'reall Honour' is generosity (the speaker's ally is called "gen'rous Love"), nobility, and courage, traditional values of the aristocratic order. But the speaker hides behind love, which represents libertine sexuality in contrast to the 'mean mistrustful shame' that this new emerging view of womanhood was perceived as representing. The Cavalier poetry actually proved that women's virtue was not actually a new phenomenon, but it was being reconfigured – from the male lover's reaction to it we can see that women's power to resist male sexuality was increased by the moral support of the emerging bourgeoisie. It came to pass that this was no more liberating a position for women, but in the eyes of the aristocratic men whose loss was great in the transfer of honour, it had the effect of another Fall.

Rochester was fond of playing with narrative voice and he wrote several poems from women's perspective that voice a rejection of men similar to the frequent masculine rejections of women in his work. Women usually cite the degradation of



their honour and person by men about town as their reason for repudiating men. Although Rochester is generally targetting the women as objects for masculine derision, there is also a sense in the woman's voice of a rejection of the autocratic cruelty associated with the nobleman, and his association with wit. The female speaker of the "Fragment of a Satire on Men" makes a strong case for abstinence from male society, comparing the "meane submissiveness" that "This ill bred age has wrought on womankind" (ll. 3-4) to the days of courtly love when "if my Lady frown'd th'unhappy Knight/ was faine to fast and lye alone that night" (ll. 25-6). Those days when "the rights their sex and beautyes gave/ To make men wish despaire and humbly crave" (ll. 5-6) have given way to

... the pell Mell, Playhous and the drawing roome  
 Their Woemen Fayres, these Woemen Coursers come  
 To chaffer, chuse and ride their bargaines home (ll. 8-10)

Rochester's speaker is commenting on the decline in respect shown towards women, how the bargaining of them as property has ceased to be perfumed with words of love, and this is a comment on the quality of the poetry as well. The women now are forced to endure "the generall fate of errant Woman," to "Bee very proude awhile, then very Common" (ll. 19-20), a fate similar to that of Corinna in "A Letter from Artemiza in the Towne to Chloe in the Countrye." The speaker has decided for herself that

E're beare this scorne, I'de bee shutt up at home  
 Content with humoring my selfe alone,  
 Force back the Humble love of former dayes  
 In pensive madrigalls and ends of playes (ll. 21-4)

Compared to the more active role chosen by the male speaker of "Love a Woman! y'are an Ass" and his violent rejection, this retirement into nostalgic contemplation is a domestic and solitary affair. Her lines combine the double entendre of 'humoring my selfe alone' with a yearning for the courtly love sung in madrigals. The reference to the 'ends of playes' pays homage to the tradition of the reformed rake that concluded so many Restoration comedies, but the role reversal effected on stage that "Tyrranyes

to Commonwealths Convert” did not last and that “Then after all you finde what ere wee say/ Things must goe on in their Lewd naturall way” (ll. 30, 31-2). The poem in fact reads like an epilogue, and the speaker continues her extended theatre analogy to examine the state of mankind, calling on the “kind Ladyes of the towne,” the actresses, to have pity on their “stol’n ravish’t men,” who are after all but “Poore broaken Propertyes that cannot serve” (ll. 35, 36, 39). The properties refer both to broken stage props and bankrupt men who have been found to be “as Errant Tinsell as their Cloathes” (l. 38) – and there is an explicit connection here between real property and honour as well. This bankruptcy of male honour/property is another way of reading the moral deficiency of male wit.

### III *Imperfect enjoyment: expenditure, wit, and debt*

Norbert Elias cites as one of the aims of his study *The Court Society* a desire to test Max Weber’s remark that “‘Luxury’ in the sense of a rejection of the purposive-rational orientation of consumption is, to the feudal ruling class, not something ‘superfluous,’ but one of the means of its social self-assertion.”<sup>57</sup> He applies Weber’s assumption to the ruling classes of Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth century and is able to prove its validity, as well as greatly improve on the original comment. Elias describes the aristocracy’s financial arrangement as a cycle of expenditure and consumption, which is in opposition to the bourgeois tenets of production and acquisition; the former often leads to deficit, while the latter usually results in profit. He emphasises that this difference is the result not of prodigality on the part of the aristocrats, but a completely different attitude toward finances, that unlike the merchant who “must match his expenses to his income,” the nobleman “must match his expenses to the requirements of his rank,” frequently resulting in debt or, in extreme cases, the ruination of his estate.<sup>58</sup> Because “In a society in which every outward

manifestation of a person has a special significance, expenditure on prestige and display is for the upper classes a necessity they cannot avoid.”<sup>59</sup>

Georges Bataille, writing a generation after Weber and contemporaneous to Elias, takes a similar observation about consumption and applies it to a psycho-historical reading of the transformation of the ruling classes from a consuming nobility to an acquisitive bourgeoisie. In his essay “The Notion of Expenditure” he characterises this shift in terms of a movement away from an honest expression of the human need for excess and destruction, which has led to the marginalisation and subordination of the arts, which are essentially forms of expenditure. He compares the two groups, saying:

Everything that was generous, orgiastic, and excessive has disappeared; the themes of rivalry upon which individual activity still depends develop in obscurity, and are as shameful as belching.... As the class that possesses wealth – having received with wealth the obligation of functional expenditure – the modern bourgeoisie is characterised by the refusal in principle of this obligation.<sup>60</sup>

He divides general consumption into two areas: the first is for subsistence, and the second is “represented by so-called unproductive expenditures: luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity (ie, deflected from genital finality) – all these represent activities which at least in primitive circumstances, have no end beyond themselves.”<sup>61</sup> He asserts that in these unproductive expenditures “the accent is placed on a *loss* that must be as great as possible in order for that meaning to take on its true meaning.”<sup>62</sup> He describes aristocratic expenditure using the model of the potlatch developed by Marcel Mauss, placing it in opposition to production. In the exchange system of potlatch “It is the constitution of a positive property of loss – from which spring nobility, honour, and rank in a hierarchy – that gives the institution its significant value. The gift must be considered a loss and thus as a partial destruction, since the desire to destroy is in part transferred to the recipient.”<sup>63</sup> He closes the essay with some thoughts that are very

close to what Rochester is up to when he uses a sexualised libertine reading of wit to combat what he sees as the minimisation of noble virtues to an ethos of material and spiritual meanness:

Human life, distinct from juridical existence, existing as it does on a globe isolated in celestial space, from night to day and from one country to another – human life cannot in any way be limited to the closed systems assigned to it by reasonable conceptions. The immense travail of recklessness, discharge, and upheaval that constitutes life could be expressed by stating that life starts only with the deficit of these systems[.]<sup>64</sup>

Bataille is talking about loss and destruction, what he calls here ‘the insubordination of material facts,’ which he sees as the only way that “the human race ceases to be isolated in the unconditional splendor of material things.”<sup>65</sup> In terms of the sexual personae that inhabit many of Rochester’s poems the language of excess, expenditure, and loss is everywhere. Rochester presents various sexual activities in his works which can be termed ‘sumptuary’ because of they are not related directly to reproduction – such as adultery, masturbation, and sodomy, and wit which can be reasonably be termed a ‘verbal luxury.’ These sumptuary expenditures are portrayed for the most part by Rochester as natural and positive – expressions of Bataille’s ‘generous, orgiastic, and excessive’ nobility. The issue is problematised in “The Imperfect Enjoyment,” where a sumptuary act of premature ejaculation leads to an ironic self-assessment of the rake figure (framed in a witty poetic exercise). The poem promotes the idea that the speaker’s sexual excess has led to a debasement of love, and an analogous debasement of wit – a notion that is repeated in other poems such as “To the Postboy” and “I rise at eleven.” However, the speaker of “The Imperfect Enjoyment” manages to verbally overcome his impediment and salvages his self-image by donning his wit persona and transforming through malediction his once-integral sexuality into an inalienable other.

“The Imperfect Enjoyment” is at its base a poem about expenditure in which the Restoration rake figure must face his devastating loss of control over the necessary

loss/destruction action to which Bataille is referring. The poem concerns a failed sexual encounter between two sophisticates which opens with a seduction scene mainly controlled by the female lover, quickly proceeds to the male lover's premature ejaculation, and ends with his violent damnation of his traitorous penis. The rake is the sexual persona of the wit and their combined analogous weapon is the pen/sword/penis, and the untimely 'spending' is meant to express a verbal and political inadequacy, as well as the sexual failure, all of which affects both the rakish and witty sides of the character. The poem portrays the lover's penis in its present form first as a "wither'd Flow'r" (l. 45), but as his rage builds it is designated a "Rakehell Villain" who "shrinks, and hides his head" (l. 57) when duty calls, although "When Vice, Disease and Scandal lead the way,/ With what officious hast dost thou obey?" (ll. 52-3). The treachery is all the more acute because of his phallus's record of reliable service:

This Dart of love, whose piercing point oft try'd,  
With Virgin blood, Ten thousand Maids has dy'd;  
Which Nature still directed with such Art,  
That it through ev'ry Cunt, reacht ev'ry Heart.  
Stiffly resolved, 'twould carelessly invade  
Woman or man, nor ought its fury stayed:  
Where'er it pierced, a cunt it found or made. (l. 37-43)

The poem consistently portrays the penis of the past as an effective weapon, while in its present state the lover offers confused epithets that reflect his own state of mind and body: "Trembling, confus'd, despairing, limber, dry,/ A wishing, weak, unmoving lump I ly." (ll. 35-6). With his sexual selfhood destabilised, the speaker is left flailing, and railing against his once-faithful weapon – his sword has failed and he is left only with his words. But in this situation, they are not a suitable substitute so they are not directed in seduction toward Corinna, but unleashed on the now disconnected penis, the metonymic symbol of his fallen sexuality.

The poem itself is part of a subgenre of erotic poetry that flourished in France and England in the late seventeenth century, which has as its original inspiration Ovid's

*Amores* 3.7. The form is a poetic exercise that plays both with Ovid's classical erotica and contemporary pornography; Aphra Behn and George Etherege also wrote versions – "The Disappointment" and "The Imperfect Enjoyment," respectively – but Rochester's interpretation differs from the others, including Ovid's, in that he uses premature ejaculation and not impotence as the sexual defect at the centre of the poem – a decision that is befitting of Rochester's own membership in the profligate aristocracy. And Rochester's poem differs again in revealing the moment of anticlimax earlier than the others, exploding into disappointment by the fifteenth line: "In liquid Rapture, I dissolve all o're, /Melt into Sperme, and spend at ev'ry Pore" (ll. 15-16). Both lovers' wholly negative reactions to his 'spending' point us in the direction of Rochester's commentary, as does his decision to use premature ejaculation, a kind of overspending, instead of impotence, the inability to spend. Corinna, at first is amused; her lover blames her sexuality for the incident initially, saying "Her Hand, her Foot, her very look's a Cunt" (l. 18). The very next line gives Corinna's reaction: "Smiling, she chide in a kind murm'ring Noise,/ And from her Body wipes the clammy joys" (ll. 19-20). Though the line that ends with 'cunt' is end-stopped, the word 'smiling' is an apposition that creates an enjambment between the two words, and in the lover's imagination Corinna is reduced to a threatening, smiling cunt. His attempt at reduction results in a monstrous apparition of female sexuality. The vulgarity of the image and the diction deliberately deflates the seriousness of Rochester's statement about sexuality which has been overarchingly heightened (like the sexual expectations) in an allusive burlesque in the preceding lines of Donne's 'soul' conceit in "The Ecstasy."

Rochester's frequent reworkings of Donne (and Jonson and the Cavalier poets) were meaningful attempts to read his own cultural moment through the convex lens of the metaphysicals, always leading to interesting distortions. Donne represents for Rochester a libertine precedent, especially in the early erotic poems, and also a voice that wittily expresses a personal scepticism about religion, the court, and love.

However, when filtered through the impossibly traumatic revolution of the mid-seventeenth century to reach Rochester in the Restoration, much of the faith – in language and in pleasure – has taken an irrevocable beating. Rochester over and over expresses a position that reduces metaphysical heights to physical realities, replacing the erotic with the obscene, the sublime with the concrete and unavoidable present.

