

"Satyr [Against Reason and Mankind]"

By John Wilmot

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- [TP] -

POEMS
ON SEVERAL
OCCASIONS
By the
Right Honourable,
THE
E. Of R---, author

Printed at ANTWERP, Antwerp 1690.

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, ^{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.

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

38 First they're enjoy'd, and then kickt out of *Doores*,
39 The pleasure,^{pleasure} past, a threatning doubt remains,
40 That frights th'enjoyer, with succeeding pains:
41 *Women* and *Men* of *Wit*, are dang'rous Tools,
42 And ever fatal to admiring *Fools*.

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

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74 From *P— Pilgrim*,^P *S— replys*,^S ,
75 And 'tis this very reason I despise.
76 This supernatural gift, that makes a *Myte-*,
77 Think he is the Image of the Infinite:

78 Comparing his short life, void of all rest,
79 To the *Eternal*, and the ever blest.
80 This busie, puzling, stirring up of doubt,
81 That frames deep *Mysteries*, then finds 'em out;
82 Filling with Frantick Crowds of thinking *Fools*,
83 Those Reverend *Bedlams*, ^{bedlam}, *Colledges*, and *Schools*
84 Borne on whose Wings, each heavy *Sot* , ^{sot} can pierce,
85 The limits of the boundless Universe.
86 So, ^{comparison} charming Oyntments, make an Old *Witch* flie,
87 And bear a Crippled Carcass through the Skie.
88 'Tis this exalted pow'r, ^{power}, whose bus'ness lies,
89 In *Nonsense*, and impossibilities.
90 This made a Whimsical *Philosopher*,
91 Before the spacious *World*, his *Tub*, ^{tub} prefer
92 And we have modern *Cloysterd Coxcombs*, who
93 Retire to think, cause they have naught to do.
94 But thoughts, are giv'n for Actions government,
95 Where Action ceases, thoughts impertinent:
96 Our *Sphere* of Action, is lifes happiness, ^{action}
97 And he who thinks Beyond, thinks like an *Ass*.
98 Thus, whilst' gainst false reas'ning I inveigh,
99 I own right *Reason*, which I wou'd obey:
100 That *Reason* that distinguishes by sense, ^{reasons},
101 And gives us *Rules*, of good, and ill from thence:
102 That bounds desires, with a reforming Will,
103 To keep 'em more in vigour, not to kill.
104 Your *Reason* hinders, mine helps t'enjoy,
105 Renewing *Apetites*, yours wou'd destroy.

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106 My *Reasons* is my *Friend*, yours is a *Cheat*,
107 Hungar call's out, my *Reason* bids me eat;
108 Perversly yours, your *Appetite* does mock,
109 This askt for *Food*, that answers what's a *Clock*?
110 This plain distinction Sir your doubt secures,
111 'Tis not true *Reason* I despise but yours.
112 This I think *Reason* righted, but for *Man*,
113 I'le nere recant defend him if you can.
114 For all his *Pride*, and his *Philosophy*,
115 'Tis evident, *Beasts* are in their degree,
116 As wise at least, and better far than he.
117 Those *Creatures*, are the wisest who attain,
118 By surest means, the ends at which they aim.
119 If therefore *Jowler*, ^{jowler}, finds, and Kills his *Hares*,
120 Better than M—, ^m, supplyes Committed *Chairs*;

121 Though one's a *Sates-man*, th'other but a *Hound*.
122 *Jowler*, in Justice, wou'd be wiser found.
123 You see how far *Mans* wisdom here extends,
134 Look next, if humane Nature makes amends;
125 Whose Principles, most gen'rous are, and just,
126 And to whose *Morals*, you wou'd sooner trust.
127 Be Judge your self, I'll bring it to the test,
128 Which is the basest *Creature Man*, or *Beast*? , ^{beasts}
129 *Birds* feed on *Birds*, *Beast* on each other prey,
130 But Savage *Man* alone, does *Man* betray:
131 Prest by necessity, they Kill for Food,
132 *Man*, undoes *Man*, to do himself no good.
133 With Teeth, & Claws: by Nature arm'd thy hunt,
134 Natures allowance, to supply their want.
135 But *Man*, with smiles, embraces Friendships, praise.
136 Unhumanely his Fellows life betrays;

