"Satyr [Against Reason and Mankind]"

By John Wilmot

Transcription, correction, editorial commentary, and markup by Students and Staff of Marymount University, Jordan Lawton
SATYR [AGAINST REASON AND MANKIND]

1. Were I (who to my cost already am
2. One of those strange prodigious Creatures Man.)
3. A Spirit free, to choose for my own share,
4. What case of Flesh, and Blood, I pleas'd to wear,
5. I'd be a Dog, a Monkey, or a Bear.
6. Or any thing but that vain Animal,
7. Who is so proud of being rational.
8. The senses are too gross, and he'll contrive
9. A Sixth, to contradict the other Five;
10. And before certain instinct, will preferr
11. Reason, which Fifty times for one does err.

Reason, an Ignis fatuus, in the Mind,
12. Which leaving light of Nature, sense behind;
13. Pathless and dang'rous wandring ways it takes,
14. Through errors, Fenny-Boggs, and Thorny Brakes;
15. Whilst the misguided follower, climbs with pain,
16. Mountains of Whimseys, heap'd in his own Brain:
17. Stumbling from thought to thought, falls headlong down,
18. Into doubts boundless Sea, where like to drown.
19. Books bear him up awhile, and makes him try,
20. To swim with Bladders of Philosophy;
21. In hopes still t'oretake th'escaping light,
22. The Vapour dances in his dazling sight,
23. Till spent, it leaves him to eternal Night.
24. Then Old Age, and experience, hand in hand,
25. Lead him to death, and make him understand,
26. After a search so painful, and so long,
27. That all his Life he has been in the wrong;
28. Huddled in dirt, the reas'n'ing Engine lies.
29. Who was so proud, so witty, and so wise,
30. Pride drew him in, as Cheats, their Bubbles, catch,
31. And makes him venture, to be made a Wretch.
32. His wisdom did his happiness destroy,
33. Aiming to know what World he shou'd enjoy;
34. And Wit, was his vain frivolous pretence,
35. Of pleasing others, at his own expence.
36. For Witts are treated just like common Whores,
First they're enjoy'd, and then kickt out of Doores,
The pleasure, past, a threatening doubt remains,
That frights th'enjoyer, with succeeding pains:
Women and Men of Wit, are dang'rous Tools,
And ever fatal to admiring Fools.

Pleasure allures, and when the Fopps escape,
'Tis not that they're belov'd, but fortunate,
And therefore what thy fear, at least they hate.
But now methinks some formal Band, and Beard, Takes me to task, come on Sir I'm prepar'd.
Then by your favour, any thing that's writ
Against this gibing jingling knack call'd Wit,
Likes me abundantly, but you take care,
Upon this point, not to be too severe.
Perhaps my Muse, were fitter for this part,
For I profess, I can by very smart
On Wit, which I abhor with all my heart:
I long to lash it in some sharp Essay,
But your grand indiscretion bids me stay,
And turns my Tide of Ink another way.
What rage ferments in your degen'rate mind,
To make you rail at Reason, and Mankind?
Bless glorious Man! to whom alone kind Heav'n,
An everlasting Soul has freely giv'n;
Whom his great Maker took such care to make,
That from himself he did the Image take;
And this fair frame, in shining Reason drest,
To dignifie his Nature, above Beast.
Reason, by whose aspiring influence,
We take a flight beyond material sense.
Dive into Mysteries, then soaring pierce,
The flaming limits of the Universe.
Search Heav'n and Hell, find out what's acted there,
And give the World true grounds of hope and fear.
Hold mighty Man, I cry, all this we know,
From the Pathetique Pen of Ingello:

From P— Pilgrim, S— replys, And 'tis this very reason I despise.
This supernatural gift, that makes a Myte-,
Comparing his short life, void of all rest,
To the Eternal, and the ever blest.
This busie, puzzling, stirring up of doubt,
That frames deep Mysteries, then finds 'em out;
Filling with Frantick Crowds of thinking Fools,
Those Reverend Bedlams, n018, Colledges, and Schools
Borne on whose Wings, each heavy Sat, n007.9 can pierce,
The limits of the boundless Universe.
So, n020 charming Oyntments, make an Old Witch flie,
And bear a Crippled Carcass through the Skie.
'Tis this exalted pow'r, n021, whose bus'ness lies,
In Nonsense, and impossibilities.
This made a Whimsical Philosopher,
Before the spacious World, his Tub, n022 prefer,

Note on Tub

And we have modern Cloysterd Coxcombs, who
Retire to think, cause they have naught to do.
But thoughts, are giv'n for Actions government,
Where Action ceases, thoughts impertinent:
Our Sphere of Action, is lifes happiness,,
And he who thinks Beyond, thinks like an Ass.
Thus, whilst' gainst false reas'ning I inveigh,
I own right Reason, which I wou'd obey:
That Reason that distinguishes by sense,
And gives us Rules, of good, and ill from thence:
That bounds desires, with a reforming Will,
To keep 'em more in vigour, not to kill.
Your Reason hinders, mine helps t'enjoy,
Renewing Apetites, yours wou'd destroy.