When the male lover's "flutt'ring Soul, sprung with the pointed kiss,/ Hangs hov'ring o're her Balmy Brinks of Bliss" (ll. 11-12), it is a moment of poetic excess that recalls, with some irony, the stately seriousness of Donne's metaphysical dissection of love in "The Ecstasy." In Donne's poem, two lovers lie motionless on a river bank while their souls hang above them engaged in spiritual negotiation. When the male speaker in "The Imperfect Enjoyment" 'dissolve[s] all o'er/ Melt[s] into sperm' it represents a failure to achieve the 'interanimation' of the souls that Donne's lovers accomplish (l. 42).<sup>66</sup> In "The Imperfect Enjoyment," the lead-up to the idealisation of sexual intercourse is the mock-serious diction of the lovers' foreplay, when "Swift Orders" are conveyed "that I shou'd prepare to throw,/ The All-dissolving Thunderbolt below" (ll. 9-10), which culminates in the intended union of souls:

But whilst her busie hand, wou'd guide that part,  
Which shou'd convey my Soul up to her Heart,  
In liquid Raptures, I dissolve all o're,  
Melt into Sperme, and spend at ev'ry Pore (ll. 13-16)

The diction then changes abruptly from the elevated Donneian 'balmy brinks of bliss' to the debased and literal 'cunt' and 'sperm', as the 'All-dissolving Thunderbolt' itself dissolves, and along with it the speaker's sense of self. His condition is mock-tragic ("I, the most forlorn, lost man alive" (l. 25)) while the woman's state is natural for her, and is counted as the cause of his grief. She has already been reduced to her sexuality - her very self is a 'cunt', while the male lover's self-image is dissolved by his sexual

failure and in order to save it he must disengage his own ruling sexuality, since it has been revealed to be a false leader, like a false wit.

In Rochester's ironic transmutation of Donne's conceit, the soul is taken from platonic unity to a dissolution of the lofty ambitions into premature 'liquid Raptures.' The logic of the soul section is that the male lover's soul is conveyed to Corinna's heart by the penis, coyly referred to as 'that part.' This is a disruption of Donne's formulation in which his lovers abstain from sex until their souls have joined and only then can they fulfil their physical desires: "To our bodies turn we then" ("The Ecstasy" l. 69). In "The Imperfect Enjoyment" Corinna has her last active moment and significantly it is to highlight the commercial undertone of those 'clammy joys':

When with a Thousand Kisses, wand'ring o're  
My panting Bosome, – is there then no more?  
She cries. All this to Love, and Rapture's due,  
Must we not pay a debt to pleasure too? (ll. 21-4)

'This,' the sperm, is in Corinna's estimation payment to Love and Rapture, referring to the intentions of the speaker's soul which was destined to join her heart. The repetition of 'rapture' here transforms it from an ecstatic religious experience to part of a line of debtors, in which pleasure remains the only one unpaid. The reminder not to forfeit pleasure's due is also an echo from "The Ecstasy" when Donne's speaker argues the importance of the lovers' bodies as the "sphere" that is guided by their "intelligences" (souls) (l. 52):

We owe them thanks because they thus  
Did us to us at first convey,  
Yielded their forces, sense, to us,  
Nor are dross to us, but allay. (ll. 53-6)

The sense here is that the bodies strengthen ('allay') the soul, while in Rochester the body has proved weak ('dross'). "The Imperfect Enjoyment" is rife with commercial



language, spending and debt, including the poetic debts to Ovid and Donne. After her speech Corinna disappears from the poem as a physical presence and with her goes the ironic and witty inversion of the rake persona, which hardens into rage and for the rest of the poem he fulminates against his penis in a verbal substitution of the second ejaculation he cannot perform. She was his mirror, her “nimble Tongue” is called “Love’s lesser Lightning” (l. 7), in other words lesser than his “All-dissolving Thunderbolt” (l. 10). It is her “pointed kiss” (French kiss) (l. 11) that ‘springs’ his soul into the air, and this is clearly analogous to his ‘piercing point.’ The couple who began “equally inspir’d with eager fire” (l. 3) are left quite unequal by the incident (with words like “Obedience” (l. 26) and “shame” (l. 29) reinforcing the speaker’s unmaning); Corinna is the only one who effected any penetration – with the tongue whose words about debt are silenced when she is overwritten by the speaker’s own verbal expenditure, his rage.

There are clear resonances for the speaker of “The Imperfect Enjoyment” in Richard Braverman’s assessment of prodigality of libertine wit, which sustains the view that began with Weber’s remark about luxury, extended to account for the luxurious expenditure of wit. But in Rochester’s poem, we must examine why, from the point of view of the rake himself, has prodigal spending become a disadvantageous activity – why has he lost control of his expenditure? We may recall the passages above from Behn (“Your Judgment’s (as your Passions) a Disease”) and Pope (“But following wits from that intention strayed,/ Who could not woo the mistress wooed the maid”) accusing the period of debasing poetic expression and replacing it with lewdness. Also, from Rochester’s own accusation against Dryden, that he had been seduced by a ‘loose slatterne Muse,’ it is clear that the whore/maiden metaphor was a common way of presenting this issue. Which brings us to those legions of women he claims to have ‘swived,’ from the “Oyster, Cinder, Beggar, common Whore” (l. 50) to the “Ten thousand Maids” his “piercing point oft try’d.” The ‘Virgin blood’ of the maids is meant as a purifier – unlike the ‘unfit’ menstrual blood of the ‘time of Flow’rs’. The

problem here, however, is with the numbers, the absurdist excess everywhere in the poem – thousands of kisses, thousands of virgins, and in the end the “Ten thousand abler Pricks” (l. 71)<sup>67</sup> who are nominated to “do the wrong’d Corinna right for thee” (l. 72). The failed penis is left passive:

Through all the Town, a common Fucking Post;  
On whom each Whore, relieves her tingling Cunt,  
As Hogs, on Gates, do rub themselves and grunt. (ll. 63-5)

The rake’s currency has been debased by too much spending on the wrong objects. However, the rake’s momentary epiphany that perhaps being led by lewdness has led to his current bankruptcy is consumed by his rage and all blame is channelled to his penis, which is psychically disconnected and cursed with disease in the last lines of the poem. It is this disconnection, along with the rake’s retreat into his other potent currency, language, that allows him to reappear as an unreformed rake in “A Ramble in St James’s Park” and “A Letter from Artemiza in the Town to Chloe in the Country.”<sup>68</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Harold C Knutson, *The Triumph of Wit: Molière and Restoration Comedy*, p. 46.

<sup>2</sup> Hobbes was Charles II's geometry tutor while the court was in exile during the Interregnum; Anthony à Wood wrote of Rochester that the court "not only debauched him, but made him a perfect Hobbist" (*Athenae Oxonienses*, Vol. 3, column 1230).

<sup>3</sup> *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic*, Part I Human Nature, Chapter 10, Section 4 (1640).

<sup>4</sup> *Leviathan*, Part I, Chapter 8, p. 137.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in W. Lee Ustick and Hoyt H. Hudson, "Wit, 'Mixt Wit,' and the Bee in Amber," p. 109n.

<sup>7</sup> Clarendon was a family friend of the Rochesters, but his *Life of Edward, Earl of Clarendon... Written By Himself* contains unfavourable assessments of the behaviour of the younger courtiers, whom he justifiably suspected of atheism. Clarendon also felt compelled to write "A Survey of Mr Hobbes His Leviathan" in which he ascribes the popularity at court of the *Leviathan* to its "thorough novelty (to which the present age, if ever any, is too much inclin'd)." He considered one of the chief dangers of such books to be "the Ornament of their Style, and the pleasantness of their method, and subtlety of their Wit, [which] have from specious premises, drawn their unskilful and unwary Readers into unwarrantable opinions and conclusions, being intoxicated with terms and Allegorical expressions, which puzzel their understandings, and lead them into perplexities, from whence they cannot disentangle themselves" Collier, a renegade clergyman, sparked a lasting debate with his "Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage" (1698). His attack inspired vindications of the stage from both John Dennis and William Congreve. Another notable moralist of the day was Rochester's confessor, Bishop Gilbert Burnet, whose *History of My Own Time* reiterated several of the anti-libertine sentiments he included in his *Some Passages in the Life and Death of Rochester*.

<sup>8</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Chapter XI "Of Discerning, and other operations of the Mind."

<sup>9</sup> Pope's regard for that generation is summed up in an observation recorded by his friend Joseph Spence in 1743: "He [Lord Dorset] and Lord Rochester should be considered holiday writers – as gentlemen that divert themselves now and then with poetry, rather than as poets." Spence added "This was said kindly of them, rather to excuse their defects than to lessen their characters." (in *Rochester: The Critical Heritage*, ed. David Farley-Hills, p. 193).

<sup>10</sup> J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, & History*, p. 108. The discussion here builds on Pocock's economic ideas summarised in the Introduction pp. 5-6 above.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 108-9.

<sup>12</sup> All subsequent references to Rochester's works are taken from Keith Walkers edition of *The Poems of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*. The play was performed in 1675 and dedicated to Rochester, who offered patronage in the only way he could afford, his critical authority and his name via the epilogue. As well as contributing to the debate about wit in the theatre, the epilogue also forms part of an ongoing rivalry between the two licensed theatre companies, the King's and the Duke's. The Duke's Theatre was drawing huge audiences with its use of elaborate stagings and interludes of singing and dancing (especially Shadwell's recent production of Dryden and D'Avenant's adaptation of *The Tempest*); Fane's play was produced at the King's Theatre.

<sup>13</sup> "A Letter from Artemiza in the Towne to Chloe in the Countrey," ll. 159-60.

<sup>14</sup> *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Chapter 3: "The Country Wife: Anatomies of Male Homosocial Desire" (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 61.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 62-3.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>17</sup> *The Country Wife*, V.iv, p. 76.

<sup>18</sup> In "Some Fops and Some Versions of Foppery," Robert B. Heilman notes that though Sparkish, in *The Country Wife*, "keeps virtually thrusting [his fiancée] Alithea into Harcourt's arms. His absence of jealousy seems such a virtue to Alithea that she holds to her engagement, even though he looks a fool and Harcourt a man of sense" (*ELH* 49 (1982): 363-95), pp. 368-9. The contradiction of the fop's popularity with women, bound up in his non-threatening, non-violent personality, was continually vexing to the wit; cf. Rochester's "A Ramble in St James's Park."

<sup>19</sup> "Libertines and Parasites," p. 79.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> John Dennis, "A Defense of *Sir Fopling Flutter*" in *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Comedy*, ed. Scott McMillin, New York: W. W. Norton, 1973, p. 430. Dennis, writing in 1722, was defending the play against accusations of immorality, brought on chiefly to justify Richard Steele's moral vision of 'sentimental' drama. Dennis's pamphlet appeared five days before Steele's *The Conscious Lovers* was staged.

<sup>22</sup> Gilbert Burnet, *Some Passages of the Life and Death of John Earl of Rochester* in *Rochester: The Critical Heritage*, ed. David Farley-Hills, New York: Barnes & Noble, 1972, p. 57.

<sup>23</sup> *The Man of Mode* in *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Comedy*, ed. Scott McMillin (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), III. iii, p. 115.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. IV. i, p. 127.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> In his biographical entry in the *Athenae Oxonienses* for Rochester's friend the Duke of Buckingham Anthony à Wood reports: "For so it was, that in Nov. (or before) an. 1679, there being *An Essay upon Satyr* spread about the city in MS. wherein many gross reflections were made on Ludovisa duchess of Portsmouth [royal mistress] and John Wilmot earl of Rochester, they therefore took it for a truth that Dryden was the author: whereupon one or both hiring three men to cudgel him, they effected their business in the said coffee-house at 8 of the clock on the 16th of Dec. 1679; yet afterwards John earl of Mulgrave was generally thought to be the author." (Volume 2, column 210). The matter has never been satisfactorily resolved.

<sup>27</sup> The complexities of Rochester's pension issues, and his petitions to Danby and Howard, are detailed in Ken Robinson's article "Rochester's Income from the Crown" (*Notes and Queries*. 227.1 (1982): 46-50).

<sup>28</sup> The scene survives, as does a letter from Howard to Rochester from April 1676 in which he comments on "the scean you are pleased to write"; Treglown notes that "Within weeks of this letter, Howard became embroiled in Danby's investigation into the organisation and conduct of the Exchequer. The enquiries lasted about a year and a half, and Howard never completed his play." (*Letters*, p. 116).

<sup>29</sup> The political intricacies of the conflict, involving Buckingham's opposition to the Duke of York whom Dryden fervently supported, are beyond the scope of the present discussion. It is worth noting that Dryden's conversion to Catholicism around 1686 (which was believed by many to have been more an act of self-interest than religious conviction) was preceded by a rumour in 1676 that his patron Mulgrave had "curried favour with the Duke of York by declaring himself a Catholic," which Rochester refers to as "my Lord M——'s mean ambition" in a letter to Savile from that year. (*Letters*, p. 119n and p. 119)

<sup>30</sup> Dedication to *Marriage a la Mode* in *Rochester: The Critical Heritage*, ed. D Farley-Hills, p. 30.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>32</sup> The issue of voice has not been much discussed with regard to this poem, as the speaker is universally accepted as Rochester himself. Although this could raise some interesting questions about socio-satiric distancing, considering the ironic level of the poem the likelihood of Rochester adopting a persona in a poem of this nature, and written for manuscript transmission with an audience well-versed in the background to the conflict, seems fairly limited.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Frank Ellis' edition of Rochester's *Works*, p. 383n.

