CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Matthew C. Augustine and Steven N. Zwicker

Over the past several decades there has been a transformation in our appreciation of the political cultures, the chronologies and the revolutions of the late seventeenth century. We have learned to read its subtleties of confessional identity and paradoxes of tender conscience, and to read anew the full range of Restoration sexualities, gender relations and sociabilities. As importantly, we have enlarged our sense of authorship in this age: its often collaborative character, the role of literary coteries in fashioning discourse and circulating texts and the workings and institutions of the commercial press. We now apprehend the Restoration theatre not simply as a repertoire of heroic plays, witty comedies and tragedies of pathos, but as an emblem of the culture's obsession with roles, performances and the constitution of the self. Naturally, indeed preternaturally, in the sexual mythologies and performance arts of the Restoration, in its literature and theatre, John Wilmot, second Earl of Rochester, plays a starring role. Rather more surprisingly, he now seems important even to our understanding of Restoration religion and ideology: to the ways in which libertinism is bound to the history of toleration and to the manner in which courtly verse at once reifies and critiques the conduct of Restoration politics (see Harris, Chapter 9).

For his contemporaries and near-contemporaries, there was no question of Rochester's importance to Restoration culture. From the manuscript circulation of his verse to the posthumous publication of *Poems on Several Occasions* (1680) through much of the eighteenth century, Rochester's works – authentic and otherwise – were often copied, widely read and steady sellers.[1] And he was hardly to be contained between the boards of quartos and folios; he migrated into fictions – into romances, anecdotes and the theatre, even into European letters.[2] He permeated print culture at every level, though Johnson's biography of Rochester in *Lives of the Poets* (1779–81) seems to have been a turning point, a key sign of diminution and disapproval.[3] There were uses to be made of Lord Rochester as a character

in the emergent novel, but there was less and less room for him as an author – corporate, spurious or genuine. Between 1700 and 1750 there were at least twenty-seven separate editions of the poetry; between 1751 and 1800 seventeen; between 1801 and 1850 only five editions and between 1851 and 1900, alas, only two selections.[4] Under the long shadow of Victorian moralists and historians – often one and the same – Lord Rochester was dismissed as a hazard to moral health, unfit for mixed company.

This was to change in the twentieth century. Thanks to bibliophiles like Johannes Prinz and John Hayward and then to the more professional attention of Vivian de Sola Pinto – editor and champion of Rochester and D. H. Lawrence alike – Rochester re-emerged as poet in the first decades of the last century.[5] The collocation of social and sexual revolution with Pinto's critical and biographical energies on behalf of both Rochester and Lawrence points a way to understand twentieth-century scholarly – and not just scholarly – interest in Rochester. In the 'roaring twenties', his writings began to drift from closet to mainstream consumption: in 1923 Roger Quilter's settings of Rochester's songs were published in both London and New York; in 1926 Nonesuch Press brought out a *Collected Works* in London; and in 1934 Ezra Pound celebrated Rochester in the *ABC of Reading*.[6] A hum of activity persisted across the war years and through the 1950s until, and surely under the sign of the 'swinging sixties', there was an explosion of interest in Rochester and his works: not only David Vieth's *Attribution in Restoration Poetry: A Study of Rochester's Poems of 1680* (1963) and his Yale edition (1968) but as well the *Gyldenstolpe Manuscript*, which appeared in the 1960s in Swedish and English, and even *Sodom* – that boldly pornographic takedown of Charles II and his court often associated with Rochester – was published by a commercial press.[7] Driven by an ideological ferment that questioned received categories of gender and sexual identity, indeed that questioned foundational assumptions altogether, we have come to see Rochester not as 'the quintessence of debauchery' but as the quintessence of a disruptive modernity.[8] If Rochester could hardly be edited respectably in the nineteenth century, now it seems he can hardly be edited enough. Following Vieth's editorial work on the verse, Jeremy Treglown's edition of the *Letters* appeared in 1980, Keith Walker's *Poems* in 1984, then in more rapid succession the editions of Paddy Lyons (1993), Frank Ellis (1994, revised and reissued 2004), Harold Love's Oxford English Texts *Works* (1999), Florence Lautel-Ribstein's two-volume bilingual edition (2009), Nicholas Fisher's recension of Walker (2010) and Paul Davis's *Selected Poems* (2013), with the promise of more to come.[9]

