

## Introduction

Even today, many people regard John Wilmot, the second Earl of Rochester, as a poet whose work is dominated by an 'overwhelming desire for sexual pleasure'.<sup>1</sup> Critical comments on the urgency with which Rochester's verse articulates a painful lack of inner assurance<sup>2</sup> have not dispelled the traditional image of him as a man and poet impelled by sensual appetite. A rake's reputation is particularly hard to live down, and that image has had a remarkable staying power, misleading as it is. In fact, nobody who did not know what sexual desire is like would be any the wiser after perusing the Rochester canon.<sup>3</sup> While few of his poems lack an erotic dimension, they have virtually nothing to say about the nature of sexual appetite and gratification.

This realisation is no novelty, nor is the contention that Rochester possessed an unusually keen intelligence. What this study attempts to do is to emphasise the way in which mental and physical experience are brought together in his work. Previous Rochester critics have tended to stress the poet's search for firm beliefs and a stable identity. While the absence of rest and quiet is strongly felt in his poetry, I do not think that this feature is due to a fruitless hankering for secure convictions. It seems to me that Reba Wilcoxon is quite right when maintaining that Rochester's ethic is based on sensual pleasure as the highest good.<sup>4</sup> The trouble is that it is not good enough.

Arguing such a case would not call for hundreds of pages. The reason

<sup>1</sup> An expression used, with reference to Rochester, by Harold Weber in *The Restoration Rake-Hero: Transformations in Sexual Understanding in Seventeenth-Century England* (Madison, 1986), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Dustin H. Griffin, *Satires Against Man: The Poems of Rochester* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1973), pp. 10–20, and Reba Wilcoxon, 'Rochester's Philosophical Premises: A Case for Consistency', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 8 (Winter 1974–5), 198.

<sup>3</sup> See pp. 29 and 82–3 below. <sup>4</sup> 'Rochester's Philosophical Premises', 200.

why this book has acquired such ample proportions has to do with another aspect of its approach to Rochester: the wish to study the poems in their historical context.

This is the third published critical full-length study of Rochester's poetry. While its predecessors<sup>5</sup> contributed a wealth of information on the seventeenth-century background, they focused on literary connexions and influences. Valuable as these analyses are, Rochester's poetry repays efforts to contemplate it in the light of Restoration events, developments and personalities in the fields of national and international politics, religion, philosophy and social life.

It has often been suggested<sup>6</sup> that Rochester was not interested in politics, and that his poetry is largely unaffected by the major events of his time. On the contrary, his satires contain a number of passages where history is transmuted into poetry, to borrow George deF. Lord's phrase.<sup>7</sup> Besides, a great many details from Rochester's poems gain freshness and poignancy when related to contemporary conditions. The disorders afflicting the various sufferers at Tunbridge Wells, the culinary predilections adumbrated in *Timon*, and the faiths and infidelities of the ladies satirised in *Signior Dildo* may serve as examples of such phenomena. Lines and phrases that seemed to be of a general nature, perhaps even somewhat platitudinous, are suddenly seen to embody sly allusions to notable figures in Restoration society.

It would indeed have been odd if a man of Rochester's brains and perspicacity had remained unaffected by the way of the Restoration world. Burnet stresses his love of gossip, and his poems and letters<sup>8</sup> testify to this inclination. A much-quoted letter to Henry Savile<sup>9</sup> states that Rochester and his addressee had both dabbled in, and proved useless at, 'Polliticks'. The expression may merely be taken to refer to Court intrigue, or to Rochester's occasional appearance in the House of Lords; but it hardly implies indifference to affairs of state. The marvellous Bendo Bill<sup>10</sup> shows with what mastery Rochester was able to imitate, and even enhance, the highly specialised jargon of seventeenth-century

<sup>5</sup> Griffin's *Satires Against Man* and David Farley-Hills, *Rochester's Poetry* (London, 1978).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Griffin's essay 'Rochester and the "Holiday Writers"' in Dustin Griffin and David M. Vieth, eds., *Rochester and Court Poetry: Papers Presented at a Clark Library Seminar 11 May 1985* (Los Angeles, 1988), p. 38.

