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John Wilmot, second Earl of Rochester, is still commonly regarded as 'the wicked Earl', and his reputation as a rake has imparted an air of dilettantism to his poetry. By contrast, *Rochester: The Poems in Context* emphasises the poet's sharp, restless intellect, a more powerful driving force in his poems than the sensual appetites stressed by previous critics. Marianne Thormählen uncovers his familiarity with, and sly allusions to, events and leading characters in Restoration politics; his awareness of trends in science, theology and philosophy; his acute representations of contemporary mores; and his commitment to high standards in literary craftsmanship. As a result, a more complex picture of Rochester emerges – that of a serious artist who tackled major issues during a particularly turbulent period in English history.

While Rochester's texts are always at the focus of the discussion, the book has much to offer readers whose main interest is in late seventeenth-century culture and civilisation rather than in Restoration literature. Among the issues reflected in Rochester's poems and addressed by the author are religious discord in seventeenth-century England, the position of women scholars and poets, military matters, statecraft and foreign affairs under Charles II, and developments in philosophy and science.

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To Claes Schaar

E come sare' io senza lui corso?
Chi m'avria tratto su per la montagna?
Purgatorio III.5-6

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