<sup>34</sup> Spring 1676, *Letters*, p. 120.

<sup>35</sup> Op. cit., p. 50.

<sup>36</sup> *Leviathan*, I, x, p. 155.

<sup>37</sup> "Shadwell, Rochester and the Crisis of Amateurism," p. 122.

<sup>38</sup> Germaine Greer argues that the source for the 1671 collection *A Collection of Poems, Written upon Several Occasions, by Several Persons* (containing poems by Sedley, Etherege, Rochester, as well as Mulgrave), "and the money to publish them with Mulgrave's poem in pride of place," was Mulgrave himself, who "envied the court wits the literary success that they seemed hardly to value and set about building himself a reputation as a wit where they would have scorned to seek it, in print." (*John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, p. 38)

<sup>39</sup> Richard Braverman, "Capital Relations and *The Way of the World*," p. 142.

<sup>40</sup> *The Court Society*, p. 94.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 75-6

<sup>42</sup> The poem is given the fuller title "An Epistolary Essay from MG to OB upon their Mutual Poems" in the spurious 1680 edition of Rochester's *Poems*. The poem had always been taken as a letter from Rochester to Mulgrave until David Vieth proposed Mulgrave (MG) and Dryden (OB, Old Bayes, the name of his character in *The Rehearsal*) as the letter-writer and recipient. This view is widely, though not universally, accepted. Vieth's argument is presented in his *Attribution in Restoration Poetry*; the issue is further discussed in D. K. Alsop's "'An Epistolary Essay from M. G. to O. B. upon Their Mutual Poems' and the Problem of the Persona in Rochester's Poetry," *Restoration* 12:2 (1988 Fall): 61-68.

<sup>43</sup> Rochester's close friend Henry Savile incurred the king's wrath when he voted in Commons against the delays in taking military action against France (who were resisting the peace breaking out in Europe) which was a provision of the treaty negotiated with Dutch in 1677. Savile wrote "if suffering bee part of the businesse if a souldier, diverse of them have made a notable progress for the time." (2 June, 1678, *Letter*, p. 183). He was banished from court in spring 1678 for his anti-Charles, anti-French gesture; Rochester was ill and in the country at the time, but wrote to congratulate Savile on his "glorious disgrace, which is an honour, considering the cause." (June, 1678, *Letters*, p. 189). The 'merry gang' of wits at court (with Buckingham as its political core) were stridently anti-French. Mulgrave and Dryden, supporters of the Catholic Duke of York, were less decided on this matter.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111

<sup>45</sup> One who did listen was Pope. Mulgrave befriended the young Pope, and Pope paid tribute by preparing a posthumous edition of Mulgrave's *Works* in 1723 (at the same time he was editing Shakespeare's *Works*). Pope was paid well for the task, but he became embroiled immediately in a controversy when the books were seized days after publication because of Mulgrave's alleged Jacobite sympathies, a cause of some anxiety for Pope due to his Catholicism.

<sup>46</sup> "Libertines and Parasites," p. 80.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Adam's wistful words to the fallen Eve in Book IX of *Paradise Lost*: "O fairest creation, last and best/ Of all God's works..." (ll. 896-7).

<sup>49</sup> Pocock, p. 103.

<sup>50</sup> Richard Braverman, "Capital Relations and *The Way of the World*," p. 142.

<sup>51</sup> The strict settlement was a compulsory property contract, instituted by the Commonwealth government in the 1650s, that was made on the marriage of the heir; the estate "descended intact to him, but descended on terms which greatly limited his power to sell and mortgage it. Once the deed of settlement was signed, the descent was settled for a generation ahead." (H. J. Habakkuk, "England's Nobility," p. 98).

<sup>52</sup> As discussed in Michael McKeon's "Historicizing Patriarchy," p. 307ff.

<sup>53</sup> "Historicizing Patriarchy," pp. 310 and 313.

<sup>54</sup> *The Court Society*, p. 95.

<sup>55</sup> "Historicizing Patriarchy," pp. 313-14.

<sup>56</sup> *The Court Society*, p. 95.

<sup>57</sup> *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (1922) quoted in *The Court Society*, p. 38.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>59</sup> *The Court Society*, p. 63.

<sup>60</sup> "The Notion of Expenditure," p. 124.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122. Richard Braverman, in his essay "Libertines and Parasites," offers (via the theories of Michel Serres) a reading of the Restoration rake character using the potlatch formulation. He argues that the rake breaks the contract of exchange and "asserts an alternative economy of desire and power to fit his sovereign ego.... [H]e takes without giving and gives in word rather than kind" (p. 76).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> These lines recall another well-known Donne poem, "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," and again Rochester's purpose is deflation of Donne's high ideals:

---

So let us melt, and make no noise,  
 No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;  
 'Twere profanation of our joys  
 To tell the laity our love." (ll. 5-8)

<sup>67</sup> The "abler Pricks" seems to be an ironic reference to the "abler soul" of "The Ecstasy," the single entity born of the union of the lovers' souls, which Rochester's lovers have been unable to achieve.

<sup>68</sup> In her article "Elizabeth Thomas and the Two Corinnas: Giving the Woman Writer a Bad Name," Anne McWhir discusses the history of the 'Corinna' epithet, from the Boeotian poet who defeated Pindar in a poetry contest, to Ovid's lover, and finally the early eighteenth century poet Elizabeth Thomas; McWhir writes that as such it is a name that embodies connotations of both 'poet' and 'slut.' (*ELH* 62.1 (1995) 105-119).

## Chapter 2

### *'This all-sin-sheltring grove':* Social upheaval and Rochester's mock-pastoral vision

Pastoral was one of the most prominent literary forms of the Renaissance, and its major concern with the dialectical interplay between concepts of town versus country and nature versus art is a significant aspect of seventeenth century intellectual debate. Especially important is pastoral's intrinsic relevance to the transformation of the population's relationship to land and property in the early modern period, for which it was employed to express reactions as disparate as nostalgia and indignation, authority and powerlessness, restraint and liberty. Norbert Elias interprets the prevalence of the pastoral form in the Renaissance as part of what he calls 'the process of courtization' that began in the post-feudal period with the centralisation of the European courts and the transformation of the nobility from warriors to courtiers. For these medieval aristocrats, nostalgia took the form of chivalrous romances featuring "the free and self-reliant knightly life that was already sinking from sight."<sup>1</sup> For the next wave of romantic writing, when the 'courtization' was complete, nostalgia was manifested in the form of classical pastoral:<sup>2</sup>

The past took on the character of a dream image. Country life became a symbol of lost innocence, of spontaneous simplicity and naturalness. It became an opposite image to urban court life with its greater constraints, its more complex hierarchical pressures and its heavier demands on individual self control.<sup>3</sup>

Pastoral flourished under the writers of the courts of Elizabeth I and James I, where, as Louis Adrian Montrose observes, its "ironic rusticity and apparent triviality" made it "the appropriate medium in which living princes may be obliquely criticised or instructed.... [and] its properties of dissimulation and insinuation make it apt to embody any motive that it might be impolitic, graceless, or dangerous to advance openly in the predatory environment of a Renaissance court."<sup>4</sup> There is, however, an

inherent ambivalence in these covert anti-court configurations, following from what Elias describes as “the dilemma of elevated strata which, while they may pull at their chains, cannot throw them off without jeopardizing the entire social order that secures them their privileged position, and so the foundation of their own social values and meaning”; in this sense “the pastoral life is here already the symbol of a longing for a kind of life that is unrealizable.”<sup>5</sup>

When Rochester took up his pen in the late 1660s pastoral was still in use but its symbolic meaning had been altered irrevocably by fashion, economics, and war. He inherited the courtly poetic tradition of the Elizabethan and Cavalier poets, and could not have been insensible to the significance of either the thwarted ambition expressed in Sidney's works or the bitter nostalgia of Lovelace's Commonwealth-era lyrics. These precedents of stately but impassioned anti-court protest on the one hand, and dignified courtly suffering on the other offered strong though contrasting politicised possibilities for the Restoration writers of pastorals. But the changes wrought by the political and economic upheavals of the mid-century meant it was impossible for the pastoral tradition to carry on unchanged. There were two other major factors that determined Rochester's interpretation of pastoral: first, the even sharper divide between town and country after the Restoration, a result of changing attitudes to property; and second, the disappointment of aristocratic hopes for the restored court and king, a disappointment linked also to economic issues as well as concerns about political potency.

Pastoral is a form that “flourishes at a particular moment in the urban development, the phase in which the relationship of metropolis and country is still evident.”<sup>6</sup> The tensions between the town and country factions intensified after the Restoration, and in a parallel development, the Elizabethan suppression of what Montrose calls “material pastoralism” (actual evidence of rural life) in favour of the symbolic imagery of shepherds, shepherdesses, and sheep was also intensified – to the point where even the symbolic trappings had been marginalised.<sup>7</sup> Rochester's



pastorals do feature characters identified as shepherds or shepherdesses, although they are normally called swains and nymphs, or their pastoral role is simply identified by the use of traditional sobriquets like Chloris or Strephon, but he does not usually include any animals for them to tend, or imbue them with any obvious connection to nature. This change can be partially explained by the poetic atmosphere of the Augustans which advocated 'naturalness' and 'unity.' Traditional artificial constructs of pastoral could only be digested in an atmosphere of mutual suspended disbelief, where clashing style and content are ignored by tacit consent in appreciation of the higher ideal being expressed. This shift was influenced by the fact that the belief system of the English was further splintered after the Restoration and superimposed universals like these became increasingly less palatable to contemporary tastes, where the mood was more one of 'suspended belief.' However, this is only half of the story; the interesting thing Rochester does with the pastoral form is the reduction cited above. He strips it down to essentials, to women and men in amorous situations, but this leads not to greater illumination but rather more obfuscation, mainly because of the overwhelming sexualised reading Rochester imposes on his pastorals – because, for him, sex *is* nature. Montrose notes that the sheep of the Renaissance models had become a "hierarchy-transcending incarnation of property, a subject of human exploitation uniting or identifying the interests of groups that had profoundly differing relations to the land itself, to their own labor, and to each other."<sup>8</sup> By the time Rochester is writing this connection is too abstract to be useful to him, and in fact the 'labour' element has become soiled due to the anxiety caused by the encroaching bourgeoisie, hence the removal of the livelihood of his pastoral characters. Since the authority of the land was being wrenched away from the aristocracy and into the hands of the bourgeoisie, land was thus becoming more and more *explicitly* associated with commercial values (whereas under the 'improving landowners' the connection had been kept tacit), and Rochester is not interested in aligning his characters with a labouring ethos.

In terms of property, the Restoration brought disappointment to many landowning families via unrecovered estates and fortunes that had been confiscated by the Parliamentary government; it also brought the lasting Commonwealth legacy of strict settlement which helped to consolidate “the establishment of the new order which had been developing for at least two centuries.”<sup>9</sup> This ‘new order’ was connected to the agrarian capitalism that had been building since the enclosure controversy, and it consisted of the ‘country’ interests of the landed gentry who were set up as opponents to court or town interests, but were roughly analogous to the urban bourgeoisie in their political and economic beliefs. The resulting dichotomy finds rich expression in the comedy of the Restoration, in what Raymond Williams calls “the sourest kind of counter-pastoral that anyone could have imagined.”<sup>10</sup> Williams notes that here “the contrast between ‘country’ and ‘town’ is commonly made, but with some evident ambiguity. Written by and for the fashionable society of the town, the plays draw on evidently anxious feelings of rejection, or a necessary appearance of rejection, of the coarseness and clumsiness, or simply the dullness, of country life.”<sup>11</sup> The central amorous plots of these plays were always implicitly concerned with the marriage market, and the strict settlement was associated especially for the women with the movement toward confinement on the estate and equally exclusion from the town and society. Williams notes the profound cynicism that accompanies their frankness about the marriage market, but remarks that (like the ambivalence Elias observed in the Renaissance pastoralists) “this cynicism never reached the point of renouncing the advantages which were being played for; that is why it is cynicism, rather than real opposition.” He continues,

the point about the cynicism of these weary and greedy intrigues – the coarser having and getting which reduces its players to a mutuality of objects – is that it is only the scum of a deeper cynicism, which as a matter of settlement, of ordered society, has reduced men and women to physical, bargainable carriers of estates and incomes.<sup>12</sup>

Rochester's own marriage provides an good example of the kind of commercial sexualisation of property Williams is describing.