<sup>7</sup> From his preface to the first volume (New Haven and London, 1963) of the *Poems on Affairs of State: Augustan Satirical Verse, 1660-1714*, p. lv.

<sup>8</sup> Jeremy Treglown's edition of *The Letters of John Wilmot Earl of Rochester* (Oxford, 1980) is an invaluable aid to the Rochester critic. Quite apart from the letters themselves, Treglown's annotation is a source of vital information throughout.

<sup>9</sup> P. 67 in Treglown's edition of the *Letters*.

<sup>10</sup> See p. 249 below.

quacks. The speaker of the *Satyr against Reason and Mankind* moves sure-footed among the philosophical and religious tenets of the late seventeenth century. And, finally, the *Allusion to Horace* is the work of a critical intelligence of a high order. Rochester was not a great or in any way original thinker; but he was, as James Sutherland has said, 'the most brilliant person at the Court of Charles II'.<sup>11</sup>

Not only did Rochester possess first-class brains; they contributed to the mental make-up of a detached observer who took nothing on trust. The word 'sceptic' has been applied to him,<sup>12</sup> and with good reason: nowhere has Rochester articulated a sober belief in a circumstance or phenomenon beyond his own direct experience. In a crucial passage from his conversations with Burnet, he averred that 'he was sure *Religion* was either a mere Contrivance, or the most important thing that could be'. For a man who 'was not master of his own Belief', and who regarded believing as, at best, 'but a probable Opinion',<sup>13</sup> it was not permissible to move with assurance beyond the evidence of his senses.

These reflections have not made any distinctions between views expressed in Rochester's letters, in his discussions with Burnet and in his verse. The problem of how to draw such distinctions cannot be evaded, however. Rochester's reputation as a poet has certainly suffered in consequence of his personal notoriety. Even his contemporaries were aware that licentious works from other, and less able, pens were imputed to him. Thanks to the pioneering efforts of twentieth-century editors, above all David M. Vieth, Rochester's *œuvre* has been shorn of such spurious pieces. Even so, a peculiar reluctance to avoid letting the wicked-Earl image colour analyses of the canonical poems is – as was pointed out above – still with us.

A new and thoroughly researched biography of Rochester, viewed as a representative of his time, would no doubt divert attention from his dissipations, such as they were, and direct it towards his cultural *milieu*. Among the issues which await scholarly clarification are the extent of Rochester's learning and his development (if any) as *homo politicus*; the religious currents and developments in his household; and the conse-

<sup>11</sup> *English Literature of the Late Seventeenth Century* (Oxford, 1969), vol. vi of the *Oxford History of English Literature*, ed. Bonamy Dobrée and Norman Davis, p. 171.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Griffin, *Satires Against Man*, ch. 1 ('The Mind of a Sceptic').

<sup>13</sup> Gilbert Burnet's *Some Passages of the Life and Death of John Earl of Rochester* (1680) has been published in many editions. For the modern Rochester student, it is most conveniently consulted in Farley-Hills, ed., *Rochester: The Critical Heritage* (New York, 1972). The relevant passages occur on pp. 77 and 66.

quences of his long sojourns in France. Did Rochester study Stillingfleet's *Origines Sacrae*, Descartes, Browne's *Religio Medici*, and the works of Henry More, Walter Charleton, Joseph Glanvill and Gassendi?<sup>14</sup> Did he actively embrace Whig ideology towards the end of the 1670s, or were his views on political events, personages and so on chiefly conditioned by personal tastes and distastes from first to last? Did he persuade his wife to become a Catholic, as Burnet would have us believe, and if so, when and why? (Developments during the mid- and late 1670s might make it seem prudent to have a practising Catholic in the family.) How did Rochester spend his months in France? What *salons* did he frequent, what plays did he see and what people did he meet? It is hard to believe that a young English courtier with literary aspirations and a sceptical mind, who spent many weeks in France with plenty of time on his hands, would never have any contacts with the intellectual high-society set there. It is surely natural to imagine that Rochester, who had lived in France as a child and knew several highly placed people at the Court of Louis XIV, would soon seek out a congenial social and literary atmosphere. Investigations of such matters lie outside the scope of this study of Rochester's poems; but there is no doubt that they would provide valuable guidance for critics analysing his verse.

