

Is there a poet in this poem?

*Finding Rochester*

Silje Nybråten Langerud



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Department of Literature, Area Studies and European  
Languages

Supervisor: Johan Schimanski

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Silje Nybråten Langerud

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# Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to study how and why scholars have connected Rochester to his poetry. Historical, biographical and psychological approaches have dominated Rochester studies, and I aim to explore how scholars have found Rochester in his poetry and why these approaches have been so dominating and still dominate the field. I have looked into the positive sides of these approaches and I have unravelled the challenges. There are reasons to support, or at least understand, historical, biographical and psychological readings of Rochester's poetry. A number of themes and attitudes are frequently repeated in his poems, and these are often repeated in letters and in the conversations with Gilbert Burnet as well. There are also statements from contemporaries worthy of attention, though they were hardly ever objective. Moreover, one cannot overlook the fact that several poems are easily transferable to events in Rochester's life. However, there are also reasons to be suspicious of making too close connections between the Rochester and the poetry. Though several poems are transferable to events in his life, it is important to be aware that Rochester's biography is full of gaps and myths. In addition, one must take into account his fondness of masquerading and personas, the challenges of attribution, difficulties caused by traditions, imitation and allusions, the contradictions between and within his poems and the question of the intention and motivation behind the writing of the poems.

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# 1 Introduction

In a general sense, poems are personal, even autobiographical; they inevitably reflect, however directly or obliquely, the varied concerns and self-images of their authors. The rake in Rochester's poems is inevitably a reflection of the historical rake [...] That he delighted in projecting an image of himself is also clear. (Griffin 1973: 21)

This study aims to find out how Rochester has been related to his poetry. The most important editors, biographers and critical scholars of Rochester through the years will be explored, as they have contributed to the reconstruction of Rochester for the modern reader. How is a poet's life connected to his poetry, and when does fiction become fiction? Can biography exist in a fictional text? The majority of the Rochester scholars seem to be certain that Rochester's biography can be traced in his poetry. They tend to avoid calling the 'I' in the poems Rochester, and some also warn against doing so. However, though they do not necessarily see the poems as autobiographical, they draw relations between the biography, the historical context and the poetry. Because the approaches dominate Rochester studies, there is a need to outline how and perhaps why they relate Rochester to his poems, and to discuss if such relations should be made. Both the author and the reader are central in such an examination. Though they often differ in their views and methods, the major editors, biographers and critical scholars rely upon each other's studies. One thing the scholars treated in this thesis have in common is the focus on biography and history, and there are few scholars who have chosen other approaches to Rochester's poetry. Farley-Hills argues that 'the history of Rochester criticism illustrates almost all the ways imaginable in which the critic can be deflected from a reasonably objective view of the poetry' (1972: 1). A few New Critics attempted to read the poems as autonomous works of art, but their studies have never gained much appreciation or recognition. The focus will be on the most recognised editions, biographies and critical studies; those who have discovered connections between the poet and the poetry and have been central in Rochester studies. These are the works that have shaped the reconstruction of Rochester and his poetry.

Rochester's biography is filled with gaps and myths; parts of it have been constructed through interpretations of the literary works, but also with letters and utterances from contemporaries. This partly constructed biography has been used to explain the poetry. Professor Germaine Greer, who has written *John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester* (2000), believes that '[t]wentieth-century literary study is more interested in poets rather than in poems and so, rather than seek Rochesterian poems, construct a personage, Rochester' (2000: 1). This tendency might be particularly strong with Rochester because there seems to be a desire to

find him in the poems. Greer claims that ‘though the facts of Rochester’s life could be sorted out by the usual means adopted by serious historians, biographers of Rochester prefer their own insight to actual information, and often dispense with documentation all together’ (2000: 7). Is there a reluctance to dismiss the myths? Some Rochester scholars openly admit that a biographical approach makes the poetry more exciting.

Poems and letters are challenging to interpret, but challenges also emerge when it comes to the stories and utterances from Rochester’s contemporaries. The merry monarch with his court lacked neither friends nor foes, and none were objective. A questionable biography is one thing, but there are also other reasons why one should question the relation between the poet and the poems; they will be revealed throughout the thesis. However, it is important to underline that the purpose of this thesis is not to dismiss biographical, historical or psychological readings. Some scholars, however, have been too blindly guided by the historical and biographical context, and some biographers have been too eager to explain and make Rochester’s biography more interesting by connecting it to the poems and prose works. The Rochester scholar John H. O’Neill emphasises that since the poet’s death in 1680, his works has been used as documents in interpretations of his life written by commentators who began by being attracted, or repelled, or both, by the life of the most intellectual libertine of the Restoration court. Of the seven book-length studies up to 1975, only one, a textual investigation, was not primarily a biography. O’Neill explains that Griffin, though he understands that the speaker is not simply Rochester *in propria persona*, fails to recognise the fact that he is a conventional figure, and tends to exaggerate the degree to which Rochester can be identified with him (1975). This tendency to exaggerate the degree to which poet and poetry can be identified seems to be common within the Rochester milieu. When using a poet’s biography and background to ‘solve’ a poem, you are in reality closing it, and an incomplete biography should seldom be patched up with literary works. There seems to be a widespread desire to solve poetry, preferably with the biography. But can literature ever be solved? Knowledge of the biography and the historical background can be of unique value and guide us to a better understanding, but we need to walk the road ourselves and read the words with our own eyes. But then again, Rochester might prove a particularly special case. Is it possible to apply general theories and methods on the infamous Rochester?

The thesis will start with a study of attribution, publication and the editions. This chapter is meant to illustrate the challenges with attribution, how Rochester’s poetry came to be published and how various editions have contributed to shaping the Rochester we know



today. The next chapter, 'Authors and Readers', will examine the view on and function of the author, and how we read and have read Rochester. 'A Product of the Restoration' will examine the biography and background scholars have based their studies on. This chapter is also meant to give the reader a broader understanding of why Rochester has so often been related to his poetry. It might also be of use in the reading of the poems, as it explores themes in Rochester's poetry. These chapters lead to the examination of how a selection of scholars, including editors, biographers and critical scholars, have connected various poems to the historical Rochester; this chapter is entitled 'Finding Rochester'. Lastly, I will discuss the arguments and discoveries in this analysing chapter in the light of the previous chapters.

## **The selected editions, biographies and critical studies**

As I present a wide range of names throughout the thesis, it will be useful with a brief and preliminary introduction of the various scholars in order to position them historically and in terms of approach. Below is a selection of the most prominent and influential Rochester scholars through the ages, as well as some recent interesting scholars who either agree with or challenge their predecessors. I have grouped them according to whether they have produced editions, biographies or criticism.

### **Editions**

The editions will only be introduced briefly in this section, as they will be discussed in-depth in the next chapter. The editions from 1680 and 1691 are only read about in other sources, as they are not accessible today. Both are of great importance in several discussions throughout the thesis. John Hayward's *Collected Works of John Wilmot Earl of Rochester* (1926) was a limited edition with several faults, but it is important as it is the first modern edition of Rochester. It was not printed in many copies, and is a valuable item. Vivian de Sola Pinto's *Poems by John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester* (1953) placed Rochester in the canon of English poetry, but it was highly constrained by the obscenity laws that were in force at the time. David M. Vieth, *The Complete Poems of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester* (1968) has been called a 'surrogate biography' because of its focus on biography and the chronological order. Jeremy Treglown's *The Letters of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester* (1980) is a popular and admired book, particularly amongst Rochester scholars, as it is the most thorough letter collection. Keith Walker's *The Poems of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester* (1984) is thoroughly

read, but seldom referred to, as I have relied more heavily on the updated version by Nicholas Fisher. Harold Love's *The works of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester* (1999) includes valuable annotations and is the edition from which I quote Rochester's poetry, for reasons that will be given later. Paul Hammond's *Restoration Literature: An Anthology* (2009) only contains a limited selection of Rochester's poetry, but includes a very helpful introduction; this is the anthology that made me interested in Restoration literature whilst studying at Goldsmiths College, University of London. Keith Walker and Nicholas Fisher's *John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester: The Poems and Lucina's Rape* (2010) and frequently discussed. It is an old-spelling edition with valuable annotations. From Paul Davis's *John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester: Selected Poems* (2013), I only make use of the introduction and textual notes, as it is only a selected edition.

## Biographies

The first written account of Rochester's life was Gilbert Burnet's *Some passages of the life and death of the Right Honourable John, Earl of Rochester* (1680). It is a pure biography with little focus on the poems. The quotations made from this book will be from an 1812-edition, which is also available online. Vivian de Sola Pinto's *Enthusiast in Wit: A Portrait of John Wilmot Earl of Rochester 1647–1680* (1962) suggests several strong connections between biography and poetry; it was first published in 1935 under the title *Rochester, Portrait of a Restoration Poet*. He writes in his preface to the 1962-edition that he had learnt so much more about Rochester during the work of his edition on Rochester's poetry; Rochester had been running in his head for a quarter of a century. He hoped that the book would satisfy the need for a 'comprehensive and reliable study of this important English poet' (1962: ix–x). Graham Greene's *Lord Rochester's Monkey* (1974) also makes several relations between biography and poetry. It was originally written around 1931–34, but was not published until 1974. At the time it was written, the only modern book on Rochester in existence was that of Prinz, published in 1927, which is not widely read or easily obtainable today, and is therefore not included in this study. Greene writes that 'I have tried to show the life and character of Rochester always in relation to his poetry [...] but I have tried to avoid any unacknowledged use of imagination' (1974: 10). However, several scholars refuse to call this a serious biography, as they believe he used his imagination too eagerly. John Adlard's *The Debt to Pleasure: John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, in the eyes of his contemporaries and in his own poetry and prose* (1974) suggests strong connections between biography and poetry. He uses

the poetry to write Rochester's biography and interpret his character, as the title more or less straightforwardly reveals. Jeremy Lamb's *So Idle a Rogue: The Life and Death of Lord Rochester* (1993) makes strong relations between biography and poetry. What is particularly interesting about it is that Lamb presents Rochester as primarily an alcoholic. James William Johnson's *A Profane Wit: The Life of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester* (2004) is a thorough and highly detailed biography. In comparison with the other biographies, it reads as less colourful. Johnson is also fond of a psychological reading. R. E. Pritchard's *Passion For Living: John Wilmot Earl of Rochester* (2012) does not make as close connections between the poet and the poetry as the other biographies. However, he does acknowledge that it is hard to resist the temptation and that a biographical relation makes the reading of the poems more interesting. Alexander Larman, *Blazing Star: The Life and Times of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester* (2014) makes a particularly strong connection between biography and poetry, and seems to be immensely fond of the many myths.

### **Critical studies**

There are only three published critical full-length studies of Rochester's poetry. Dustin Griffin's *Satires Against Man* (1973) is perhaps the most famous, and relies on a psychological approach to a distinct part of the poetry. Though he warns about naming the various speakers of the poems Rochester, he often makes strong connections between them. The purpose of David Farley-Hills's *Rochester's Poetry* (1978) is to show how the poetry stems from a tension between the contradictory attitudes of rebelliousness and a sense of form; he argues that Rochester was a man of contradictions, and born into a world of contradictions. He says that it is as important to understand Rochester's deep sense of conventional orderliness as to respond to his rebelliousness and originality in considering his poetry. 'Not to understand what Rochester borrowed from the past is not to understand what he contributed to his own' (3). The book, he says, is dedicated to the proposition that you can know nothing of a poet if you know nothing of the poet's literary background. Farley-Hills warns about making too close relation between the Rochester and the speakers, but more often than not, he does so himself. Marianne Thormählen's *Rochester: The Poems in Context* (1993) is the largest monograph written on Rochester, and comments on all of the poems. She explains that

while its predecessors contributed a wealth of information on the seventeenth-century background, they focused on literary connexions and influences. Valuable as these analyses are, Rochester's poetry repays efforts to contemplate it in the light of

Restoration events, developments and personalities in the fields of national and international politics, religion, philosophy and social life'. (1993: 2).

Though she is far more critical against making connections between Rochester and the speakers than her predecessors, she does speculate herself. However, she is honest about the temptation to speculate and is conscious about when she speculates and makes connections.

There are also essay collections and articles in academic journals and books that have made important contributions to Rochester studies. David Vieth's *Attribution in Restoration Poetry* (1963) examines important themes such as attribution and publication, and comments on a wide range of Rochester's poems. David Farley-Hills' *Rochester: The Critical Heritage* is a collection of responses to his life and works from the early 1670s down to 1903. The selected essays below are all of importance when it comes to the relation between the poet and the speakers of the various poems. Jeremy Treglown's *Spirit of Wit: Reconsiderations of Rochester* (1982) is the earliest of four modern essay collections on the poet. From this essay collection, I discuss Barbara Everett's 'The Sense of Nothing', John Wilder's 'Rochester and the Metaphysicals', Peter Porter's 'The Professional Amateur' and Jeremy Treglown's 'He knew my style, he swore'. Everett is particularly interested in Rochester's need to excel, Wilders focuses on Rochester's divided mind in 'Against Constancy' and 'Absent from thee', Porter focuses on Rochester's position as a writer, whether he was a professional or a holiday writer, and Treglown is particularly interested in Rochester's style and voice. From Nicholas Fisher's *That Second Bottle: Essays on John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, I discuss Fisher's 'Rochester's Deathbed Repentance'. He writes about his biography with a clear emphasis on his religious point of view and the deathbed repentance. From Edward Burns' *Reading Rochester* (1995), I examine Edward Burns' 'Rochester, Lady Betty and the Post-Boy' and his discussion of 'To the Post Boy' and how he perceives the relation with Rochester. Germaine Greer's *John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester* is a brief but very helpful introduction to Rochester and his poetry. Though she is a major feminist voice, her book is not written from a particularly feminist point of view.

## 2 Publication, editions and attribution

Today, we are quite sure about what Rochester did and did not write, but the canon was not established until 1968, two hundred and eighty-eight years after his death. In the meantime, a reputation partly based on poems not written by Rochester was established, a reputation that stays strong despite the hard work done by several scholars to improve it. As Thormählen argues, ‘a rake’s reputation is particularly hard to live down, and that image has had a remarkable staying power, misleading as it is’ (1993: 1). Though the canon is more or less established, it is not beyond dispute. Publication, the challenges of attribution, the major editions and the canon will be the subjects of this chapter. The chapter is necessary because the method of publication, the various editions and the poems attributed to Rochester contribute to how we read and have read Rochester into his poetry; it is a natural starting point as it deals with the texts on their most basic level. For an in-depth study of scribal publication, editions and attribution, see Vieth’s *Attribution in Restoration Poetry* (1963) and Harold Love’s ‘A Tale of Two Manuscripts’ (1997).

### Publication

Rochester was not a professional writer. He did not earn his money by being a poet, and it is doubtful that he intended his poems to be published and read by a wide audience. Love explains that ‘he wrote for a small circle of friends, who saw the poems in manuscript, and seems to have had no interest in their future fate’ (1993: 146). Rochester published his poems by giving copies to his friends, or by leaving them anonymously in the ‘Wits’ drawing room’, which was a public room in Whitehall. These copies were reproduced, and some texts ended up with collectors and professional scribes (Walker 2010: xx–xxiv). Love suggests it is likely that Rochester issued copies of some poems himself, and that the variants between sources are in some cases authorial (1999: xxiii–xxvi). Even after the introduction of printing in England, writers preferred publishing through handwritten copies. Scribal publication was common for texts that were not meant to be published in large numbers, and censorship was another reason for choosing this practise. Love emphasises that manuscript circulation was the preferred mode of publication for members of the British governing class (1997: 41). Their poetry was often too obscene and sensational to be published.

Rochester’s texts were distributed in manuscript to circles of readers who were linked by region or common interest, and the readers copied the texts into personal miscellanies.

Most readers belonged to other circles as well, hence the proliferation was usually rapid. The most popular texts ended up in the London coffee-houses. Sometimes, malice was the motivation behind a poem. In such cases, the poems were often circulated in a more haphazard way, and were left at random around the court, posted up on doors, or smuggled into the apartment of enemies. There were also politer poems, usually given to members of Rochester's own or his wife's family. The second stage of the circulation began when copies leaked into other scribal communities (Love 1999: xxiv). Poems often ended up in the country as well, as they were included in newsletters from town (Love 1997: 46–47). Though Rochester probably did not intend his poetry to be read by a wide audience, he must have been aware of how rapidly manuscript copies propagated.

## **Editions**

There is a close connection between the different editions, and they build on each other in various ways. The editions from 1680 and 1691 formed the basis of all modern editions, and Hammond argues that the twentieth-century editions have presented readers with a variety of different Rochesters. He states that in some contexts, he was presented as the writer of graceful songs; other readers sought out his libertine and pornographic writings. The serious-minded readers copied and replied to his philosophical satires, such as the *Satire* (2006: 190–91). An edition is more than just a collection of works, and serious readers should always be aware of what kind of edition they are holding in their hands. The editions have had a significant influence when it comes to both establishing and undermining the Rochester myths. His reputation was partially established during his lifetime, and he was anything but an anonymous person, but the editions and attributions are perhaps of greater importance in the establishment and maintenance of the Rochester myth.

Rochester has always been edited from a perspective. Love explains that the earliest collections were directed at connoisseurs of the pornographic and the profane. Collections were also created that brought him within the pale of polite literature, but this was at the cost of both mutilation and exclusion. The eighteenth century maintained both traditions, the respectable and the subversive, and Love explains that they existed as parallel editions available at different levels of the trade. Considering the proliferation of printings, it is likely that Rochester's writings remained popular throughout the first half of the eighteenth century. The knowledge, printing and reading of Rochester declined during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and in the Victorian Age, the reprinting of his work ceased altogether

(1999: xv). Rochester's poetry did not become readily available again until the twentieth century. Scholarly interest was revived in the 1920s with Hayward and then again the 1960s with Vieth's edition. Farley-Hills believes that it is with Whibley's essay on 'The Court Poets' in volume 8 of the *Cambridge History of English Literature* (1912) that one finally gets the feeling that there is a critic willing to take the poetry on its own merits and independently of the myth that had grown up round Rochester's life. With Whibley, he feels that we arrive at a new phase of Rochester criticism, the modern phase, with its increasing understanding of Rochester as a literary artist (1972: 2). Several scholars have later aimed to present Rochester as a serious and highly talented poet, but the myths are still with us.

I will start with the first edition, which has an anonymous editor, and Tonson's edition from 1691. As Davis argues, '1680 and 1691 have formed the basis of all previous modern editions of Rochester aimed at the general reader. Yet both are in different ways unreliable' (2013: xliii). Next, I will make a large jump and touch down in the year 1926, when John Hayward published his edition, move over to Pinto in 1953, Vieth in 1968, Walker in 1984, Love in 1999 and Fisher's updated version of Walker's edition published in 2010. I have not included any editions between the late seventeenth century and 1926, as they were few and none are of importance in this study; they are not widely read, neither have they contributed significantly to modern Rochester studies. Leading scholars such as Nicholas Fisher had made the same choice of selection. In his section on 'Further Reading', he jumps from the edition of 1691 to Hayward in 1926 (2010: xxviii). I have not included selected editions or classroom-editions either, as the focus is on those who have been influential in Rochester studies and widely read. However, I have consulted two introductions from such editions.

The five most important collections of Rochester's works are the editions from 1680 and 1691 and three manuscripts: (1) Yale University MSS Osborn b 105; (2) b 334 (known as the 'Hartwell' MS) and (3) Thynne Papers, vol. XXVII at Longleat House, Wiltshire (the 'Harbin' MS). Yale MS Osborn b 105 is closely related to the ancestor of *1680*, and is an anthology of Restoration poetry with attributions that are in general reliable. Unfortunately, the anthology has seven gaps where forty-five pages are cut out. Walker emphasises that the Hartwell and Harbin MS are two vitally important documents that draw on a source that was available to Tonson when he published his edition in 1691, and which was possibly prepared for, or even by, members of Rochester's family. The most important manuscripts in this group are Nottingham University MS Portland Pw V 31, which include the poems in Rochester's hand, and two manuscripts that contain corrections in the hand of Rochester's mother.

Rochester asked his mother to burn his own manuscripts shortly before his death. The few surviving autographs, along with others by his wife, are preserved in the made-up volume from the Portland papers (Love 1999: xxx–xxxi). As a result of his mother’s destruction of the manuscripts, few poems in Rochester’s own hand have survived. The consequence of the burning of the poems and private texts is of course that we are left with a questionable canon.

