

Introduction: the imperfect enjoyment

This is the monstrosity in love, lady, that the will is infinite,
 and the execution confined; that the desire is boundless, and the
 act a slave to limit.

(*Troilus and Cressida*, III.ii.79–81)

How Blest was the Created *State*
 Of *Man* and *Woman*, e're they fell,
 Compar'd to our unhappy *Fate*;
 We need not fear another *Hell*.

(*The Fall*, 1–4)

Libertinism embodies a dream of human freedom, recognised from the outset both as infinitely desirable and as unattainable, a magical power enabling one to overcome a sense of alienation and helplessness. The appeal of transgressive libertinism is perhaps best embodied in the problematical figure of Don Juan, trickster, rebel, servant of the phallus and of the ruthless amoral will, demanding a freedom which enslaves oneself or others. Mozart's Don Giovanni, like other libertine heroes, exploits a deep ambivalence in his victims and in the audience, embodying their secret unacted desires, lulling moral judgement to sleep.¹

With nothing to rebel against, no taboos to be transgressed, blasphemy would lose its power to shock. It can be argued that society creates its rebels, and that limited toleration and eventual punishment of dissenters from the established order of family, church and state serve as effective instruments of social control. The youthful libertine, for all his vaunted independence, is acting out his part in a described Oedipal scenario, and must inevitably define himself in terms of the perceived norm he is rebelling against. Society asserts its hegemony over the rebel by pre-empting the very vocabulary the rebel is allowed to use. Indeed, as Foucault and others have argued, the very conceptions of sexual norm and

deviancy serve a policing function.² Donna Anna and the Commendatore, in this view, create Don Giovanni in order to keep the Don Ottavios of the world in line. Yet even Foucault, who argues that the sexual instincts have no existence other than as a ‘historical formation’, in a universe of ‘force relations’ in which the controllers and the controlled are indissolubly bound together in symbiosis, recognises that the attempt by those in authority to contain rebellion often produces the very effect it seeks to preclude.³ As I shall show in detail in examining the careers of the Earl of Rochester, Aphra Behn and other writers of the Restoration period, the dialogue between the felt need for order and the compulsion to rebel cannot be resolved in a single predictable pattern.

Nearly all accounts of libertinism as an ideology stress restlessness, dissatisfaction or a sense of incompleteness as its defining characteristic. No one woman, no one conquest, can ever satisfy, and the libertine finds himself on ‘an infinite round of repetition, where each disillusionment leads to a new idealisation’.⁴ The rake-hero of Restoration comedy, like Mozart’s paradigmatic libertine, remains uninvolved emotionally, unperturbed by the chaos he creates around him. This accords with the Platonic theory that there must always be in love an imbalance of emotion between lover and beloved, pursuer and the object pursued.⁵ It is the nature of the libertine hero to resist entanglements and responsibilities:

Then bring my Bath, and strew my bed,
 as each kind night returns,
 I’le change a Mistress till i’me dead,
 and fate change me for worms.⁶

Leporello’s catalogue aria, with great comic gusto, admiringly depicts his master’s seductions as an infinite series – not quite ending in death, as in Hobbes’s formulation and in the Rochester passage just quoted, since the prospect of extending the series keeps death at bay. With 1,003 sexual encounters – both the stuff of myth and, in its wry comic precision, the mock-heroic undercutting of myth – the sex act must inevitably become an assertion of power: one woman is more or less like all the others. But it is equally true that each time will be the first time, a fresh start: Mozart makes it clear that nothing in Elvira’s or Zerlina’s life will be nearly as interesting. The catalogue aria, itself an enacted seduction, in which the singer (or composer) toys with Elvira and with the opera-house audience,

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knowing they are in his power, is an instance of the transformative power of the erotic, made manifest in the supple, witty, expressive music.