Quite apart from considerations of this kind, the problem of voice, of identity, is one that every student of Rochester's poems has to face. Despite the historical bias of this book, the biographical dimension is not, on the whole, much to the fore in it. There are two reasons for my unwillingness to call the 'I' of the various poems 'Rochester'. One is the poet's mastery of disguise, so well brought out in Anne Righter's (now Anne Barton) seminal lecture on Rochester.<sup>15</sup> Several of Rochester's best poems are demonstrably dramatic monologues, among them *A Letter from Artemiza in the Towne to Chloe in the Countrey* and the *Song of a Young Lady to her Ancient Lover*.<sup>16</sup> Even where a speaker utters

<sup>14</sup> These works are commended in William Ram(e)sey's *The Gentlemans Companion, or, a Character of True Nobility, and Gentility In the way of Essay* (London, 1672), p. 128. We know that Rochester was familiar with one of Ramesey's choices; 'for a Diversion, you may read *Hudebras* [sic]' (p. 129).

<sup>15</sup> It was printed as 'John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester' in the *Proceedings of the British Academy* 53, 1967 (1968), 47–69. A recent reminder to this effect was supplied by D. K. Alsop in "'An Epistolary Essay from M. G. to O. B. upon Their Mutual Poems'" and the Problem of the Persona in Rochester's Poetry', *Restoration: Studies in English Literary Culture 1660–1700*, 12.2 (Fall 1988), 66–7 ('The difficulty of discovering the "real" Rochester is compounded by his particular enjoyment of mask, imitation, and self-parody', 66).

<sup>16</sup> Eric Rothstein's *Restoration and Early Eighteenth-Century Poetry*, vol. III of *The Routledge History of English Poetry* (Boston, London and Henley, 1981), makes several important observations

opinions which sound very like the Rochester we know from traditional sources, there are obstacles in the way of identification. The other reason is the peculiar lack of stability, of poise, that characterises the poet's work. Even where the argumentation is both persuasive and coherent, one senses the irritable movement of an unquiet mind behind it.

Rochester's verse shows us a mind which constantly demands that the body supply evidence of true worth. Despite its yearning for fixity, for the moment when the senses provide complete and immutable satisfaction, that mind has the strength to refuse to be taken in by tainted ware. Where Rochester's contemporaries are balanced, even complacent, hitting their targets squarely, his poetry is always on the move. I think that Rochester's mind was the most interesting thing about him, and that the way in which that mind tackled great existential issues in a particularly turbulent historical period was the most interesting thing about it.

Textual difficulties and problems of authorship caused much confusion during the early decades of twentieth-century Rochester criticism. Worthy pioneering contributions like Johannes Prinz's *John Wilmot Earl of Rochester: His Life and Writings*, published in 1927,<sup>17</sup> have suffered in the eyes of later generations as a result of quantities of argumentation built on poems that were not in fact written by Rochester.<sup>18</sup> Vivian de Sola Pinto, the second great name in early-twentieth-century Rochester scholarship, contributed a biography which, despite its virtues, has long cried out for a successor.<sup>19</sup> His Muses' Library edition of Rochester's poetry, first published in 1953, represented a great advance at the time but has now been superseded.

Where Rochester's poetry is concerned, one name towers above all others in respect of textual scholarship. David M. Vieth's *Attribution in*

regarding Rochester's speakers, applying the term 'dramatic monologues' to his poetry; see pp. 31–2.

<sup>17</sup> In Leipzig; it is no. 154 in the Palaestra series.