*Poems on Several Occasions By the Right Honourable, The E. of R*— appeared only weeks after Rochester’s death. Apart from the date, all the information on the title page was incorrect, as the printer needed to cover his tracks because of the content. Of the seventy-two items included, less than half were written by Rochester. The edition was ‘rushed out in a bid to capitalize on Rochester’s notoriety by a printer, whom agents acting on behalf of the poet’s immediate family, subsequently sought to unmask and prosecute’ (Davis 2013: xliii). Davis states that what all the items in this volume had in common was that they were all representative of the new libertine cultural temper of the 1660s and 1670s; ‘that explosive release of sexual licentiousness, moral scepticism, and religious heterodoxy which swept away the spiritual authoritarianism of the Puritan era’ (2013: xi). He believes the edition to be not so much an edition of Rochester as an anthology of the libertine literary culture of which he was and still remains the prime embodiment. He concludes that the anthology came to look like a commemoration, because the world it describes passed away with Rochester (2013: *ibid.*). It is interesting that scholars do not agree on such basic details as the number of poems in an edition. Davis declares that it consisted of seventy-two items, whilst Walker reports it contained sixty-one, of which thirty-three are now thought to be by Rochester.

Jacob Tonson’s *Poems &c. on Several Occasions: with Valentinian, A Tragedy* (1691) contains thirty-nine poems, thirty-seven are today considered to be by Rochester. Whilst the edition in 1680 revealed no real information but the date of publishing, eight poems were attributed to Rochester for the first time in this edition. For a long time, it was thought to be the best early edition of Rochester’s work, but as Walker argues:

[...] whereas *1680* has all the marks of an unauthorised edition, *1691* has all the deficiencies of an authorised one: it omits violently personal poems [...] it also omits temperately personal poems [...] It is an avowedly castrated text, omitting stanzas from *The Disabled Debauchee*, ‘How happy Chloris, were they free’, *Love to a woman*, and ‘Fair Chloris in Piggsty lay’. Worse, from the point of view of an editor who wishes to base a text on *1691*, its versions of some nineteen of the poems it has in common with *1680* are derived wholly or in part from the earlier collection. (Walker 2010: xxi).



1691, almost certainly instigated by Rochester's pious mother, excluded or bowdlerised his most scandalous verse to make him fit for the new age of moral reform (Davis 2013: xliii). This illustrates what power editions may have, and that they are hardly ever just simple collections of texts. The next major edition was not published before modern times.

According to Hammond, 'the story of Rochester's treatment at the hand of modern editors begins in 1926 with the publication a limited edition, printed on fine paper, and edited by John Hayward, a friend of T.S. Eliot'. Hammond calls the edition 'a rightly criticised edition' because of its many faults; nevertheless, he made available work that had previously been hard to find (2006: 191). Love comments that this is Rochester for the elite, and textually does no more than unite the materials of early printed sources (1999: xv). As this edition is of little significance except that it marks the beginning of modern editing, I will move directly over to an editor that made contributions of more significance.

In 1953, Vivian de Sola Pinto published *Poems by John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, the edition which placed Rochester within the canon of English Poetry (Hammond 2006: 192). This edition contains a biographical and textual introduction, and an anthology of critical opinion. Pinto was highly constrained by the obscenity laws that were in force at the time of publishing; he omitted 'The Imperfect Enjoyment' and 'A Ramble in St. James's Park', as the publisher feared prosecution. Pinto used Tonson's edition as the copy-text for most of the poems and supplemented with some additional material from the 1680-edition in addition to selected manuscripts. Hammond is of the opinion that Pinto's edition to some extent took over the respectable version of Rochester that Tonson had promoted. Both needed to make the editions fit their society which demanded a respectable Rochester. However, Pinto knew that bawdier versions of some of the poems in 1691 existed in other sources, and supplied readers with some of this material in his notes. Nonetheless, the readers were not given clues about the relationship between these variant readings or the status and authority of the respective texts. This made it difficult for readers to determine what kind of poet Rochester was (Hammond 2006: 192). Love argues that Pinto's edition gestures toward bibliophilia. He emphasises that its declared aim was to rescue Rochester from the mythmakers who had cast him as 'the wicked earl' and 'the noble penitent' (1999: xv). In short, there was not yet a satisfactory edition of Rochester's poetry in 1953.

It was David M. Vieth that affected the breakthrough in the understanding of Rochester's poetry. Hammond calls *Attribution in Restoration Poetry* (1963) 'a magisterial analysis' of the textual tradition behind the famous edition from 1680. Hammond praises the

way he directed scholars' attention to the importance of scriptorium manuscripts for the first time, and argues that 'his scrupulous evaluation of the competing attributions' found in manuscript and printed texts formed the basis for the radical pruning of the canon which resulted in this edition (2006: 193). Vieth explains that

[...] punctuation, spelling, and capitalization have been modernized simply because there is virtually no basis for an old-spelling text of Rochester's poems. The chosen copy-texts exhibit a bewildering and largely meaningless variety of treatments of accidentals by different compositors and copyists. (1968: xlv).

Vieth's edition (1968) is a modernised text which attempted to arrange the poems in chronological order, and scholars have tended to criticise this arrangement. Hammond, for instance, believes it to be unduly speculative since there is little or no evidence for the composition date of many poems (2006: 193). Vieth labelled the periods: (1) 'Prentice Work (1665–1671)'; (2) 'Early Maturity (1672–1673)'; (3) 'Tragic Maturity (1674–1675)' and (4) 'Disillusionment and Death (1676–1680)'. Vieth believed there was enough information available to permit a chronological ordering. However, Love argues that assumptions and outright guesswork are inevitable in the creation of such an edition (1999: xliii). Vieth comments that since the poems are printed in approximately their order of composition, the account of Rochester's life in the introduction 'provides a necessary biographical framework, especially for readers who have little familiarity with Restoration literature' (1968: xiv). He believes Rochester's poems possess value in three different directions: historically as an important contribution to the shaping of the new literary expression; biographically as 'part of a life-story so compelling that it constantly threatens to overwhelm his poetry'; and artistically as 'unique formulations and universal human experiences' (1968: xxxiii). Vieth argues that at the one extreme are the self-consciously conventional poems, which include pastoral dialogues, Ovidian imitations and lyrics with features of courtly love and Petrarchan traditions. He states that life in these verses resembles an elaborate ritual or game, far removed from reality. At the opposite extreme are the personal poems, which he sees so directly in contact with raw flesh and blood that they have little formal structure. He believes Rochester's later fondness for satire begins to assert itself in these personal poems as a scorn for specific people (1968: xxxvi). But even after Rochester's poems have been placed historically and biographically, Vieth makes clear, they retain a uniqueness that probably accounts for their 'perennial appeal' to readers who care nothing about the seventeenth century and know little about their author (1968: xl). The poems, he seems to say, has a

uniqueness that awakens our interest, but to fully understand them all, we need knowledge of the historical and biographical context.

Hammond believes that this focus on biography suggests a naïve link between the poet and the poems. It affects the way we read the verse and turns the first person singular voice into an uncomplicated authorial utterance. Hammond finds this particularly troublesome since many of Rochester's poems play games with persona (2006: 193). Love believes it is reprehensible that several headnotes invite the reader to relate the poems to Rochester's life, as 'the focus on the life deflects attention from the brilliant work in the manuscript heritage which is the edition's real foundation' (1999: xvi). Farley-Hills, however, has quite a different view on Vieth's books. In 1972, he argued that until very recently, critical evaluation had interpreted the poetry from what we know of the man. He believed that critics, amongst them Pinto, found Rochester highly sympathetic as a man and preferred the poems in which he seems to be speaking in his own person. In more recent criticism, he explains, some attempt has been made to redress the bias towards a personal interpretation of the poems by stressing Rochester's skill in disengaging himself from his work. He uses Anne Righter's British Academy lecture as an example, where she demonstrated Rochester's use of irony. Further, he claims that Vieth is concerned with detachment in *Attribution in Restoration Poetry*. What were earlier taken to be autobiographical poems, he explains, are shown to be mock-heroic in his book (1972: 26). He believes that the tendency of Vieth's critical comments, even clearer in the introduction to his edition of the poems, is to demonstrate the ironic detachment of Rochester's satirical techniques. He also argues that Vieth tends to ignore passionate comments that form an essential part of both lyric and satire, 'and the critic is still awaited who can see the interplay of the two sides of Rochester's art, the emotion and the detachment, as part of complex unity of his work' (1972: 25–26). In any case, there seems to be no disagreement that Vieth's books have made several great contributions and have influenced scholars up to this day.

Keith Walker is the man behind the next scholarly edition, published in 1984. Hammond praises Walker for how he rectified the omission made by Vieth and because he published an edition that includes a collation of variants for most of the poems. However, Walker did not collate all the manuscripts that were available, not even those in major repositories. Hammond explains that Walker did not provide stemmata, any other account of the interrelation of the witnesses, or any explanation for his own choice of copy-text. Hammond believes the consequence is that the reader does not know how to use the extensive

collations. However, the edition provides the reader with an overview of variants in Rochester's text, from which it was possible to comprehend the scale of corruption, censorship and rewriting. Walker also offered more extensive explanatory annotation than Vieth (2006: 194–95). This is an old-spelling edition, and the versions are faithful to their manuscript copy-texts, except when the accidentals cause difficulties for a modern reader. Walker explains that an old-spelling edition should be desirable because many of Rochester's words are slightly different in connotation from their modern equivalents (1984: xv). Thormählen's agrees with Walker, and argues that practically every line in Rochester's poems should send an attentive reader to a dictionary.

The editors explain several words, but the words that are explained differ between the editions. Thormählen argues that Vieth's modernisation blunted his readers' awareness of the fact that words we assume we understand do not always mean what we think they do (Thormählen 1993: 7). Barbara Everett points out that 'the primary need in presenting a poet is not to obscure his tone' and refers to Vieth's text as 'able but toneless' (1982: 15). Hammond argues that both ways of editing have their advantages and their disadvantages. A modernisation of spelling will inevitably destroy rhymes and puns. In addition, a modernisation of punctuation replaces the rhetorical pointing of seventeenth-century texts. However, by preserving the accidentals, Walker might cause problems for the reader (2006: 195–96). Vieth focused on a biographical arrangement of the poems, whilst in Walker's 1984 edition the poems are arranged by genre. In each case, Love argues, 'the editor's particular interest in the writings has influenced the way in the text was prepared, presented and explicated' (1999: xvi). Again, we discover that the editions are not just simple collections.

Love's edition (1999) was the next substantial edition. It builds on Walker's old-spelling text with extensive collations. The reader is also given an account of the editor's choice of copy-text and variant readings, and Hammond praises Love for this contribution. Love has presented Rochester primarily as a writer for the Court. Hammond argues that a question which this particular edition repeatedly prompts is what kind of poet Rochester was (2006: 200). Love has also included poems that are about, and not only by, Rochester. These poems are, according to the editor, testimony to a mythic Rochester rather than the historical John Wilmot (1999: xxviii–ix). Love writes that his own edition relies heavily on both Vieth's and Walker's editions, but particularly Walker's. Love is critical towards Hayward's and Pinto's editions, whose editions he believes 'reflect a much earlier stage in our understanding

of the Rochester tradition and cannot now be recommended, except to those in search of reading texts of poems which have been dropped from the canon' (2006: xxxix).

Nicholas Fisher's *John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester: The Poems and Lucina's Rape*, builds on Keith Walker's *The Poems of John Wilmot, of Rochester* (1984), and is a revised and updated edition. Though published by Fisher, it is 'edited by Walker and Fisher'. This edition includes *Lucina's Rape*, Rochester's adaption of Fletcher's tragedy *Valentinian*. Fisher writes that the edition remains true to the spirit of Walker's edition, not least in the arrangement of the poems by genre, but also in the notes and in following Walker's original principle of making Rochester available to students and scholars 'in versions that were read in his lifetime' (2010: ix). No monumental complete editions have been published since 2010, but a few selected editions have appeared. Amongst them is Davis' edition from 2013, which is a solid edition with a critical and informative introduction.

## Attribution

Vieth asserts in the introduction to his edition that 'probably the Rochester canon, which seemed an insoluble puzzle as recently as 1950, has now been established about as securely as that of most authors ever are' (1968: xliii). As that was held true for the core of poems currently accepted as being by Rochester, different editors have continued to reach different conclusions.

Rochester has often been claimed to have a distinctive style and voice. Treglown argues in 'He knew my style, he swore' that 'considering how distinctive a tone of voice Rochester's is generally thought to be, it is surprising how many other people's have been mistaken for it' (1982: 75). There were many reasons for wanting to foist poems on him, for instance that his name was good for sales. Most of the poets of the time wrote in the literary conventions for which Rochester is famous, and Treglown argues that faced with this fact, and with additional complications like the joint authorship of many Restoration poems, it is tempting to concentrate on what the court poets have in common. He believes it is interesting that there has been an increasing awareness since the 1940s of Rochester as a member of a group, coinciding with a heightening of his own reputation, and a growing sense of his individuality. Treglown suggests that one of his qualities is an idiosyncratic complexity of tone, which is uniquely pervasive in his work, 'so much that it unifies the otherwise disparate lyrics and satires that can confidently be attributed to him, as well as the poems of both kinds written in dramatic voices' (1982: 76). There are moments, Treglown explains, when

Rochester depends on the reader to recognise a literary reference in order to catch its tone, to feel the full weight of his otherwise ‘unobtrusive irony’. Treglown admits that this characteristic tone of voice cannot be used to solve problems of authorship, but argues that Rochester’s is a style which can be characterised from the body of poems we are sure are his (1982: 79–91).

Despite the challenges of attribution, a Rochester canon has been established. Hayward’s collection printed 120 poems as Rochester’s; Pinto printed 67, with a further 21 in an appendix of ‘Some Poems Ascribed to Rochester on Doubtful Authority’. Vieth printed 75 poems in his main section, with another eight ‘Poems Possibly by Rochester’; Walker 83 with five ‘Poems Possibly by Rochester’. Love calls his main section ‘Poems probably by Rochester’, which includes 75 pieces; then follows a section reporting five lost works, five ‘Disputed Works’ and an ‘Appendix Roffensis’ of 36 poems which have been attributed to or associated with Rochester at some stage and are collected for the convenience of scholars (Hammond 2006: 207–11). The variation in number is accounted for partly by how one treats fragments and variant versions, but nevertheless indicates disagreement on the canon. Whist most scholars are convinced that we have a reliable Rochester-canon, Love reminds us that

[...] question marks still remain over a number of ‘canonic’ pieces, while one can never be sure that a late attribution, even if based of guesswork, may not have been correct. It is also likely that genuine work by Rochester survives among the large proportion of scribally published lampoons that remain anonymous. While careful weighing of the external evidence for attribution is essential, it can lead to an inertial dismissal of authentic work and is of no help at all with anonymous work’. (1999: xxvii).

Davis believes that the chaotic state of the surviving manuscripts of Rochester’s verse suggests he considered it either undesirable or impossible to homogenise his authorial self; he was apparently content to be a different type of poet in each of the communities to which he belonged. In this sense, he argues, understanding scribal publication brings us to the heart of Rochester’s concerns as a poet; for the discontinuous or occasional aspects of human identity is a major subject in his verse (2013: xv–xvi).

The attribution of poems and the various editions have influenced how we have perceived, and still perceive, both Rochester and the poetry. There is no doubt that reputation created by the attributed poems and the editions have had a remarkable staying power.

### 3 Authors and readers

Rochester's poetry was more or less forgotten for almost two hundred years after his death. When scholars started to dust off the poetry in the late nineteenth century, historical and biographical methods played major parts in literary studies. The psychological approach soon followed, whilst the theory of literary autonomy has never gained popularity amongst Rochester scholars. The Rochester myth might have caused an unwillingness to detach him from his poetry, and his poetry has seldom been read as 'l'art pour l'art'.

The concept of the author does not mean the same today as it did in the antiquity or in Rochester's age. There is still no absolute agreement on what constitutes a poet or what the relationship between author and authorship is. The majority of the Rochester scholars reckon his biography, the historical background and even psychoanalysis to be of importance in the reading of the poems. This chapter will start with a brief outline on the conception of the author through the ages, before the conception of the author in Rochester's age is given closer attention. Next, I will move on to discuss the reader as it appears that Rochester has to some extent been reconstructed by the readers. The reader does not only contribute in the creation of poems, but sometimes in the creation of poets too.

#### **What is an author?**

In Classical Greece, the poet was generally considered a medium and a chosen person whom was subject to divine inspiration. During and after the Renaissance, western literature consisted chiefly of imitations of classical writings, and imitation dominated the literary world for a long time. To begin with, the ideal was to imitate the great ancient writers; Rochester wrote at a time when this ideal still held, but was starting to abate. The tradition of imitation continued to dominate the literary world even after Rochester's death, but the imitation ideal altered; the ideal of the French critic Boileau (1636–1711) and his English pupil Alexander Pope (1688–1744) was to imitate nature. However, the writer was still expected to imitate nature in accordance with the antique writers. The idea behind this doctrine of imitation was that the history of mankind does not change; history is succession rather than development. This conception did not change until the eighteenth century. Until then, it was the poet's knowledge of the literary tradition, and his ability to follow it, that was his most important quality. During the Romantic Movement, by contrast, the poet was valued for transcending tradition, expressing his originality and revealing his genius. This high value

of the poet's creative ability has influenced modern conceptions of the author, but has also resulted in critical theories on how social and psychological relations confine both the author and the reading of the literary works. To take a case in point, psychological theories on the unconscious have undermined the notion of the author's control over his own work. In the nineteenth and twentieth century, literary criticism granted particular attention to the relationship between the literary work and its biographical writer. Biographical and historical approaches are still popular, but in the field of literary science, there is a tendency to devaluate the importance of the author in the understanding of the literary work. This is most prominent in New Criticism, Russian Formalism and Structuralism. Closely connected to the focus on biography is attention to the author's intention. Wimsatt and Beardsley argue in the article 'The Intentional Fallacy' that knowledge of the author's intentions are unnecessary and even fallacious; attention to intention leads to no good criticism. They believe that once the poem is made, it assumes primary importance over its maker as literary artefact and should not be reduced to simple expressions of a writer's psychological state or biographical clues. They see intentionality as an impossible quest. Even in the cases where the author is alive and can be consulted, they find no critical satisfaction in recourse to the unscientific, subjective pronouncement of this 'oracle' (1989: 468–88). Roland Barthes agrees in 'The Death of the Author' (1968) that the author cannot be regarded as a guarantor for the meaning and intention of a text. He seeks to put the author to death and make room for the reader. According to Barthes, the author enters his own death when the writing process begins and the author is born simultaneously with the text. The reader creates meaning and cannot look to the author for answers. He states that language uses the writer more than the writer uses language.

In 'What is an author?' (1969), Foucault emphasises the importance of the author's name, and introduces the concept of the 'author function'. He argues that the author's name is more than the name of the writer. It refers to a set of expectations to both the author and the authorship. As we have seen in the chapter 'Editions, attribution and publication', it is true that the author's name refers to a set of expectations, but these expectations may lead us astray, as poems not written by Rochester have been wrongly attributed to him because they are conformable with the set of expectations. Foucault argues that a text always bears a number of signs that refer to the author. The biographical method and Barthes' killing of the author mark the extreme points in modern notions of the author. 'The Death of the author' and 'What is an author?' are both influential essays that discuss the role of the author and the



notion of authorship, and they have an ongoing presence in the authorship debate. A Danish literary scholar who has protested against Barthes' killing of the author is Poul Behrendt, who published the book *The Double Contract* in 2006. He argues that the empirical author cannot be ignored in literary analysis. Though biographical and historical approaches have remained popular, they have been challenged and criticised within the field of literary science. The book is a critique of the exclusion of the author. The double contract comprises an active author and reader and denies that the literary work should be understood as autonomous. The tendency of excluding the author, at least to a certain extent, is a tradition with deep roots. However, scholars have hardly ever excluded Rochester from his works, and this is a tendency worth studying.