While Rochester was off on his grand tour, his mother was busy finding him an heiress to help repair the family fortunes. He returned in 1664, aged eighteen, to news that she had secured the king's, the royal mistress Lady Castlemaine's, and Clarendon's support for a match between him and Elizabeth Malet, a girl of about fifteen who was sole heiress to a large fortune and her family estate in Somerset. The Malets, however, preferred a more beneficial marriage for their heiress and continued negotiating with other noble families. Rochester (and probably his mother) decided to take action and in May 1665 Elizabeth Malet's coach was intercepted at Charing Cross and she was snatched into another coach and conveyed to a rendezvous point, but Rochester was arrested before he could meet her there. He spent three weeks in the Tower for the offence before being sent on a naval expedition under the Earl of Sandwich, who was incidentally the father of his chief rival for Malet's hand. It is not known how or why, but two years later Malet and Rochester were married secretly (but with her consent) at Whitehall in the king's presence. However, because Malet's family were against the match and no settlement had been made before the elopement, Rochester was never able to access his wife's fortune, and it eventually passed to their daughters.<sup>13</sup>

At some point in their marriage, the husband and wife exchanged a pair of conventional songs that seem to contain a subtext about their financial entanglements. Rochester's poem opens:

Give me leave to raile at you,  
I aske nothing but my due;  
To call you false, and then to say,  
You shall not keepe my Heart a Day.  
But (Alas!) against my will,  
I must be your Captive still. (ll. 1-6)

The language of entrapment ('captive') and debt ('my due') bespeak disappointed ambition, and in the context of the unlucky financial outcome of their marriage it seems

likely the reference is a personal one. The second stanza is a sermon about kindness, which can be read as a synonym for generosity – “Kindnesse has resistless Charmes,” he advises his wife, and ends the poem with the words “It guilds the Lovers Servile Chaine/ And makes the Slave grow pleas’d and vaine.” (ll. 9, 15-16). Lady Rochester’s “Answer” has the effect of dampening the complaint of her husband’s song, and defends her own position:

Thinke not Thirsis I will e’re  
 By my Love, my Empire loose,  
 You grow Constant through despair,  
 Love return’d, you wou’d abuse.  
 .....  
 Let your Example make me true  
 And of a Conquer’d Foe, a Friend.  
 Then if e’re I shou’d complaine,  
 Of your Empire, or my Chain,  
 Summon all your Pow’rfull Charmes,  
 And fell the Rebell in your Armes. (ll. 9-12, 19-24)

The imperial and militaristic language she uses delivers the message that her ‘empire,’ that is, her estate and her person, will remain sovereign, and she challenges him by punning on his own use of ‘Charmes’ to ‘conquer’ her ‘empire’ with kindness.

The reality of their situation was recreated in *The Man of Mode*, in which the dissembling Rochester figure, Dorimant, woos the heiress Harriet “to repair the ruins of my estate that needs it.”<sup>14</sup> Harriet’s reluctant mother finally consents to “give Mr. Dorimant leave to wait upon [her] and [her] daughter in the country,” and Harriet describes what he will find:

a great, rambling, lone house that looks as it were not inhabited, the family’s so small. There you will find my mother, an old lame aunt, and myself, sir, perched up on chairs at a distance in a large parlor, sitting moping like three or four melancholy birds in a spacious volary. Does not this stagger your resolution?<sup>15</sup>

Dorimant replies to her ironic devaluation of her estate with empty conventionality, not unlike Rochester’s poem above: “Not at all, madam. The first time I saw you, you left me with the pangs of love upon me; and this day my soul has quite given up her

liberty.” Dorimant’s resolution is not staggered because what he is after is the value of the estate, not the house itself or its contents; he knows he will not be trapped in the volary with Harriet and the Woodvill women, as a wealthy man he will be free to return to the town whenever he chooses. Harriet responds to his words with more gentle mockery, aware of her fate: “This is more dismal than the country. – Emilia, pity me who am going to that said place. Methinks I hear the hateful noise of rooks already – kaw, kaw, kaw. There’s music in the worst cry in London.”<sup>16</sup> Her family name, Woodvill, embodies the two worlds she is torn between. Raymond Williams remarked on this passage, “what the birds cry is what the world cries in the end: that the settlement has to be made, into an estate and into a marriage.”<sup>17</sup> The play was performed in 1676, nine years after Rochester’s marriage; those in the audience (and on the stage – Rochester’s lover Elizabeth Barry was playing the role of Dorimant’s jilted mistress Mrs Loveit) who were aware of the characterisation would also know that Elizabeth Malet essentially ended up Rochester’s neglected country wife, which is clearly the role Etherege predicts for Harriet. The situation is illustrated in a curt letter Rochester sent Lady Rochester from London:

Madam

It was the height of Compliance forc’t mee to agree y<sup>f</sup> La<sup>sp</sup> shoul’t come into Oxfordshire if it does not please you ’tis not my fault, though much my expectation; I receive the compliment you make in desiring my company as I ought to doe; But I have a poore living to gett that I may bee less Burdensome to y<sup>f</sup> La<sup>sp</sup>; if y<sup>f</sup> La<sup>sp</sup> had return’d moneys out of Somerts for the Buying those things you sent for they myght have bin had by this time, But the little I gett here will very hardly serve my owne turne, however I must tell you that ’twas Blancourt’s fault you had nott Holland & other things sent you a fortnight agoe, next weeke I goe into the West & att my returne shall have the Happiness of waiting on y<sup>f</sup> La<sup>sp</sup>.<sup>18</sup>

The quibbling over whose purse should pay for a piece of fabric (‘holland’ linen) and the bitterness about the ‘poore living’ he is forced to eke out at court indicates Rochester’s life of leisure was not as fruitful or as leisurely as he would like; and Lady Rochester’s complaints about being stranded with her mother-in-law at the Rochester estate bespeak an equal dissatisfaction. The rooks are crying something else, then –

that on a personal level the settlement will consume the soul of the wife to feed the fortune of the husband, who is in turn prostituted to the all-consuming court. And lastly these birds of prey also remind us of Rochester's failed abduction attempt, a 'romantic' act with an ugly motive and a disappointing result; this 'forced settlement' constituted a feudal warrior throwback, and Rochester's first failure in the 'new order' just months after his arrival at court. The dramatic promise of the earl, the heiress, and the elopement was played out in dull squabbles over money, the land he risked it for a fiction just beyond his grasp.

Like the court poets before him, Rochester uses the pastoral form to express covert and dangerous political beliefs, but his thorough cynicism about the court and king mark him as an unlikely interpreter of this most nostalgic form, since he had no reverence for the court on which to focus. Since his philosophical scepticism is often at odds with the deep social conservatism he shared with most of the nobility, there is a further paradox at work as well. He can be lukewarm in his nostalgia, and his ambivalence often undermines his social and political allegiances; at other times, however, as we saw in his literary feuds, when his status is being threatened he is a stalwart patrician, but in a way that invariably recalls an older, more independent vision of nobility. It is fitting then that he would invoke the pastoral in its dying hour as an aristocratic medium and use it, most often to satirical effect, in a handful of enigmatic poems. In his body of work there are several reworkings of pastorals, most of them distortions of the stylised playfulness of the Latin originals and of Renaissance imitations. When compared to the fluidity of the Caroline examples that preceded him, Rochester's versions are cynical and coarse. Montrose points to the "encoding principle" of Elizabethan literature in which "amorous motives displace or subsume forms of desire, frustration, and resentment other than the merely sexual."<sup>19</sup> In Rochester's pastoral world there are rape fantasies, rapes, whores and hucksters, all usually more prurient than arousing, more derisive than wistful. There is a compulsion for naturalism, often grotesquely portrayed, in these poems – the nymphs and swains

fulfil their urges one way or another, and the reticence ubiquitous in Renaissance versions is filled here by a sexual voracity that wavers between delight and depravity. He is clearly effecting an inversion of the Renaissance coding by putting all the sexual goods on display, but the reversal snaps back when the underlayer of complex nostalgic yearning, anti-court bile, and economic anxiety is revealed. What emerges is a world that is essentially mock-pastoral, fraught with paradox, where progress is decay, and decay progress – and it is informed by the Fall, the contradictory moment when we gained “knowledge of good through knowledge of evil. Loss was gain and gain was loss.”<sup>20</sup> It is a world not unlike Rochester’s own, and it is fuelled by the very contradictions that are the touchstones of his larger ideology.

### *I      Aristocratic Crisis and the Golden Age*

One of pastoral’s most common conventions is an underlying nostalgia for a perceived golden age, expressed in elegiac contemplation of the countryside and its customs. The power of the European nobility was derived from its property, but as the seventeenth century progressed political and financial power was being disconnected from the land, and increasingly based in more abstract notions of trade and capital. Concern over these changes was profoundly expressed by Ben Jonson who “lamented the death of an order as old, he thought, as the countryside; a way of life in which generosity, in the fullest sense of the word, accompanied a purity of life and pleasure which the Juvenalian town had exchanged for disease, obscurantism, affectation, and bigotry.”<sup>21</sup> This same anxiety is saliently expressed in Rochester’s compact lyric “The Fall,” which beneath its sexual complaint holds a passionate subtext about the demise of the mythic old order and its idealised codes.

Not strictly pastoral in its imagery, the poem has as its subject matter the Fall of man, which was the inspiration for so much Christian-era pastoral poetry. At the Restoration, the Fall metaphor took on new significance for the two groups who seized upon it. For the newly defeated Parliamentarians, the myth represented the failure of

the Good Old Cause, and they were left to ponder the loss of their Christian paradise on earth. Obviously, the giant among these is Milton's *Paradise Lost*, published in 1667.<sup>22</sup> Christopher Hill outlines Milton's viewpoint:

The English Revolution had gone wrong because the revolutionaries had failed to allow for the resilience and adaptability of the English gentry, their powers of adjustment. The radicals had tried to take political short cuts, had relied on individuals who turned out to be avaricious and ambitious, or hypocrites. The desire for reformation did not sink deeply enough into the consciences of supporters of the Revolution, did not transform their lives. They had passively handed politics over to their leaders, as to some factor. The leaders had betrayed the cause, had accepted cowardly compromises, had sacrificed principles to what they thought was economic expediency.<sup>23</sup>

Hill asserts that Adam represents the fallen leaders of the Revolution and Eve the radicals: "The Fall had been a consequence of the wrong sort of solution, of Eve's attempted short cut towards a godlike power, instead of achieving this by self-knowledge and self-discipline, which would give true control."<sup>24</sup> Milton's own leanings in the Revolution were more conservative than radical – he did not approve, for instance, of Winstanley's declaration that "the introduction of private property *was* the Fall" and that "If we abolish private property and wage labour we shall be back in the prelapsarian state of innocence and bliss."<sup>25</sup> What Milton advocated was "the unalienable labor of Edenic cultivation" which "goes hand in hand with a radical critique of aristocratic values and styles – a critique that is, of course, not proletarian in character but rather religious, intellectual, and bourgeois."<sup>26</sup>

The second use of the Fall myth at the Restoration was the Royalist vision of God's intervention to restore Charles II to the throne, repeated in panegyrics and histories alike, which attempted to act as a reversal of the embittered mantle thrust upon the defeated Cavalier poets. Lovelace evoked the prelapsarian state with heartfelt melancholy in the poem "Love Made in the First Age":

In the nativity of time,  
Chloris, it was not thought a crime  
In direct Hebrew to woo.  
Now we make love as all on fire,  
Ring retrograde our loud desire,



And court in English backward too.

Thrice happy was that golden age,  
When compliment was construed rage,  
And fine words in the center hid;  
When cursèd *No* stained no maid's bliss,  
And all discord was summed in *Yes*,  
And nought forbade, but to forbid. (ll. 1-12)<sup>27</sup>

Lovelace's poem, written during his years of poverty and obscurity after the Royalist defeat in the Civil War, is a lament on the loss of sexual and poetic freedom which forces him to write in an encoded 'backward' English without the liberty of the paradisaical original tongue. The present is conceived of as a time of negativity in which the 'cursèd *No*' of the disapproving Puritans drowns the pleasing licentious discord, 'summed in *Yes*,' of a mythic Caroline generosity. Lovelace did not survive to see the Restoration, but his tragic rendering of the Commonwealth years, and his own tragic end, gave force to the mythmaking of Charles II's Restoration, figured again and again as a rebirth for the nation, with England transformed into a new Eden.<sup>28</sup> Charles, however, did not make a particularly noble Adam, and his succession of (mostly unpopular) Eves did not help to lift the cloud of cynical dissipation that fell over the court. By the 1670s, when Rochester's version of the familiar lament on the fallen state of mankind was probably written, the bloom was firmly off the rose, anti-court lampoons were rife, and the tensions that led to the Exclusion Crisis in 1678 were causing court factions to split into sometimes treasonous alliances. The demise of the latest earthly paradise, compounded by anxieties about property and authority, sent courtly poets again in search of an historically unattainable golden age.