The compulsion to secure conquest after conquest, fleeing from any possibility of a stable relationship, is in many ways a manifestation of insecurity. Psychoanalytically, it can be seen as Oedipal, with the unattainable mother as origin of a series of unsatisfactory surrogates, 'while the adversaries, deceived, fought and eventually even killed, represent the unconquerable mortal enemy, the father'.⁷ Certainly the element of misogyny has always been prominent in libertine writing – quite unabashedly so in pornography, with its symbolic reduction of women to objects to be used, soiled and discarded, and more obliquely in the casual unexamined assumption, prevalent in many of the works to be discussed in this study, that women are created for the diversion of men, 'not to dwell in constantly, but only for a night and away': 'Mistresses are like Books; if you pore upon them too much, they doze you, and make you unfit for Company; but if us'd discreetly, you are fitter for conversation by 'em.'⁸ The pleasures of 'Company' and 'conversation' are in this passage in *The Country-Wife* (1675) defined as male, reflecting a bonding which, in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's useful term, is 'homosocial', effectively excluding women: 'I tell you, 'tis hard to be a good Fellow, a good Friend, and a Lover of Women, as 'tis to be a good Fellow, a good Friend, and a Lover of Money: You cannot follow both, then choose your side' (I.i.203–6). Sedgwick in her discussion of *The Country-Wife* defines cuckoldry as 'a sexual act, performed on a man, by another man', in which a woman, third party in a triangular relationship, serves only as an object of exchange, assumed to have no intrinsic value.⁹ The women in the play in their different ways all seek to resist or subvert such commodification ('Sir, you dispose of me a little before your time', II.i.200), yet *The Country-Wife*, like a number of works we shall be considering, presents no alternative to a competitive model in which all human relationships are property relationships and 'freedom' means mastering and humiliating another: 'Now I think I am rid of her, and shall have no more trouble with her – Our Sisters and Daughters like Usurers money, are safest, when put out; but our Wives, like their writings, never safe, but in our Closets under lock and key' (v.ii.75–8).¹⁰ The assertion of power, literally phallogocentric in *The Country-Wife*, masks a fear of impotence and reduction to a 'female'

passivity, no less marked in the priapic Horner, the play's Don Juan prototype, than in the play's collection of blind and foolish cuckolds: 'Now your Sting is gone, you look'd in the Box amongst all those Women, like a drone in the hive, all upon you, shov'd and ill-us'd by 'em all' (III.ii.10–12).

As we shall see in subsequent chapters, the ideology of libertinism in seventeenth-century England places a pre-eminent emphasis on competition, presupposing a zero-sum game. In every transaction, the assertion of freedom by one participant means the deprivation of freedom for another: in a world where betrayal is the norm, the sex act itself becomes predatory. C. B. Macpherson has argued persuasively that the Hobbesian competitive model of man, so influential in the later seventeenth century, reflected the economic organisation of a society in which outmoded aristocratic ideals of responsibility, magnanimity and service were being supplanted by a cash nexus which eroded distinctions and overrode human ties.

But a market, they say, does suit the king well,
 Who the Parliament buys and revenues does sell,
 And others to make the similitude hold
 Say his Majesty himself is bought too and sold.¹¹

When in the closing scenes of *The Country-Wife*, Margery Pinchwife, rejecting all prudential considerations, seeks to assert the claims of natural feeling ('I don't intend to go to him again; you shall be my Husband now . . . I do love Mr. *Horner* with all my soul, and no body shall say me nay', v.iv.204–5, 330–1), she is forcibly silenced and, in a general conspiracy of cuckolds and dissemblers, 'sent back' into the power of the husband she has learned to despise (v.iv.1).¹² Ultimately, Horner, like the dupes whose values he shares, loves only himself: the libertine pattern is to stamp one's ownership and then pass on, indifferent or actively hostile once the moment of conquest is over. Peter Brooks describes a similar pattern in terms of a psychology of victimisation and control: 'The libertine, who pursues, seduces, then brings a rupture to recommence the process of pursuit and seduction, remains free, while his victims are deprived of freedom by his control of their psychological movements and their reputations.'¹³

Again and again the works to be discussed in this study demonstrate how the ideology of libertinism can justify oppression in the