### **Rochester – poet or 'holiday writer'?**

In Rochester's age, poetry could not be a career by itself. Professional writers relied on work for the theatre and on patronage from rich aristocrats. Others were lucky to be in possession of independent means or government posts. Rochester was a court wit and his task was primarily to entertain Charles II. He seldom agreed to have his poems published, and he certainly did not earn his money by being a poet. Alexander Pope (1688–1744) was the first poet to earn enough from his writing to survive on this profession alone (Hammond 2009: xxiii). As a Roman Catholic, Pope was excluded from the sort of patronage that was bestowed by statesmen on many writers at that time. It was a disadvantage not to have a patron, but Pope turned it into his favour. His translations of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* gave him enough money to live comfortably (Lipking and Noggle 2006: 2493). Rochester was a court poet excluded from the possibility of independence. He was a patron himself for several writers, and one of his clients was John Dryden. However, their patron-client relationship was rather brief, as Dryden soon gained great confidence in himself as 'Poet Laureate' and started to offend Rochester's courtly pride. Rochester responded with the poem 'An Allusion to Horace', where he ridicules Dryden's attempts to fit in with the court wits. Pope dismissed Rochester and the other court poets 'as holiday writers'; to him they were gentlemen that diverted themselves now and then with poetry. Within a generation after Rochester's death, the court lost the primacy it had enjoyed since the Middle Ages; by early eighteenth century, the idea of the court as the natural seeding ground for poetic genius had begun the long decline (Davis 2013: xx–xxiv). In Walker and Fisher's edition from 2010, there is a group of poems named 'Poems to Mulgrave and Scroope'. This group had its origins in the tensions

between court wits and professional writers in the early 1670s. The court wits were aristocrats such as Dorset, Buckingham and Sedley. Walker and Fisher argue that they ‘wrote largely for their own satisfaction and amusement’ (2010: 111). Larman stresses that Rochester, like many young men of his age, used poetry as his tool. Poetry was a normal part of everyday life for both aristocrats and commoners. Any courtier would write poetry, though some of their writings was little more than ‘rhyming bawdy squibs’ or parodies and ‘answer poems’ (2014: location 1563–89). This reinforces the impression that at least parts of Rochester’s poetry were written for entertainment.

Rochester was a Gentleman of the Bedchamber; he was obliged to attend the King at all hours, both day and night, one week in every four. He slept on a makeshift bed at the foot of the royal four-poster (Davis 2013: xviii). Greer reveals that the most important clue to Rochester’s way of working is Portland MS PwV 31, which contains the only versions of his poems in his own hand. Some of the sheets bear signs of having been folded several times until they were small enough to be slipped into the fob of the court waistcoat. One poem was written across a fold, as if the held in the palm; another poem had been folded before the ink was dry. Greer explains that a courtier in attendance could not sit before he had the King’s permission, but that in every withdrawing room at Whitehall there was a standish, a type of inkstand, with both pen and ink. Here, the poet could write down a few lines when he had the opportunity (2000: 27–28). However, Rochester also spent a lot of time in the country where he would have more time to write. Most of his satires are said to have been composed here. There were plenty of drinking companions and drinking events at Court, and the wits composed drinking songs, as singing was a natural activity in their social gatherings. The creative process was often a collaborative project; a single poem could have several creators, though they were usually attributed to only one poet. A court wit was also expected to provide pungent epigrams, impromptus, bouts rimes, squibs and lampoons upon demand. Greer argues that several of the writings were nothing but *jeux d’esprit*, which deploy obscenity for fun. In the court milieu of the 1770s, obscene fiction was driven by faction, and Greer states that ‘faction requires a measure of collectivity’ (2000: 34–35). The fact that the court wits co-operated makes attribution more complicated. Greer argues that understanding of Rochester’s way of working is impossible without recognition of the readership that he sought among other noblemen and court wits, most of whom were involved from time to time in literary composition. She explains that ‘much of Rochester’s versifying was done in company, with his companions’ assistance or spurred on by competition with them’ (2000: 2). When poems

are written in company, they automatically lose some degree of biographical significance. The challenge is to know which poems were written in co-operation.

Rochester was considered neither dead nor a medium, but not an original genius either. The imitation doctrine was still prominent, but Rochester also challenged this literary tradition. We do not know much about how his contemporaries related his poetry to his person, but we do know that his poetry painted his reputation as a rake and sensualist even further. We also know that he was a popular poet and was widely read. Farley-Hills argues that Rochester was more controversial as a man than as a poet during his lifetime, and it was

almost impossible to judge his literary achievement without entering into the controversies that surrounded him as a patron of literature, notorious rake, reputed atheist and finally Christian penitent; and even after his death criticism remained as much concerned with his character as with his poetry. (1972: 1).

Obscene poems not written by Rochester were more than once attributed to him, as it seemed likely that a man of his assumed nature could have written them. This suggests that Rochester was sometimes related to his poetry in his own age. Griffin believes that it is largely ‘the poems of crude obscenity not by Rochester, read in old editions or heard about, which foster the impression, still current, that Rochester was only a debauched sensualist and sensationalist’ (1973: 4). As his reputation has affected which poems to include in the canon, it is likely that the poems were never considered autonomous. According to Porter in ‘The Professional Amateur’, Rochester’s reputation is coloured by confusion, presumptions and prejudices. He argues that ‘it is not possible to write about his poetry with that detachment which would be expected in the case of any other poet as eminent and as long dead’. He also aims to show that Rochester and his friends were more than cynical show-offs:

[...] they were the sons and heirs of long-exiled cavaliers, men and women distrustful even of their own legitimation. Behind their masks of fashion, their charades to relieve boredom and their sexual predatoriness, was a Hobbesian anxiety about the state itself. Certainly their privileges meant much to them. The Restoration led to a diminution of England’s seriousness and effectiveness. There was nothing to do but to act up. (1982: 59).

Rochester was an amateur in the old and correct sense, as he was not interested in publishing. Gentlemen simply did not publish. However, he was not an amateur at versification, Porter sees him as highly ‘professional’, and suggests the term ‘Professional Amateur’ (1982: 58–74). Porter, as so many other modern critics, attempts to show how he was by no means a ‘holiday writer’, but a highly talented poet.

Love claims that if we can come to understand why Rochester wrote, and how and why he was read, we will also understand the larger picture better. He argues that the

realisation from which everything follows is that Rochester's mode of publication was through the circulation of poems in manuscript. Love states that Rochester did not regard himself as an author or a poet, as the terms have been and are still understood today. He believes that Rochester might have allowed himself to be a wit, if pressed, and argues that writing was a manifestation of the aristocratic self and not a trade which could be learnt or practiced. Writing was grounded in conversation, and therefore a kind of inspired spontaneity. When it comes to motivation, Love argues that they wrote because there was an 'occasion' – because the writing of verse was an outcome of governing-class sociability. Further, he states that one of the principal acts of reading Rochester is to work out what the occasions might have been. He believes that lampoons and satires arose from court politics and personal rivalries, and that experiments in classical forms were a response to discussions about literary principles with his court friends of a way to discipline the professionals. Prologues and epilogues were written for stage performance, song were meant to be set by musicians and often for specific occasions and love lyrics were used to seduce. Love mentions the lines from *Timon*, where the speaker denies that he was a poet in any sense, as he only wrote for his 'Pintle's [penis] sake' (l. 22). Love concludes that several poems were certainly directed, in ways that are now hard to determine, at specific readers. The poems then, were often written for occasions and people, and Love states that the problem with occasional verse is that when the occasion has passed, not even the author may regard it as worthy of preservation (1997: 41–44). The motivation and intention behind writing a poem will undoubtedly affect how much it should be related to the author's biography. But how is one to reveal the intention behind a poem centuries after it was written? Love leaves us with the impression that Rochester did not see himself as a poet and was not perceived as one either, but Farley-Hills argues that he was a very popular poet amongst the reading public and admired beyond his small circle at Whitehall (1972: 6–7). Even so, this does not suggest that Rochester saw himself as a poet, particularly not a professional one. Rochester probably wrote poetry both for entertainment, because there was an 'occasion' and for personal reasons and relationships.

## **The Reader**

Theories of autonomy have never gained popularity amongst Rochester scholars. Throughout New Criticism, there existed a belief that poems can be perceived and studied as freestanding units. Obversely, in positivist approaches, poetry is regarded as the result of the surrounding elements, and the aim of study were these elements. The main postulate of New Criticism is

that when you take these elements into consideration, you are moving away from the literary work instead of approaching it. It may seem unnecessary to explain movements that have never been central in Rochester studies, but they illustrate the strength of the Rochester myth and the significance of his biography in the reading and understanding of the poems.

It is wrong, however, to claim that no scholars have chosen other approaches than historical, biographical or psychological. Some commentators in the 1960s and 1970s, for instance, did seek to ‘dislodge the naïve biographical readings of Rochester’s work which abounded in the eighteenth and nineteenth century’ (Davis 2013: xxvii). Nonetheless, the scholars who have chosen this approach are relatively few and have never had any important influence upon Rochester studies. Three critics, all stem from the ‘New Criticism’, have gained a certain amount of recognition: (1) Ronald W. Johnson with the article ‘Rhetoric and Drama in Rochester’s “Satyr against Reason and Mankind”’ from 1975; (2) Isabelle White with the article ‘So great a Disproportion: Paradox and Structure in Rochester’s *A Satyr against Reason and Mankind*’ from 1976 and (3) Charles A. Knight with the article ‘The Paradox of Reason: Argument in Rochester’s “Satyr against Mankind”’ from 1970. In addition, there is Anne Richter who has gained recognition for her British Academy lecture in 1967, where she amongst other things emphasises how Rochester detached himself from his poetry with the use of irony. The assertion of this thesis is not that all Rochester studies are based on historical, biographical and psychological approaches, or these approaches exclusively, but that they dominate the field. Other approaches appear to have been of little or no importance and influence in the overall picture.

Vieth explains that the dominant tradition has tended to stress Rochester’s biography rather than his poetry, ‘which it has generally treated in terms of critical assumptions inherited from the nineteenth century’ (1963: viii). He also mentions the more recent tradition which has been almost exclusively American, and began in 1950 with an edition by James Thorpe. Underlying this newer tradition is the premise that Rochester’s importance resides primarily in his poetry, so that the principal goal of scholarship ought to be a satisfactory edition of his works. This tradition has emphasised bibliographical and textual investigation, and it has insisted upon more rigorous standards of scholarship. It focuses attention on various aspects of the poems themselves: on their date of composition, the people they satirise, the biographical and historical backgrounds that gave them birth, and their meaning and value as literary artefacts (1963: vii–ix). In this tradition, the historical and biographical backgrounds are still important, but the poetry is the centre of attention.

The question is not only whether the poet is in the poem or not; it is perhaps just as important to examine how we read the poems and find the poet in the poem. One single line, or even a seemingly insignificant word, may have as many different meanings as there are readers. Our choice of method and our personal background are crucial for the reading of any poem. Take Rochester as an example. As stated several times, Rochester wrote in a tradition after his classical ancestors, and he often makes use of classical allusions, explicit or implicit, in his poetry. Classical allusion, according to Paul Hammond, creates its own circle of understanders, and simultaneously excludes the unlearned. He argues that ‘rhetorical strategies such as anonymity, multiple personae, allegory and allusion invite the reader to engage in an active form of reading, making him a co-author of the text’ (2006: xxii). The next section will focus on specific, but fairly wide, methods rather than individual reading strategies.

## **Historical and biographical approaches**

The historical-biographical method is a scientific tradition that includes several variants of author-oriented approaches. The literary works are seen as expressions of the poet’s feelings, points of view and temperament, and the key to the literary work lies in its creation, which is painted by the poet’s life and environment. The poet and the poetry elucidate each other. Though modern literary theory and criticism usually challenge the historical-biographical method, elements in it are constantly re-actualised. The method quickly became and has remained popular. For the historical-biographical scholar, it is crucial to understand how the poet was coloured by his age. Some scholars have attempted to reconstruct the author’s life and opinions by interpreting their literary works; they believe that the author’s letters and similar personal documents might give answers to questions concerning the literary works. Rochester’s letters have often been considered to be of great importance in the understanding and confirmation of his poetry.

Biography grew out of the human need to remember and tribute the dead, and in the beginning none were written about ordinary people. Until the nineteenth century, only men of the church, monarchs, important conquerors and politicians were worthy of a biography. They also tended to have an instructive aim; it was the mission of biographies to educate. It was not until the patronage system disappeared and the poets were socially accepted that biographies on poets appeared. The number of biographies on poets increased in the eighteenth century, for instance Samuel Johnson’s *The Lives of the English Poets* (1781) and James Boswell’s

*The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791). In the nineteenth century, biographies on poets became immensely popular. This popularity also paved way for the literary biographical method. The real breakthrough for the biographical science arrived at the middle of the century, in connection with positivistic historicism. In the twentieth century, new tendencies arrived in the field. Due to influence from psychological and psychiatric science, some literary biographies changed character and became forms of literary psychology. Life and literary works are seen as a unity in this approach too, and the personality of the poet is interpreted out of conscious and unconscious traces in the literary work. If biographies of poets were not common before the nineteenth century, one might wonder why Burnet did write one on Rochester in 1680. This happened one hundred years before Johnson published *The Lives of the English Poets* (1781), and even he was considered a forerunner. However, Burnet did not write a biography on the poet Rochester, but the rake Rochester. The biography probably belongs to a religious and political mission. Rochester must have been an excellent example of how even the most notorious rake could leave his sinful life behind.

There is no doubt that historical and biographical approaches have met several challenges, but still they remain popular methods. The reason might lie with the reader. Readers are curious about the authors, proven by the abundance of portrayals, interviews, literature festivals and biographies. The use of historical and biographical approaches does not mean that the scholar believes the entire meaning of the literary work to be explained out of the author's biography. Some scholars certainly do believe the biography to be of immense significance; others will ask if biography can ever exist in a fictional text, and a good crowd is positioned somewhere in between.

## **Psychological readings**

In many cases, this is a literary approach where critics see the text as if it were a kind of dream to be interpreted as an indication of the psychological state of the author. Although it is true that psychoanalytical theory is not really a literary theory, the field has been a major influence to literary studies. The tradition is almost exclusively interpretative. It originates in the method of dream-analysis exhibited in Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), and in similar analyses of jokes, slips of the tongue, and neurotic symptoms in his later writings. Freud argues that a dream is the disguised expression of a wish. He outlines his dynamic theory of drives coming from the unconscious and meeting repression from the mind's censoring functions, which forces it to seek indirect expression in symbols and in condensed

or displaced images. In accordance with this theory, Freud also outlines a narrative model of child development explaining how the unreasonable demands of the infant are subdued to the requirements of civilization: the infant boy who desires undisputed possession of his mother wishes to dispose of his father, but is coerced into deferment of gratification until he can assume the father's powers. Critics have included the model of child development, Don Juanism and the Oedipus Complex, in their readings of several poems by Rochester about sex. 'The Imperfect Enjoyment', which is examined later in this study, is amongst the most significant examples where critics have explained the sexual failure through Rochester's unnatural relationship with his mother and the absence of his father. Griffin writes that '[p]sychoanalysts associate Don Juanism and psychological impotence – especially premature ejaculation - by tracing them to the same cause, a fixation of erotic attachment on the mother' (1973: 120). Further, he argues that the Don Juan and the premature ejaculator are intensely narcissistic, the former striving for 'narcissistic supplies in order to maintain self-esteem' and the latter invariably in love with himself only (1973: 121). The application of these theories to literary interpretation is as old as psychoanalysis itself, and the relationship between literature and psychoanalysis has always been and still is problematic.

The concept of the author is challenging, so is the categorisation of Rochester as a writer; he was not a professional writer in its initial meaning, but he was certainly not a 'holiday writer' either. Rochester was a court wit, and the great majority of court wits were skilled in poetry writing. However, it might be argued that Rochester deserved the title 'court poet' more than most of his fellow courtiers. Historical and biographical approaches are more frequently used than the psychological approaches, as it is a particularly disputed approach. However, it is understandable that scholars have attempted a psychological reading, as Rochester's biography at times encourages such approaches.



## 4 A product of the Restoration?

No man was ever more typical of his age than John Wilmot, second earl of Rochester. The legend that sees him as the darling of the polished, profligate Court of Charles II is true as far as it goes, although somewhat simplified. (Vieth 1968: xvii).

Rochester has been called a product of the Restoration and a child of his age. The poems have been used to reconstruct his biography, and the biography and the historical context has been used to explain and even solve the poems. The function of this chapter is to gain a better account of the background that scholars have based their studies on. The focus will be on important aspects of the age, which both affected and were in turn affected by Rochester. It is necessary with an exploration of the age, politics and religion, his life as a courtier and the theatre. These are topics he touched upon in practically all of his poems. Vieth argues that

[i]n an age when skill in writing verses was a practical asset to a courtier, Rochester became the second-ranking poet, excelled only by Dryden. In a decade when the most significant literature was being written for the stage, he was patron to several important playwrights, served as model for countless witty young rakes in Restoration comedy, and wrote some dramatic pieces himself – in addition to numerous nondramatic poems which influenced the drama and were influenced by it. As a contemporary of Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, and the Royal Society, he was a skeptic [sic], [...] Yet Rochester was never more typical of his age than in his ability to step outside it. (1968: xvii–iii).

A shortage of hard facts from his life has often been the subject of anxiety and discussion. Greer states that twentieth-century literary study is more interested in poets than in poems, and rather than seeking Rochesterian poems, they construct a personage, Rochester. Failing hard facts drawn from documentary sources, she claims that scholars cannot resist treating selected poetry as autobiographical (2000: 1–5). The interest in the poet overshadows the interest in the poetry, as the latter is mainly used to understand the biography.

### Life of Rochester

John Wilmot, second Earl of Rochester was born 1 April 1647 in Ditchley in Oxfordshire. Few genuine life records are available, but they are sufficient to plot out the major events. His father, Henry Wilmot, was a royalist under Charles I and participated in several military actions. After the execution of Charles I, he became one of Charles II's chief advisers. Henry accompanied Charles to Scotland in 1650 and played an important part in his escape. As a reward for his services, he was appointed Earl of Rochester. Henry Wilmot died on the Continent in 1658, and John succeeded to his earldom, which was a powerless and

impoverished title. Vieth believes that his relationship with a father he rarely saw may partly explain his later distrust in father-figures (1968: xvii–xix). Scholars have suggested that the King took a paternal role in Rochester's life. His mother, whom was known for being a tough-minded and pious woman, was responsible of the upbringing of the child. Rochester was exposed to the Bible and Prayer Book daily through biblical study and prayers at school, and of course through his mother. Fisher argues that there can be little doubt that by the time Rochester graduated, the Bible and Prayer Book of 1604 had become a permanent frame of reference for him (2010). From the age of seven, he was tutored by his mother's chaplain; two years later he attended Burford Grammar School and went up to Wadham College, Oxford, in January 1660 as a Fellow commoner. Rochester's education was centred on the Latin authors such as Ovid, Horace, Lucretius and Seneca, and this influenced his own works where he translated and adapted the classics to his own expression (Vieth 1968: xix–xxi). Larman says about the life at college 'Unsurprisingly, in this place of cross-dressing lewdness, bisexuality and sodomy were rumoured to be rife, as was drunkenness' (2014: location 635–40). It was the King who saw to Rochester's education out of gratitude towards his father. He was granted a pension and sent on a tour after the studies with the Scottish physician Sir Andrew Balfour as his tutor. Balfour has been praised because he succeeded in 'imbuing the boy with a love of knowledge' (Vieth 1968: xx). We do not know much about this period of Rochester's life (1661–64); the information we have is chiefly from the stories Rochester told Burnet. Neither is it known whether Rochester wrote poetry while on his tour. Such a tour was customary for young noblemen, and was meant to complete their education (Redwood: 1974). Rochester arrived at Charles II's court on Christmas Day 1664. What is known of Rochester as a courtier is mostly from the earlier period, after which myth tended to take over the record. Larman explains that his reputation was entirely based on his actions, whether those he actually performed or those with which he was associated (2014: location 130–4).

In 1665, Rochester kidnapped his future wife Elizabeth Malet, for which he was punished by Charles II with imprisonment in the Tower of London for three weeks. He made good his disgrace by fighting bravely in a sea battle against the Dutch, and his courage at the Battle of Vågen in Norway made him a war hero. Subsequently, he was appointed Gentleman of the Bedchamber of the King in March 1666. Later that year, he returned to sea and once again he proved extraordinary courage in battle. Rochester married Elizabeth Malet with the King's consent in 1667. It might be challenging for modern readers to understand the custom amongst Restoration aristocrats of keeping mistresses. Davis believes the act could be seen as

concubinage rather than adultery, as it was both common and justifiable in certain groups of society. We know that Rochester had several mistresses; most famous was his relationship with Elizabeth Barry, whom Rochester trained for the stage. The relationship lasted for some years before it reached a dramatic end. Rochester became the father of four legitimate children and a bastard daughter, the latter by Elizabeth Barry. In 1667, Charles II granted Rochester special license to enter the House of Lords early. The act was probably an attempt by the King to bolster his number of supporters amongst the Lords. In the later 1670s, there is also evidence of greater involvement in affairs of state (Davis 1968: xxiv–vi).