Rochester's "The Fall" begins conventionally, but by the second stanza he is using the subject to reduce the meaning of the Fall to sex – the lofty introduction seems to anticipate a philosophical contemplation, but the verses focus instead upon the first couple's fortunate ability to make love with ease, sexual disorders as yet unknown to them. The poem's emphasis on impotence as a tragic consequence of the Fall travesties a real seventeenth century anxiety in what is clearly a very political poem

dominated by the metaphor of impotence as a loss of sexual and political power. The sexual theme emerges in the second stanza and becomes rapturous in its description of the happy state of Adam and Eve in paradise. The third stanza descends into complaint, but the tone is neutral, and the final stanza focuses the narrative on a specific earthly couple, ending on a whimper with the speaker pleading with his lover for compassion.

The political subnarrative of the poem operates as an allegory in which Paradise represents a happier age and the sexual uncertainty suffered by the earthly couple stands for the anxieties of a less than ideal present. More specifically, given Rochester's low opinion of Charles II's reign I think it is reasonable to read the idyllic state of humanity before their disgrace as portrayed in the first two stanzas as a metaphor for a pre-war golden age and the male speaker as a voice of dissent and disenchantment about the current state of contemporary society, which is portrayed negatively against the paradisaal age that preceded it. His mistress is the embodiment of the prevailing decadence – she is frivolous and fickle, her plaintive lover implies, with no deep sensibilities. But she is as desirable as he is feckless; she is the irresistible temptress, and it is but a short leap to read her as a metaphor for the Restoration Court itself. There is real despair for the old regime in the politicised language of the second stanza. In the line "Each member did their wills obey," the sexual 'member' can be interpreted to represent both aristocrats and Parliamentarians who once obeyed the will of a higher order – in the case of the nobility, this was a land-based political authority embodied by the notion of Honour, while the Parliamentarians, who were once 'God's Englishmen,' had strayed from their antinomian roots. Their rebellions have left the nation "poor Slaves to hope and fear,/...never of our Joys secure" (ll. 9-10) in the third stanza. The irony that both the Commonwealth period and the Restoration are depicted in the propaganda of the day as liberations is conveyed in these words – Englishmen end up far from free, slaves of uncertainty wrought by civil war and the refutation of the monarch's divinity, proven both by the severed head of Charles I and

the inefficacy and amorality of his son. The pre-revolutionary world is portrayed as one of fulfilment, where “enjoyment waited” like a faithful servant “on desire” (l. 6), whereas the present moment exists only in desire never to be fulfilled. These desires “lessen still, as they draw near:/ And none but dull delights endure” (ll. 11-12) – desire’s loyal servants have fled and are replaced by inferior sensations not to be enjoyed but ‘endured.’ The desire engendered by the Restoration of the Stuart monarchy, with its desperate promise that England would be transformed into an ideal and enlightened realm, faded more and more as the years passed.

However, even in the Paradise of the first two stanzas, dissatisfaction lurks. The two stanzas are strung together by the colon that ends line 4 and by the contrast between “Hell” and the “cool Shades” of line 5, but the contrast breaks down on further examination. Firstly, the “cool Shades” have both positive and negative connotations, the coolness pleasing in contrast to hot suffering hell, but also implying disinterest. The portrayal of the “blest... Created State” in stanza 2 is ordered, sheltered, but not particularly passionate. The imagery effects an inversion against a straightforward lament, the protectiveness of the cool Shades repressive and dampening. The earthly present cannot be redeemed, but the ambivalent references to Paradise subtly undermine the appeal of the golden age.

Although there is no assignation of blame for the Fall in the poem, the allusion cannot but imply the accepted interpretation of Genesis as man’s betrayal by a woman. The same roles are in fact repeated in the last stanza where the male speaker is clearly at the mercy of his mistress, imploring her not to love him for his “frailer part” while he pays the “nobler Tribute of a heart” (ll. 16, 14). As well as establishing historically gendered roles, the connection with the Fall serves to make sinister the convention of the courtly lover and his cruel beloved. The proud courtly tradition of feigned powerlessness of the male aristocrat was only possible when there was real tangible power to back it up. Now that that power is decimated this poem shows the lover as he is, powerless, dependent, but clinging to fictitious notions of honour – like Adam in

Genesis. The poem implies that the dangerous empowerment of women and subordination of men are a direct result of this socio-economic decline, and of the political equation of power with sex.

Despite the sinister undercurrents, the poem ends on a strangely tender note; the speaker's entreaty, though phrased in mock-courtly language, imbues the poem with a pathos that reflects the sense of loss to which the once-hopeful royalists were forced to resign themselves. The poignancy of these lines seems to consciously echo Sidney's *Astrophel* and recall the great age in which he lived. Yet there is an imbedded irony in this back-glancing; even a disillusioned Restoration courtier like Rochester must have been aware that Sidney's age was the beginning of the end – Sidney was the pinnacle, but already his 'flower with base infection' had met.<sup>29</sup> If *Astrophel*'s sweetly confessed powerlessness at the hand of an indifferent lady is called into question, when it seemed the aristocrat's real power as a man and as a lord was secure, that clearly leaves the power of later gentry nothing more than castles in the sand.

While the first three stanzas express the existential dilemma in very general terms, the final stanza opens with the causal 'Then' and brings things into focus with a specific and present moment of sexual uncertainty:

Then, Cloris, while I duty pay,  
The nobler Tribute of a heart;  
Be not you so severe, to say  
You Love me for a frailer part. (ll. 13-16)

The 'frailer part' clearly refers to the penis which Cloris prefers above the other organ, his heart, that he offers in payment in l. 14.<sup>30</sup> The diction of this stanza is very commercial, and chronicles a series of exchanges that leave the male speaker bankrupt and in debt at the end. He pays duty with his heart to Cloris, trading in the currency of loyalty and love; it is he says a nobler tribute. This invites the question, nobler than what? Nobler than what she is offering: an empty authority, not backed up by a paternalistic ideology like the patriarchalism of aristocratic rule. Tribute has a direct feudal connotation – a tribute was the payment rendered by a vassal to his lord for

protection. The male lover is upholding the noble code of honour, where tributes were paid amongst the nobility through cyclical obligation. He is beseeching her not to undervalue his tribute because it will lead to a deflation of its worth in general. Cloris appears to represent Charles II and the lover a courtier pledging allegiance to his sovereign, accepting it as his duty, but expecting it to be debased. The "cool shades" of protection are gone, and they are left in a world turned upside down. The frailer part is the general malaise – playing on the diseased member of the pox-ridden period – of an intense interest in money, novelty, shock-value, and pleasures of the moment, which kept the court and king distracted from the ground shifting beneath their feet.

The seriousness of the biblical story is deflated and the political situation of Restoration England parodied as a moment of sexual frustration in "The Fall," but the poem is entirely humourless. Rochester uses the poem soberly to raise the same issues (ie. the decline of honour and the misplaced sense of values of his contemporaries) that concerned Jonson in his time. For the Restoration the golden age and its demise were very real events: the pre-Revolutionary world, with Charles I's flawed but resplendent court at its centre, was obliterated by the extraordinary belief-shaking regicide whose far-reaching consequences were by now too entrenched to be reversed. These are the events that shadow Rochester's poem, though he never pinpoints an exact moment for man's lapse but leaves us to grapple with an ambiguity that renders his golden age nebulous and impossible to invoke. But perhaps that is exactly the point, because like most nostalgists Rochester attempts to focus on an unpleasant immediate past and present, but in the end is unable to ignore a rot that was much deeper than he cares to admit.

## *II      Wanton nymphs and wanting rakes*

Another prominent formal aspect of pastoral is the characterisation of its principal figures, the nymph and shepherd. In general these characters, as they were

derived from the ancient originals, came to represent in the Renaissance paragons of dignity and decency who had special access to truth and wisdom through their unmitigated connection to nature. The shepherd variously praises nature, laments dead companions, levels veiled criticisms against urbanisation, and sings of his passion for a beloved nymph; the nymph, on the other hand, is typically less vocal and usually exists solely as an object of the swain's affection or complaint. The Elizabethans perfected these constructs – which were most fully mapped by Spenser in *The Shepheardes Calender* – but did not necessarily take them at face value; indeed often they questioned and modified their meaning, most famously in the flood of poetic rejoinders inspired by Marlowe's rapturous "Come live with me and be my love." Much of the trope is tongue-in-cheek, especially the assumptions about the nymph, and contrary but equally prominent stereotypes like that of the wanton country maid co-exist with the idea of the fair indifferent shepherdess. But at their most lofty and conventional these characters are clearly specialised versions of courtly lovers, and mouthpieces for the profoundly patriarchalist doctrine of honour and stability.

Rochester deconstructs the conventional portrayals of the nymph and shepherd, mixing up their roles, and diffusing their usual associated ideologies. His rustics are in many ways hybrids of older types – for instance, he instils in his shepherds traits of the seducing aristocrat from the pastourelle, especially lechery and falseness, and merges him with the conniving satyr of classical lore.<sup>31</sup> Another important rewrite in this vein is his characterisation of the nymph. Diverging significantly from the norm, he frequently allows his pastoral nymph the opportunity to voice her own desires and responses, and her expressions – usually of a sexual nature – often drown out those of the swain. The tone varies from poem to poem, but one of Rochester's main motivations is to shatter the illusion of the frigid virtuous courtly lady, and generally the male lover gets shot down along with her. As with the majority of his female characters, the principal object here is satire, but for us the most interesting facets of these women are found in the residue left behind by Rochester's relentless cynicism

and misogyny – regardless of whether the fissures are intentional, our interest is piqued by the clash of his modern cynical vision of mankind and our contemporary revision of the values of his age.

“The Fall” featured an urban nymph thrown into relief by the golden age values she refuses to uphold. One of Rochester’s more typically pastoral songs, “Fair Cloris in a Piggsty lay” presents the nymph persona in her natural rural setting with the more familiar role of erotic object. Both Clorises are strong reinterpretations of a stock type, but in the latter poem Rochester distorts the stereotype by offering a primarily female perspective although it is as an ironic articulation – exposed to the male gaze through its readership – of his satire on women’s virtue. He repeats the common pastoral sobriquet Cloris, in these and other lyrics, and though like the Corinna poems they are not always meant to represent the same woman, again like the Corinna poems there are enough deliberate recurrences to warrant comparison. The briefly-sketched Cloris character from “The Fall” was cold, unfeeling, and sexually predatory, and signals a dangerous level of female autonomy as well as a general moral decline in contemporary society. In “Fair Cloris in a Piggsty lay” Rochester offers a fuller portrayal of the nymph and destabilises the literary stereotype through humorous denouement in what can be classed as a playful piece of erotica. What is unusual in this poem is that in most of Rochester’s more complex uses of pastoral (usually in longer not necessarily pastoral narratives) nymphs appear as diseased, conniving whores, blights on an already blemished land; but here – still at pains to debunk the concept of the icy platonic nymph – he plays on the tenets of pastoral and replaces her with a woman with natural desires, and most importantly substitutes his usual degradation with sympathy. The position is deeply ironised by the overarching satire at work, but the relative lack of cynicism and the frequent dismissal of male sexuality exist as more than trifling anomalies.

“Fair Cloris in a Piggsty lay” is the quirky narrative of a pretty pigherdess who dreams that she has been tricked into leaving her herd and raped by a lustful swain,

then awakes aroused and satisfies herself. The poem is full of saucy double entendres, and the dream clearly plays on Cloris's own vanity and false modesty. The opening stanza presents an image of beauty slumbering in the mire:

Fair Cloris in a Piggsty lay  
 Her tender herd lay by her  
 She slept; in murmring Gruntlings they  
 Complayneing of the scorching Day  
 Her slumbers thus inspire. (ll. 1-5)

This stanza sets the tone for the dream that follows, and the reader is led immediately to wonder why she is a pigherless and not a shepherdess. This disruption of the basics of the convention is an early warning of the reversals to come – already the reader is forced to question that which is supposed to be taken for granted in pastoral. On top of this Cloris's occupation is deliberately chosen since sheep are symbols of innocence while pigs are earthier and bring to mind baser physical appetites, better suited to an erotic poem. Their "murmring Gruntlings" in the "scorching Day" anticipate the swain's "broken Amorous groan" and his uncontrollable passion – not to mention the aural similarity of 'swain' to 'swine.' The pigs play an important role in the poem's allegorical narrative, and Cloris's ties to them are very strong. She is depicted almost as one of them, which has a possible maternal connotation of a sow suckling her piglets, as well as an implied bestiality. There are two competing impressions raised by these associations, specifically the contrast between her fairness and her surroundings and the suggestion that she is beastly herself with an unnatural sexuality, and both possibilities inhabit the poem with equal validity and give some dimension to what is otherwise a one-dimensional character.