<sup>18</sup> Still, Vieth's tribute to this predecessor in his *Rochester Studies 1925–1982: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York, 1984), p. 134, is satisfyingly generous. Another early work of Rochester criticism, albeit on a much more modest scale, whose usefulness is marred by such inaccuracies is Fredelle Bruser's still intriguing 'Disproportion: A Study in the Work of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester', *University of Toronto Quarterly* 15 (July 1946), 384–96. The same goes for two biographical works that retain their fascination: Graham Greene's *Lord Rochester's Monkey: Being the Life of John Wilmot, Second Earl of Rochester* (London and New York, 1974); and Charles Williams' *Rochester* (London, 1935).

<sup>19</sup> The first version was published as *Rochester: Portrait of a Restoration Poet* (London, 1935); the revised biography, *Enthusiast in Wit: A Portrait of John Wilmot Earl of Rochester, 1647–1680*, appeared in 1962 (Lincoln and London).

*Restoration Poetry*<sup>20</sup> constituted a tremendous achievement when it appeared in 1963 and still does. In it, Vieth proposed a Rochester canon to which subsequent decades have only seen marginal amendments. In 1968, Vieth's edition of *The Complete Poems of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester* laid a solid foundation for, and did much to inspire, modern Rochester criticism.

Vieth's *Complete Poems* consists of modernised texts. The editor explained his decision to modernise by maintaining that 'there is virtually no basis for an old-spelling text of Rochester's poems' (p. xlv). It is true that there is no single authoritative seventeenth-century text, and very few of the poems exist in Rochester's holograph. Even so, Vieth's modernisation, while no doubt helpful in winning a wide audience for Rochester in the 1960s, has often been felt to be too radical (see below). In 1984, Keith Walker published an old-spelling edition of *The Poems of John Wilmot Earl of Rochester*.<sup>21</sup> Quotations in this study are taken from that edition.

The decision to use Walker's texts rather than Vieth's was by no means a foregone conclusion. As several reviewers have noted, there are errors and omissions in the newer edition. A more fundamental objection was summed up by Ken Robinson:

For the vast majority of poems [Walker] cannot claim to represent Rochester's spelling or punctuation. At best we are given versions close to those read by contemporaries. It is difficult to see the wisdom of preferring the spelling, capitalization, and accidentals of a variety of scribes and compositors to the judgement of an editor.<sup>22</sup>

Walker clearly felt that there was no need to impose a regularising editorial element on the texts and refrained from aiming higher than presenting versions read in Rochester's lifetime (Introduction, p. xv). Freely admitting to being 'everywhere indebted' to Vieth (p. xiv), he has applied the labours of others as well as his own scholarship and judgement to give us an old-spelling edition, the first ever with collations, which takes stock of present-day Rochester scholarship and criticism. As such, it is a vital contribution to research on Rochester.

Walker also gives an important answer to the question of why an old-spelling edition should be desirable in the first place:

<sup>20</sup> The full title is *Attribution in Restoration Poetry: A Study of Rochester's Poems of 1680* (New Haven and London).

<sup>21</sup> Oxford (Blackwell). A paperback edition, with some corrections, has subsequently appeared.

<sup>22</sup> Review of Walker in *The Modern Language Review* 81.4 (October 1986), 989. See also Paul Hammond's review of Walker's edition in *The Review of English Studies* 37.146 (May 1986), 263.

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A great many of Rochester's words are 'slightly different' [the reference is to a quotation from Vieth regarding the respective meanings of 'satyr' and 'satire'] in connotation from their modern equivalents, and it may serve some purpose to be reminded of this. (p. xv)

Indeed they are, and indeed it does. Practically every line in Rochester's poems should send an attentive reader to the *OED*. Some words are explained by editors; but how many readers – even when acquainted with Restoration English – realise that 'duty' in line 13 of *The Fall* refers to a vassal's tribute, and that 'Baffl'd' in line 5 of *My Lord All-Pride* means 'disgraced, dishonoured'? Vieth's radical modernisation entailed blunting his readers' awareness of the all-important fact that words we automatically assume we understand do not always mean what we think they do.