Small wonder that Rochester's poetry should attract so much editorial attention; some of his lyrics and philosophical verses, even his scabrous satires, are perfect of their kind. The love lyrics are striking not only for their lapidary form but also for the ways in which they allow us to hear a history of seductive cadences, how love poetry sounded before the flood, before the civil wars and republican novelty. We cannot rightly admire Rochester without a knowledge of the forms and exemplars he so perfectly mimicked, nor reread cavalier poetry innocent of Rochester's ironies, Herrick's advice to tarrying virgins without Rochester's brutal envoy, 'Then if to make your Ruine more, / You'll peevishly be Coy, / Dye with the Scandall of a Whore, / And never know the joy' (*Song* [Phillis, be gentler], ll. 13–16). And who between Jonson and Rochester could boast 'the true veine of Satyre'[10] or rival Rochester's philosophical verse for its effortless polish and arresting depth? 'Whate'er he did, was done with so much ease, / In him alone'twas natural to please; / His motions all accompanied with grace / And paradise was opened in his face'; Dryden wrote this celebration of *sprezzatura* for the Duke of Monmouth, but had the Earl been a more constant patron, Dryden might well have offered these couplets to Rochester, even in memory of Rochester.[11]

Sociability and collaboration

To see Rochester as the epitome, the poster boy, of the Restoration sorts well enough with his celebrity status at the court of Charles II, his ubiquity in the gossip and rumour that swirled through Whitehall and into the Town, the Country and even abroad (see Zwicker, Chapter 5). But to view Rochester as standing out, standing apart, so brilliantly from his age obscures how deeply he was embedded in Restoration sociabilities and especially in the sociability of writing. Of course, the sociability of writing in the Restoration wasn't always very sociable; at times it was poisonous and vituperative. Restoration satires aimed to deride and deface, to explode pretension and obliterate reputation. Some of Rochester's wickedest verse lampooned his social equals and rivals, especially John Sheffield, Earl of Mulgrave, though when it came to handing out abuse, Rochester's muse was fairly indiscriminate. Jester and provocateur, he mocked the king and the king's whores; pilloried literary competitors and pretenders; and was the scourge of fools, drudges and arrivistes. But Rochester's envy for Dryden was a different matter. He laughed off the laureate as that 'rarity which I cannot but be fond of, as one would be of a hog that could fiddle, or a singing owl' (*Letters*, 120),[12] but he also paid Dryden the compliment

of his close attention: the filaments of Dryden's writing are woven deeply into the fabric of Rochester's texts. His 'Fine Lady' (*Artemiza to Chloe*) recaptures the comic bravura of Dryden's Melantha (*Marriage A-la-Mode*), though in darker shades, and Rochester read with some care the raft of Dryden's prefaces and prologues dismissed in the *Allusion* as so much impertinence (see Augustine, Chapter 4).[13] Collaboration in this world points to projects of shared writing, but might it also include the productivity of envy and enmity? Could we consider the Earl of Mulgrave to have 'collaborated' in the making of some of Rochester's lampoons, *My Lord All-pride*, *Ephelia to Bajazet*, *An Epistolary Essay, from M. G. to O. B. upon their mutuall Poems*?

We are familiar with the category of collaboration from the Renaissance theatre and fascinated by the puzzles of Shakespearean authorship – which words, which scenes attributed to the Bard might have been crafted by some lesser hand. But collaboration is not epiphenomenal to Restoration poetry. For Rochester and his circle – for Sedley, Savile and Dorset – it was the very condition of writing: in fashioning *The Rehearsal*, for instance, the Duke of Buckingham and his friends vied to outdo one another in humiliating that rhymester, that grasping professional, John Dryden,[14] to say nothing of the many and promiscuous hands that copied, altered and added to the texts of scribal authors.[15] For such writers, collaboration was a challenge, a competitive sport, an art. Appreciating the centrality of collaboration has transformed our understanding of Restoration writing. It is a striking irony that John Milton, hero of the republican imaginary, that 'equal commonwealth', should have been so insistently the sole author of his voice and that those subjects of Stuart tyranny, struggling under the 'troublesom and modern bondage of Rimeing', should have been so democratically and irrecoverably absorbed into a literary collective.[16] When we read Rochester's verse, we can seldom be certain exactly whose words we are reading, and it is not only a matter of copyists, it is more essentially a matter of composition.