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name of freedom, liberating the will to possess and destroy or its masochistic counterpart. *The Country-Wife* brings to the fore the element of aggression and violence within sexuality: 'Write as I bid you, or I will write Whore with this Penknife in your Face' (iv.i.92–3). For rakes and cuckolds alike in this play, the sexual act is a symbolic enactment of mastery, most satisfying (and conversely, most galling) when performed before witnesses, with the cuckold an unwilling, passive voyeur or auditor of his own humiliation. Where Freud interprets the 'need for a debased sexual object' as a projection of male self-loathing, some recent feminist theorists, recoiling from the aggression and misogyny implicit in the libertine ethos, have assimilated all heterosexual relationships to a model of rape and colonisation, presenting the male's 'thrusting into' the female as 'an act of invasion and ownership undertaken in a mode of predation'.¹⁴ A less reductive variant of this argument restates the polarity as tyrant and victim, of either sex, and locates it specifically in a fear-laden 'unfree society' in which, as in the nightmare vision of Sade, the desire to dominate and tyrannise becomes all-embracing, and the ultimate sexual pleasure is murder: 'Sexuality, stripped of the idea of free exchange, is not in any way humane; it is nothing but pure cruelty . . . The act of predation . . . is the assertion of the abyss between master and victim. There is no question of reciprocal sensation; the idea of it is abhorrent to the Sadeian libertine . . . because to share is to be robbed.'¹⁵

The notorious 'china scene' in *The Country-Wife*, with its string of double entendres, anatomises a society in which sex is a quantifiable commodity both for women and for men, and in which, as in the model of human behaviour proposed by Hobbes, all members of a society are locked in an unceasing struggle for dominance, masked by the polite formulas of decorum:

SQUEAMISH. O Lord, I'll have some China too, Good Mr. Horner, don't you think to give other people China, and me none, Come in with me too.

HORNER. Upon my honour I have none left now.

SQUEAMISH. Nay, nay I have known you deny your China before now, but you shan't put me off so, Come –

HORNER. This Lady had the last there.

LADY FIDGET. Yes indeed Madam, to my certain knowledge he has no more left.

SQUEAMISH. Oh but it may be he may have some you could not find.

LADY FIDGET. What d'y think if he had any left, I would not have had it too, for we women of quality never think we have China enough.
 (IV.iii.180–92)

The exchange, in which the two women in coded language fight over the sexual favours of Horner, reverses conventional expectations in presenting the women as aggressive and the male as post-coitally passive. Quite explicitly, the passage equates the competitive and sexual drives, unmasking the unbridled, ravenous desire for dominance and sexual satisfaction which motivates these two female libertines.¹⁶ One possible reading of the passage is that Lady Fidget and Mrs Squeamish, a fortiori, stand for all mankind, with their stratagems for concealing the desires that master them. But it can also be read as expressing a male hostility and fear directed toward an alien sex with a sexual capacity imagined as boundless, where that of the male is a slave to limit.

The treatment of female sexuality in libertine writings of the Restoration period is highly ambivalent. Even those works by male authors which consciously subvert stereotypes of male power and female passivity, treating sexually active women with a degree of sympathy rather than as monstrous embodiments of unbridled appetite, frequently present women as servants to the divine phallus, accessory to the sexual pleasures of the male. Rochester's 'Song of a Young Lady. To her Ancient Lover' employs a female persona who, in a poem of considerable wit and charm, embodies the principles of natural fertility, youth and sexual vigour, a dream of regeneration associated with the Lucretian Venus, earth goddess and Queen of Love. Yet it is striking that in this poem, as in a comparable passage in the sharply satirical 'scepter' lampoon on Charles II, the woman's formidable energies are wholly directed toward giving her male partner an erection.