This section is not meant to be a collection of scandalous Rochester-stories, but will include three of the perhaps most famous incidents, as they are of importance to the thesis. The first incident happened at court at Christmas 1673; during the festivities, Rochester accidentally handed over a copy of his satire ‘In the Isle of Brittain’ to Charles II. The satire criticises the King for being obsessed with sex at the expense of the kingdom. Rochester was exiled from court, but like so many times before, he was quickly pardoned by the King. Lamb suggests that Charles had an extraordinarily toleration of Rochester because he thought him ‘terribly funny’ and whenever he banished him from court, he found himself missing him. Gilbert Burnet indicates in *History of His Own Time* that Charles used Rochester as a means of escaping his own melancholy. From an account of a conversation between the King and the Earl, Lamb reports, it seems that Rochester knew how Charles used him (1993: 135–36). The second incident took place in June 1676, when he was part of the affray at Epsom that led to the death of Mr Downs. It was a scuffle with the night watch, leading to Downs being killed by a pike wound; Rochester and his friends were reported to have fled the scene. Incident number three immediately followed the second; Rochester fled to Tower Hill and impersonated a mountebank named ‘Doctor Bendo’. Under this persona, he ‘treated’ infertility and other gynaecological disorders, often with the help of his own body. Rochester practised successfully in this trade for a couple of weeks before he returned to Court (Redwood, 1974). The two first incidents are mentioned because they are directly linked to his poetry (‘A Satire on Charles II’ and ‘To the Postboy’), and the third incident illustrates the impersonation and role-playing in both his life and poetry.

Rochester’s poetic career began to move downhill about 1676, and Vieth claims that ‘the mood of pessimistic probing which lent tragic maturity to many of his poems of 1674 and 1675 was deepening into the misanthropy which partly explain the lessening literary activity of his remaining four years of life and which led finally to his dramatic deathbed repentance’

(1968: xxviii). Vieth explains that the last four years of his life were marked by ‘prolonged illness and depressed spirits’. Because a high proportion of the poems can be dated from 1676 up to 1680, he argues that the decline of Rochester’s verse in quantity and quality is well documented (1968: xxviii–xxxix). Along the same lines, Lamb suggests that his alcoholism ensured that the once steady stream of euphoria which drink brought him evaporated into shorter, darker bursts, finally culminating into suicidal thoughts (1994: 99). It has been claimed that Rochester’s poetry is largely unaffected by the major events of his time. However, his satires contain a number of passages where history is transmuted into poetry. Besides, Thormählen argues, many details from Rochester’s poems gain ‘freshness’ and ‘poignancy’ when related to contemporary conditions (1993: 2). The historical context like the biography, then, arguably contributes in making the poems more interesting.

### **A child of what age?**

Greene called the Restoration Age one of the most bizarre periods of English history (1974). Rochester did not create the seventeenth century climate of opinion; he inherited it and worked within it. Farley-Hills believes that Rochester was not only a poet of many contradictions; he was also ‘born into a world of contradictions’ (1978: 1). Vieth argues that the period was an intellectual crossroad; the aristocratic attitudes inherited from the past centuries was increasingly tested under the pressure of new ideas, particularly by the rising middle class (1968: xxxiii). He states that within the Restoration context, Rochester’s special emphasis is his striving for immediacy of experience, ‘as in his statement that pleasure may be an illusion, but pain can never deceive’ (1968: xxxiv). The restoration of the monarchy in 1660 was a specific event, but the term ‘Restoration’ is used to refer to the whole reign of Charles II (1660–85) and up to the eighteenth-century. The Restoration is often said to have brought hope to a divided nation. Charles I became immensely unpopular during his personal rule and was found guilty and executed on 30 January 1649. England was declared a republic and named ‘The Commonwealth’: The House of Lords and the Church of England were abolished, the majority of Parliament and its supporters shared Puritan views, which soon were imposed on the country, an austere lifestyle was advocated, holidays such as Christmas were suppressed, and the theatre and gambling were banned. Though he did not reign, Oliver Cromwell did rule the Kingdom during this interregnum. After Richard Cromwell’s abdication in 1659, Britons hoped that King Charles II would bring ‘order and law and a spirit

of mildness back into the national life' (Black 2003: 132–43). But did he live up to the expectations?

## **Politics and Religion**

Fisher argues that Rochester's letters and poetry should be understood against the background of a devout upbringing and the potent mixture of religion and politics. He states that 'Rochester's letters, in forming a kind of lifelong ground bass to, or private commentary on, the public engagement with the world that he achieved through his poetry, reveal a distinct and intimate perspective on his inner life' (2010: 328). Fisher sees in the letters a sincerity and a yearning for truthfulness and honesty, and believes they display a disappointment with human imperfection, a recognition of human restlessness, and a longing for truth, certainty and stability (2010: 327–43).

With the Restoration, government under the King, the Lords and the Commons was quickly reinstated, so were bishops and priests (Hammond 2009: 9). Though the monarchy was restored in 1660, it did not entail a straightforward continuation of Stuart rule. The monarchy had to be modified due to a fear of a second personal rule; kings were ultimately accountable to their people, not to God alone, as Stuart ideology had always claimed, and Charles II was required to govern through Parliament. The Restoration age is in retrospect considered a relatively peaceful age, but there existed a 'profound fear which ran like an undertow through English politics' (Hammond 2009: xix). Most important was the fear of a return to Roman Catholic rule. Charles II, like his father, married a Catholic, and was highly suspected of harbouring Catholic sympathies (Hammond 2009: xix–xx). As Charles II leaned towards Catholicism, it is no wonder he desired religious toleration. Several attempts were made to formalise toleration of Catholics and Non-Conformists, but they were all prevented by the parliament. Calvinism had been the dominant orthodoxy within Anglicanism, but was now largely confined to nonconformist sects. The 'terror' of Anglicanism was lost, and instead one witnessed an increasing respect for reason (Hammond 2009: xxvii–xxviii). This respect for reason hinted towards the age of Enlightenment, so did various forms of scepticism.

Two horrible events marked the early years of Charles II's reign; England faced a devastating plague in 1665, and the Great Fire destroyed a considerable part of London in 1666. England was also at war with the Dutch. The warfare was born out of English and Dutch commercial and colonial rivalry and ended in Dutch victory. Despite English losses,

the period was one of increasing commercial prosperity and global trade. In 1679, Charles signed a secret treaty with Louis XIV of France. He agreed to convert to Catholicism and support the French against the Dutch in the Third Anglo-Dutch war; in return, he received subsidies from France, enabling him some room for manoeuvre with Parliament. By 1677, Charles became increasingly aware that his Catholic leanings were causing discontent, and decided to marry his niece Mary to the Protestant William of Orange to improve his own Protestant credentials. His secret treaty with France did not remain secret for long, and the knowledge of his negotiations with France brought him into conflict with Parliament.

Charles II had promised to govern through Parliament, but tried to consolidate royal power. He steered away from crisis and managed to hide his Catholic sympathies for a while. In 1678, the report of the Popish Plot terrified London; and though the charge turned out to be a fraud, the House of Commons tried to force Charles to exclude his Catholic brother James from succession to the throne. Charles II had several children, but they were all illegitimate and with various mistresses; his openly Catholic brother James thus became his heir. Charles defeated the Exclusion Bill by dissolving Parliament. The crisis resulted in a basic division of the country between two new political parties: the Tories, who supported the king, and the Whigs, the king's opponents (Lipking and Noggle 2006: 2058).

In October 1679, Rochester started having conversations with Burnet (Davis 2013: xxxvi). In his biography, Burnet created an image of Rochester as the 'greatest of sinners' who became the 'greatest of penitents'. Burnet himself writes that 'I was not long in his company when he told me, he should treat me with more freedom than he had ever used to men of my profession. He would conceal none of his principles from me, but lay his thoughts open without disguise' (1812: 30–31). The circumstances of this deathbed conversion has been a matter of discussion. Burnet has been accused for having shaped the account of Rochester's denunciation of libertinism to enhance his own reputation. Greene, however, argues that '[w]ith the lapse of more than 250 years, with the knowledge we possess of Rochester's life and parentage, Burnet's book becomes more than credible, it becomes convincing' (1974: 207). Larman also believes the biography to be reliable, and argues that discounting Burnet's account of Rochester is impossible (2014: location 4783). Rochester's mother fiercely defended the repentance. On 19 June, he dictated what was to become known as his dying remonstrance, and it was signed in the presence of his mother and the chaplain. Poems and letters were ordered burned lest the example of his works should lead others to sin (Greene 1974: 217–21). The news of Rochester's repentance swiftly reverberated through the

Court, the City and the Church. This was reinforced through the rapid publication of Rochester's letter to Burnet and the funeral sermon delivered by his mother's chaplain Robert Parsons. Three months later, Burnet issued the biography. Some have rejected the whole notion of the repentance (Fisher 2010: 323–4). However, Burnet does not pretend to have convinced Rochester on every question. For instance, Rochester thought no man could believe that which he cannot comprehend. In addition, he despised the 'aspirings that he had observed at Court, of some of the Clergy, with the servile ways they took to attain to Preferment' (quoted in Farley-Hills 1972: 77). Both Erastian and anticlerical views are to be found in Rochester's poetry, but they should not be confused with 'atheism', as we understand the concept today. Outright disbelief in God was considered unfeasible in this period (Davis 2013: xxxvii–ix). Rochester professed to Burnet that 'he had never known an entire *Atheist*, who fully believes there was no God' (1812: 22). Aged thirty-three, Rochester was dying. A generally accepted theory of his death cause is the effects of syphilis, gonorrhoea and other venereal diseases, combined with heavy alcoholism. Burnet arrived 20 July and left early on the 24th without taking leave. When Rochester learned about Burnet's departure, he murmured 'Has my friend left me? Then I shall die shortly'. 26 July 1680, Rochester passed away. His wife died in July 1681, followed in the middle of November by their son Charles (Vieth 1968: xxxii).

## **A court wit and a libertine**

Rochester's audience was primarily the King with his court. Consequently, it is natural to assume that several of his poems were in fact written with an implicit audience in mind and with a particular purpose; perhaps they were written simply to entertain. Some poems had a political content, meant to amuse the King. Charles wanted to be entertained at all times; the court was a place where everyone knew the part they had to play (Larman 2014: location 1175–82). A poem written with entertainment as its main task is probably less biographical related than those written for personal reasons.

According to Larman, Rochester needed the chaos, dirt and 'occasional gleaming beauty' of the Restoration court to be the poet and social commentator that he became (2014: location 5020). Two concepts are crucial in the understanding of Rochester, namely 'wit' and 'libertine'. Hammond argues that the word 'wit' encapsulates the characteristic tenor of Restoration literature (2009: xv). The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'wit' as the capacity for inventive thought and quick understanding; keen intelligence; a natural aptitude for using

words and ideas in a quick and inventive way to create humour; a witty person (Soanes 2008: 1656). The word had a wider range of meanings in the 1660s than it has today:

Intelligence, mental agility, penetrating, insight, pointed verbal expression, sharp repartee. It connoted a self-conscious, stylish, civilised panache. It applies equally to thoughtful philosophical insight and to comic devilment. It is the hallmark of an intelligent, confident culture [...]. At the same time, Restoration 'wit' is sometimes notoriously bawdy, unbuttoned, ranging beyond the boundaries of good taste and polite manners - but always with a panache'. (Hammond 2009: xv).

'Libertine' is also a challenging concept. According to Oxford English Dictionary, a libertine is 1) a person who is freely indulgent in sensual pleasures; 2) a freethinker in matters of religion (Soanes 2008: 821). Professor Knut Stene-Johansen explains that a libertine is chiefly a person who appears challenging and provocative to his surroundings because he (and sometimes she) so strongly defends freedom (2011: 8). Farley-Hills argues that libertinism in the seventeenth century is largely an uncharted territory. He states that it was a naturalistic doctrine arguing that the closer man got to his animal nature the happier he was likely to be (1978: 23). The concept of 'libertinism' will not be problematized here, as Rochester is generally accepted to be a 'libertine'. Rochester is also frequently referred to as a 'rake' (rakehell, analogous to 'hellraiser'); broadly speaking, a 'libertine' and a 'rake' are the same.

Rochester's philosophy was sensualist; he celebrated wit and intelligence, and attacked artificial and 'bookish' learning. A sensualist believes that man understands nature through the senses (Redwood: 1974). Rochester was familiar with the ideas of contemporary philosophers and embraced some, but not all, of their tenets. His personal philosophy is a blend of his own and others' ideas. Hence, Rochester's opinions, or those presented by the speakers of the poems, are seldom unique of his time. Rochester has been called both a profoundly moral poet and an obscene sensationalist. In the conversations with Burnet, he made it clear that morality is necessary for the government, the world, and for health, life, and friendship. He argues that his morals are based on following nature rather than on the laws and restraints of society or religion. He knew that he did not follow his own maxims, and was ashamed of how he had made himself a beast (Farley-Hills 1972: 56). Rochester told Burnet about his two maxims of morality, 'that he should do nothing to the hurt of any other, or that might prejudice his own health' and 'all pleasure, when it did not interfere with these, was to be indulged, as the gratification of our natural appetites' (1812: 50). Griffin is convinced that the personality revealed during these conversations and in the poems must belong to a moralist. He argues that 'his morals are based on pleasure and pain, and on following "nature" (gratifying the desires of the self) rather than on the laws and restraints of society or religion.



Rochester knew very well that he did not follow his own maxims. This stands in contrast his other statements that he believes in ‘the gratification of natural appetites’, especially ‘the free use of wine and women’, as long as nobody is hurt by such sensual indulgence (Griffin 1973: 7). Rochester confessed to Burnet that he had been constantly drunk for five years, and during this period he was never really a master of himself (Burnet 1812: 12). Hobbes is the philosopher most frequently connected to Rochester, and he has even been called a ‘Hobbist’. Hobbes might be most famous for his political theory which advocates absolute monarchy as the means of guaranteeing a stable civil society. However, perhaps more important in this study are his theories on senses and nature. Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651) rejected the idea of conventional morality and asserted that man’s behaviour was and always should be governed by his senses, desires and passions. God was a creator not to be worried about, and the soul, as Christians think of it, did not exist. Constancy was not to be expected. Lamb argues that this is significant when considering the attitudes towards love expressed by Rochester in much of his poetry (1994: 42).

Rochester’s life was divided between the domesticity in the country and the outrageous lifestyle at court. Andrew Marvell called Rochester and his fellow courtiers the Merry Gang. They also formed a sexual society called the ‘Ballers’, they entertained themselves with pastimes such as drinking, sexual exhibitions and dancing naked with young women in a brothel. One of Savile’s letters to Rochester reveals that our poet was a mastermind among the Ballers (Johnson 2004: 106). Some assume that the darker part of Rochester’s spectrum, usually satires, lampoons and dramatic pieces, belong to the town side. Rochester spent almost as much of his life in the country as in London, according to the surviving correspondence between Elizabeth and Rochester. From 1674, he was in Oxfordshire more regularly than in his early court career. He was not always with his family when visiting the country, however, as he had a bachelor pad nearby to which he often retreated. Quite a number of Rochester’s poems, including those with urban settings, were written in the country, if a remark in Burnet’s biography is to be believed. According to Burnet, Rochester ‘would often go into the Country, and be for some months wholly employed in Study, or the Sallies of his Wit, which he came to direct chiefly to satire’ (quoted in Farley-Hills 1972: 54). This punctures the famous illusion of spontaneous poetic fecundity that earned Rochester his reputation as a master of the courtly arts of improvisations. Davis believes that there is reason to believe that the country enabled a deepening of Rochester’s

imaginative range (Davis 2013: xxxii). It appears that many of his satires belong to the deeply reflective Rochester, whilst most of his songs are the product of spontaneity at court.

The bio-pic *The Libertine* does not feature a single scene at Whitehall. Yet, the court was Rochester's main habitat, and hence the inescapable context for understanding his poetry (Davis 2013: xxxii-xviii). Davis claims that from the very beginning, Rochester had a love-hate relationship with the court:

In this ambivalence, Rochester was essentially no different from courtier-poets in previous ages – Wyatt and Surrey under Henry VIII, or Raleigh and Sidney in the reign of Elizabeth I – all of whom complained about a life at court as often as they celebrated it. (2013: xx).

In a letter to Savile he said that the country was 'where only one can think; for you at Court think not at all; or, at least, as if you were shut up in a drum; you can think of nothing, but the noise that is made about you' (Greene 1974: 143).

The final act of Rochester's life as a court poet was 'An Epistolary Essay, from M. G. to O. B. upon their Mutual Poems'. On the surface, Davis explains, it looks like a defence of poetry as written by a Restoration court wit 'M. G.'s verse has come under attack from "saucy censurers" in the town; he dismisses their criticism with a classic display of aristocratic insouciance, declaring that he does not write "with the vain hope to be admired" but only to 'beget' some 'pleasure' to his 'dear self' (2013: xxiii). Rochester was the most conspicuous public face of this ethic of self-gratification, hence many copyists assumed the poem was an actual verse letter in his own voice. Several copyists retitled it 'A Letter from My Lord Rochester', 'From the E. R.', and the like. This 'confessional reading' remained the norm for almost three hundred years, but then Vieth proposed that the poem was only a satire of his bitter enemy Mulgrave (hence 'M. G.'). Vieth's theory has gained wide acceptance, but is not beyond dispute. Davis believes that the poem proves what is often said about satirists, that they share the vices they impute to their victims; that their attacks are always in some sense self-directed. He concludes that the poem is 'the suicide note of England's last great court poet' (2013: xxiv). This suggests a close connection between poet and poetry.

## **Literature, drama and life**

Hammond explains that when the nation began again in 1660, its literature, theatre and publishing trade was also born anew. All forms of theatrical activity were not prohibited during the years of the Interregnum, but the full-scale reopening was seen as the beginning of

a new age. As mentioned, poetry could not in itself be a career, and writers such as Dryden and Aphra Behn worked for the theatre and relied on the patronage of rich aristocrats if they did not have independent means or government posts. There was a growing market for polite literature, play texts, novels and translations, and there was a growth in female readers, writers and patrons who all influenced the drama in various ways.

Rochester was a part of a relatively small circle of poets and playwrights who were well known to one another and to their audiences. The dominant literary regimen was neo-classicism, and Hammond claims that the literary elite was tired of extravagant plots and far-fetched metaphors. Instead, they wanted simplicity, purity and morality. French drama, particularly Racine, established a new standard (2009: xxiv). Neoclassical English literature aimed to be both classical and new. The new simplicity of style gave more readers the possibility to understand the expressed passions in the poems (Lipking and Noggle: 2070–74). Imitation and inheritance were important concerns; writers translated and imitated the Greek and Latin classics, but also contemporary French literature and drama. They often transposed the originals into contemporary setting (Hammond 2009: xxv). These tendencies are all recognisable in Rochester's poetry, as I will show shortly.

Davis argues that the culturally symptomatic status of the theatre is fully reflected in Rochester's life and writing. He reveals that the leading playwrights of the day were either his friends (Etherege, Wycherley) or clients (Dryden, Shadwell), and that he had affairs with numerous actresses. Rochester was passionate about the theatre, and seems to have been fascinated by the blurring of the divide between the onstage and offstage worlds. There were no clear boundaries between the stage and the auditorium in Restoration playhouses, and the auditorium remained lit throughout performances. The court wits used to sit in the pit right in front of the stage, and their critical remarks meshed with the dialogue. Rochester's interventions were usually much appreciated, as he was considered an authority on dramatic taste (Davis 2013: xxv–vi). Rochester did not write many dramatic pieces himself, but it has frequently been observed that his verse were often highly dramatic. Theatrical motives and imagery dominate much of his verse (Walker and Fisher 2010: xviii). Anne Richter proposed that the actorly inclinations in Rochester found an outlet in his poems, and that the major satires in particular are written in dramatised voices as 'in character'. Davis explains that 'this thesis has acquired the status of a critical truism' (2013: xxvii). Rochester, then, has been called dramatic and theatrical and he was a master of masquerading, both in real life and in his poetry. Is it possible to find Rochester amongst all the drama and personas in the poetry?