We would do well to remember that much of the work that has revealed the collaborative character of early modern writing and the scribal nature of publishing and transmitting verse in the Restoration has taken place in the wake of deconstruction. As distant as scholarship on the history of the book and the history of reading may seem from French theory, there is in fact a striking complementarity between the high theory of the 1970s and 1980s and recent materialist histories, between the undecidability, the unending iterability of meanings, and the aporias of the material text. Thanks to Rochester's editors, whose glosses and

annotations have revealed the play of so many texts and voices within his writings, we are now able to appreciate Rochester as an illustration of post-structuralist insights, as wonderfully instantiating Roland Barthes's conviction that a text is not a line of words releasing a single meaning, but rather 'a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture', and not only from centres of culture but for Rochester from the parks and theatres and from the brothels and stews of Restoration London.[17] Fixed within the material conditions of Rochester's verse, Harold Love's magisterial edition puts in front of us the irreducible multiplicity of the Rochesterian text, meticulously indexing the poems' legion variant readings. In the impossibly complex cases of *In the Isle of Brittain* and *Seigneur Dildoe*, Love does not even attempt to reconstruct an authorial archetype, instead printing several alternate copy texts, none of which can be securely identified either with the author's first or final intention, and all of which embody variants of attention and intention on the part of author and scribe, collaborator and consumer (see Davis, Chapter 3).[18] Can we think then of a gradient of uncertainties with Rochester: first his brilliant acts of mimicry and ventriloquism, themselves part of a shared culture of collaboration and impersonation; then the irresoluble textual uncertainties and problems of attribution; and finally an opening out into a nearly boundless scepticism?[19]

Theatre and theatricality

And yet despite the tendency of recent editorial and bibliographical work to unsettle the stability of Rochester's texts, such work has hardly disturbed the poet's near complete identity with his age. Indeed, in some paradoxical way, the unsettling of Rochester's texts seems to have enhanced that cultural identity, or at least to have coincided with our understanding of the ways in which the Restoration is defined by the bad faith of its politics, the instability of its social practices and altogether by an aura of contingency and performativity. From the moment Charles II stepped ashore at Dover, he understood what it meant to perform gratitude, piety and magnanimity – and he acted with remarkable success at the opening of his reign. As he descended from ship to bridge in Dover Roads, accompanied by 'a great number of nobility and gentry of England and his life guard all most richly accoutred', the king was met by the town's mayor and by a chaplain who 'presented His Majesty with the Holy Bible as a gift from this town', 'and his gracious Majesty laying his hand upon his breast, told the Mayor, nothing should be more dear to him than the Bible'.[20]

This may have been the first act on English soil in the reconstitution of Stuart kingship, but it was hardly the king's first effort at play-acting. In flight from the defeat of his Scots-Royalist army by Cromwell's forces at Worcester in 1651, Charles was disguised as a peasant farmer, dressed in 'a Country-Fellowes habbit, with a pair of ordinary grey Cloath Britches, a Leathern Dublett, and a greene Jerkin', coached to speak with a local accent and walk like a farm labourer.[21] Nor should it escape our notice that in his flight from Worcester the future king was accompanied by a future earl of Rochester – Henry Wilmot performing an act of 'signal loyalty and integrity' that would echo through his son's life.[22]

Charles's escape from Worcester, the tale of his sheltering in the 'royal oak', the low guises he assumed, were all woven into the high romance of Stuart kingship,[23] a series of episodes that might well put us in mind of Shakespeare's meditations on the performance of political authority in the 'Henriad'. Of course the theatricality of Restoration politics was never bound solely to the king; Charles II may have been its principal player, but his entire court was of a piece with costuming and masquerade, and the trials and executions of the regicides, crucial stagings of the new government's authority.[24] Toward the end of Charles's reign, the trials of Stephen College and Algernon Sidney would provide some of this age's most compelling scripts,[25] but the epitome of baroque theatre in late Stuart rule was surely the Popish Plot, a tissue of stories and lies, of escalating conspiracies and paranoia – Catholic priests skulking in the wings of the palace, the king's Catholic wife and brother supposedly concocting schemes and potions.[26] As if anyone would have been fool enough to rush towards a Jesuit coup with an aging and childless king on the throne and his brother already savouring the succession. As Kevin Sharpe has demonstrated, the constitution of authority was, in a world without police or standing armies, always a matter of image and representation.[27]