My Reasons is my Friend, yours is a Cheat,
Hungar call's out, my Reason bids me eat;
Perversely yours, your Appetite does mock,
This askt for Food, that answers what's a Clock?
This plain distinction Sir your doubt secures,
'Tis not true Reason I despise but yours.
This I think Reason righted, but for Man,
I'le nere recant defend him if you can.
For all his Pride, and his Philosophy,
'Tis evident, Beasts are in their degree,
As wise at least, and better far than he.
Those Creatures, are the wisest who attain,
By surest means, the ends at which they aim.

If therefore Jowler, finds, and Kills his Hares,

Better than M—, supplyes Committed Chairs;

Though one's a Sates-man, th'other but a Hound.

Jowler, in Justice, wou'd be wiser found.

You see how far Mans wisdom here extends,

Look next, if humane Nature makes amends;

Whose Principles, most gen'rous are, and just,

And to whose Morals, you wou'd sooner trust.

Be Judge your self, I'le bring it to the test,

Which is the basest Creature Man, or Beast?,

Birds feed on Birds, Beast on each other prey,

But Savage Man alone, does Man betray:

Prest by necessity, they Kill for Food,

Man, undoes Man, to do himself no good.

With Teeth, & Claws: by Nature arm'd thy hunt,

Natures allowance, to supply their want.

But Man, with smiles, embraces Friendships, praise.

Unhumanely his Fellows life betrays;

With voluntary pains, works his distress,

Not through necessity, but wantonness.

For hunger, or for Love, they fight, or tear,

Whilst wretched Man, is still in Arms for fear;

For fear he Armes, and is of Armes afraid,

By fear, to fear, successively betray'd

Base fear, the fource whence his best passion came,

His boasted Honour, and his dear bought Fame.

That lust of Pow'r, to which he's such a Slave,

And for the which alone he dares be brave:

To which his various Projects are design'd,

Which makes him gen'rous, affable, and kind.

For which he takes such pains to be thought wise,

And screws his actions, in a forc'd disguise:

Leading a tedious life in Misery,

Under laborious, mean Hypocrisie.

Look to the bottom, of his vast design,

Wherein Mans VVisdom, Pow'r, and Glory joyn;

The good he acts, the ill he does endure;

'Tis all for fear, to make himself secure.

Meerly for safety, after Fame we thirst,

For all Men, wou'd be Cowards if they durst.

And honesty's against all common sense,

Men must be Knaves, 'tis in their own defence.

Mankind's dishonest, if you think it fair;
Amongst known Cheats, to play upon the square,
You'll be undone
Nor can weak truth, your reputation save,
The Knaves, will all agree to call you Knave.
Wrong'd shall he live, insulted o're, opprest.
Who dares be less a Villain, than the rest.

Thus Sir you see what humane Nature craves.
Most Men are Cowards, all Men shou'd be Knaves:
The difference lies (as far as I can see)
Not in the thing it self, but the degree;
And all the subject matter of debate,
Is only who's a Knave, of the first Rate?

All this with indignation have I hurl'd,
At the pretending part of the proud World,
Who sowne with selfish vanity, devise,
False freedoms, holy Cheats, and formal Lyes

Over their fellow Slaves, to tyrannize.

But if in Court, so just a Man there be,
(As Court, a just Man, yet unknown to me.)
Who does his needful flattery direct,
Not to oppress, and ruine, but protect;
Since flattery which may so ever laid,
Is still a Tax on that unhappy Trade.

If so upright a States-Man, you can find,
Whose passions bend to his unbyas'd Mind;
Who does his Arts, and Policies apply,
To raise his Country, not his Family;
Nor while his Pride, own'd Avarice withstands,
Receives Aureal, Bribes, from Friends corrupted hands.

Is there a Church-Man who on God relyes?
Whose Life, his Faith, and Doctrine Justifies?
Not one blown up, with vain Prelatique Pride,
Who for reproof of Sins, does Man deride:
Whose envious heart with his obstrep'ous sawcy Eloquence,
Dares chide at Kings, and raile at Men of sense.