This poem is Rochester's only pastoral in which anyone is shown actually working, and Cloris's industriousness and concern for her herd are important factors in differentiating her and the swain. In her dream she is employed "with carefull pains" in feeding her pigs when the swain rushes in with the news that her "Bosom pigg" is in danger. The swain, by contrast, has been spending his time not labouring in the fields



as swains should, but laying plots “against her Honor.” The language used to supplement the action leading to the rape – the “snowy Arms” lifting the “Ivory pails to fill out graines” – emphasises her virtue. Cloris’s purity is undermined, however, by the casual reference to her rapist as “one of her Love Convicted Swaines” (l. 9), inferring that he is not her only admirer. Her physical appearance as she rushes off to save her piglet also implies a burgeoning sexuality of which she is possibly unaware: she flies as quickly “As blushes to her face,” and her speed is compared significantly both to “bright Lightning from the Skies” and “Love shott from her brighter eies.” Her fear and anxiety become analogous to sexual anticipation, building the reader up for a moment of pleasurable climax. Lightening is a conventional symbol of male potency and the second metaphor implies that her rebuffed lovers have probably been encouraged by such looks. It is fairly hackneyed pastoral posturing, underscored by the mock-courtly solemnity of the language. But it is all turned on its ear by the reality, or rather the unreality of what is actually happening. The swain does have his way with her, but the pleasure is markedly one-sided – she does not submit at the last minute, the usual outcome in this genre, but continues to struggle. The rape is reported from her perspective:

Now peirced is her virgin Zoan  
 She feels the Foe within it  
 She heares a broken Amorous groan  
 The panting Lovers fainting moan  
 Just in the happy minute. (ll. 31-5)

The middle lines of the stanza in which she feels him and hears him but does not experience any sensation of her own are particularly effective – Cloris’s impressions come as though from far away, and she is wakened with fright. The expected readerly climax is wrenched away as she satisfies the desires inspired by her frightening and sexually charged dream by masturbating. The poem plays with the conventionality of the dream’s action and firmly wrests the control from the swain and places it with the nymph. The dream depicts a standard male fantasy common in erotic literature but

subverts it with the frame text in which it is the nymph who dreams up the male fantasy, and Rochester then gives the convention another twist by having that nymph's standard capitulation to desire be resolved not by the swain but in the frame text, but by "her own Thumb between her leggs." Her controlled passion makes a mockery of the panting "Lustfull Slave."

The third stanza is filled with double meanings that overlay a pastoral *carpe diem* mini-narrative. Cloris is charged to

Fly Nymph oh! fly e're 'tis too late  
A Dear lov'd life to save  
Rescue your bosom Pigg from fate  
Who now expires hung in the Gate  
That leads to Floras Cave. (ll. 11-15)

The swain is barred from entering the vaginal "Floras Cave"; the forbidding gate brings to mind a chastity belt, and the hanging pig is a phallic symbol which the swain urges her to rescue before it is too late (for his pleasure) – he refers to past seduction attempts, excusing the deception: "My selfe had try'd to set him free/... But I am so abhorr'd by Thee." The subtext of the rescue's life-or-death urgency is that Cloris's insistent virtue has tragic consequences, but of course any conclusion drawn in this poem forces the reader to step back and remember that it is based in lies and fantasy – there is no pig in danger, it is the swain's fabrication, which is in turn a figment of Cloris's erotic daydream.

Keith Combe argues that the poem contains a tacit political allegory that "admits a pattern of politicized censure of Charles's licentious reign based on the unexpected reversal of male desire."<sup>32</sup> I agree with this assessment but I think he is slightly off the mark when he goes on to say the target audience for this poem is fops. Fops are not deceitful rogues, that is the domain of the rake, and Rochester is taking aim at the clever rake whose deceptive ways are both symptom and cause of the present decay. Although I do not want to impose an overly elaborate allegory on the poem, I believe there are strong echoes that the dishonourable rake is as much a target

of the poem's satire as are dishonourable women. As discussed in the previous chapter, the rake is a poet-figure representing wit, and here his deception of the nymph becomes a self-deception when his planned rape is cut short and her autoerotic satisfaction ends the poem. The *carpe diem* is refused because Cloris's only viable option is the compromise she makes, to be "Innocent and pleas'd," which compromises not only the pleasure but also the future (ie, offspring/wit) of the rake. There is an oblique intimation here that wits create lies that degrade the world with impotent verse – the narrative unravelled through levels of fantasy and reality leaves us with a frustrated rapist on the one hand and his intended lover's autoerotism on the other, and like "The Imperfect Enjoyment," the pattern of failed masculine sexuality is repeated and here represents the re-alignment power defined through sex. Both types of sex experienced in the poem – rape and masturbation – are taboo, one is violent and the other is non-reproductive. Rape is an aristocratic act, and in this poem Rochester deliberately invokes both classical sources and the *pastourelle*, an offshoot of pastoral in which a peasant girl is either seduced or raped by a powerful lord who boasts of his conquest and brings shame on her family. In Rochester's version, the nobleman fails and women represent the new way – one which has been exposed through the wanton nymph as not necessarily honourable – which will not reproduce, literally and figuratively, what have become outmoded patriarchalist values. Pastoral is unequivocally an expression of aristocratic nostalgia, and in this and other poems<sup>33</sup> Rochester's use of mock-pastoral is a corruption that reveals the faltering foundations of an order being felled by the inner erosion of its core ideology, honour.

### III. *Pastoral inversion in the urban park*

Hobbes's "Answer to D'Avenant's Preface before *Gondibert*," written in 1650 while he was in exile in Paris, offers a configuration of literature as it relates to station:

As philosophers have divided the universe (their subject) into three regions, celestial, aerial, and terrestrial; so the poets (whose work it is by imitating human life, in delightful and measured lines, to avert men from vice, and incline them to virtuous and honourable actions) have lodged themselves in the three regions of mankind, court, city, and country correspondent in some proportion, to those three regions of the world. For there is in princes and men of conspicuous power (anciently called heroes) a luster and influence upon insincereness, inconstancy, and troublesome humor of those that dwell in populous cities, like the mobility, blustering, and impurity of the air; and a plainness, and (though dull) yet a nutritive faculty in rural people, that endures a comparison with the earth they labor.

From thence have proceeded three sorts of poesy, heroic, scommatic [satiric], and pastoral.<sup>34</sup>

Rochester's "A Ramble in St James's Park" represents a 'scommatic' vision of a mock-pastoral world where the three spheres of 'court, city, and country' collide. Recent discussions of this important narrative poem have often, and justifiably, occupied themselves with the violent expressions of hatred and misogyny against Corinna that occupy the second half of the poem. This analysis will look at the opening thirty lines which deal with the Park itself and which provide the setting for the action that ensues. The first of the three sections that make up the narrative, this part introduces the first person narrator, a city rake who takes the reader on a tour of the underbelly of Restoration London after a customary session of gossip and debauchery at his haunt, the Bear in Covent Garden. He guides us through St James's Park, but our tour is interrupted when he meets his mistress accompanied by three unworthy suitors, and he uses the next part of the poem to verbally tear their pretensions to shreds. The last and longest section of the poem is taken up with the speaker's violent denunciation of his mistress, culminating in a vicious and disturbing curse for her future. Rochester establishes a mock-pastoral setting for the distasteful dramatic monologue that follows, and St James's Park, an essential rendezvous for London's fashionable set, provides the perfect backdrop. The concept of the park itself is interestingly represented in the poem, and sheds some light on the Restoration relationship between town and country. Rochester is clearly very cynical about the urban population's regard for these pseudo-pastoral spaces and he no doubt saw the

irony in St James's Park past as part of Henry VIII's hunting grounds. Charles II, inspired by the elaborate gardens he had seen in France, decided to have it refurbished and opened as a public park, pouring public funds into it, importing flowers and exotic birds for that same public's diversion. St James's Park was not the first public park in London – Hyde Park had already been opened to the public by James I – but it was certainly the most spectacular, and formed an integral part of the Court's social and political schedule. The existence of these artfully 'ruralised' spaces, designed by skilled architects in the centre of London, speaks of a need in the increasingly urban populace to reconnect with the growing sense of loss for old values that were naturally associated with the increasingly mythologised country. But at the same time the very artfulness of it all says that they wanted a revised version of the country – cleaned up, without the taint of labour, leaving only the pure unadulterated aesthetic. In Rochester's estimation, this artificial vision is an empty shell that crumbles under the weight of its own delusions – because of course the aesthetic was adulterated, not by instances of Montrose's 'material pastoralism,' but literally by its use for sexual assignments.<sup>35</sup> Just as pastoral poetry became a skeleton of its former self, more and more a shepherd without a flock, Rochester tells us the English are becoming a people without a purpose. The "Three Knights of the Elbow and the Slurr" who have appropriated the speaker's mistress represent a social mobility of which Rochester did not approve, because it was part of the increasing mobility of property and the decreasing potency of the traditional aristocratic power base is expressed in the literal debasement of the inception of this artificial vision of land in Charles II's reign.

As the speaker of the poem enters the Park he relates the history of a hallowed patch of land which since ancient times has been the setting for lubricious behaviour: "But tho' Saint James has the Honor on't/ 'Tis Consecrate to Prick and Cunt" (ll. 9-10). He catalogues a composite sketch of the demographic of the Park, a cross-section of London society, from Great Lords to Rag Pickers, Heiresses to Gaolers, all of whom, along with our guide, are united by their commitment to "still take care to see/

*Drunkenness Reliev'd by Leachery*" (ll. 5-6). Rochester portrays the revellers as heirs to a long tradition of debauchery, a lineage that can be traced back to the pagan Picts and the lewd rituals he attributes to them. The entire poem harks back to ancient times – its poetic influences are Juvenalian, its setting mock-pastoral – intimating that English society has returned to its pagan roots, though not to the richness of the Romans, but rather to the brutality and uncouthness of their native forebears. The implication is that Charles II's is not another golden age, but a restoration of English barbarity with merely a veneer of Continental civility.

Rochester's "Ramble" draws satirical inspiration from Edmund Waller's 1661 commemorative poem "On St James's Park, As Lately Improved by his Majesty." Waller's poem is a fairly straight panegyric to the king using the improvements to the Park as a pretext for his adulation. Like Rochester's, Waller's poem is structured as a ramble, with the speaker's Muse leading him through the newly formed byways of the Park where she foretells the propitious future of the grounds and the monarch who created them. Waller's speaker describes the Park in detail and compares it to Eden, thereby inscribing his own commemoration as a new Genesis. Rochester's poem is clearly intended to deflate Waller's lofty aims. He deliberately takes references and twists them, taking Waller's innocent grove where "Methinks I see the love that shall be made,/The lovers walking in that amorous shade" (Waller, ll. 21-2)<sup>36</sup> and transforming it into a place where "nightly now beneath their shade/ Are buggeries, Rapes, and Incests made" (Rochester, ll. 23-4). It is not particularly surprising that Waller's rendering of the park's exhilarated trees, "Bold sons of earth, that thrust their arms so high,/ As if once more they would invade the sky" (ll. 69-70), had phallic bells ringing in Rochester's head. He effectively annuls Waller's worshipful intentions, mingling them with his description of the jilted Pict who walked these grounds long before:

Poor pensive Lover in this place  
 Wou'd frigg upon his Mothers face  
 Whence Rowes of Mandrakes tall did rise

Whose lewd Topps fuckt the very Skies (ll. 19-20)

The jilted lover, “Deluded of his Assignation” (l. 15), presages the speaker’s own betrayal as well as inferring an oblique reference to the jilting king, who failed to make good on the early promise of his reign. Waller’s grove recalls a time when the fairy kings of Britain populated the forests and drew wisdom from the “sacred groves” (l. 74). Rochester replaces the wise fairies with lusty pagans inhabiting an “all-sin-sheltering Grove” (l. 25), and the religious allegory is displaced by connotations of un-Christian witchcraft and magic. In doing so, he corrupts the serene vision of a place where the newly-restored King Charles’s wise contemplation will ensure a peaceful future after years of upheaval. Waller’s poem is resolutely about the future, though it does refer briefly to the Civil War when it compares Westminster Abbey to the nearby House of Commons “where all our ills were shaped” (l. 99). Significantly, the only public building mentioned in Rochester’s poem is the Beare.