## 5 Finding Rochester

The preceding chapters have led up to and prepared the reader for this chapter, which purpose is to examine how influential scholars have approached a selection of Rochester's most famous poems. Biographical, historical and psychological readings have dominated the field of Rochester studies, and these are the approaches I aim to examine. The chapter will focus on examples where scholars have found connections between Rochester and the poetry. How and why have editors, biographers and scholars worked to find Rochester in the poems?

The choice of arrangement in this study, as in the editions, is problematic; chronological order has proved very much impossible, as the dating is uncertain with the great majority of the poems. Editors such as Harold Love and Keith Walker decided to organise the poems by genre, a method which has been more successful. However, they do not always agree on the genres and often include poems in different categories. 'The Imperfect Enjoyment', for instance, is categorised as both a love poem and satire. To organise poems by genre, then, has disadvantages too. The editor Davis argues that generic experimentation is a central feature of Rochester's best work; he 'persistently eroded the distinction between lyric and dramatic verse' (2013: xlv). The selection of poems in this study will be organised by themes or concerns, as it aims to explore the concerns which are connected with Rochester's biography, psychology and historical context. 'A toast to the beautiful young boys' deals with the connection with Rochester's alcohol habits and his sexuality; 'Love –Inconstancy, disappointment and pain' explores Rochester's relationship to women; 'When love is not the main issue' deals with subjects such as religion, politics and Rochester's relationship to himself and others. These concerns, I believe, show the poetry's connection to various aspects and sides of Rochester's life better than a chronological order or ordering by genres would. However, though arrangement by themes and concerns might be the best solution, we will still find that Rochester's poems are contradictory and hardly ever about simple and obvious themes. The poems selected within each of the categories are all amongst Rochester's most famous and discussed poems. In each poem, editors, scholars and biographers have found relations to Rochester, either concerning his sexuality, drinking habits, views on love and life, views on society or his relationships to others or to himself.

After an examination of the major editions, I have decided to quote from Harold Love's *The Works of John Wilmot Earl of Rochester* (1999). It has been called monumental by editors, biographers and critical scholars alike. Even so, it was a hard decision to make.

Keith Walker was highly admired by Harold Love and was also his London agent. Walker's edition from 1984 is reliable and perspicuous, so is Fisher's revised and updated version of it published in 2010. The decision fell on Love because the edition itself is of the same high standard as Walker and Fisher's edition, and the textual notes are thorough and informative. All quotations will be from Love's edition unless otherwise specified.

When it comes to Rochester's poetry, a good edition with textual notes is a necessity, as he frequently refers to events, philosophies, people and thoughts of his time. We are dependent on thorough textual notes to truly be able to enjoy his poetry. Already at this stage, we learn that Rochester's poems are not self-contained units shielded from the world beyond.

## Persona

In this chapter, we will meet a wide range of speakers, or personas. Pritchard argues that particularly in a biography, one must be aware that the speaker in a poem is not simply equivalent to the writer, nor the situation evoked a record of actual events: both are creations. He states that Rochester invented personas to express attitudes that he could present and entertain and distance himself from. Pritchard points at the literary critic and poet William Epton who wrote that Rochester provides 'a test case...against some recent critics who have said that one ought to ignore biography because a poem ought to stand by itself' (2012: location 145–46). Later, I will present several reasons why Rochester provides a test case.

Most scholars prefer to avoid calling the 'I' Rochester and talk about his personas instead. In *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 'persona' is described as the assumed identity of fictional 'I' assumed by a writer in a literary work; thus the speaker in a lyric poem, or the narrator in a fictional narrative. A number of modern critics insist that the speaker in any poem should be referred to as the persona to avoid the unreliable assumption that we are listening to the true voice of the poet. A poet may write different poems in which the speakers are of distinct kinds, this is particularly prominent in Rochester's poetry. Another reason is that our identification of the speaking voice with that of the real poet would confuse imaginative composition with autobiography. Some theorists of narrative fiction have preferred to distinguish between the narrator and the persona, making the persona equivalent to the implied author (Baldick 2008: 254). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'persona' as the aspect of a person's character that is presented to or perceived by others and a role or character adopted by an author or actor. Literally, the word means 'mask', in other words a character played by an actor (Soanes 2008: 1069). Vieth argues that the structure of 'Artemisia to Chloe' illustrates the multiplicity of assumed identities or persona used by

Rochester as speakers in his poems, thereby raising the philosophical question of identity which has been ‘such an insistent concern’:

Logically, in a literary construct based on intersecting planes of experience, with immediacy of experience a desideratum, there must at the point of intersection be a perceiving or participating consciousness, the ‘I’ of the poem. This inherently unstable identity is defined largely by its relationship to the intersecting planes. Enriching the situation further, Rochester’s poems, to the extent that they are a coherent body of expression, acquire a corporate unity as projections of what we imagine to have been his real-life personality. To a greater or lesser degree, the ‘I’ of each poem is always Rochester, even when the speaker is a woman. (1968: xli).

The speakers in Rochester’s poems include a wide range of identities. This multiplication of identities, Vieth argues, was the real-life Rochester’s practice of disguises (1968: xli–xlii). With all the identities and disguises, it must be problematic to reveal the ‘real Rochester’, even if he does in fact exist amongst the several identities in his poetry.

## **A toast to the beautiful young boys**

Some love poems by Rochester do not treat love in terms of heterosexual relations; Thormählen unified these poems in a category entitled ‘Cupid-and-Bacchus-poems’. Cupid is the god of love whilst Bacchus is the god of wine, and the poems in this category are primarily about drinking and pederasty. I will examine three of these poems: ‘Upon his Drinking his Bowl’, ‘The Disabled Debauchee’ and ‘Love to a Woman’. ‘Upon his Drinking his Bowl’ is an Anacreontic tribute to wine and beautiful boys, ‘The Disabled Debauchee’ presents a soon-to-be impotent debauchee whom looks back on his life and philosophises about his future, and ‘Love to a Woman’ is a rejection of women and a celebration of wine and male company. This category is included to illustrate how scholars have unveiled Rochester’s sexuality and drinking habits in his poetry.

### ***Nestor / Upon his Drinking his Bowl***

(Love pp. 41–42)

This poem is included because scholars have read it in light of the fact that Rochester was a soldier in the early wars against the Dutch, to illustrate how scholars have discovered Rochester’s fondness of drinking and young boys in his poetry, because it is highly indebted to a literary tradition and because it has been used to illustrate Rochester’s own pessimistic view on life and love. It has thus been related to Rochester in different ways.

The poem presents a man's fondness of drinking and lovemaking. The speaker addresses Vulcan and asks him to contrive him 'a Cupp / As Nestor us'd of old' (ll. 1–2). He did not want it engraved with battles, as 'With war I've nought to doe' (l. 10). Rochester served at sea during the Second Dutch War, but the references to the siege of Maastricht and the camp at Yarmouth are connected with the Third Dutch War. Larman asserts that Rochester's response to the success in Maastricht was to write a poem which repudiates his military career (2014: location 2483). Vieth develops on this, and argues that the Third Dutch War had an impact on Rochester's poetry and inspired anti-war sentiments (1968: xxxviii). In short, both have read the poem as a reaction on the present conflict. What the speaker wanted portrayed on his cup was a spreading vine and two lovely boys 'Their Limbs in amorous folds entwine / The Type of Future Joys' (ll. 19–20). Thormählen explains that most of the delights in Rochester's poetry are 'future joys' (1993: 22–23). Pleasure, we will come to understand, is almost always conditional or unrealised in his poetry. The final stanza goes:

*Cupid* and *Bacchus* my saints are:  
 May Drink and Love still Reign.  
 With wine I wash away my cares  
 And then to *Phill*: again.

In some editions, amongst them Vieth's, the final line goes 'And then to cunt again', but in the editions by Love, and Walker and Fisher, the line goes 'And then to *Phill*: again'. This difference is probably due to censure and interpretation. Davis argues that textual variations also need to be understood in terms of the various cultural environments in which the poems circulated (2013: xv–xvi). The same goes for the editions, as various editions have been published for different audiences. The speaker's conclusion is that drink and love should always reign, and he washes away his cares with wine. This was also a classical virtue of wine amongst Rochester's contemporaries and the poetry of antiquity testifies to the same powers (Thormählen 1993: 11). Lamb also recognises this tendency in Rochester himself, as alcohol banished his sadness, allowed him to forget the guilt, and 'it gave him a feeling he had once known in Oxford: happiness' (1994: 98). Pinto has a slightly different take, and believes that drinking sometimes was an aesthetic experience which gave him 'a moment of significant emotion' and that the poem was the result of such an emotion (1962: 64–65). The scholars mentioned above might not perceive the poem as autobiographical, but they do see it in the light of Rochester's drinking habits and his own experiences.

With this poem, Rochester owes a debt to the Anacreontic tradition. The editors Walker and Fisher state that the poem derived from the Greek *Anacreon*, which celebrated love and

wine, and that it is an imitation of ‘Du grand Turc je n’ay sourci’, a translation by Ronsard (2010: 11). Thormählen rejects it being an imitation, but agrees that Ronsard was an influence. The critic Curt Zimansky simply calls the poem a translation (1993: 17). Unlike his predecessors, Rochester places the classical theme in his own country and time. By doing so, he creates a break in the Anacreontic tradition. The *Anacreontea* praises paedophilic as well as heterosexual love, and the seventeenth poem describes Bathyllus in his ‘youthful glory’. This element is toned down in the French Anacreontic verse, and in England, the paedophilic component virtually disappeared. Whether or not Rochester had read the Greek originals, the fifth stanza portrays the joys of love in a classical manner (1993: 16–20). Hence, Rochester is playing and breaking with both a classic tradition and a domestic tradition in this poem.

Scholars have pointed at the homosexual and pederastic elements in the poetry and used them to explain Rochester’s own sexual nature. Moreover, the speaker’s fondness of alcohol has been related to, and explained with, Rochester’s own fondness of alcohol. Whilst the critical scholars Thormählen and Zimansky are mainly concerned about the poem as written in a tradition, and even translation, the biographers concentrate on the relations between Rochester and the speaker, particularly the fondness of drinking and young boys. The editors Walker and Fisher focus on it deriving from the *Anacreontea*, and being an imitation of Ronsard’s translation, whilst Vieth is also concerned about Rochester’s own attitudes towards the Third Dutch War. It has been read as translation and imitation, and that might be one reason why it has often been read as less biographical than for instance ‘The Disabled Debauchee’. This leaves us with a crucial question: are poems that imitate and are written in a clear tradition less biographical than other poems? Hopefully, I will be able to answer this question later.

### ***The Disabled Debauchee / The Maim’d Debauchee*<sup>1</sup>**

(Love pp. 44–45)

Some believe this poem is based on Rochester’s own memories of his military career. It has also been associated with Rochester’s need to find meaning in a meaningless world, and it has been read as a comment on Rochester’s own sexual and creative downfall. Moreover, the poem illustrates how we can be misled by our own expectations, it has close connections with other literary works and one scholar admits openly that a relation to Rochester’s biography makes the poem more interesting. Thus, the connections are many and varied.

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<sup>1</sup> In the Sackville MS 79-version, the poem is headed ‘Lord Rochester upon himself’ and in Osborn MS it is headed ‘Ld: R:s Ghost’ (Vieth 1963: 384). These titles, however, have not been maintained in any editions. In Love’s edition, it is entitled *The Disabled Debauchee*, but it is also frequently referred to as *The Maim’d Debauchee*.



The speaker compares himself, a soon-to-be impotent debauchee, with a retired admiral. He thinks back to his great past achievements and philosophises about his forthcoming downfall. Greene's opinion is that this might be the most moving of all his poems with its 'distant memory of Bergen and the battle in the Channel quatrain' (1974: 173). Greene, then, suspects that the speaker's memories are based on Rochester's own. Farley-Hills also sees a connection, though a rather different one, between Rochester and the speaker. He argues that two sets of values are presented in the poem, the heroic and erotic, and it is not clear whether we are meant to approve or disapprove of either:

In paradox Rochester saw the contradictoriness of man's general situation, his need to find meaning in a meaningless world, his need to find spiritual fulfilment in carnal pleasure, his attempt to understand the feelings that his understanding destroyed. These paradoxes are central to Rochester's view of the world and in the *Maim'd Debauchee* he demonstrated the relativity of our judgements and the impossibility of seeing experience singly or seeing it whole. (1978: 17).

The satires, Farley-Hills argues, show Rochester attempting to build a structure of coherent thought and feeling. 'The Disabled Debauchee', with its 'strict command of form' and 'controlled juxtaposition of contradictory ideas', is an assertion of the poet's ability to create a coherent structure out of uncertainty (1978: 116–17). This proves that Farley-Hills sees a close relation between the poem, both in form and content, and Rochester's psychology.

Several scholars agree that Rochester eventually realised the damage of his drinking habits, and that it affected his poetry. Lamb states that 'at first, wine did much more than merely wash away his cares: it pushed the pendulum back to the opposite extreme and made him feel that life was fantastical' (1994: 100). He argues that he lived in a careless euphoria; it was impossible for Rochester to understand the damage drink was doing to him (1994: 100). Greene elaborates on this and states that drink, which 'at first brought him happiness, poetry, fantastic fancies, soon combined with disease to attack his health, sour his tongue, and embitter his poetry' (1974: 70–71). Likewise, Thormählen argues that the poem suggests a darker side to inebriety, as it declares that drinking is ruinous to the health (1993: 13). This is expressed in the fourth stanza:

So, when my days of Impotence approach,  
And I'm by Pox and Wine's unhappy chance  
Forc'd from the pleasing Billows of Debauch  
On the Dull Shores of lazy Temperance;  
(ll. 13–16)

The speaker admits that sexual licentiousness and wine will eventually make him impotent and weak. Larman claims that the line 'So when my days of Impotence approach' (l. 13)

refers to both sexual and creative stagnation, and he argues that this is one of the first times Rochester acknowledges poetically that his illnesses were caused by his deeds (2014: location 3148–50). Along the same lines, Lamb argues that at the time Rochester wrote this poem, he began to fluctuate between periods of seriousness (sobriety) and bursts of flippancy (drunkenness). He claims that when he was sober and had a pen in his hand, he understood that he could no longer take part in this world (1994: 247–49). If Larman and Lamb did not consider the poem outright autobiographical, they did see a close relation. Several scholars have recorded their uncertainty regarding the debauchee's status and values, but Thormählen has little doubt that the rake foreseeing his disreputable old age is satirised by the poet (1993: 13). How personal can the utterings be when spoken by someone who is satirised? We cannot be completely certain whether the utterings are personal, self-mocking or just performance.

Walker and Fisher state that the poem mocks heroic attitudes in such works as Davenant's *Gondibert* (1651), Waller's *A Panegyric to my Lord Protector* (1655), and Dryden's *Heroique Stanza's* (1659) and *Annus Mirabilis* (1667) (2010: 80). Thormählen agrees on this and asserts that a Restoration audience would have perceived the speaker as a satirical creation. Further, she argues that though several critics have commended the poem, its satire has not been fully appreciated. She suggests that the reason might be that readers expect all poems by Rochester to defend debauchery. The point Thormählen is making here is crucial and can be applied to the reception of a major part of Rochester's poetry. The expectations we have to an author's name may lead us astray, and poems not written by Rochester wrongly have been attributed to him because they are conformable with the expectations. 'Love and Life' is another poem where the expectations are challenged; Farley-Hills writes that 'The subject of the poem is perhaps not libertine at all and this may, therefore, be cited as yet another example of a poem where Rochester surprises us by reversing our expectations' (1978: 80–81). Judged on its own terms, Thormählen claims, 'The Disabled Debauchee' paints a repulsive picture of riotous living. She states that the idea of cautious youths and moralists being persuaded to intemperance by a decrepit old man is ridiculous (1993: 13–16). This reveals how the reader's expectations can alter a poem's meaning, and the last argument reinforces Thormählen's argument that the poet is satirising the speaker in this poem.

Along the same lines, Pinto imagines that the poem must have been inspired by some 'worn-out voluptuary' at Court, and calls it Rochester's most notable piece of irony (1962: 119–21). In other words, he does not see it as autobiography. Griffin has a different take, he claims that the speaker expresses his own foolishness and that the tone is gay mock-heroic,

'[a]gainst a background of heroic action and lofty detachment, and in mockery of it, the rake stands. At the same time he stands in mockery of himself' (1973: 47–53). Pritchard emphasises that the speaker is a fictional character; he is a persona created for the occasion. Nevertheless, he sees the relationship between the speaker and his career and the writer and his life as interesting, and admits that the poem would lose some excitement if it were wholly detachable from its author (2012: location 2412–17). There is reason to suspect that several scholars have been driven, and sometimes carried away, by this excitement.

Greene sees the poem as moving with its memory of Bergen and Lamb believes it was written in a moment when Rochester recognised that he could no longer play an active part in this excessive world. Similarly, Larman believes Rochester refers to his own sexual and creative stagnation, whilst Pritchard wants us to remember that the speaker is a fictional character, though he admits that Rochester's biography lends the poems more excitement. Farley-Hills is primarily concerned about Rochester's need to find meaning in a meaningless world, he is thus more concerned about Rochester's inner life than to relate the poems to Rochester's past actions. Thormählen suspects that the poem may derive from a certainty that drinking is ruinous to the health, and both Farley-Hills and Thormählen are interested in how our expectations can lead us astray in our reading. Griffin primarily focuses on the mock-heroic tone and the self-mockery. Though very differently, they all connect the poem to Rochester's own life and context.

### ***Love to a Woman / 'Love a Woman! y'are an Ass!'***

(Love p. 38)

This poem is included because scholars have related it to a disillusionment with sex and women recognised in Rochester, and because Rochester's own vulnerability and admission of being an 'errant fumbler' has been revealed in it. Thus, it is related to Rochester's personality rather than his actions.

The speaker declares that the love to a woman is a filthy thing, and that he prefers to spend his time drinking with male companions. He goes as far as to call women 'The dullest part of Gods Creation' (l. 4). Thormählen states that the hostility is directed towards all women, and observes that it has been explained in various ways. She mentions Katharine M. Rogers who suggests that Rochester's 'glutted sensuality' made him feel sexual disgust (1966: 162), Reba Wilcoxon who tries to reduce the poem to a rejection of indiscriminate sexual activity (1979: 138–39) and Griffin who believes that Rochester's anti-woman songs

may 'reflect Rochester's utter disillusionment with sex and with women' (1973: 90). Similarly, Thormählen argues that the speaker despises women in general. Such malignancy, she explains, often betrays the speaker's own vulnerability. Rochester admitted to Savile that he had turned out to be hopelessly inept at two of the three 'Buisnisses of this Age', namely 'Woemen' and 'Polliticks', and that the only 'exercise' where he had not disgraced himself was 'drinking' (quoted in Treglown 1980: 67). Thormählen argues this statement should be taken seriously. Attempts have been made to view the poem as atypical and an isolated instance of no significance, but she declares that it is also possible to go too far in the other direction, regarding it as a sincere confession. She believes the poem expresses a loathing which originates in a feeling of inadequacy:

The speaker severs all intercourse with women, retiring to all-male company. Such a radical measure suggests something different from mere disillusionment or an overdose of female sexuality. It could be argued that female society is painful to him because it reminds him of his own painful experiences, and nothing hurts as much as personal failure. (1993: 25).

Thormählen states that this approach would provide a link with the 'Errant fumbler' admission and impart auto-biographical relevance to the poem. However, she admits that this is only speculation (1993: 23–25).

Along the same lines, Pritchard argues that in this poem, sex with women to beget children is dismissed as tiresome drudgery; greater pleasure is anticipated from drinking with his male friends (2012: location 1994). This is expressed in the third stanza:

Farewell *Woman*—I entend  
Henceforth every Night to sitt  
With my lewd well natur'd Friend  
Drinking to engender witt.  
(ll. 9–12)

Farley-Hills also addresses this question, and explains that leaving womankind to others whilst he 'tipples with his (presumably male) friend' was a common conclusion to Cavalier lyrics (1978: 69). This argument might weaken the biographical relevance, if poems written in traditions are indeed less biographical than those who are not. Larman, however, has a different take and calls it a misanthropic poem that might offer insight into his miserable and bored state of mind. The second part of the poem, he argues, indicates how Rochester considered the day-dreams of going back to the free and easy life of London. He believes Rochester's 'lewd, well-natured' drinking companion referred to here was almost certainly Savile (2014: location 2587–2613). That he speculates on who the unnamed friend could be proves that he to a great extent sees it as a biographical relevant poem.