Who from his Pulpit, vents more peevish lies,
More bitter railings, scandals, Calumnies,
Than at a Gossipping, are thrown about,
When the good Wives get drunk, and then fall out.
None of that sensual Tribe, whose Talents lye,
In Avarice, Pride, Sloth, and Gluttony.
Who hunt good Livings, but abhor good Lives,
Whose lust exalted, to that height arrives,
They act Ad#ltery with their own Wives.
And e're a score of years compleated be,
Can from the lofty Pulpit proudly see,
Half a large Parish, their own Progeny.
Nor doating B—, who wou'd be ador'd,
For domineering at the Counsell Board;
A greater Fop, in business at fourscore,
Fonder of serious Toyes, affected more,
Than the gay glitt'ring Fool, at twenty proves,
With all his noise, his tawdrey Cloaths, and loves,
But a meek humble Man, of modest sense,
Who Preaching peace, does practice continence;
Whose pious life's a proof he does believe,
Misterious truths, which no Man can conceive.
If, upon Earth there dwell such God like Men,
I'll here recant my Paradox to them.
Adore those Shrines of Vertue, Homage pay,
And with the Rabble World, their Laws obey.
If such there are, yet grant me this at least,
Man differs more from Man, than Man from Beast.
John Wilmot, second earl of Rochester, was born to Anne St. John, Countess of Rochester and Henry Wilmot, first earl of Rochester on April 1st, 1647, in Oxfordshire, England. In 1658, at age eleven, Wilmot succeeded his fathers’ Earldom. Just three years later, Wilmot received an M.A. from Wadham College, Oxford. Charles II, King of Great Britain and Ireland at the time, appointed Rochester a tutor to be mentored by. Rochester and his tutor, Sir Andrew Balfour travelled through France and Italy until 1664 when Rochester returned to Charles’ court. In his time at court, Wilmot became one of the most famous poets and controversial satirists of the Restoration period. In the collection *The Poems of John Wilmot*, editor Keith Walker notes that Rochester’s raucous lifestyle and many vices--some characteristics of his libertinism--often garnered contempt from the king’s court. Though he was a notable poet, Rochester acted as a patron to many playwrights including John Dryden and John Fletcher. The latter part of the 1670s saw Rochester contribute more seriously to the affairs of the state. On his deathbed, Rochester is said to have called upon his close friend, the bishop of Salisbury, Gilbert Burnet, to recant his past libertinism and convert to Christianity. Rochester died on July 26th, 1680, in Oxfordshire, at the age of thirty-three. The image included here (NPG 804), licensed under Creative Commons, is a portrait in oil on canvas of John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester by an unknown artist (c.1665-1670), via the National Portrait Gallery, UK. As the notes to the portrait point out, "This portrait has a satirical message almost certainly of Rochester's devising. It portrays him, manuscript in hand, bestowing the poet's laurels on a jabbering monkey who is tearing out the pages of a book and handing them crumpled to the poet."

-A [JL]

'Antwerp' is a false imprint. James Thorpe discusses this interesting detail in *The Earliest Editions of Rochester’s Poems* noting that the printings were “unlicensed books printed in London” where the false imprint was used for “simple subterfuge presumably intended to attract the lovers of racy literature or distract prosecution”.

- [JL]

Gloss/note on "gross"
- [JL]

From the Latin meaning, literally, "foolish fire," an ignis fatuus is a will-o'the-wisp, a flitting phosphorescent light that led travelers astray in marshy areas like the "Fenny Bogs and Thorny Brakes" (15) Rochester describes below (*OED*, "ignis fatuus, n.").

- [JL]

Lines 29-36 explain how, from Rochester's perspective, this approach to life that prizes reason is "in the wrong."

- [TH]
During the Restoration period in England, Charles II would often be found in the company of young intellectuals or "wits." In The Court Wits of the Restoration, John Harold Wilson writes that "the label Wit was attached only to one who made some real pretense to distinction as a poet, critic, translator, raconteur, or a man of learning" (6). Among the so-called "court wits" were Rochester, Sir John Suckling, Edmund Waller, and others. [add paraphrase from page 5 of Tilmouth: https://books.google.com/books?id=DipmhwkFfQMC - [JL]

As Jeremy Webster argues in Performing Libertinism in Charles II’s Court, "[l]ibertines...performed traditionally secretive acts—excessive drinking, carnality, sodomy, sedition, assault, and sacrilege—in the public sphere in a variety of ways" (2). Here, Rochester is talking in part about sexual pleasure that, once enjoyed, brings the enjoyer to fear or hate that pleasure. This fear is in part existential or philosophical—pleasure brings with it "dang'rous" (41) questions about the value of social order founded on reason—but it is also material, as in the fear of sexually transmitted infection, from which Rochester suffered. The "succeeding pains" (40) to which he refers encapsulate both kinds of fears. - [TH]

In "Fops and Some Versions of Foppery," Robert B. Heilman discusses this term, noting that as a "general, all-purpose carrier of disapproval, fop works much like fool" (364). - [JL]

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, "band" refers to an eighteenth-century neck piece traditionally worn by clergy members, scholars, and those in the legal profession (n.2.4b). In this portrait by Benjamin Wilson (c.1750) of James Bradley, third Astronomer Royal from 1742 to 1762, the band at his neck indicates his academic profession. Via the Royal Museums Greenwich online collections, this Wilson's portrait of Bradley is housed in the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London. ) - [JL]

For Margaret Ezell, who writes about the performative quality of Restoration libertinism, Rochester's libertinism was a deliberate assertion of privilege designed to cultivate power in the court ("Enacting Libertinism: Court Performance and Literary Culture" in The Oxford English Literary History, Vol. V.). Rochester's poem is a response to the question being asked here by a hypothetical clergyman (the "formal band and beard"). Here, he is performing the persona of the pedantic, prudish curate ultimately to mock him and his moral philosophy, thereby cultivating a witty superiority.