Other reactions to Vieth's over-modernisation<sup>23</sup> have expressed further grounds for unhappiness with his editorial policy in this respect. In a seminal essay on Rochester, Barbara Everett pointed out that 'the primary need in presenting a poet is not to obscure his tone',<sup>24</sup> referring to Vieth's text as 'able but toneless'. Margaret Anne Doody has seconded this view.<sup>25</sup>

As Dustin Griffin concluded in a review of Walker's and Hammond's<sup>26</sup> Rochester editions, 'specialists will probably want to have both [Vieth's and Walker's] editions'.<sup>27</sup> The latter cannot, as Robinson says, properly be said to have superseded the former, and neither is definitive. In view of the situation a few decades ago, however, present-day Rochester readers are indeed fortunate in having them both.

This study of Rochester's poetry adds very little to the labours of textual scholars. A few altered readings and datings are suggested, but they are of no great importance. Nor are any substantial advances made with regard to the order in which the poems were written. The chronology is a vexed issue; the spectacle of editorial struggles with it has left me with no ambition to map out Rochester's poetic development stage by stage. In any case, I do not think that the matter of Rochester's development is itself of overriding importance. Certainly, it is not, in my view, sufficiently interesting to be set up as the fundamental

<sup>23</sup> A term applied to Vieth in Robinson's review, 989.

<sup>24</sup> 'The Sense of Nothing', in Treglown, ed., *Spirit of Wit: Reconsiderations of Rochester* (Oxford, 1982), p. 15.

<sup>25</sup> See *The Daring Muse: Augustan Poetry Reconsidered* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 268, n.2.

<sup>26</sup> *John Wilmot Earl of Rochester: Selected Poems* (Bristol, 1982).

<sup>27</sup> *The Scriblerian* 18 (1985), 73.



organising principle of a study of his poetry. Consequently, the structural outline of the book has been determined by other concerns. It has seemed most natural and expedient to start with Rochester's lyrics on sensual/erotic topics. The satirical works are best considered in succession, and in view of the wealth of secondary material drawn into those analyses, beginning with them would have resulted in a decidedly top-heavy structure. The book is divided into five sections. To some degree, each of them draws on the preceding one(s). However, many readers will only be interested in one or two works and will not wish to be burdened with the necessity of ploughing through a great number of pages looking for scattered references to them. With their needs in mind, I have tried to make it possible to read every section – and, as far as possible, each chapter within every section – as a self-contained unit.

The present study is the outcome of an obstinate feeling that there was more 'to' John Wilmot than people seemed willing to admit. The air of dilettantism that still clung to his verse, despite much admirable work by twentieth-century scholars,<sup>28</sup> seemed inconsistent with what came across to me as the records of an exceedingly sensitive, acute and essentially incorruptible mind, records transmitted by way of the expert craftsman's cold eye and painstaking hand. I may have failed in my ambition to present Rochester's poetry as the work of a complex and serious artist; but I would be glad if this book went some way towards erasing the stubborn remains of the wicked-Earl-who-wrote-with-ease image.

<sup>28</sup> One of them, Rachel Trickett, supplied a thoughtful and balanced view of Rochester's stature as an artist in *The Honest Muse: A Study in Augustan Verse* (Oxford, 1967), p. 89.



## CUPID AND BACCHUS



### I

#### *Cupid and Bacchus*

The section entitled ‘Love Poems’ in Keith Walker’s edition of Rochester’s poetry contains a handful of poems where ‘love’ in terms of heterosexual relations, with or without an emotional element, is not the main issue. The *Song* beginning ‘Love a *Woman!* y’are an *Ass*’ is virtually a negation of conventional love lyrics. For various reasons, the poem *Grecian KINDNESS. A SONG* (‘The utmost Grace the *Greeks* could show’) does not fit in readily with the designation ‘Love Poem’ either, and nor does the Anacreontic poem called *Upon his Drinking a Bowl*. Like *Grecian Kindness*, the latter fuses the deities of love and wine; but the joys of love are typified by ‘Two lovely *Boys*’, and the greater part of the poem is devoted to the splendours of the ideal ‘Cup’.