The scholars seem to agree that the poem presents woman-hostile sentiments. Though exaggerated, there also seems to be a wide agreement that the views presented by the speaker are related to a disillusionment with sex and women in Rochester himself; even Thormählen admits to be tempted into speculation on the connection. However, the exaggerated language and woman-hostile attitude make it reasonable to suspect that the poem was written mainly with the purpose of entertainment, though perhaps with a solid touch of truth.

### **Bacchus, Cupid and Rochester**

‘Upon his Drinking his Bowl’, ‘The Disabled Debauchee’ and ‘Love to a Woman’ address the themes of drinking and pederasty in various ways. However, they express a surprising consistency in tone and attitude, and are often easily transferable to Rochester’s private life – both in manner of his personality and actions.

Thormählen believes there is a general favour in the poems on drinking which makes one suspect a fair measure of sincerity. In a letter to Savile, Rochester asserts that ‘that second bottle Harry is the sincerest, wisest, & most impartial downright freind we have, tells us truth of our selves, & forces us to speake truths of others’ (quoted in Treglown 1980: 67). Thormählen also explains that biographical evidence suggests that Rochester was more than a social drinker (1993: 10–13). His drinking habits has always been a subject for discussion.

In 1993, Lamb published the biography *So Idle a Rogue*. It became a popular book; rumour has it that Johnny Depp used it keenly in his preparations for the role as Rochester in the biopic *The Libertine* (2004). Lamb makes several excellent arguments and observations, but seems deadlocked in his own theories and interpretations. He was fond of Prinz, Pinto and Greene’s biographies, and argues that they cannot be accused of overlooking the Earl’s alcoholism, since they were writing at a time when it was regarded more as a simple addiction than an incurable illness (1993: viii). How we read literature is affected by our time, as this example illustrates. This suggests that his poems are not constant, and that the interpretation might be affected by the reader’s time and background as well as the writer’s.

The problem with Lamb’s biography is that he attempts to explain and define Rochester solely in terms of his alcoholism; every instance of his life, mind and poetry are explained in the light of it. He tells us what Rochester thought and felt, as if he had access to his innermost world. For instance, he asserts it was sobriety that turned Rochester to Christianity and repentance. That most scholars and historians assume that Rochester turned to Christianity because he was frightened of dying is utterly rejected by Lamb, who believes

he showed no signs of being a man afraid to die. This is best illustrated with his own words, ‘This is rubbish!’ (1993: 245). Lamb is too eager to make the alcoholic theories add up with Rochester’s life and poetry, and consequently he closes the option to other explanations. Further, he argues that Rochester’s poetry was helped and to some extent accounted for by his alcoholism. This is a reasonable argument, as a text inevitably will be affected by the writer’s temper. A heated mind and a calm mind will not produce equal texts. Lamb believes that Rochester’s language became increasingly aggressive and lewd as his alcoholism worsened. He claims that it must have limited the output of his work and probably was to blame for the sometimes unpolished style. This does not mean that Rochester wrote poetry when he was drunk, but it takes approximately six months for the alcoholic to completely dry out (1994: 104–5). Lamb argues that ‘[t]o omit an explanation of these basic medical laws would be to miss the axis of the Earl’s life, the core of his personality’ (1993: 107).

Johnson believes that in the first years of his marriage, Rochester’s genuine ardour for his wife appears to have confirmed his heterosexuality. After 1670, however, he sees strong evidence for his interest in boys, ‘perhaps in part as a renewal of his desire for variety but possibly also because of his venereal woes and growing misogyny’ (2004: 109). Griffin supports the argument that young boys are openly admitted and even preferred to women in some poems (1973: 123). Rochester may have had homosexual relationships, and his age tolerated a certain degree of bisexuality, especially amongst libertine aristocrats. However, there is no proof for or against that Rochester had homosexual relationships. Paedophilia is another matter; Thormählen explains that Rochester scholars fail to distinguish between paedophilia and homosexuality. One exception is Treglown, who finds no conclusive evidence for homosexual relations with the man Rochester really seems to have loved, his friend Savile, but he points out that they had a common interest in boys.

Against this background, Thormählen argues, Vieth’s attempt to weaken the case for Rochester’s homosexuality by referring to his happy marriage is naïve. She claims that the only evidence of homosexuality is in the following lines of ‘The Imperfect Enjoyment’:

Stiffly Resolv’d, t’would Carelesly invade  
Woman, nor Man, nor ought its fury stayd,  
Where ere it pierc’d a Cunt it found or made –  
(ll. 41–3)

However, both Vieth, Walker and Love have departed from their copy-text. They substitute ‘Man’ found in the extant manuscripts for the ‘Boy’ of the text they selected. Because of the references to paedophilia in three other canonical poems, and the lack of evidence of

homosexuality, Thormählen thinks 'Boy' should be reinstated (1993: 20–7). Johnson seems convinced that Rochester's orientation was heterosexual. However, he states that 'he apparently was also a lover of youths in the style of fellow rakes who, craving variety turned to sexual experimentation with boys' (2004: 109). Similarly, Lamb states that Rochester was a heterosexual whose love affairs were with women. He was also, however, an aesthete who appreciated beauty of every kind (1994: 169). Johnson believes that Rochester's sexual orientation is significant because of the obsession with varieties of sexuality in his writings and his own psycho-sexuality as a vital part of his creativity (2004: 19–34). Larman, in contrast, argues that whether Rochester was bisexual, itself an anachronistic concept, is hard to gauge from his poetry alone. There are numerous allusions to homosexual, as well as heterosexual, liaisons throughout his verse, but his letters are mostly devoid of any romantic or sexual passion towards men, with the exception coming in some of his correspondence with Savile (2014: location 2604). There is no doubt that Rochester's drinking habits and sexual orientation are widely perceived to be of importance to his writings and creativity.

## **Love – Inconstancy, disappointment and pain**

This section will examine five poems treating women and love. It will be about the emotional and physical relationships between the speakers and the women in the poems, Rochester's relationship to the speakers and Rochester's relationship to women. It will be about the impossibility of constancy, the necessity of honesty and the unavoidable disappointment and pain of love. 'Against Constancy' is about this impossibility of constancy; 'Absent from thee' is often assumed to be addressed to Rochester's wife, and expresses the speaker's divided mind; 'The Mistress' is popularly thought to be addressed to his mistress Elizabeth Barry. It expresses the pain in both presence and absence of the beloved. Whilst the male speaker is the inconstant part in 'Against Constancy' and 'Absent from thee', both lovers are inconstant in 'The Mistress'. The two latter poems also express disgust with falsehood. What they have in common is that the lovers are never satisfied, constancy is impossible and pain cannot be escaped. Though you can sense the torment and disillusionment in several of Rochester's poems, there are two poems where this view is distinctly illustrated. 'The Imperfect Enjoyment' presents a hopeful lover who is disappointed and hurt by love, whilst 'A Ramble in St. James's Park' illustrates a dark view on love, sex and mankind. Griffin claims that Rochester's poems about sex stand in close relation to his own life as a rake, and 'like the libertine speaker of the satires,

the libertine lover of the songs is a projection of the poet himself' (1973: 79). The speaker's pain is often thought to be shared with Rochester.

### ***Song of the Earle of Rochesters / 'Against Constancy'***

(Love p. 34)

This poem is particularly interesting because it has been read with a psychological approach. Further, several scholars argue that Rochester considered constancy a hypocritical virtue, hence he shares the view presented by the speaker. The fear of boredom is also something the speaker and Rochester are claimed to share, as in 'Love to a woman'. However, one scholar believes the speaker is bearer of 'particularly un-Rochesterian qualities', and such contradictory views makes the poem even more interesting to examine.

The song is entitled 'Songe of the Earle of Rochesters' in both Walker and Fisher and Love's edition. One of the two surviving manuscript copies is also a musical setting, which suggests that it probably was written with an entertaining purpose. It is noteworthy that it was entitled 'Songe of' and not 'Songe by', as the two short words indicates widely different meanings. Whilst 'by' refers to the writer of the poem, 'of' refers to the subject of the poem. The title in these editions, then, indicates that the song is about Rochester. In contrast, two other poems are both entitled 'Song By the Earl of Rochester' in Love's edition, which do not suggest the same autobiographical connection.

Griffin believes that a psychological and even a psychoanalytical approach to Rochester appears to reach deeper into the meaning of a number of Rochester's poems about sex, and writes that '[p]sychological material – fantasies, compulsions, aggressions, anxieties – is often remarkably overt or near the surface of his poems and should not be ignored' (1973: 114). He claims that Rochester's life was 'rich in neurotic activity – notorious philandering, chronic alcoholism, a violent combativeness', and states that it would not be surprising if his neuroses helped shape the poems, particularly since it has been 'almost universally felt that his songs are intensely personal' (1973: 114–15). Freudian analysis is used to uncover hidden fears, anxieties or obsessions, but Griffin observes that with Rochester, almost everything is distinct in his poetry. The speaker declares that he will change mistresses every night until he is dead and fate changes him to worms. He longs to be often tried and claims that constancy is a mere pretence; a cover for the jealous and the dull. Inconstancy becomes a proof that he is neither dull nor defective. Impotence, Griffin concludes, is the unspoken fear of the speaker (1973: 114–16). Farley-Hills supports the view that constancy is scorned not only because



inconstancy is preferable, but because it is a hypocritical virtue cultivated by people who are too old or weak to be inconstant. However, he argues that the ‘Don Juan-like assertion’ is to be regarded as much as a fiction as all the other personas Rochester adopted (1978: 63).

Similarly, John Wilders believes the speaker express a seemingly confident assumption that sexual fidelity is the last refuge of the stupid and impotent, and that the libertines are distinguished from the ‘duller fools’ because of their sexual potency and versatility. However, he argues that the language of the final stanza casts doubt on the apparent heroism. Instead of seeming free to experience limitless variety, the speaker appears to be trapped in an obsession. It is paradoxical, he says, and if we re-read it in the light of its final stanza, we wonder whether its opening lines are ironical or not. Wilders concludes that Rochester can create the impression of an underlying insecurity when he seems most assured, and that the poem reveals a divided mind unable to embrace the kind of life it seems to defend (1982: 52–54). Rochester’s poems are often coloured by several contradictory layers of attitudes, and this tendency will be discussed further later.

Thormählen, in opposition to most scholars, argues that it is particularly important to distinguish between Rochester and the speaker in this poem. She claims that the last two stanzas offer strong evidence in favour of a separation between poet and speaker:

And Wee, whose Hearts doe justly swell  
With noe vaine glorious pride,  
Knowing, how Wee in Love excell,  
Long, to bee often try’d.

Then bring my Bath, and strew by Bed,  
As each kind Night returns.  
I’le change a Mistresse, till I’m dead,  
And Fate change mee to Wormes  
(ll. 13–20)

She points at the ‘forbiddingly obsessive tone’ of the last stanza which comes after the swaggering. Normally, Rochester’s poetry expresses disgust with pride and vanity. Thormählen doubts that the poet behind those works would describe himself in the terms presented in this poem, as the speaker is bearer of what she calls ‘particularly un-Rochesterian qualities’ (1993: 61–64). This suggests that we do have expectations of the poet and the poetry, and that the poetry affects how we perceive the poet and the other way around.

Lamb and Pritchard are the only biographers who have given attention to this poem, and both mention it very briefly. Lamb writes that Rochester was being treated for pox in 1669, and that it was probably around this time he wrote one of his most libertine lyric poem,

‘How perfect Chloris, and how free’, and that it was in a similar vein he wrote ‘Against Constancy’. He explains that dullness and boredom frightened Rochester, and that he spent his life trying to escape them. He believes it is remarkable how often dullness is referred to in his poetry, for instance the comment on the ‘duller fools’ in this poem (1993: 127–29). Along the same lines, Pritchard claims that the poem has libertine sentiments and is an ‘exuberant, braggart piece’. He concludes that the swaggering tone, ‘of a phallic passion for living driven by fear of dull death’, ends with a sudden, macabre death (2012: location 2587). Griffin sees the closest relation between the speaker and Rochester, whereas Farley-Hills wants us to see the speaker as a fictitious persona. Wilders focuses on Rochester’s divided mind, whilst Thormählen is most eager to distinguish between Rochester and the protagonist. The editors, Walker and Fisher and Love maintain a biographical relation by using the title ‘Songe of the Earle of Rochester’.

### **Song (‘Absent from thee’)**

(Love p. 29)

This poem has frequently been read as an address to Rochester’s wife. The speaker’s notions that love is the only thing that can yield meaning and happiness, and that love can only be proven through pain, are argued to be shared with Rochester. Like the speaker, Rochester apparently regretted his infidelities, and some believe the poem expresses extraordinary honesty and sincerity on the behalf of both the speaker and the poet. The tone has been perceived as uncertain because the poet seems to be wallowing in feeling. In addition, the poem has raised questions about Rochester as a libertine.

Pinto is of the opinion that this is one of the most touching and characteristic of Rochester’s love poems and that it is almost certainly addressed to his wife. He argues that the poet regretted his infidelities (1962: 54–55), and points at a fragment from a letter to his wife to illustrate the relation:

‘Tis not an easy thing to be intirely happy, But to bee kind is very easy and that is the greatest measure of happiness; I say nott this to putt you in mind of being kind to mee, you have practis’d that soe long that I have a joyfull confidence you will never forgett itt, but to show that I myself have a sence of what the methods of my Life seeme soe utterly to contradict, I must not bee too wise about my owne follyes [...] (quotes in Treglown 1980: 229).

Pinto is not alone in his conviction that the poem is an address to Rochester’s wife, or at least inspired by their relationship. Greene supports that infidelity tormented his conscience, and explains that this poem was written with melancholic tenderness (1974: 159). Larman has a

slightly different take and believes that a tension between showing apparently heartfelt sentiment and adopting the arch persona of the removed lover dominates this poem (2014: location 1816). As we will discover, this point of view is central to this study, and can be adopted to a large proportion of his poetry. It is probable that Rochester's poetry was written in a tension between heartfelt sentiment and acting, and the question is to what extent he was sincere and to what extent it was acting.

Whilst 'Against Constancy' seems to attempt to excuse and explain libertine behaviour, or a man in denying, 'Absent from thee' appears to present a guilt-ridden speaker. There is no carefree expression, the speaker admits that he is 'Faithless to thee, false, unforgiven' and will 'lose my everlasting rest' (ll. 15–16). Wilders argues that this poem is distinguished by its extraordinary honesty: the poet knows that he can only find peace in the love of the woman he is addressing '(possibly his wife)', yet he knows that he must be unfaithful. Wilders believes this is the expression of a divided mind which longs to be faithful. Though the speaker knows that the consequence of his infidelities is torment, he is forced by his self-destructive nature (1982: 56–7). 'Absent from thee' appears to be the portrait of a man who has realised and regrets the error of his ways without being able to control his actions. Lamb believes that in the case of his wife, his infidelities were never calculated and always regretted. He states that the poem implies that self-torment is all he is worth, and that Rochester portrays himself with the lack of self-respect typical of the alcoholic. Lamb suggests it was as though Rochester saw himself as having a kind of duty to perform in showing his society the error of its ways (2004: 121–22).

Likewise, Farley-Hills stresses that this is a poem much praised for its sincerity, and he believes it is legitimate to point to parallels in the letters to Rochester's wife, as Pinto does, or, like Griffin, to show that the quest for security and stability is a recurring theme not only in the poems but also in the conversations with Burnet. Farley-Hills explains that we need to understand both the biographical and historical context of the ideas from which the poetry stems in order to understand those ideas. However, he underlines that the critic's task is to ask how these ideas are being used in his poetry. In this poem, Rochester is using the traditional language of love without much irony. There are traditional elements in it too, Farley-Hills observes, hence it is not simply personal effusion. Usually, we can be certain what puns and ambiguities are intended because the tone guides us to interpret the possible range of meaning. However, in 'Absent from thee', Farley-Hills claims the tone to be uncertain because the poet seems to be wallowing in feeling. He concludes that it is not surprising that with such uncertainty, critics like Griffin are tempted to move from criticism to psychoanalysis (1978: 78–80).

Griffin also addresses this question, and mentions Pascal who once described Man's condition: inconstancy, ennui, unrest (1973: 18). The same condition is repeated so often in Rochester's poetry that it is hard to dismiss it as merely acting and fiction. He argues that Pinto's comment on the complex mood is fine as far as it goes, but that it only isolates two of the elements. He believes it suggests that the address and the plan are calculated efforts by a libertine lover to heighten pleasure. The song, he objects, should be seen against a background of libertine defences of inconstancy, but also as a comment on them. Though a hint remains of the strategic departure, the overwhelming sense in the song is that the speaker feels compelled to fling himself from woman to woman. Griffin argues that 'Absent from thee' shares with 'Love and Life' a sense that external and irrational forces such as heaven and miracles control his actions. It is true, however, that the defence of inconstancy is a traditional libertine departure strategy and indeed one that Rochester employed. Griffin also states that some kind of psychological speculation is clearly invited by this poem (1973: 110–14). However, if a libertine is of the opinion that pleasure is important and that engaging in sexual intercourse with various mistresses is unavoidable, it is not clear where the guilt comes from. If we are to trust his biographers that he had a complicated relationship to his own role as a libertine, we can read him as a libertine that unsuccessfully attempts to convince others, but perhaps most of all himself, that his libertine ways can be explained and excused.

Several scholars have associated the wanderer with Rochester and the speaker's beloved with Elizabeth Malet. The letters to his wife and the conversations with Burnet are held as their 'main proofs'; but how sincere were the letters, how honest was Rochester in the conversations with Burnet, and how truthful was Burnet in his account of the conversations? I will attempt to answer these questions later.

### ***Song ('An Age in her Embraces pas'd) / The Mistress***

(Love pp. 27–29)

This poem is particularly interesting because it is assumed to be addressed to Elizabeth Barry, and the pain and jealousy expressed by the speaker is thought to be shared with Rochester. Besides, the poem been compared to the letters to Rochester's wife, and some believe the poem, like Rochester's entire oeuvre, bespeaks a disgust with falsehood.

In this song, it is not only absence that entails suffering, but also presence. The speaker is unable to stay away from what torments him, and the poem represents absence as painless because of its lifeless state. Thormählen is amongst the most critical when it comes to relating the poetry to Rochester, but also she is tempered into speculation. About this poem, she says

that even for a reader not very interested in Rochester's biography, biographical speculations are hard to resist when looking for explanations of the divergence between 'Absent from thee' and 'The Mistress'. She stresses that there is evidence in favour of the view that the first is associated with his wife and the latter with Elizabeth Barry, and Rochester's own letters supply most of it (1993: 73–76).

Greene sees a connection between the poem and Rochester's jealousy in his relationship with Elizabeth Barry, and argues that 'to place one's mistress upon the stage was to place her in the market place, fair game for any man with money in his pouch. He could declare disagreements and jealousy to be the mark of true love' (1974: 127). Farley-Hills develops on this and states that Rochester in this poem argues how the torment of jealousy is a proof of the intensity of their love, and that 'Rochester is again on the subject of love as a moment of truth in a meaningless world, contrasting the brief experience of the life and light of his mistress' embrace with the death of the soul in her absence' (1978: 86–88). Lamb also gives jealousy particular attention in this poem; he believes that when Elizabeth Barry no longer had a professional need for Rochester, she found someone else. Until that happened 'Rochester continued to struggle with her in the hopelessly romantic belief that tiffs, arguments and slanging matches were an indication not of a doomed relationship but of true love' (1994: 206–7). Griffin observes that it is almost as if pain has been so associated with true sexual pleasure that it becomes a sign of authentic passion (1973: 107–8). Pinto also argues that a group of Rochester's lyrics is distinguished from the rest by their genuine and intense passion, and amongst them is 'The Mistress'. He believes that the poems may have been addressed to some mistresses, but that it is more likely they were inspired by his wife. He states that the tone of the letters is exactly that of the best love songs and he believes the letters and the songs are addressed to the same person (1962: 52). Pinto differs from his fellow Rochester-scholars by relating it to his wife rather than Elizabeth Barry.