Waller was a generation older than Rochester, not quite a relic of the Caroline age, but a surviving poet of the Puritan years and one of the major influences on Augustan verse. He was a pioneer of the smoothly metered end-stop verse that was to dominate the eighteenth century and was counted by the Restoration writers as “one of the first refiners of our English language and poetry.”<sup>37</sup> Rochester reputedly held the older poet in very high esteem, so why would he choose to degrade Waller’s harmless flattery in this way?<sup>38</sup> Rochester’s poem was written about ten years after Waller’s, and it seems likely that reading Waller’s optimistic and flowery lines provoked him to present the Park – and London society – as they had really become. Waller’s poem is about nature tamed for a higher purpose, to inspire humanity to achieve great things. He shows the Park in daylight, with “gallants dancing by the river side” and “ladies, angling in the crystal lake.” However, there is something strange going on even in Waller’s apparently idyllic world. Overhead, above the pleasure boats,

a flock of new-sprung fowl  
Hangs in the air, and does the sun control,  
Dark’ning the sky; they hover o’er, and shroud

The wanton sailors with a feather'd cloud. (Waller, ll. 27-30)

The fisherwomen, meanwhile,

Feast on the waters with the prey they take;  
At once victorious with their lines, and eyes,  
They make the fishes, and the men, their prize. (Waller, ll. 34-6)

All is not well, even in the fantasy realm. Waller's poem, written a year into Charles II's reign, is full of warnings. The flock of new-sprung fowl who 'hang' in the air could be the same upstarts Rochester refers to, and according to Waller they control the sun (the King?). Negative diction follows: they darken, hover, and shroud, connotations that seem to augur ill. The voracious fisherwomen are active and greedy hunters, and are overseen by cupids and sea-nymphs, themselves

From Thetis sent as spies, to make report,  
And tell the wonders of her sovereign's Court.  
All that can, living, feed the greedy eye,  
Or dead, the palate, may you here descry (Waller, ll. 39-42)

Waller's poem seems unable to maintain its optimism without ambivalence creeping in, and Rochester's anti-pastoral park confirms the unease of Waller's "doubtful Muse" (l. 48).

The characters that occupy Rochester's inverted pastoral setting are mainly social and sexual upstarts, objects of satire but also sources of anxiety for an endangered peer like Rochester. He paints the scene with as ugly a brush as he can, but undercuts the attack by placing a semi-autobiographical character in their midst, making his own fashionable set accessories to the corruption. It can be no accident that Rochester returned again and again to the name Corinna, and as he paints an inverted pastoral scene as a setting for her violent debasement, the grasping allusion to Herrick's undeniably more innocent pastoral celebration "Corinna's Going A-Maying" bespeaks a tortured realisation that those days of innocent nostalgia can never be regained.



IV. *Decadence, debasement, and courtly conflict*

Rochester's literary feud with the minor courtier and poet Sir Carr Scroope produced many bitter invectives on either side. Rochester derided Scroope as 'Poet Ninny' and Scroope responded by inviting him to "Raile on poor feeble scribbler." Scroope's "I cannot change as others do" and Rochester's reply poem "I swive as well as others do" form part of this feud and are characteristic of a type of pastoral decadence that became common in the Restoration period. These 'pastoral' poems, though peopled with shepherds and nymphs, are virtually devoid of the other usual signposts of the genre – lofty feeling, praise of nature, golden age nostalgia, sheep. The characters invoke the tradition in what is a mixture of shorthand reference to pastoral's concerns and the evolutionary vestiges of a dead paradigm.

Scroope's song certainly seems to fall more in the second category. It is a slight affair which bears enough trappings of the pastoral to evoke the form – a sighing swain and a cold-hearted nymph, both with Latinate names, and a theme of unrequited love – but it suffers from lumbering metre and tired melodrama. The poem's main interest today lies in its role as the inspiration for Rochester's bizarrely grotesque rejoinder. We are left to wonder how such a seemingly innocuous poem inspires such a violent reaction. On the surface, the connection between the two poems is spurious. There is no doubt Rochester's is a response to Scroope: they share deliberately similar structure, metre, refrain, and opening line. In terms of thematics, however, Rochester's rude proclamations have neither an apparent affinity nor an obvious satirical aim when set against Scroope's anaemic lament. Rochester's poem is really not pastoral at all, his lovers are not figured as swains or nymphs, and this time his reduction of the pastoral form is complete – he has moved beyond mock-pastoral to a poem that envisions the death of pastoral as represented by the obliteration of Scroope's anachronistic vision.

Scroope's poem begins with the swain Amyntas's complaint "I cannot change as others do," which immediately invites a few questions: Change to what? Who are the others? Why can't he change? The second line informs us that the swain's beloved

"unjustly scorn[s]" his inability to change despite the fact that "that poor Swayne that sighs for you/ For you alone was born". From these insipid beginnings Amyntas hatches a twisted revenge plot in which he will die of a broken heart and Phillis will live on in regret of her indifference:

That welcome hour that ends his smart  
Will then begin your pain,  
For such a faithful tender Heart  
Can never break, can never break in vain. (ll. 13-16)

The poem ends on the same note of self-pity with which it began, the swain comforted by a desperate hope phrased in woeful refrain.

Scroope's Phillis is the traditional nymph of the swain-lament poems – silent and un pitying – while Rochester's Phillis, like Cloris the pigherless, has been used to transform the pastoral nymph from a virtuous paragon into a fleshly woman, although in this instance he has taken the metamorphosis to a surreal extreme. Rochester's swain demands Phillis's reasons for scorning his "tender Heart," and she is given the rest of the poem to respond, though the poem's interest is clearly not to represent a sympathetic female voice. Phillis's theatrical admission "Alas I am, alas I am a Whore" both debases Scroope's conventional refrain and prefaces a grotesque elaboration on her wantonness:

Were all my body larded o're,  
With Darts of Love, so thick,  
That you might find in ev'ry Pore,  
A well stuck standing Prick;  
Whilst yet my Eyes alone were free,  
My Heart, wou'd never doubt,  
In Am'rous Rage, and Extasie,  
To wish those Eyes, to wish those Eyes fuckt out.

This surreal and shocking stanza is, in stark contrast to Scroope's poem, rich in interpretative possibilities. It is a titillating male fantasy of a woman so sexualised that she cannot be satisfied until every last pore and orifice is covered and clogged with masculinity; Rochester intentionally creates the image of the sperm-coated body covered in erect penises with only the eyes remaining to repulse both visually and

thematically. The result is a fantasy of female desire that is a gross perversion of conventional male mirroring. Donne's rapturous lover in *Elegy XIX*, for instance, imagines his mistress as an undiscovered continent and sees his own triumph reflected in her beauty; Rochester takes this trope and perverts it first by having Phillis voice the degrading fantasy, and then by representing that fantasy as a literalised metonym for masculinity, ie sperm and penises. The last lines of the poem express a demented wish for total consumption by male desire, the "Eyes fuckt out" delineating the violent and final extinguishment of the female self, rendered in the ironical sing-song repetition copied from Scroope's poem.

In terms of pastoral, I think Rochester's vision of a grotesque sexual abundance has parallels in the complicity of nature in augmenting the wealth of the country house in the Renaissance pastoral subgenre, the country house poem. Raymond Williams asks, in his discussion of Jonson's "To Penshurst" and Carew's "To Saxham," "What kind of wit is it exactly – for it must be wit; the most ardent traditionalists will hardly claim it for observation – which has birds and other creatures offering themselves to be eaten?" Williams quotes the following passage from "To Penshurst":

To crowne thy open table, doth provide  
The purpled pheasant with the speckled side:  
The painted partrich lyes in every field  
And, for thy messe, is willing to be kill'd.<sup>39</sup>

Williams assesses this expression as dependent upon "a shared and conscious point of view towards nature":

The awareness of hyperbole is there, is indeed what is conventional in just this literary convention, and is controlled and ratified, in any wider view, by a common consciousness. At one level this is a willing and happy ethic of consuming, made evident by the organisation of the poems around the centrality of the dining table. Yet the possible grossness of this, as in Carew (a willing largeness of hyperbole, as in so many Cavalier poems, as the awareness of an alternative point of view makes simple statement impossible) is modified in Jonson by a certain pathos, a conscious realisation of his situation.<sup>40</sup>

Rochester's poem represents an indirect parody of Jonson's vision, with an equal awareness of the hyperbole, but the generosity Jonson revels in is exposed as merely a

desire for consumption. On the one hand, Rochester is deflating Scroope's lofty outrage by telling him that he is falsely investing his values in a valueless commodity, that women are natural whores, and that the property they represent has been prostituted. On the other hand, the deflation of the Jonsonian romanticisation of noblesse oblige is a step further in his project of demystification, and it questions the foundations such notions were built on, albeit obliquely and through a misogynist degradation.

The convoluted diction of Rochester's poem at times makes it difficult to know who is speaking – it is as though the fantasy takes on a life of its own and feeds on its own perversion, reaching a surreal conclusion that consumes both Phillis and the male lover. The lover is left in the dust of the conventional question he has posed, rendered speechless by the horrific vision it has engendered. Rochester's poem presents a disturbing vision of gender relations, but Scroope's poem offers an equally unhealthy, if less graphic, view of the inequalities between the sexes. Scroope's male speaker wants to retaliate with violence but is ineffectual, while Rochester's male lover is inconsequential and merges into the sea of phalluses that Phillis salivates for. The scale of betrayal is worlds apart but the spirit is the same. What Rochester is responding to in Scroope's poem is the mad inefficacy of its vision, and so he responds with an antithetically insane world view.

Lastly, the poem is a court attack against Scroope the rival poet and courtier. Scroope moved in the same social circles as Rochester, and was associated at times with Mulgrave's faction. David Vieth points out that Phillis could represent Cary Frazier, one of the queen's Maids of Honour whom Scroope was courting in 1676-7. She was also reported to have been Mulgrave's mistress and the fact that her father was the unofficial 'royal abortionist' could certainly be used to add fuel to any satire against her. Rochester also composed the impromptu, "On Cary Frazier":

Her father gave her dildos six;  
Her mother made 'em up a score:  
But she loves nought but living pricks,

And swears by God she'll frig no more.

And now in "The Mock Song" Frazier has herself become a 'living prick' she loves so well. Mulgrave and Scroope had every reason to believe in the system that was working for them, and their unadventurous poetic output bears this out. Scroope's poem is an expression of social conservatism – the "others" are the harbingers of the "change" he claims he cannot accept, they are the libertines of whom he did not approve, the defamers of England's correct verse, and proponents of a nihilistic philosophy. Ironically his protest is by means of a pastoral suicide, which Rochester's violent response renders comparable to a temper tantrum. His desperate grasp on outmoded ideas is evidenced by his usage of the pastoral form, which he employs in bland but earnest defence of tradition, but which might as well literally represent pastoral's suicide. Rochester's poem, like "St James's Park," is a disturbing wakeup call to a fellow poet, telling him that the world is in fact exactly the opposite to what he believes. Mulgrave accused Rochester of prurience in his "Essay upon Poetry":

Obscene words, too gross for desire,  
Like heaps of Fuel do but choak the Fire.  
That Author's Name has undeserved praise,  
Who pall'd the appetite he meant to raise.<sup>41</sup>

What he did not comprehend is that he had unwittingly struck upon Rochester's very aim – that the world had been turned inside out by events beyond anyone's control, and the reality of this fact poisoned all the age tried to hold dear: desire, potency, pleasure, honour.

Rochester's own famous internal struggle between his town and country obligations provides an interesting background to his pastoral attitudes. He was in the not entirely unique position of being a peer whose ties to the country were necessarily strong because of landed interests. Add to this the impoverishment of his estate and the battle over his court office as Ranger of Woodstock Park and the country becomes a very complicated place for Rochester. His Adderbury would be no Penshurst; that

generosity is gone, if it ever existed. On the other hand Rochester rarely entertained at his own estate, but preferred to invite his guests to Woodstock Lodge, a place of fantasy provided directly by the Crown, and where “his Lordship had severall lascivious Pictures drawn” and where he and his friends amused themselves and the local population with nude bathing followed by “a frisk for forty yards in the meadow to dry ourselves.”<sup>42</sup>