The three versions of the poem called *To A Lady, in A Letter*<sup>1</sup> form a somewhat different case. This lyric consists of the epistolary address of a lover to his mistress, and sexual pursuits play a vital part in it. It thus has a better claim to the ‘Love Poem’ label than the three lyrics whose main accent is on drinking. Still, it does constitute an *apologia* for that very pursuit; and it has seemed more natural to discuss it along with them.

One of Rochester’s best-known poems, *The Disabled Debauchee*, makes up the fifth member of the Cupid-and-Bacchus category. Placed by Walker among the ‘Satires and Lampoons’, it is a poem in which the two occupations of drinking and sexual activity are combined, again with an unmistakable reference to pederasty.

The ensuing discussion focuses on four main topics: the attractions, and effects, of drinking; Rochester’s indebtedness to the Anacreontic conventions that flourished in seventeenth-century England; pederasty,

<sup>1</sup> This is the title given to the last versions published by Vieth (who includes two) and Walker (whose edition contains three).

or paedophilia; and the inferiority of the female sex. On all these points, Rochester's poems recall a number of classical loci. Much in the way of classical influence had of course been handed down by the poet's predecessors in France as well as in England; this is especially true of the Anacreontic elements. Still, the poems in this category seem to testify to that 'very good grounding in Latin' which Vivian de Sola Pinto believed Rochester to have acquired as a boy.<sup>2</sup>

## FOLLOWING THE GOD OF WINE

In his letter<sup>3</sup> of 22 June 1671(?) to Henry Savile, Rochester asserts, 'that second bottle Harry is the sincerest, wisest, & most impartiall downright freind we have, tells us truth of our selves, & forces us to speake truths of others'.<sup>4</sup> The core of the eulogy on the second bottle expresses a central concern in the poet's works. Rochester hated insincerity as much as he detested folly and presumptuousness. Hence, his subscription to the *in vino veritas* dictum implies an exalted opinion of the properties of wine.

In the poems, however, this effect of alcohol is not expressly mentioned; other reasons for imbibing are emphasised instead. Thus, for instance, wine is a natural companion of 'mirth', and enjoying it in the company of a cheerful friend is simply pleasurable in itself. However, convivial drinking may also be conducive to loftier attainments by affording potent stimulation to the mind. In 'Love a *Woman!* y'are an *Ass*', drinking 'engender[s] *Wit*'; and the second version of *To A Lady, in A Letter* (in Walker's edition) extols the ability of wine to 'raise / Our thoughts', affording 'Idea's fitt to praise / What wee thinke fitt to Love'.

A succession of classical poets had acclaimed the same virtue (cf., for instance, Horace's *Epistle* 1.19 and *Ode* III.25); as Robert Herrick put it in *His fare-well to Sack* (lines 31–2), 'Horace, Anacreon both had lost their

<sup>2</sup> Albeit, naturally, on the basis of very different texts. See *Enthusiast in Wit*, p. 5. Cf. the dissimilar views on Rochester's classical attainments offered by Burnet and Thomas Hearne, easily accessible in Farley-Hills' *Critical Heritage* volume, pp. 48 and 170n. On the familiarity of Restoration readers with classical works, including indecent ones, see Roger Thompson, *Unfit for Modest Ears: A Study of Pornographic, Obscene and Bawdy Works Written and Published in England in the Second Half of the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1979), pp. 3–4.

<sup>3</sup> The – as far as I am aware – only extant critical discussion of any length to deal with drinking in Rochester's verse gives detailed consideration to this letter; see John D. Patterson, 'Rochester's Second Bottle: Attitudes to Drink and Drinking in the Works of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester', *Restoration* 5.1 (Spring 1981), 6–15.

<sup>4</sup> P.67 in Treglown's edition of Rochester's *Letters*.