Thy Nobler part, which but to name
 In our Sex would be counted shame,
 By Ages frozen grasp possest,
 From his Ice shall be releast:
 And, sooth'd by my reviving hand,
 In former warmth and Vigor stand.
 All a Lover's wish can reach,
 For thy Joy my Love shall teach:
 And for thy Pleasure shall improve,

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All that Art can add to Love.
 Yet still I love thee without Art,
*Ancient Person of my Heart.*¹⁷ (15–26)

As this poem illustrates, the representations of women in libertine works are projections of male desire and male fears. This is no less true of poems like Rochester's 'A Letter from Artemiza in the Town to Chloe in the Country' and 'The Imperfect Enjoyment', where, as in the lines just quoted, the idealised female figures are associated with an imagined unfallen sexuality, than of his most vitriolic obscene lampoons. Rochester employs the same conceptual vocabulary of 'naturall freedoms' and 'gen'rous passion' for praise and dispraise, in giving a prelapsarian dignity and pathos to 'that lost thing (Love)' in 'Artemiza to Chloe' (38–40) and in attacking the whorish inclinations of Corinna in 'A Ramble in Saint James's Parke' (97–8). This quality of ambivalence is especially pronounced in 'Upon his leaving his Mistriss', with its tone elegantly poised between admiration and contempt for a female libertine who, putting the doctrine of sexual equality into practice, dispenses her bounty like a goddess.

Favours like *Nature* you dispense,
 With Universal influence.

 See the kind Seed-receiving earth,
 To ev'ry Grain affords a *Birth*;
 On her no Show'rs unwelcome fall,
 Her willing *Womb*, retains 'em all,
 And shall my *Celia* be confin'd?
 No, live up to thy mighty *Mind*,
 And be the Mistriss of *Mankind*. (13–22)

Libertinism thus has its territorial side, and resistance to female encroachment is a recurrent motif in libertine writings of the Restoration period. As the *OED* notes dispassionately, the term 'libertine' is 'rarely applied to a woman', making the transgressive, indecorous assertion by a woman of her 'naturall freedoms', rivalling the men, all the more a cause for anxiety.

The erotic element so prominent in libertine writing, as Reichler has pointed out, in certain respects breaks down the customary barrier between self and Other, exciting the imagination of the reader and encouraging direct involvement, identification and

imitation. In other ways such works are profoundly alienating, producing sexual excitation and release of a purely physical, mechanical kind. No one in seventeenth-century England or France bought the clandestine *Tullia and Octavia* or *L'Ecole des filles* for the sake of the plot, characters or sentiments, but for a direct, practical end, immediately apparent in male readers by an erect penis; the aim of such pornographic works, in David Foxon's clear definition, is 'principally to arouse sexual desire and encourage erotic fantasies'.¹⁸ If pornography entices and seduces, obscenity, with its foregrounding of the violently aggressive elements in sexuality, combines elements of attraction and repulsion. The poems of Rochester are occasionally pornographic and frequently obscene, and in both respects they illustrate, in a particularly striking form, some problematical aspects of the ideology of libertinism in the Restoration period.

The obscene poems for which Rochester is notorious set out to embarrass or trap the reader by bringing out into the open what normally is kept discreetly concealed.

By all *Loves* soft, yet mighty *Pow'rs*,
 It is a thing unfit,
 That Men should *Fuck* in time of *Flow'rs*,
 Or when the *Smock's* beshit.
 Fair nasty *Nymph*, be clean and kind,
 And all my joys restore;
 By using Paper still behind,
 And sponges for before. ('Song', 1–8)¹⁹

As often is the case with Rochester, the shock administered by these lines is partly satiric in intent. The advice tendered is severely practical, and the lines contain an objective, factual element, useful to the social historian in providing evidence for the state of feminine hygiene in the later seventeenth century. But aesthetically they gain their effect by deliberately violating the reader's expectations and common standards of propriety, thus causing acute physical pain. The conventionally elevated diction of the opening lines prepares the reader for the standard sentiments of love lyric: the descent from flattering euphemism to menstruation and fecal stains is like a slap in the face. Doctrinally Yeats makes a similar point in more decorous language in 'But Love has pitched his mansion in/The place of excrement',²⁰ but the emphasis is entirely different. There is no room for love in Rochester's poem, only fucking.