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137 With voluntary pains, works his distress,
138 Not through necessity, but wantonness.
139 For hunger, or for Love, they fight, or tear,
140 Whilst wretched *Man*, is still in Arms for fear;
141 For fear he Armes, and is of Armes afraid,
142 By fear, to fear, successively betray'd
143 Base fear, the fource whence his best passion came,
144 His boasted Honour, and his dear bought Fame.
145 That lust of Pow'r, to which he's such a *Slave*,
146 And for the which alone he dares be brave:
147 To which his various Projects are design'd,
148 Which makes him gen'rous, affable, and kind.
149 For which he takes such pains to be thought wise,
150 And screws his actions, in a forc'd disguise:
151 Leading a tedious life in Misery,
152 Under laborious, mean *Hypocrisie*.
153 Look to the bottom, of his vast design,
154 Wherein *Mans* Wisdom, Pow'r, and Glory joyn;
155 The good he acts, the ill he does endure;
156 'Tis all for fear, to make himself secure.
157 Meerly for safety, after Fame we thirst,
158 For all Men, wou'd be *Cowards* if they durst.
159 And honesty's against all common sense,
160 *Men* must be *Knaves*, 'tis in their own defence.
161 *Mankind's* dishonest, if you think it fair;
162 Amongst known *Cheats*, to play upon the square, ^{square},
163 You'le be undone -----, ^{dashes}
164 Nor can weak truth, your reputation save,

165 The *Knaves*, will all agree to call you *Knave*.
166 VVrong'd shall he live, insulted o're, opprest.
167 VVho dares be less a *Villain*, than the rest.

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168 Thus Sir you see what humane Nature craves, ^{nature},
169 Most Men are *Cowards*, all Men shou'd be *Knaves*:
170 The diff'rence lyes (as far as I can see)
171 Not in the thing it self, but the degree;
172 And all the subject matter of debate,
173 Is only who's a *Knave*, of the first *Rate*?
174 All this with indignation have I hurl'd,
175 At the pretending part of the proud World,
176 Who swolne with selfish vanity, devise,
177 False freedoms, holy Cheats, and formal Lyes
178 Over their fellow *Slaves*, ^{slaves} to tyrannize.
179 But if in *Court*, ^{court}, so just a Man there be,
180 (In *Court*, a just Man, yet unknown to me.)
181 Who does his needful flattery direct,
182 Not to oppress, and ruine, but protect;
183 Since flattery which may so ever laid,
184 Is still a Tax on that unhappy Trade.
185 If so upright a *States-Man*, you can find,
186 Whose passions bend to his unbyas'd Mind;
187 Who does his Arts, and *Policies* apply,
188 To raise his *Country*, not his *Family*;
189 Nor while his Pride, own'd Avarice withstands,
190 Receives *Aureal*, ^{aureal} Bribes, from *Friends* corrupted hands.
191 Is there a *Church-Man* who on *God* relies?
192 Whose Life, his Faith, and Doctrine Justifies?
193 Not one blown up, with vain Prelatique Pride,
194 Who for reproof of Sins, does *Man* deride:
195 Whose envious heart with his obstrep'ous sawcy Eloquence,
196 Dares chide at *Kings*, and raile at Men of sense.

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197 Who from his Pulpit, vents more peevish lies,
198 More bitter railings, scandals, Calumnies,
199 Than at a Gossipping, are thrown about,
200 When the good *Wives* get drunk, and then fall out.
201 None of that sensual *Tribe*, whose Talents lye,
202 In Avarice, *Pride*, *Sloth*, and *Gluttony*.
203 Who hunt good Livings, but abhor good Lives,
204 Whose lust exalted, to that height arrives,
205 They act Ad#ltery with their own *Wives*.

206 And e're a score of years compleated be,
207 Can from the lofty *Pulpit* proudly see,
208 Half a large *Parish*, their own *Progeny*.
209 Nor doating *B—* ,^b who wou'd be ador'd,
210 For domineering at the *Council Board*;
211 A greater *Fop*, in business at *fourscore*,^{fourscore} ,
212 Fonder of serious *Toyes*, affected more,
213 Than the gay glitt'ring *Fool*, at twenty proves,
214 With all his noise, his tawdrey Cloaths, and loves,
215 But a meek humble Man, of modest sense,
216 Who Preaching peace, does practice continence;
217 Whose pious life's a proof he does believe,
218 Misterious truths, which no *Man* can conceive.
219 *If*,^{if} upon *Earth* there dwell such *God like Men*,
220 I'll here recant my *Paradox* to them.
221 Adore those *Shrines* of *Vertue*, *Homage* pay,
222 And with the *Rabble World*,^{rabble} , their *Laws* obey.
223 If such there are, yet grant me this at least,
224 *Man* differs more from *Man* , than *Man* from *Beast* .