Pastoral survived into the eighteenth century, until its next reinvention by the Romantics and in the nineteenth century when it was again a potent weapon in the attack on industrialism. Rochester’s pastoral contributions constitute a minor part of his so-called minor poetry, but they are emblematic of his use of poetic tradition to evaluate the turbulent times in which he lived. In his estimation the nobleman has become interchangeable with the rustic – neither possesses honour anymore, and the rustic, as the town encroaches on the country, bringing vilification with it, had traded communion with nature and its attending wisdom for a taste of modernity. Rochester took a form that was being pallidly employed by his contemporaries and put it to use in a host of attacks on complacency as well as defiant expressions of a warped world view. He was aware that the courtly form could never exist as it had in the Renaissance, but his less than lofty attempts derived an angry power from the enforced silencing of that tradition during the Interregnum and at least had pastoral’s pulse beating again.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *The Court Society*, p. 216.
- <sup>2</sup> Louis Adrian Montrose asserts that the gap between the periods of romantic literature can be explained, at least in England, by the necessary "period of decontamination" that followed the bitter enclosure controversy of the mid-sixteenth century ("Of Gentlemen and Shepherds," p. 427).
- <sup>3</sup> Elias, p. 215.
- <sup>4</sup> "Of Gentlemen and Shepherds," p. 438.
- <sup>5</sup> Elias, pp. 222 and 260.
- <sup>6</sup> Frank Kermode, "Introduction" to *English Pastoral Poetry*, p. 15.
- <sup>7</sup> "Of Gentlemen and Shepherds," p. 422.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 424.
- <sup>9</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, p. 39.
- <sup>10</sup> *The Country and the City*, p. 52.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 52 and 53.
- <sup>13</sup> Source for biographical information is Germaine Greer's *John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, pp. 12-18.
- <sup>14</sup> George Etherege, *The Man of Mode*, V. ii, p. 147.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 149-50.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.
- <sup>17</sup> *The Country and the City*, p. 52.
- <sup>18</sup> Treglown dates this letter sometime between 1671-2 (*Letters*, pp. 65-6).
- <sup>19</sup> "Of Shepherds and Gentlemen," p. 440.
- <sup>20</sup> Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution*, p. 347.
- <sup>21</sup> Kermode, p. 38.
- <sup>22</sup> It is not possible to accurately date Rochester's poem, but it is certainly later than *Paradise Lost*.
- <sup>23</sup> *Milton and the English Revolution*, p. 350.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 351.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 346.
- <sup>26</sup> Montrose, p. 426.
- <sup>27</sup> Richard Lovelace, "Love Made in the First Age. To Chloris."
- <sup>28</sup> See for instance Dryden's "Astrea Redux"; also, Waller's "A Poem on St James's Park as lately Improved by His Majesty," discussed in section two below.
- <sup>29</sup> Shakespeare, *Sonnet 94* (They that have power to hurt and will do none). Empson discusses this sonnet at length in *Some Versions of Pastoral*, assessing it in terms of 'ironical acceptance of aristocracy'.
- <sup>30</sup> Cf. Rochester's "The Imperfect Enjoyment" where the penis is compared to "a withered flow'r," and "A Song of a Young Lady to Her Ancient Lover" where it is called "thy nobler part."
- <sup>31</sup> "a literary form which has for its most distinctive feature an aristocratic contempt for the serf" (Kermode, p. 35).
- <sup>32</sup> *A Martyr for Sin*, p. 114.
- <sup>33</sup> Cf. "Chloris full of harmless thought," in which another virtuous nymph (of undetermined social status) submits to the advances of a passing "comely Shepherd":  

Thus she who Princes had deny'd  
 With all their pompous Train,  
 Was in the lucky minute try'd  
 And yielded to a Swain. (ll. 21-24)
- <sup>34</sup> "The Answer to D'Avenant's Preface before *Gondibert*," p. 211.
- <sup>35</sup> Wycherley's play *Love in a Wood, or St James's Park* represents the park as a lewd nocturnal playground, a kind of perverted *Midsummer Night's Dream*.
- <sup>36</sup> *The Poetical Works of Edmund Waller & Sir John Denham*, pp. 74-8.
- <sup>37</sup> John Aubrey, *Brief Lives*, p. 468.

□

<sup>38</sup> In *The Man of Mode* George Etherege shows Dorimant frequently quoting Waller, and it is by this "very particular esteem" for the earlier poet that Rochester is recognised in the role (John Dennis, "A Defense of *Sir Fopling Flutter*," p. 429).

<sup>39</sup> *The Country and the City*, p. 29.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 30. Williams characterises Jonson's vision as a "charity of consumption," a Christian notion that is revealed as a half-generosity because its alms withhold the means of production from the recipients and thus keep them on the dole.

<sup>41</sup> The poem appeared in 1682, two years after Rochester's death. In *Rochester: The Critical Heritage*, ed. David Farley-Hills, p. 43.

<sup>42</sup> *Brief Lives*, p. 481; *Letters*, p. 159.



## Conclusion

### *Artemiza and Chloe:*

#### Women, town and country, and the question of wit

Rochester's epistolary poem "A Letter from Artemiza in the Towne to Chloe in the Countrey" provides a fitting place to conclude the concepts explored in this study. Encapsulated within this comedy of manners in miniature is an investigation of a point of convergence between the town and country with wit acting as a catalyst for both positive and negative action. Rochester uses the epistolary form as a frame for the dramatic action of the poem which is, as the title suggests, a letter from the town to the country. As we have seen, these designations indicate far more than rural or urban spaces – the locations of the two correspondents are dictated by duty and necessity and the two spheres they occupy move in orbit around the court, and the letter is an act of communication bringing the two worlds and all their opposing ideologies into contact. The poem demonstrates that it is a point of friction and disruption, but one that culminates in a moral vision which is in turn disrupted by the current of satire that runs through the poem.

'Town' and 'country' would have immediately registered a series of contrasting principles in Restoration readers of the poem – town versus country gives way to liberality versus conservatism, action versus contemplation, rakes versus cuckolds, sex versus reproduction, experience versus innocence, and wit versus foppery. Rochester sets out to disturb these dialectics, and Artemiza begins from the outset by involving another binary, masculine versus feminine, by writing as her country friend has bid her in the language of the town, "in Verse." As she says, by attempting it she sets herself up as "the Fiddle of the Towne" because she is essaying a strictly masculine forum, wit. But though she protests to the contrary, warning herself "poetry's a snare:/ Bedlam has many Mansions: have a Care" (ll. 16-17) where even "stoutest Ships (the Men of Witt) are lost" (l. 13), she deftly accomplishes her task, composing a witty

verse epistle, and uses town's own language to revile it. She knows what Chloe, out of touch with the news of the town, wants to hear:

Y' expect att least, to heare, what Loves have past  
 In this Lewd Towne, synce you, and I mett last.  
 What change has happen'd of Intrigues, and whether  
 The Old ones last, and who, and who's togeather.  
 But how, my dearest Chloe, shall I sett  
 My pen to write, what I would faine forgett,  
 Or name that lost thing (Love) without a teare  
 Synce soe debauch'd by ill-bred Customes here? (ll. 32-9)

Her Juvenalian vision of the town is hardly designed to make Chloe long for it, and the reference to 'ill-bred Customes' is an ironic inversion of what is normally a charge against the 'uncivilised' country, here expressed in compliment of Chloe's situation. That sentiment is overturned, however, with the appearance of the "fine Lady" who proclaims

I fynde my selfe ridiculously growne  
 Embarassé with being out of Towne,  
 Rude, untaught, like any Indian Queene;  
 My Country nakednesse is strangely seene. (ll. 97-100)

She then asks her town hostess the same questions Artemiza has anticipated from Chloe: "How is Love govern'd? Love, that rules the State,/ And, pray, who are the Men most worne of late?" (ll. 101-2). She is a former town wit who has married a fop "her humble Knight," a "necessary thing," despite his "Countrey-drinking-breath" because "These are true Womens Men" (ll. 74, 92, 89, 135).

She goes on to tell the sordid tale of "that wretched thinge Corinna," and here the poem darkens considerably. The fine lady relates how Corinna, once an admired beauty, made the mistake of falling in love with a man of wit, "Who found 'twas dull, to love above a day,/ Made his ill-natur'd Jest, and went away" (ll. 199-200). It seems quite possible that this jest refers to the rake's avowed revenge in "A Ramble in St James's Park":

Loathed and despised, kicked out o' th' Town  
 Into some dirty hole alone,  
 To chew the cud of misery  
 And know she owes it all to me.  
 And may no woman better thrive  
 That dares prophane the cunt I swive! (ll. 161-66)

Her offence in that poem was consorting with “knight errant Paramours,” to whom he believes she has betrayed “The secretts of my tender houres.” The trio of fops represent the encroaching classes, and consist of a hack, a foolish gentry heir, and an ambitious court pretender. Corinna embodies for him a prostituted sense of honour, especially *his* honour, which has been tainted by these moneyed interests. Ironically, as the fine lady tells us, his action forces her into literal prostitution, preying on the gullible country gentry. After her fall, Corinna is portrayed like a spider who “in some darke hole must all the Winter lye” till Easter term when the country families visited the city, and then she will seize her chance and cozen a young heir, with predictably unsavoury results:

The unbred puppy, who had never seene  
 A Creature looke soe gay, or talke soe fine,  
 Beleaves, then falls in Love, and then in Debt,  
 Morgages all, e'ne to th' Auncient Seate,  
 To buy this Mistresse a new house for life;  
 To give her Plate, and Jewells, robbs his wife;  
 And when to the height of fondness he is growne,  
 'Tis tyme, to poyson him, an all's her owne.  
 Thus meeting in her Common Armes his Fate,  
 Hee leaves her Bastard Heyre to his Estate;  
 And as the Race of such an Owle deserves,  
 His owne lawfull progeny he starves. (ll. 240-51)

The precariousness of status is shown in this formulation, and it is clear that because Corinna has been undone by wit, she has been forced to turn parasite on a country estate, and disinherit legitimacy. The systems of exchange in the poem are all shown to be parasitical upon each other, with a strong sense of feminised fop victimisation that is connected to a legitimate (if naive) vision of the land; wit is clearly implicated as

weapon of destruction, but this time all the reverberations of the verbal attack are revealed.

Another economy displayed in the poem is the feminine exchange system between the four female personae. There is a complete lack of positive masculine presence in the poem, and all of our information is filtered through the levels of narrative voice and differing feminine perspectives which play off one another. Artemiza herself stands between the twinned worlds of town and country and wit and foppery, purportedly not participating but only acting as a moral observer. She is witty but explicitly does not sexualise wit, and tells the third hand morality tale in which wit has been effectively used as a weapon in the harshest possible way. Her name as well puts her perfectly between the two spheres, as Artemis she is the moon, the virgin huntress – her wit thus uses a purer weapon cleansed by her virginity and imbued with the natural feminine wisdom of the moon, but as a huntress she is a nature goddess who possesses a potent power. Chloe is a less significant player, she is silent but presents a foil for the sins of the town, possibly a country wife longing to visit like the fine lady. Corinna and Chloe act as opposite extremes of femininity – Corinna's has become based in a predatory sexuality, while Chloe's is contained in a purifying environment. Their stories are written, they do not write them themselves as they are excluded presences, only present in others' voices. Most interesting though is the indirect dialogue between Artemiza and the fine lady, who each offers a visionary monologue directed at another listener, but on the same topic, wit and the town. Their deflected dialogue buried and layered in levels of narrative resonates with multiple truths, untruths, and ambiguous moral judgements that form a meaningful and complex contribution to the debate. In the poem wit and folly meet, as do town and country, and they are centred on the figure of the monkey which forms a pause in the middle of

the poem, when the fine lady pauses in her praise of fools to commune with “Her much esteem’d deare Freind”:

The dirty chatt’ring Monster she embrac’t,  
And made it this fine tender speech att last  
Kisse mee, thou curious Miniature of Man;  
How odd thou art? How pritty? How Japan?  
Oh I could live, and dye with thee – then on  
For halfe an houre in Complement shee runne. (ll. 141-6)

The monkey represents both an exotic, bestial sexuality and a creature who ‘apes’ man, much like the fop who is a ‘dirty, chattering monster’ compared to the wit. There can be no coincidence that the most famous portrait of Rochester pictures him solemnly crowning a monkey with a wreath of laurels, the traditional way of honouring poets. Rochester is clearly making a statement in both instances about the connection between wit and foppery, that they are involved in an exchange of power. When Artemisia wonders “what nature meant/ When this mixed thing into the world she sent” it is initially unclear of whom she is speaking, the lady or the monkey, for they are both strange ‘mixed things.’ The business of writing poetry has been corrupted by the same world that has made love “like play, to be an arrant trade” (l. 51). Love and poetry are commodified in the poetry of this mad, carnivalesque society – in a bitterly nostalgic inversion of the prior age of idealisation.

The idea of the debt to pleasure is a ruling one in Rochester’s life. He was in many ways, as were many courtiers, a glorified court jester and pimp to the King (which he freely admitted), but he constantly undermined this role by biting the hand that fed him. In order to live the life that would eventually destroy him, Rochester depended financially on the King and he paid the debt with his informal services and poems, prostituting his wit to what he believed to be an unworthy cause. The debasement of his wit is foppery of a tragic, inexplicable sort, which leads him to a world where “my fantastic mind may prove/ The torments it deserves to try” (“Absent from thee” ll. 6-7). After his conversion, and very near his death, Burnet wrote tells us “He told me, He had overcome all his Resentments to all the World; so that he bore ill-

will to no Person, nor hated any upon personal accounts. He had given a true state of his Debts, and had ordered to pay them all, as far as his Estate that was not settled, could go: and was confident that if all that was owing to him were paid to his Executors, his Creditors would all be satisfied.”<sup>1</sup> Poets like Spenser and Sidney, Rochester’s poetic debtors, would have likely been both repulsed and attracted by his interpretations of their Renaissance legacy; this is a comparison which again leaves us in the void of unassailable paradox Rochester’s poetic landscape evokes, unable and unwilling to “crave pardon for [his] hardyhedde.”<sup>2</sup> Or, to use Artemiza’s words, he leaves us “pleas’d with the contradiction and the sin.”

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Burnet, p. 83.

<sup>2</sup> Edmund Spenser, Dedication to Sir Philip Sidney of *The Shepheardes Calender* (l. 12).

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