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In some ways, these lines are closer to graffiti than to anything we would ordinarily describe as poetry. The emotional energy behind these lines, and others like them, can be described as a desire to deface or destroy, a free-floating aggressiveness of considerable intensity. The impulse to cause pain, to lash out at and, if possible, destroy one's enemies has traditionally been associated with satire and in particular with the writings of Swift: 'Though it must be understood, / I would hang them if I could'.²¹ In these lines as in Swift's 'The Lady's Dressing Room', the aggressive energy seems somehow in excess of the circumstances, has not entirely been channelled toward the poem's didactic end. Ultimately the poem defeats any single rational, coherent interpretation. Does Rochester's 'Song' express a healthy Rabelaisian sexuality and acceptance of bodily needs? Or does it express a loathing of the flesh, a disgust at one's own mortality in its reduction of the 'Fair Nymph' to a bag of bones and excrement?

This sense of an overflow of destructive energy, causing uncertainty or instability of tone, is even more pronounced in another satire in lyric stanzas, 'On Mistress Willis', which once again presents menstrual blood ('Flowers') as an emblem of degradation and pollution.

Against the Charms our *Ballox* have
 How weak all human skill is
 Since they can make a Man a slave
 To such a Bitch as *Willis*.

Whom that I may describe throughout
 Assist me Bawdy Powers
 I'll write upon a double Clowt
 And dipp my Pen in Flowers . . .

A Prostitute to all the Town
 And yet with no man Freinds
 She rails and scolds when she lyes down
 And Curses when she Spends. (1-8, 13-16)

The opening stanza would suggest that the concerns of the poem are in part general, even philosophical: Rochester is commenting on the slavery the sexual appetite exercises over all men, whatever their grand intentions. Here the contrast between 'high' and 'low' terms, between the poetic resonances of 'Charms', 'slave' and 'human skill' and the blunt deflation of 'Ballox' and 'Bitch' makes Rochester's

point with witty economy. In lines 13–16, the penultimate stanza, the poet remains thoroughly in control of his medium, as he uses the characteristic Augustan devices of balance, antithesis and chiasmus ('A Prostitute to all the Town . . . with no man Freinds') to paint a memorable satiric portrait. The lines lack the element of pity for the benighted victim we find in Pope's 'Epistle to a Lady', but, as in passage after passage in that poem, the rhetoric, echo to the sense, builds up a character sketch of a woman divided against herself.²²

A similar point is implied by the successive oxymora in stanza 3:

Her looks demurely Impudent
 Ungainly Beautifull
 Her modesty is insolent
 Her witt both pert and dull. (9–12)

It is possible to read these lines as suggesting that Mrs Willis is a pretender to wit and beauty, whose 'modesty' is a whore's come-on, but the passage is more interesting if we read it not as a catalogue of insults, but as an analysis of gifts misapplied. No empty-headed ninny but 'a Foole of Parts' like the Fine Lady of 'Artemiza to Chloe', her 'Impertinence' and lack of 'discretion', her inability to judge the fitness of an occasion, cause her to become a parody of her own good qualities ('Artemiza to Chloe', 149, 161, 168, 257). Promiscuous, she is at all times alone and, devoted to sex, she robs the sexual act of any pleasure. Yet the tone of the last stanza veers violently away from the witty understatement of 'And Curses when she Spends'.

Bawdy in thoughts, precise in Words,
 Ill natur'd though a Whore,
 Her Belly is a Bagg of Turds,
 And her Cunt a Common shore. (17–20)

The last two lines of the poem come across as a cry of rage and pain, an expression of a misogynist recoil from the female genitalia, represented, in language negating any possibility of desire, as loathsome and unclean. As manifestation of the double standard, the poem both violates and erects taboos.²³ The shock of the offensive language, ill prepared for, with no attempt to make the accusation particularly appropriate to the character built up in the previous lines, does not provide an effective satiric climax, but signifies a loss of artistic control.

The same kind of satiric overkill can be found in the second