

Rochester introduction

John Wilmot, the second earl of Rochester (and therefore traditionally referred to as “Rochester”) was the most famous—and notorious—writer of the Restoration period in Britain. A poet and dramatist, Rochester became as well known for the scandalous life he led as for his writing. Rochester is the period’s most notable instance of what was known as a libertine. Libertines chafed against restraints of any kind: political, religious, moral, intellectual, sexual. It’s this last category—sexuality—that is the one for which Rochester is best remembered; he was married (to a woman he had tried to abduct before their marriage) but engaged in numerous often very public affairs with partners of both genders. Equally notorious in his own lifetime were some of his drunken fights, duels, and various scandals. Toward the end of his life, Rochester said that he had done “many wild and unaccountable things” because he was “continually Drunk” for months at a time. Rochester was brilliant, handsome, charming, charismatic—and also more than a little dangerous.

He died at age 33, probably of venereal disease and the effects of chronic alcoholism. Because of Rochester’s notoriety, he became (and has in some ways remained) the face of a Restoration court culture that has been remembered as uniquely licentious.

But it is too simple to reduce libertinism to sexual licentiousness, or to think of Rochester as only a party animal, is to sell libertinism short. For Rochester and other libertines of this period, the “liber”—Latin for “free”—at the root of the word “libertine” was key, signifying the freedom that they sought from traditional, stultifying dogmas of any kind. Libertines struck out on their own, rejecting orthodox systems of morality and manners, determined to use their own minds and sensibilities to forge paths where they relied on the evidence of their own senses and on logic, rather than on

belief or tradition. They wanted to question everything—religious dogma, political orthodoxy, the moral systems they inherited from the past. This was the era, too, when experimental science was taking off, and Rochester and other writers of the period were intent on describing the world in realistic terms; the frank sexuality of Rochester's poetry comes in part out of a desire to name things accurately and directly rather than euphemistically. There is a great deal that is admirable about a stance like this, and a lot that should sound familiar to us; they saw themselves as modern, breaking the chains of tradition and striking out in new directions. Sexuality was a big part of libertinism, but only a part.

Rochester's poetry is thus suitably bold, funny, satirical, and sharp. His poem "A Satyr upon Reason and Mankind" is an aggressive attack on the human impulse to follow orthodoxies of any kind, and is one of the great testimonies of a thinker who is willing to follow his belief in reason untainted by dogma to its logical conclusion. And "The Imperfect Enjoyment" makes a hilarious, theatrical scene out of a bout of impotence. At the heart of most of Rochester's poems is a narrator who is in some ways like, in some ways unlike, Rochester himself.

Like Katherine Philips, Rochester was a coterie poet, though in his case the coterie was the court of Charles II. In the court culture that Rochester moved in, writing poetry was a was of gaining attention, of demonstrating one's intelligence and taste. It is plausible, in fact, that some of Rochester's outrageousness has something to do with this coterie environment, since saying outrageous things was a way to stand out and gain the King's favor (it was also a way to lose the King's favor when you went too far, as Rochester did on a few occasions). Rochester's poems circulated in manuscript well before they ended up in print, and, like Philips, he was not at all eager to see his works printed, since that kind of

“publication” would make his writing available to the vulgar masses. He never authorized an edition of his own works. Rochester’s poems thus present a kind of nightmare to textual editors trying to figure out the authentic text, which is in many cases a hopeless task. Some of his poems were group efforts, with several members of the court contributing various parts, or with Rochester adding his own ideas to a poem that was started by someone else. Some poems may have been begun by Rochester but were revised by others, or perhaps revised by Rochester himself; one example of this is “A Satyr on Reason and Mankind,” for which Rochester added the final paragraphs as a kind of afterthought. And, to complicate things much further, there are many poems that have been attributed to Rochester that he certainly did not write. An example of this is “Monsieur Dildo,” which is still often wrongly attributed to Rochester. We include it here in a kind of homage to the way that “Rochester” came to refer less even in his own lifetime not so much to an individual man but to a kind of myth of the model libertine, the kind of person who could be expected to have written such a poem, and who therefore might as well be considered to be its “author.”