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The pursuit of sexual freedom and its political, philosophical and practical implications are the themes of this wide-ranging new study of seventeenth-century literature, which confronts ideological issues of sexual politics equally relevant to modern debate. The author examines the writers of the later seventeenth century in their historical context, and focuses particularly on what happens when women as well as men desire sexual freedom. In a study of the writings, notorious for their sexual candour, of the Earl of Rochester, God-haunted atheist and licensed rebel of the Restoration court, and Aphra Behn, the most prominent and most controversial woman writer of the period, the author explores some of the tensions inherent in the ideology of individual liberty as applied to the conduct of sexual relations inside and outside marriage. The works by Rochester, Behn and their contemporaries as discussed here gain much of their power from the ambivalence with which they treat the competing claims of freedom and authority, rebelliousness and security, the assertion of power and the need to love.

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LITERATURE

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In memory of my mother, Ruth Parker Chernaik

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