As the pursuit of pain plays a vital part in these poems, Thormählen reminds us of a passage from 'A Very Heroicall Epistle': The speaker in the poem, assumed to be a satirical representation of Mulgrave, states that 'this my Maxim, to avoyd all paine'. The avoidance of pain is crucial to Epicureans. Therefore, Thormählen states, anyone wishing to make a coherent Epicurean of Rochester would have to contend with the satirist's irony in the 'Heroicall Epistle', as well as with the love lyrics where pain is regarded as a necessity. One stanza of 'The Mistress' attacks Epicurean values:

Fantastick fancys fondly move  
And in fraile joys believe,

Taking false pleasure for true love,  
But pain can ne're deceive.  
(ll. 29–32)

Thormählen states it would be difficult to argue that the stanza is merely an exponent of the poet's irony; it is vital to the argumentation of the poem, and if it is not taken seriously, then neither can the poem as a whole be. Thormählen asks what reasons there is for assuming that these lyrics are the outcome of a sincere impulse. Most recent Rochester criticism, she observes writing in 1993, has focused on the values expressed in the poems. How can we explore an artist's values when we do not know if Rochester is playing games? Thormählen does not think that a reliable scale can be constructed, but that some elucidation might be gained when shifting the emphasis from arguments to concerns. It is true that 'when a certain complex of emotions and ideas is dealt with repeatedly and at length in works of high quality, it is not unreasonable to suppose that this mattered a great deal to the artist'. I agree that it seems that discontent with what one recognises as a valuable possession is such a concern (1993: 77–78). This poem, and the love lyrics in general, suggests that sexual compliance is something worth striving for, but it never yields complete satisfaction.

In the poet's entire oeuvre, Thormählen argues, hypocrisy and stupidity are held up to scorn. Both 'Absent from thee' and 'The Mistress' bespeak a disgust with falsehood. In neither lyric is the speaker satisfied with the true love he believes is his; the 'straying Fool' in 'Absent from thee' acknowledges that he can never find permanent contentment even in his true love's arms. Thormählen suggests that the lover in 'The Mistress' distrusts the reliability of commitment; jealousy is the 'only proof' that they 'love and doe not Dream' (ll. 27–28). She believes that such features suggest concerns that were vital to the poet, and are hence should be taken seriously (1993: 73–78). Whilst the male speaker in 'Against Constancy' and 'Absent from thee' is the inconstant part, both lovers are inconstant in 'The Mistress'. Pritchard writes that 'The Mistress' is usually taken to have the turbulent relationship to Elizabeth Barry in mind, and 'Song: Absent from thee' to relate to his often unhappy, betrayed wife. Together, he states, they illustrate a divided and distressed spirit (2012: location 3164). The poems presents a wide range of attitudes, even within the poems. In his entire oeuvre, Rochester plays with several voices, from young innocent girls to old men. How can we possibly know when he is revealing his own? The repeated themes, concerns and attitudes might guide us to some answers, and will be discussed further later.

## ***The Imperfect Enjoyment***

(Love pp. 13–15)

This poem is included because though it is treating a traditional subject, it has also been read as highly personal – hence, it might be difficult to argue that literary tradition, imitation and illusion necessarily make poems less biographical. It is also coloured by vigorous exaggerations and several tonal shifts, and one critic believes the aim of the poem is to make the reader laugh, in other words for the purpose of entertainment. The speaker's bisexuality has been related to Rochester's sexuality, and it has been read with a psychological and psychoanalytical approach. The poem has also been argued to reveal the transition from a youthful, erotic perspective to the ironic and satiric purview of his maturity.

Due to its obscene language and content, 'The Imperfect Enjoyment' has appeared in and disappeared from editions, dependant on the editor and the legal demands. Pinto was forced to exclude it due to risk of prosecution; this was as late as 1964. The majority of modern scholars, however, agree that Rochester did not write pornography in our modern definition of the term, which is 'printed or visual material intended to stimulate sexual excitement' (Soanes 2008: 1117). Griffin, for instance, writes that 'I think Rochester's own purposes are never to stimulate. Herein he may be distinguished from many of the writers of bawdry in the Restoration'. He believes Rochester may justifiably claim to be writing about nature and human experience, and hence claim the right to use 'the necessary language' (1973: 83). Other reasons for using obscene language are to provoke and satirise. Sexual stimulation was probably never the intention, and obscenity should not be confused with pornography.

The subject of the poem is male sexual dysfunction, more specifically premature ejaculation and later impotence. Rochester is treating a traditional subject dating back to classic works such as Petronius' *Satyricon* and Ovid's *Amores* 3:7. Griffin claims that Ovid's work is the ultimate source and that 'The Imperfect Enjoyment' is a loose imitation. Ovid's lover is unable to perform due to impotence and curses his fate. Petronius adds the 'grotesque comedy of the lover's vehement curse against his own member'. Ovid's curse, in comparison, is mild (1973: 92). We need to see the poem in relation to a tradition of poems about the experience of imperfect enjoyment. It can be seen as an original variation of a traditional theme, and the originality is the premature ejaculation. Rochester is working in a tradition, which might have made scholars willing to read the poem with a more serious attitude.

The poem is marked by exaggerations and several tonal shifts. The subject is serious, but the style is playful. Farley-Hills believes that the first aim of the poem is to make the

reader laugh. Though the poem is dark, it is indeed funny rather than erotic or tragic. The erotic elements are so exaggerated one can hardly take them very seriously nor experience sexual arousal from them. Along the same lines, Griffin describes the poem as a central example in which sexual failure provides an occasion for both laughter and disgust (1973: 93). The descriptions of the physical act of love can be unpleasantly detailed:

In liquid raptures I dissolve all o're,  
Melt into sperm, and spend at every pore.  
A touch from any part of her had don't:  
Her hand, her foot, her very look's a Cunt.  
(ll. 15–18)

'Is there then no more?' she cries, as she cannot bring the erection back. The speaker is humiliated because he has suffered a personal defeat, and starts boasting about his sexual successes in the past, when 'Tis dart of love, whose piercing point, of tried, / With virgin blood ten thousand maids has dyed (ll. 37–38). He did not limit himself to women only, and the bisexuality has been related to Rochester's own sexual life. However, one should keep in mind that this part is particularly boastful and exaggerated. An interesting detail in the stanza quoted above is the word 'carelessly'. Normally in Rochester's poetry, the speaker criticises passionless lovemaking. Wilcoxon observes that '[o]ne kind of sexual relationship is clearly attacked and another not. That which is not invokes an ideal of mutual consideration and equality' (1975: 389). His penis rises for any 'small whore', but with his love, the penis 'dar'st not stand' (ll. 60–1). The speaker is humiliated and betrayed by his penis and by love.

Griffin argues that his poems prove that Rochester was concerned with compulsive sexual promiscuity and impotence. He states that Rochester often sees the promiscuous rake as a man plagued by sexual failure, doubts or fear of impotence, and that psychoanalytical theory bears out the connection that Rochester establishes (1973: 118). He believes the Oedipus complex and strong emotional attachment to the mother are 'revealed' in Rochester's life. Griffin mentions Freud, who said that where a man loves, he cannot desire, and where he desires he cannot love. Psychoanalysts associate Don Juanism and physical impotence, especially premature ejaculation, by tracing them a fixation of erotic attachment on the mother. This is an event likely to happen in cases where the child is either spoiled or rejected by a strong mother. Griffin believes Rochester was spoiled by his mother, whilst Larman on the other hand claims that Rochester had been abandoned by his father and that his distant mother was more concerned with politicking than attending Rochester (2014: location 539). Griffin suggests that biographical evidence can bear out the possibility that Rochester suffered from



the Don Juanism and physical impotence he described in his works. He believes Charles II may have served as a kind of father figure, and that Rochester's ambivalent attitude towards him may be a kind of father-hatred linked with love-hatred for his mother (1973: 120–21).

The main problem with Griffin's approach is that it is based on a twentieth-century premise. As John O'Neill argues in his review of Griffin's book, he has not considered that what he calls neurotic activity was conventional amongst Restoration courtiers. He states that many of Rochester's poems were written to shock the readers or to insult his victims. They often emphasise those aspects of sexuality which, in the view of psychoanalysts, are unhealthy. Griffin treats the sexual poems by examining the personality of Rochester to find the sources of the pathological states of mind and character which the poet satirises. O'Neill stresses that whatever validity such examinations may have as techniques of psychoanalysis with living patients, they are not useful methods of literary criticism, as they lead our attentions away from the poems themselves (1975). Almost like mathematicians, it appears that some literary critics long for the poems to 'add up'; by connecting it to a specific context, a biographical or social, the poem can 'be solved' and make sense.

Amongst the recurring themes and concerns in Rochester's poetry are the disappointments of sexual experience. Farley-Hills argues that this concern is central to his 'existential belief that only the experience of love and lovemaking can provide the brief moment of truth that "heaven allows" as a compensation for the torment of being alive' (1978: 2). He suggests that this poem, but also 'A Ramble in St. James's Park', is self-mockery, with Rochester being 'the comic butt'. He believes it to be one of Rochester's favourite subjects; the laughable frailty and unreliability of the one pleasure that is worth living for (1978: 96–111). It might be self-mockery that Rochester is practising in this poem, but perhaps rather on the behalf of manhood than himself exclusively. Griffin recommends us to see the poem in relation to his other works and his own personal experience as a rake, and that '[o]ut of that experience, mediated through Ovidian convention, Rochester constructed a serio-comic dramatization of kind of sexual failure which every male lover risks' (1973: 91–114). Whether or not the poem is a biographical account drawn from experience, Larman argues, matters less than its evocation of masculine frailty and sexual frustration, which was becoming a central feature of his poetry. He emphasises how the narrator describes himself as 'trembling, confused, despairing, limber, dry' – the last word a self-regarding term about his poetic ability as much as it is about his sexual prowess (2014: location 2113–25). Johnson states that for someone with Rochester's obsessions, the first symptoms of sexual

malfunctioning indicated a diminishment of sexual activity. He explains that this could take the form of premature ejaculation, inability to climax more than once or impotence, and that he explored those conditions and their psychological impact in several poems. ‘The Imperfect Enjoyment’, he argues, is the most revealing, as it shows Rochester’s transition from a youthful, erotic perspective to the ironic and satiric purview of his maturity (2004: 125–26). Pritchard observes that it has been pointed out that the literary history and fashion shrink the autobiographical element, but that the problem could have been a sore point for Rochester when suffering the effects of venereal disease. He states that ‘once again, he presents a persona (however related to himself) and situation open to derision’ (2012: location 1492–93). Along the same lines, Johnson writes that whatever the date of its composition, the poem was almost certainly written after Rochester had developed some of the symptoms he lists (2004: 127). In short, they appear to agree that the poem was written at least partly in light of personal experiences, hence critics have regarded the poem as a personal and confessional poem and as a philosophical poem. Though most relate the speaker and/or the subject to Rochester somehow, the exaggerations and the fact that it might have been written for the purpose of entertainment are two reasons why one should be careful with relating the persona in the poem too closely with Rochester.

### ***A Ramble in St. James’s Park***

(Love pp. 76–80)

This poem is interesting because it has been argued that it presents the view associated with Rochester that life is meaningless, and though love is a degrading experience, it is the only value that can bring forth an illusion of a meaningful existence. As in ‘The Mistress’, the jealousy felt by the speaker has been identified as Rochester’s jealousy, and it has been observed that the threat uttered by the speaker is close to Rochester’s theory of satire. Whilst one critic simply says that the poet and the protagonist are ‘clearly related’, another argues that the speaker is not modelled on Rochester at all. One critic also believes that the poem reveals a poet who despairs his own abilities.

‘A Ramble in St. James’s Park’ tells a story about a man who is betrayed by the only value that can bring forth an illusion of a meaningful existence; love and lovemaking. Griffin describes the speaker as a boastful libertine who in several ways resembles Rochester. He claims the speaker to be a self-confessed drunkard, gossip and lecher, and that his declaration is often theatrical. This overstatement, Griffin says, suggests that he looks on himself with some sarcasm. He believes that the poem is ‘designed as the satiric observation

of a self-conscious libertine' (1973: 25–26). The protagonist attacks a wide range of perverse and unnatural behaviour. He sees Corinna in the park and is hurt and offended by 'the proud disdain she cast on me' (l. 36). Corinna is accompanied by three men, and the speaker looks at the men as nothing but cheats. Thormählen argues that the men's chief motive is not sexual, but instead social ambition. She explains that '[i]t is her status as the mistress of a man who keeps the company they aspire to that really whets their appetite' (1993: 97). By obtaining Corinna's favours, they will learn intimate details about the speaker which will help them in their pursuit for social ambition (1993: 97). This motive is clearly detested by the speaker.

The speaker adheres to a libertine principle and the three fops are out to raise their social status, but what is Corinna's motivation? Her actions are not motivated by passion, and a libertine would abhor passionless sex as it equals unnatural behaviour. Thormählen asserts that Corinna is 'Joyfull and pleas'd' because she is flattered. She argues that Corinna's motivation is one of the three defects which are seen as inexcusable in Rochester's oeuvre: vanity or pride. She also claims that the three fops represent the other two: folly and hypocrisy, or stupidity and insincerity (1993: 98). Had they been motivated by passion, the case would have been very different as

Such nat'rall freedoms are but just,  
There's something gen'rous in meer Lust.  
But to turn damn'd abandon'd *Jade*,  
When neither *Head* nor *Tail* perswade;  
To be a *Whore*, in understanding,  
A passive *Pot* for *Fools* to spend in!  
(ll. 97–102)

Similarly, Griffin argues that '[h]onest, generous lust, then, becomes the ideal against which Rochester measures the decadent world of those who feel nothing' (1973: 32). It is impossible to gain a complete understanding of Rochester's concept of love, but it is plausible that honesty and passion were necessary factors. The remaining lines of the poem present a vehement curse against Corinna. Lamb believes that the speaker is lying about how he did not care that Corinna came home 'drencht with the Seed of half the Town' (l. 114), he suggests that the curse is an expression of his manic jealousy (1994: 226). Lamb argues that this is the poem in which Rochester reveals that Hobbism has let him down. He claims that it is fired with jealousy, and must have been written during the affair with Elizabeth Barry (1994: 225). He sees the expressed jealousy as fired by Rochester's jealousy, and one of the greatest insecurities this poem raises is perhaps what is causing the jealousy.

Rochester told Burnet about his rationale for satire, namely that ‘a man could not write with life, unless he were heated by Revenge: For to make a *Satyre* without Resentments, upon the cold Notions of *Phylosophy*, was as if a man would in cold blood, cut men’s throats who had never offended him’ (1812: 26). Johnson elaborates on this, and claims that the poem is based on Rochester’s discovery that his mistress Foster had betrayed and passed on deadly forms of the pox to him. He believes that the threat is close to Rochester’s rationale for satire, which indicates biographical significance of the poem and gives us insight into the poet through his acknowledged feelings for ‘resentment’ and desire for ‘revenge’. He finds support in Freud, who said of aggressive wit, whether obscene or satirical, that it allows one to infer the presence of a concealed inclination to exhibitionism in its inventors (2004: 152–54).

Farley-Hills believes that Rochester presents love as a degrading experience. He writes that ‘[t]he experience becomes an archetypical situation for demonstrating the essential meaninglessness of all human experience and the betrayal of the one value that can give him the illusion of a meaningful existence’ (1978: 105–6). Along the same lines, Griffin argues that poet and protagonist are clearly related in ‘A Ramble’, and that ‘Rochester associates himself as poet with the clown-hero whose role is to express the humiliation forced on him by his mistress’ indiscriminating promiscuity’ (1973: 32–34). Pritchard nuances this and writes that Rochester invents a situation, perhaps made up from actual incidents, to ‘expose what he had observed of the heartless and degrading sexuality in his time – and to express his own deep anxieties about existing in a world of insecurity and betrayal’ (2012: location 1453–5). The speaker does not necessarily feel this way because Corinna is having sexual intercourse with other men. What troubles him must be that she is fornicating with unworthy fools.

Johnson argues that the poem’s targets are multiple and include ‘language, Waller, Foster/Corinna, her three lusting followers, the entire spectrum of London society, British history, classical mythology, human and animal copulation, the Devil of Christianity, cowards, school-boys, whores, Jesuits, doctors, atheists – and himself’ (2004: 153). In contrast, Davis believes it is unlikely that the speaker is modelled on a single individual, least of all Rochester himself. However, he argues that ‘his situation as an aristocratic male co-habiting with a whore has precedents in social fact’ (2013: 106). Larman claims that Rochester is despairing his own abilities in this satire. He also points at the lines that are ‘directed as much towards the various women who have wronged Rochester, either by infecting him with syphilis or by trifling with his affections, as they are towards Corinna’ (2014: location 2236). These lines, he states, make a counterpoint to Rochester’s letters to his wife. Still, he warns us that ‘For all this, it is

important to remember that Rochester is writing not as John Wilmot, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Rochester, but in a poetic persona as part of the satirical tradition'. Larman concludes that Rochester's satire is directed at virtually all of society, but it is also aimed at himself (2014: location 2236–72). Davis believes that the speaker in 'A Ramble' is the Rochesterian speaker who comes worst off in the dealings with the world beyond Whitehall. He calls it 'a hybrid of the expansive mode of Horatian satire, particularly associated with the description of encounters in urban public spaces, and the narrower mode of personal satire or "lampoon" which was the vernacular of territorial conflict inside Whitehall'. Lamoons, he explains, were court graffiti, often tagged on to the doors of their victims' chambers. Davis concludes that it would be a mistake to align Rochester too closely with the speaker, but the latter's predicament was one in which his creator was unavoidably implicated (2013: xxii). Though the speaker probably does not talk on behalf of Rochester, there are elements in the poem that relate the speaker and Rochester. However, the speaker is theatrical and the content is exaggerated, which makes it reasonable to assume that it was written with the purpose of entertainment.

### **Women and disappointments**

'Against Constancy', 'Absent from thee', 'The Mistress', 'The Imperfect Enjoyment' and 'A Ramble in St. James's Park' all treat the painful love to a woman, expressed by various speakers whom all have been connected to Rochester in various ways.

Rochester's relationship to women, both in life and poetry, was complicated. Lamb claims that women were a glorious enemy for Rochester, and he believes that Rochester's poetry should be read in the context of his age and society. The playwrights did not depict women as delicate little creatures wafting around the stage; their sexual appetite were made clear to the audiences. Neither poets and playwrights nor their audiences were politically correct. Rochester ranted against women, but no more than he did against men. In fact, Lamb argues that in his poetry, he generally shows a higher esteem for women than for men. Because Rochester treats the genders differently, he has been charged for being sexist. This accusation would have been impossible to understand to a seventeenth-century courtier. Lamb reminds us that Rochester lived in a sexist society and, like all of us, he was a product of his environment. He believes that the impotence caused by alcoholism, combined with the end of his affair with Elizabeth Barry, resulted in an indifference towards women (1993: 108–14). Furthermore, he argues that Rochester's appreciation of his wife caused him to speak of himself as a 'straying fool', and the poem most obviously written with her in mind, 'Absent

from thee' implies that self-torment is all he is worth. Marriage, according to Lamb, was the kind of social constraint which Rochester saw as being in conflict with natural instincts.

Rochester is said to have had profound respect for his wife, and Lamb argues that Rochester was always honest with her. Nevertheless, he was consistently driven to unfaithfulness:

His repeated, numerous infidelities to Elizabeth racked him with remorse and self-disgust throughout his life. To read many of his letters to her is to listen to a condemned man speaking with head hung in shame and eyes shut tight but in a bitter, useless despair. Like most alcoholics, Rochester despised himself. (Lamb 1994: 88).

Rochester told Burnet that he had a secret value and reverence for an honest man and that he loved morality in others. However, he was drawn to infidelity and drinking; it was a kind of fulfilment that he saw as fundamentally honest to nature but which also caused him pain. The fulfilment of desire never lived up to the expectations, and he was frustrated by what he loathed most of all: boredom. Lamb suggests that inconstancy was due to a fear of dullness and boredom, and that he spent all his life trying to escape them (1994: 88–129). The inconstancy is not only preferable, it is compulsory. The matter of inconstancy is directly related to pain; life without love was painful and meaningless, but life with love was just as painful. Griffin sees Rochester as a poet and a man in search of certainties in love, court and friendship, which continually eluded him (1973: 5).

Larman argues that Rochester felt abandoned by many of his acquaintances. Rochester wrote to Savile that 'if it were the sign of an honest man to be happy in his friends, sure I were marked out for the worst of men, since no-one e'er lost so many as I have done, or knew how to make so few'. Paranoia and poetic exaggeration, Larman argues, were familiar to him (2014: location 3203–10). In another letter to Savile, Rochester termed himself melodramatically 'a Man whom it is the great Mode to hate' (Vieth 1968: xxix). Johnson sees anxieties and fears in Rochester; he believes Rochester's fear of death made him turn to alcohol and sexual promiscuity for escape. He argues that his uncertainties and ambivalences about sexuality and money were caught up in his apprehensions about death (2004: 20).