The theatricality of Rochester's verse may not have been part of the high drama of Stuart politics, but Rochester was alive to the full range of idioms and accents at the court and in the street.[28] His poems are echo chambers of voices, some distant – Latin poetry, cavalier song – some proximate – voices heard in fashionable resorts, but also, and of course, from below, in taverns and alleys, among bawds and whores, cutpurses and cheats. Rochester ventriloquized aristocratic peers and mere poseurs, and quite brilliantly and intimately he inhabited a range of female subjectivities: lovers and mistresses, women seduced and abandoned, as well as courtiers and aristocratic ladies and the king's own favourites and

concubines. Dryden may well have caught the negligent masculinity of the king's bedchamber at the opening of *Absalom and Achitophel*, but it was Rochester who was capable of imagining himself into the pathos of female service. It is surely no surprise that Elizabeth Barry, renowned for her performance of female passion, was tutored for these roles by Rochester.[29] Could we even say that he taught her to perform herself? – not an unlikely pedagogy for this master of ventriloquism and disguise who would at times 'go about in odd shapes, in which he acted his part so naturally, that even those, who were in the secret, and saw him in these shapes, could perceive nothing by which he might be discovered'.[30] And yet this art of imitation should not obscure Rochester's striking capacity for self-irony and self-disclosure (see von Maltzahn, Chapter 6):

> Witness Heroick Scarrs—look here—nere goe:
> Sear Cloths and uclers from the Top to Toe.
> Frighted at my own Mischeifs I have fled
> And bravely left my Lifes Defender dead;
> Broke Houses to break Chastity and Dy'd
> That floor with Murther which my Lust denyd.
> Pox on't, why do I speak of these poor things?
> I have Blasphem'd my God and Libelld Kings.
> The Readyest way to Hell? come quick, nere stirr!
> The Readyest Way, my Lord's by Rochester.
> (*To the Post Boy*, ll. 7–16).

It may surprise that Rochester did not write more directly for the theatre – there is a scattering of verse, a prologue, an epilogue, the adaptation of Fletcher's *Valentinian*. But perhaps it belonged to the logic of mimicry and impersonation that Rochester should have produced his most sustained theatrical script by adopting and adapting the voice of another playwright. He transposed the psychomachia of Jacobean revenge tragedy into the register of Restoration passions and politics and re-centred the play's tragic action from the emperor to the violated Lucina (see Taylor, Chapter 7; Sanchez, Chapter 10).

That sex was a drama of sovereignty at the court of Charles II is a perception at the heart of *Lucina's Rape*,[31] though Rochester also taught this lesson in briefer and wittier fashion in the famed Scepter lampoon, where he writes of his monarch,

> Nor was his high desire above his Strength:
> His Scepter and his Prick were of a length,
> And she may sway the one who plays with t'other
> Which makes him little wiser than his Brother.
> (A-text, ll. 10–13)

Rochester is bracingly sceptical about the king's agency, but play and play-acting were arts that Charles II well understood; unlike his father and his brother, Charles died peacefully in his bed at the end of a reasonably long life, certainly of an improbably long reign. But it is worth remarking Rochester's acuity in linking the king's political dependency with his proclivity for heedless spending, 'Restlesse he Rowles about from Whore to Whore / With Dogg and Bastard, always goeing before, / A merry Monarch, scandalous and poore' (A-text, ll. 20–22). One way and another, and repeatedly in his verse, Rochester articulated a politics constituted out of sexuality: of course in the Scepter lampoon and *Lucina's Rape*, in *Seigneur Dildoe*, in the *Lampoone by the Earle of Rochester*, and in an array of uncertainly attributed squibs and epigrams. Though Harold Love concluded that *Sodom* – that astonishing piece of porno-political theatre – is unlikely to have come from Rochester's hand, its relentless exposure of sexual voracity and transgression seems congruent with the operations of his more securely attributed writings.[32] Nor is the recovery of political argument in Rochester's verse only a matter of our archaeology; his contemporaries were sensitive enough to the ideological force of his work. A great deal of pornographic verse was spuriously attributed to Rochester, but so were many overtly political satires.[33] The name 'Rochester' was a register of the political; in those anthologies collected at the end of the seventeenth century called 'poems on affairs of state', Rochester was the boon companion of Milton and Marvell and Dryden, a collocation of political writers bundled together regardless of party and partisanship.

The problem of the topical and the ephemeral

Rochester's scrupulous editors have identified a wide range of topical and ephemeral matter in his verse, a gallery of players in the frolics and intrigues of Charles II's court. We are now able to read Rochester with a nearly contemporary mastery of its references,[34] and further, recent work on the sexual politics of Restoration literature has pointed to the significance of sexual libel in a world where sex was politics. Harold Love's *English Clandestine Satire*, for example, reveals how the intricate liaisons whispered and circulated in manuscript lampoon map onto court affiliations and power relations, discovering what we might almost call a symbolic cartography of sex.[35] But the indexicality of maps – if that is our metaphor of representation – betrays us once again into the notion that literature operates essentially as a mode of reference, as a kind of secondary iteration of the 'real'. There is of course no reading Restoration