The clergyman describes Rochester's mind as "degen[e]rate," and his way of thinking, deviant. Rochester’s poem is a “Satire against Reason and Mankind”; it is fundamentally skeptical of the ability—or desirability—of reason and law to ameliorate baser human interests. - [TH]
At this point, Rochester's character speaks, returning a satirical answer to the pedantic curate.

Nathaniel Ingelo, born ca 1621. Graduate and fellow of the Queen’s College, Cambridge. Ingelo was a clergyman and author of a religious romance entitled *Bentivolio and Urania*. Marianne Thormählen writes in *Rochester: The Poems in Context* that the works of Ingelo and Simon Patrick mentioned below would have been well known during Rochester’s time. She mentions that Rochester would have detested “Ingelo’s exalted view of man; and his attacks on Epicurus and his followers”.

Simon Patrick, Bishop of Ely. 1626-1707. Graduate of Queen’s College, Cambridge and was a fellow from 1649 to 1658. Author of a book entitled “The Parable of the Pilgrim: Written to a Friend” which Rochester is directly referencing here. Patrick’s first assignment as a domestic chaplain at the home of Sir Walter St. John, John Wilmot’s uncle.


Rochester compares the inflated ideology of the pedantic curate--whose "business" is "Nonsense" and "impossibilities" (86)--with the superstitions that give witches the power of flight.

- [TH]

Rochester refers here to reason as the falsely "exalted pow'r." The remainder of the poem will lay out why the poet thinks so.

Rochester became identified with philosophical and sexual libertinism of the Restoration, which was characterized by the public, even performative pursuit of pleasure and a vivid, almost nihilistic sexuality. Libertinism was underpinned by a selective reading of Thomas Hobbes' theory of human nature. Hobbes, according to Christopher Tilmouth, "declar[ed] that the passions, not reason, constituted the proper, primary determinants of human conduct" and "posited...a new ideal of happiness, equating felicity with a constant motion of the self from the satisfaction of one appetite to the next, and he accorded fear and the lust for power critical roles in this kinetic process" (Tilmouth 4-5). Hobbes characterized humankind in nature as in a permanent state of conflict and struggle, governed by their appetites and their passions, and to avoid this chaotic, violent state of nature, human societies contract with strong leaders to bring order to passion and law to desire: "it is manifest that, during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war, and such a war as is of every man against every man" (*Leviathan*, XIII, para. 8). Rochester positions his libertinism as a moral freedom beyond the civil codes of contractual law. For more on Restoration libertinism, see James Turner, *Libertines and Radicals in Early Modern London*, especially chapter 6; and Diane Maybank's article for the British Library about libertinism on the Restoration stage.

Rochester compares his materialist sense of reason--reason that rightly "distinguishes by sense [perception]"--to the flawed or "false" reason of the pedantic curate, that starts with the "beyond" (97).
In the following lines, Rochester sets up an extended comparison between the nature of violence in the animal kingdom and in the human world.

"To play upon the square" means to play fairly (or "fair and square," in current colloquial terms). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, this expression was "[v]ery common from c1670, frequently with reference to...gaming" ("square," adj., III.12.b).

Note on these dashes, use of dashes like this in general

In *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes argued that humans are completely driven by the primary drives of appetite and aversion; people are selfish at their root. In the state of nature, which is a state of war, "there is no place for industry...; no account of time, no arts, no letters, no society, and, which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Paragraph 9, Chapter 13, *Leviathan*).

Rochester suggests that "the pretending part of the proud World" (175) use their supposed spiritual superiority to wield tyrannical power over other people, not recognizing that everyone is a "Slave."

Note on "court" and court culture

Note on aureal

A unit of measurement, usually of time. A "score" is twenty; so, four score is four times twenty, or eighty.

Rochester here makes an IF/THEN logical statement. If such "[in]conceiv[ably]" (218) "meek humble M[e]n, of modest sense" (215) can be revealed, he'll "recant" (220) this poetic statement.

Note on paradox?

"Rabble" here is used as a derogatory term to refer to the masses or the common people--and "their Laws" (222)--from which mob Rochester distances himself through his libertinism. See the OED "rabble," n.1 and adj., particularly sense 3.