Footnotes

author 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, John 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."
- [JL]

Antwerp '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]

gross In this sense, gross refers to materiality as distinct from ethereality or spirituality. See OED adj III.8.c: describes "things material or perceptible to the senses, as contrasted with what is spiritual, ethereal, or impalpable."
- [MUSudStaff]

ignus-fatuus 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]

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

- reason The "reasoning Enging" is the mind--here, Rochester notes that the mind is "huddled in [the] dirt" of the physical body. The body and the mind are intertwined, rather than separate.
- [TH]
- bubbles Here used as a noun, "bubbles" in this sense refers to those who have been fooled or cheated (OED, n.2b).
- [TH]
- wits 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]
- pleasure 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 causes 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]
- fops 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]
- band 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]
- libertinism 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.

- rage 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]
- speaker At this point, Rochester's character speaks, returning a satirical answer to the pedantic curate.
- Ignello [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 *aRochester: 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".
- p Simon Patrick, Bishop of Ely (1626-1707) was an English theologian and, eventually, bishop; his book *The Parable of the Pilgrim* (1663/4) is referenced here. Patrick's *Pilgrim* is an allegory along the same lines of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Patrick's first assignment after graduating from Queen's College, Cambridge, was as a domestic chaplain to Sir Walter St. John, John Wilmot's uncle ([Dictionary of National Biography](#))>
- [TH]
- s Richard Sibbes (1577-1635), was a popular Puritan theologian, minister, and writer, in the affective tradition with intellectual connections to Calvinism. He is most well known for a work called *The Bruised Reed*, but Rochester here references a work this editor has not been able to trace. Other editions of the poem replace "replies" with "soliloquies," possibly suggesting a different work, Richard Bayne's *Holy Soliloquies* (1637)--Sibbes was very influenced by Bayne. Regardless, all of these references are to popular theologians during the 17th century. He, too, studied at Cambridge, but his Puritanism caused him to lose a lectureship there ([Dictionary of National Biography](#)).
- [TH]
- bedlam Bedlam is the colloquial term for the Hospital of St. Mary of Bethlehem, an asylum for the mentally ill first established in 1676. It was often used as a broader term for any location of perceived insanity.
- [TH]
- sot A sot is a stupid person, usually someone who is "stupified" with liquor or habitually drunk (OED).
- [TH]
- comparison 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]
- power Rochester refers here to reason as the falsely "exalted pow'r." The remainder of the poem will lay out why the poet thinks so.

- [TH]

tub The word *tub* has a lot of meanings during this period. Proverbially, it is used to refer to a fiction, or a made-up story; but it also specifically refers to the pulpit from which a non-conformist preacher spoke. Nonconformity refers to any religious faith not strictly Anglican. It also has another meaning that Rochester would have known about--a "sweating-tub" or a sort of barrel encasing the body used specifically to treat venereal disease. See the OED.

- [TH]

action 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.

- [TH]

reasons 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).

- [TH]

jowler A common name for a dog.

- [TH]

m M-- is Henry More, a rationalist Cartesian theologian who argues that God orders the world infallibly and always according to the best ends ("the best of all possible worlds"). He wrote several books, including *On the Immortality of the Soul* , where he sought to counter the Hobbesian view of life outside of society as "nasty, brutish, and short" and instead to prove "the existence of immaterial substance, or spirit, and therefore God" ([Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)); he is most well known for his idea of the Spirit of Nature, which connected the material world to the spiritual. Like other Platonists of the 17th century, he believed that the immortality of the soul proved an afterlife, characterized by damnation or salvation. Rochester disagreed with this perspective.

- [TH]

beasts In the following lines, Rochester sets up an extended comparison between the nature of violence in the animal kingdom and in the human world.

- [TH]

square "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).

- [TH]

dashes During this period, dashes were often used to visibly omit a name that would identify the subject of satire. Usually, contemporary readers would have understood who the author was referring to.

nature 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*).

- [TH]

slaves 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."

- [TH]

court Court here, as elsewhere, refers to the court of nobles and other people of power surrounding King Charles II (or whomever was monarch at the time). Court culture, in the Restoration, was often characterized both by stringent absolutism and a permissiveness that distinguished those of privilege. To read more about Restoration court culture, see *Culture and Politics at the Court of Charles II, 1660-1685* , by Matthew Jenkinson.

- [TH]

aureal Readers may be more familiar with the noun form ("aura") of this obsolete adjective. "Aureal Bribes" are bribes that are gilded or golden (OED).

- [TH]

b Other versions of Rochester's poem replace the initial with "bishops."

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

- [TH]

if 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.

- [TH]

rabble "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.