literature without some control over the referential and the topical. It seems a literature denser and richer with topicality than almost any other; this creates a special barrier to the teaching of Restoration literature at the same time as it makes these texts a veritable playground for scholars. The Yale edition of *Poems on Affairs of State* illustrates just this richness of context and how instructive can be the play between text and annotation.[36] No doubt part of the contemporary pleasure of these poems derived from the recognition of veiled identities and circumstances, but Restoration readers did not experience the send-ups and execrations of satire merely as crosswords. The force of Rochester's verse lay in the irrepressible presence of the 'background' in the foreground; that crowd of contemporary names – now hung with learned annotation – once had the immediacy of charms and curses. For us Rochester's obscenities retain the power to shock,[37] but rightly read the entire body of Rochester's verse – not only the obscene words and proper names but the broader spectrum of lyric and satiric gesture, of philosophical meditation and pitiless self-scrutiny – comprises a force field of comparable energy (see Lockwood, Chapter 14). It is not that maps and mapping fail to identify networks of ideological cause and effect. But the metaphor of physics better suggests the conveyance of charges between producers and consumers, and especially so in a world where coteries formed the nucleus and writing radiated out more broadly into the market of scribal copies and print, a world where readers themselves might be at once consumers and producers – commonplacers, transcribers, editors and plagiarists of Rochester's verse (see von Maltzahn, Chapter 6).

The dissemination of Rochester

And if we extend the metaphor of physics, of charges and force fields, surely the figure conjures up as well the escapades and glamour of Rochester's life. Scandal and story attached themselves irresistibly to Rochester, and it was just such gossip and rumour that gave point to the published accounts of his deathbed repentance and conversion. The more extraordinary the sins, the more miraculous the salvation; what might seem almost a principle of physics is in fact a law of hagiography. And so it was for those divines Robert Parsons and Gilbert Burnet, who wrote the first biographies of Rochester as deathbed penitent. Attached to their sinner, Parsons and Burnet lived a notable life in eighteenth-century print and not in England alone; their Lives commonly prefaced editions of his poetry, inoculating readers against its dangers, perpetually refreshing Rochester's reputation as

sinner and saint, poet and penitent alike.[38] Eventually, Rochester would cast off those officious clerics to enjoy incarnations that neither Parsons nor Burnet could have imagined. But we should not overlook the fact that Rochester's poetry was long a secret sharer in the divinity of Parsons and Burnet.

We know that in his life Rochester took care to withhold his verse from print; and yet almost simultaneous with Rochester's death came the first of what eventually proved to be scores of print editions of Rochester, in many languages and designed for many audiences. Print in fact made Rochester a transnational brand. While capital did not invent Rochester, either the poems or the character, just as certainly commerce drove the poet's widening reach and the proliferation of texts passed under his name. The last several decades of textual scholarship have both confirmed the breadth of such dissemination and made clear the extent to which the marketplace of print entangled his 'true' writings with impersonations and false attributions. Ironically, however, the growing care with which manuscript flows and scribal traces have been catalogued has led not to the recovery of the poet's original text but rather to a recognition of the invariably mixed, collaborative and improvisatory character of Rochester's texts and indeed of Restoration writing altogether.

The remarkable proliferation not only of editions but of lives that began with Rochester's death is a tribute to the force of his imprint. Of course, Rochester's self-inventions were themselves exercises in fiction and fabrication; he understood perfectly the portability of signature gestures, and the energy and wit distilled in his texts were variously enacted and embodied by characters on the Restoration stage. He may have given little thought to the immortality of his verse, but it seems he fashioned himself a character not of an age but for all time. Those lives that Parsons and Burnet wrought did not deny or erase the potency of the rake but wrapped it in the lineaments of Augustinian conversion. His contemporaries Aphra Behn and Anne Wharton elegized his beauty and grace, the 'softly commanding stimulus' of his verse, especially on female wit and poetry (see Ballaster, Chapter 11). Not surprisingly, Rochester metamorphosed into the Byronic hero of Gothic fiction, into Charlotte Brontë's Mr Rochester, brooding on the moors. By the late nineteenth century, he was more the closet companion of Victorian collectors of fine press books and pornography, but as we have seen, in the twentieth century Rochester returned quite remarkably to view: in biography; in historical fiction; and equally as the fascination of popular audiences, in Rose Tremaine's novels *The Restoration* and *Merivel*, in Stephen Jeffreys's play *The Libertine* and