

Headnote for John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester

By John O'Brien

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John Wilmot, the second earl of Rochester (and therefore traditionally referred to as “Rochester”) was the most famous--and notorious— writer of the Restoration period in Britain. A poet and dramatist, Rochester became as well known for the scandalous life he led as for his writing. Rochester is the period's most notable instance of what was known as a *libertine* . Libertines chafed against restraints of any kind: political, religious, moral, intellectual, sexual. It's this last category--sexuality--that is the one for which Rochester is best remembered; he was married (to a woman he had tried to abduct before their marriage) but engaged in numerous often very public affairs with partners of both genders. Equally notorious in his own lifetime were some of his drunken fights, duels, and various scandals. Toward the end of his life, Rochester said that he had done “many wild and unaccountable things” because he was “continually Drunk” for months at a time. Rochester was brilliant, handsome, charming, charismatic—and also more than a little dangerous.

Rochester died at age 33, probably of venereal disease and the effects of chronic alcoholism. Because of Rochester's notoriety, he became (and has in some ways remained) the face of a Restoration court culture that has been remembered as uniquely licentious.

But it is too simple to reduce libertinism to sexual licentiousness, or to think of Rochester as only a party animal, is to sell libertinism short. For Rochester and other libertines of this period, the “liber”--Latin for “free”--at the root of the word “libertine” was key, signifying the freedom that they sought from traditional, stultifying dogmas of any kind. Libertines struck out on their own, rejecting orthodox systems of morality and manners, determined to use their own minds and sensibilities to forge paths where they relied on the evidence of their own senses and on logic, rather than on belief or tradition. They wanted to question everything--religious dogma, political orthodoxy, the moral systems they inherited from the past. This was the era, too, when experimental science was taking off, and Rochester and other writers of the period were intent on describing the world in the same realistic terms that were being called for by experimental scientists; the frank sexuality of Rochester's poetry comes in part out of a desire to name things accurately and directly rather than euphemistically. There is a great deal that is admirable about a stance like this, and a lot that should sound familiar to us; libertines like Rochester saw themselves as modern people, breaking the chains of tradition and striking out in new directions. Sexuality was a big part of libertinism, but only a part.

Rochester's poetry is thus suitably bold, funny, satirical, and sharp. His poem “Satyr” is an aggressive attack on the human impulse to follow orthodoxies of any kind, and is one of the great testimonies of a thinker who is willing to follow his belief in reason untainted by dogma to its logical conclusion. And “The Imperfect Enjoyment” makes a hilarious, theatrical scene out of a bout of impotence. At the heart of most of Rochester's poems is a narrator who is in some ways like, in some ways unlike, Rochester, who, for all his swagger, is able to mock himself.

Like many writers of this period, Rochester was a coterie poet, whose works circulated first in manuscript among a small group of like-minded friends and readers. Coterie poetry was widely written and distributed in this period, and much of it was never printed. In Rochester's case, however, the coterie was the court of Charles II. In the court culture that Rochester moved in, writing poetry was a way of gaining attention, of demonstrating one's intelligence and taste. It is plausible, in fact, that some of Rochester's outrageousness has something to do with this coterie environment, since saying outrageous things was a way to stand out and gain the King's favor (it was also a way to lose the King's favor when you went too far, as Rochester did on a few occasions; he spent some time as a prisoner in the Tower of London). Rochester's poems circulated in manuscript well before they ended up in print, and he was not at all eager to see his works printed, since that kind of “publication” would make his writing available to the vulgar masses. He never authorized an edition of his own works. Rochester's poems thus present a kind of nightmare to editors trying to figure

out the authentic text, which is in many cases a hopeless task. Some of his poems were group efforts, with several members of the court contributing various parts, or with Rochester adding his own ideas to a poem that was started by someone else. Some poems may have been begun by Rochester but were revised by others, or perhaps revised by Rochester himself; one example of this is "Satyr" for which Rochester added the final paragraphs as a response to a sermon attacking the first version of the poem. And, to complicate things much further, there are many poems that have been attributed to Rochester that he either certainly did not write, or for which his authorship is an open question. An example of this is "Signior Dildo," which is often attributed to Rochester, but which may or may not be by him. Its frequent attribution to him is perhaps a kind of homage to the way that "Rochester" came to refer less even in his own lifetime not so much to an individual man but to a kind of myth of the model libertine, the kind of person who could be expected to have written such a poem, and who therefore might as well be considered to be its "author."

Image: John Wilmot, the Earl of Rochester, perhaps painted by Jacob Huysmans, around 1675. (National Portrait Gallery, London). It's not clear exactly what the message of the picture is supposed to be. Rochester is crowning a monkey with laurel leaves. We could take this to be a mockery of literary accomplishment, or it might more specifically be a satire on John Dryden, then the poet laureate. The painting may also be referring to Rochester's poem "Satyr," where he claims that he would rather be a monkey or other animal rather than be a creature like a human that claims to be rational. Whatever the precise meaning here, it does seem clear that the artist, who might well have been collaborating with Rochester himself, is making a complex joke about mimicry, authorship, and what it means to be a poet.