Greene elaborates in this and writes that there existed a general disillusionment in the Restoration age, and that 'spleen was the disease which ran through literature'.

Disillusionment, monotony and boredom, he argues, preyed worst on the finer spirits such as Rochester's. However, he writes, life had to be lived, and 'Rochester drank to make it endurable; he wrote to purge himself of his unhappiness, [...] he flung himself, the better to forget the world, into the two extremities: love and hate' (1974: 75). Rochester was also accused for cowardice on various encounters, most significantly after the death of Mr Downs.

Greene believes this encounter may have been the final cause of Rochester's quarrel with the world, and if '[t]he world despised him, very well, he would despise the world. His pen would return the strokes suffered from men's tongues' (1974: 85). Greene argues that the spirit of hate dominates his later poetry and a growing weariness with his reputation troubled him. Rochester became an embittered and thoughtful man (1974: 74–173). Love is the only meaningful thing in life, but will always end in disappointment and pain. Inconstancy is unavoidable and is not the power of man to control. Scholars have found several connections between these poems on love and Rochester, though several are primarily based on speculation and interpretation.

## **When love is not the main issue**

This section will examine poems that treat themes such as nation, religion, politics and philosophy. 'A Satire against Reason and Mankind' is primarily a philosophical satire and is famous for its treatment of 'reason'. The two poems categorised as social satires are 'Tunbridge Wells' and 'Timon'. Timon and the speaker in 'Tunbridge Wells' are libertine wits who accounts for their journeys amongst fools, and both speakers have frequently been identified as Rochester. 'Timon' is particularly interesting because attribution is an important theme in it; literary criticism is another. 'Tunbridge Wells' is frequently used to explain Rochester's hostile view on society.

The section will also explore five poems that are written to or about specific people. 'In the Isle of Britain' is about Charles II, 'An Allusion to Horace' about the poet Dryden whilst 'Give me leave to raile at you' and ''Tis the Answer' make up a correspondence between Rochester and his wife. Lastly, I will examine the only poem where Rochester mentions his own person by name, 'To the Post Boy'.

### **[Against Reason and Mankind] / A Satyre against Reason and Mankind**

(Love pp. 57–63)

One of the reasons why this poem is included in this study is that it is almost impossible to discuss Rochester's poetry without it, being his most famous literary work. The final part of the poem was not included until after the poem had begun to circulate, and is commonly assumed to be a response to a sermon. The speaker's apprehension of 'reason' has been related to Rochester's, and he refers to people Rochester may have had reasons to dislike. The relation between the 'I' and Rochester has been widely discussed; one scholar argues for

instance that lines 31–45 must be about Rochester and his friends. Several scholars agree that the poem reflects Rochester’s experience, but that it is also based on a wide background. One scholar even argues that Rochester hints at self-doubt in the poem, another points at a schizophrenic quality caused by alcoholism, sickness and increasing unhappiness. Moreover, some believe Rochester is practising self-mockery with the poem.

The satire circulated widely in manuscript, but the lines 174–225 were not included until after the poem had first begun to circulate. This ‘addition’ is assumed to be a response to Stillingfleet’s sermon at Court in 1675, where he attacked Rochester’s satire and the court morality at large (Hammond 2009: 412). The speaker starts by stating that if he was free to choose, ‘I’d be a Dog, a Monkey, or a Bear. / Or any thing but that vain Animal / Who is so proud of being Rational.’ (ll. 5–7). He criticises the ‘false reason’ man is living by and states that it is an ‘Ignis fatuus of the Mind’, which leaves ‘Light of Nature, sense, behind’ (ll. 12–13). ‘Ignis fatuus’ means foolish fire in Latin, and is sometimes called the will-o’-the-wisp, which is a light that appears in marshy lands that leads travellers astray (Lipking and Noggle 2006: 2173). Reason walks pathless and dangerous ways, and after him walks the misguided follower. It is a life-long search for knowledge until old age and experience lead him to death and make him understand that ‘After a search so painfull and so long / That all his life he has been in the wrong (ll. 27–28). His wisdom destroyed his happiness.

The adversary, an optimistic rationalist, argues that man, because created with the possession of Reason, is above beast. The speaker is not impressed by the adversary’s speech:

Hold, mighty Man I cry; all this we know,  
From the pathetick pen of Ingelo<sup>2</sup>,  
From Patricks Pilgrime, Sibbs Soliloquies<sup>3</sup>;  
And tis this very Reason I despise.  
(ll. 72–75)

Latitudinarians, as represented by the contemporary divines Simon Patrick, Edward Stillingfleet and John Tillitson, urged the reasonableness of Christian, and in particular Protestant, belief. Rochester attacks not the concept of reason itself, but their understanding of reason (Fisher 2010: 333–35). This critique of contemporary people might well be Rochester’s own as well as the speaker’s. The speaker criticises how ‘wrong reason’ makes man think he is greater than he really is, and presents his own notion of ‘right reason’:

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<sup>2</sup> Ingelo was the author of an allegorical romance called *Bentovolio and Urania*. Patrick’s *The Parable of the Pilgrim* was another allegorical work. Sibbs was a popular Puritan preacher (Pinto 1962: 154).

<sup>3</sup> The reading in some MSS of ‘Stillingfleet’s replies’ for ‘Sibbs Soliloquies’ may represent an authorial revision following Stillingfleet’s sermon (Walker/Fisher 2010: 92).



Thus whilst against false Reasoning I enveigh,  
I own right reason, which I could obey;  
That Reason which distinguishes by Sense,  
And gives us Rules of Good and Ill from thence:  
(ll. 98–101)

The term ‘right reason’ was used ‘for reason which was properly informed; specifically, for that reason which was imparted by God to all mankind as part of their nature’ (Hammond 2009: 412). The speaker uses the term ‘right reason’ for reason grounded upon sense. The greediness and pride he despises in man’s ‘reason’ is illustrated in his claim that:

Birds feed on birds, Beasts on each other prey,  
But savage Man alone does man betray:  
Prest by necessity they kill for food,  
Man undoes Man to do himself no good.  
(ll. 129–132)

He argues that man is driven by fear, and ‘the Good he acts, the Ill he does endure, / Tis all from Feare to make himself secure.’ (ll. 155–6). He doubts there exists a truly good man, but even if there is such a man in this world, he wants at least to be granted that ‘Man differs more from Man, than Man from Beast’ (l. 225). Larman believes that Rochester’s view of ‘God-like-men’ is insincere, because for Rochester, the world was essentially rotten, with even the best of men dedicated to little more than self-interest (2014: location 3003).

The poem is written in a literary tradition. Rochester is indebted to Boileau’s *Satire VIII* and draws upon several commonplaces of sceptical philosophy, for instance Hobbes, Montaigne and Epicurus. Pinto develops on this and claims that it is an attack on Man, Reason, the idol of Hobbes, the freethinkers of the age and a turning-back on himself. He argues that Rochester is too much of a child of the Enlightenment to deny Reason altogether. The poem has been seen in terms of Rochester’s interest in seventeenth-century materialistic philosophy; Pinto writes that ‘Rochester had reached the end of the *cul-de-sac* into which he had been led by materialism’ (1962: 158). He argues that in the epilogue, we see it beginning to dawn upon him that he must find a new direction in which his life can develop. Pinto believes Hobbes’s materialism had appealed to him because of the justification it offered for pleasure, but this poem shows that he was outgrowing that seducing system (1962: 152–86).

Johnson nuances this, and states that the speaker should not be assumed to be Rochester; the ‘I’ person should be seen as a semi-independent character, constructed with pieces of but not entirely Rochester. Whilst the poem may not entirely represent the author’s state of mind, he believes it reveals him at a crucial point of intellectual transition. Johnson observes that because the poem is an attack on all mankind rather than specific people known

to be objects of Rochester's contempt, it has caused critics to question the extent to which its 'I' speaker is the historical Rochester. Some believe the 'I' to be a satiric persona not to be confused with the author; others regard the views in the poem to reflect Rochester's true beliefs.<sup>4</sup> Some New Critics even argue that the reader must approach the poem as a self-contained entity (Johnson, 2004: 403), and no contemporaries appeared to doubt that the poem was Rochester's personal credo. Besides, Johnson concludes that given his statements in a letter about his 'serious reflections', his 'maxims' and 'philosophy', the poem is biographically relevant (2004: 201–7).

Larman takes it a step further and claims that Rochester aimed to show his friends and enemies that he was a serious thinker. He sees Rochester as a self-aware writer, and believes it is obvious that the following lines were written about himself and his friends:

His Wiesdome did his Happiness destroy,  
Ayning to know that World he should enjoy;  
And Witt was his vain frivolous pretence,  
Of pleasing others at his own expence:  
For Witts are treated just like common Whores  
First they're enjoy'd and then kickt out of doors.  
The Pleasure past, a threatening doubt remains,  
That frights th' enjoyer with succeeding pains:  
Women and men of Witt are dangerous tools,  
And ever fatal to admiring Fools.  
Pleasure allures, and when the fops escape,  
Tis not that they're belov'd, but fortunate;  
And therefore what they fear, at heart they hate.  
(ll. 33–45)

He believes nothing comes close to how he criticises the Whitehall society in this poem; they were all hypocrites acting roles they were ill-equipped to fill (2014: location 2737–944).

Griffin elaborates on this and claims that the poem reflects Rochester's experience, but that it also reflects a wide philosophical and literary background, and 'although a psychological approach is suited to much of Rochester's work, especially the libertine satires and love songs, a broader approach is necessary to his most famous poem' (1973: 156).

Hobbes has been considered one of Rochester's most influential idols; Courthope states in *History of English Poetry* (1911) that Rochester shows in every line how eagerly he had imbibed the opinions of Hobbes. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes presents the idea that the life of man by nature is selfish and competitive. He rejects Aristotle's view that man is a naturally social

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<sup>4</sup> Robinson, 'Rochester's Dilemma'; Selden, *English Verse Satire*, 92–100; Wilcoxon, 'Rochester's Philosophical Premises' (Johnson 2004: 403).

being, and describes man's life as 'solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short' (Hobbes 1985: 186). This influence has been reconsidered and challenged the later years, but it is undoubtedly present in his account of human motivation: 'Tis all from fear, to make himself secure'. Griffin argues it is likely that Rochester was interested in entertaining his friends and shocking the audience, but he also believes that it 'carries a note of disgusted conviction, as if it springs from his honest appraisal of experience' (1973: 156–82).

Lamb argues the poem to be of great significance to a biographer because he hints heavily at self-doubt. The most obvious paradox about this work is that it took a lot of reason to write it. He claims that Rochester writes his own epitaph in this poem. His intended task in the poem, he suggests, is to play the part of the committed Hobbist versus the man of reason:

The latter launches his attack on Hobbism by upholding the beliefs which the Earl had held upon first coming to Court in 1664 and which still represented his stifled idealism [...] Rochester was arguing with himself in this satire, and he now adopts the Hobbist's argument to destroy the one he had just put forward. He sounds convinced by it because he knew it backwards. (1994: 176–77).

Lamb claims that the schizophrenic quality is indicative of the confusion and uncertainty which alcoholism, sickness and increasing unhappiness were causing Rochester. He believes that 'still only in his twenties, it was already becoming difficult for him to look into a mirror and understand how Hobbism had benefited him' (1994: 175–79).

Farley-Hills has a slightly different take, and believes that some of the questions Rochester was facing were how to construct poetry out of unbelief, and how to build a world on a vanishing point. He states that Rochester's major satires are an attempt to answer these problems; they attempt to construct a coherent world out of the chaos of experience. He believes that because the argument is presented with such force and immediacy, we do not think of it as presented by a 'spokesman' but by the poet himself. The persona is the poet in the sense that he represents the emotional conviction of the poem. On the other hand, the persona's point of view is ultimately rejected, 'indeed made to look absurd'. As in 'A Ramble' and 'The Imperfect Enjoyment', Farley-Hills argues, the poet is assuming the role of clown (1973: 170–86). Again, Rochester is claimed to practise self-mockery.

Thormählen agrees that 'A Satire against Reason and Mankind' have components that are similar to personal statements made by Rochester. She also agrees that the thrusts directed at different people, who he may have had reasons to dislike, prove a biographical relevance. However, she does not believe we know enough about what Rochester felt and thought to be able to imply clearly definable views to him. She argues this is further challenged by '[h]is

constant restlessness, physical and mental, his merciless perspicacity and his distrust of anything that posed as established wisdom'. Even the argumentation of the satirist, which often corresponds with the Rochester we know through biographical material, seems 'reductive and rigid' when considered and compared with other parts and the satire as a whole. Thormählen suggests that the speaker in the *Satire* represents 'opinions and convictions for which Rochester the man felt some sympathy and which Rochester the poet endeavoured to express as efficiently as possible'. She concludes that this entailed views he did not necessarily share (1993: 238).

There are several reasons to believe that there are some close relations between the speaker and Rochester. There are for instance the components that are similar to the statements made by Rochester, the naming of people he may have had personal reasons to dislike and the fact that the last lines were written as a response to critique. However, as Thormählen makes clear, we do not know enough about what Rochester felt and thought to place views on him, and this is undoubtedly a highly philosophical satire.

### **Satyr. (Timon)**

(Love pp. 258–63)

This poem is included because several scholars believe Timon resembles Rochester; the misanthropic view on society, for instance, is thought to be Rochester's own. The poem also illustrates the challenges of attribution, which makes it particularly relevant and interesting in this study, and it has been stated that Rochester's life gives extra spice to the poem.

In the opening lines, the poet Timon tells a friend about the previous evening when he was dragged off to an absurd dinner party. At the party, he describes the host and the guests of corrupted taste in food and poetry; he was concerned both with reactionary responses to all things French and with the weakness of contemporary drama and popular taste.

We are in the world of Rochester's London circle, and Farley-Hills argues that the suspicion of a connection between the poet and the satiric persona is strengthened when Timon describes himself as admitting that he occasionally writes verses for his 'Pintle's [penis] sake'. The adversary seems to suggest that Timon's attitude to the meal could be the result of personal spleen. In Rochester's world of uncertain values, Farley-Hills argues, the 'disease' of being human afflicts observer and actor alike. Farley-Hills concludes that the poem turns to be more than merely a social commentary, 'it expresses that characteristic disgust with humanity that is also the subject of *Tunbridge Wells* as well as *Satyr against*

*Mankind*. A radical criticism of the very nature of man' (1978: 188–90). This 'disgust with humanity' seems to be perceived as Rochester's own.

Griffin argues that 'Timon' shows close ties with classical satire, both French and Roman. He states that the *repas ridicule* and the meeting with a bore in a city street had become satirical topoi. The poem is a loose imitation of Boileau's *Satire 3*, and owes something to Horace's *Satire 1:9* for its opening lines (1973: 36). The name 'Timon' presents several challenges. Vieth suggests that '[i]ts principal speaker, who resembles Rochester in his character, activities, and social position, may be named "Timon" in allusion to Timon of Athens, the misanthrope, or to Timon of Philus, a Greek Skeptic philosopher and satirical poet' (1968: 65). Pritchard, however, claims that Timon is not Shakespeare's misanthrope, but a sceptical observer not wholly unlike, but not to be identified with, Rochester (2012: location 1934). 'Timon' was used in Restoration literature for a variety of types. It is unclear which traditional association, if any, Rochester had in mind. Wilson, Thorpe and Vieth agree that Timon represents Rochester, at least to some extent. Conversely, Griffin argues that none of the three critics have faced the problems raised by the unpleasant characterisation of the speaker, and points at the uncertainty in Timon's attitude toward the meal, his companions, himself, and in Rochester's attitude toward his speaker (1973: 35–42). Once again, uncertainties and contradictions make a connection challenging.

The poem recounts the experience of being accosted by an admirer who has come across an anonymous satire and recognised it as his by its style. Hammond argues that '[t]hough Rochester denies authorship, the admirer refuses to believe him, and circulated the poem through the town with this erroneous attribution' (2006: 190). This is a fine example of the way poetry circulated in the period, and how poems can be falsely attributed to major names such as Rochester's. However, as Hammond admits, this is not Rochester speaking: it is the persona of Timon in a satire modelled on Boileau's adaption of Horace. He underlines that the voice is both a fictional Restoration voice and one which echoes the complaints of French and Roman poets. All too often, Hammond complains, editors and critics have assimilated the voice in the poems to that of the historical Rochester, regardless of the games which are played with voice and role across his oeuvre. In addition, Hammond states that though it appears in every modern edition of his work, it may not have been written by him (2006: 190–91). He reminds us what Harold Love writes in the textual notes of his edition:

The poem is attributed to Rochester in three manuscripts only, in one of which his name has been deleted and replaced with Sedley's. Two other manuscripts attribute

the poem to Sedley, and four give no author. The printed sources (some of which attribute the poem, or a share in it, to Buckingham) are of no authority. (1999: 482).

Despite the factors pointed at here, 'Timon' will be treated as a poem by Rochester, as it generally is today. However, it is important to be aware of the challenges of attribution. Larman points at the fact that it has been suggested that Sedley or Buckingham was the author, but argues that it feels more like the work of Rochester's. He argues that the poem might be a comment on the 'confused and confusing' age in which it was written, and that Timon is an avatar for Rochester, or at least his public persona. As Timon's narrative continues, Larman believes the parallels with Rochester's life become particularly clear. As ever, 'remembering the biographical details of Rochester's own life at this point gives extra spice to the poem' (2014: location 2676–701). This comment is important, as it reveals one of the reasons why the biographical approach might have such staying power. The biography spices up the poems, just as the poems spice up Rochester's biography. Pinto states that the general conception, as well as the style and versification show Rochester's hand in it everywhere, 'the description of the insistence of the attribution "is certainly a transcript of Rochester's own dearly bought experience"' (1962: 127–28). However, his view on it being a transcript has not gained wide support, but most agree it is based on a personal experience.

Johnson believes that Rochester's choice of Timon as a 'satiric alter-ego' discloses some of the darker aspects of his complex selves. Certainly, Johnson says, some passages suggest the applicability of his characterisation to Rochester. Even so, some passages show Rochester at his most rational and witty as he reduces ignorance and violence to nonsense. The hostess' castigation of coarse love and 'our *Poetry*, Unfit for modest Eares', Johnson argues, shows Rochester detached and laughing at himself (2004: 189–90). As a result of the exaggeration and playfulness, the relation between the speaker and the poet becomes dicey.

'What do we make of Timon?' asks Thormählen. Does he represent Rochester's point of view? Vieth, who points out that many Augustan poems employ the persona, finds such an identification admissible. Thormählen reminds us about a passage from Vieth's *Attribution*:

[...] Timon may be a projection of the values, and conceivably the identity, of the author of the poem. The identification of Timon with Rochester is at least plausible. Timon's personality resembles Rochester's, and his name as well as his attitudes suggest the misanthropy which was associated with the Earl. (1963: 286)

Thormählen raises two questions to this last sentence: First, does Timon possess anything that might be called a 'personality', and second, is 'misanthropy' a proper designation for the

attitudes? His characterisations, she argues, are typical of the inner circle of Court Wits and hardly amount to a personality:

What *Timon* tells us about the speaker of the poem is that he is young; writes occasional poetry and sometimes reflects on that of others; is familiar with the ways of whores and gamblers; and is an intimate acquaintance of the Court Wits Sedley, Buckhurst and Savile (particular friends of Rochester's). He had certain standards when it comes to eating and drinking, and he shares the general Restoration view that women past their prime are useless for amorous purposes (1993: 277–78).

A personality is almost always impossible to interpret from any poem, be it the speaker's or the author's. This also proves how challenging it is to call any speaker 'Rochester'.

The scholars have widely differing views on the relation between Rochester and Timon, though most do see a relation of some sort and to some degree. It is also interesting that it includes the theme of attribution, as it suggests that Rochester was personally familiar with the problem. The claim that Rochester's biography gives extra spice to the poem strengthens the impression that it exists an unwillingness to detach the poetry from its poet.

### ***Tunbridge Wells***

(Love pp. 49–54)

Even the composition date of this poem has been perceived as being of biographical relevance. One scholar compares it with 'Timon' and believes the association with the author is less in evidence in 'Tunbridge Wells'. Some believe the purpose of the poem was for Rochester to express his own pessimistic feelings about mankind; one scholar even believes the poem is based on a real visit to Tunbridge Wells, and that some reflections are the result of an alcoholic's loss of touch with reality. However, it has also been argued that it is unlikely to have been the work of Rochester, or at least by him alone.

Johnson argues that based on evidence in a passage that may be spurious, the composition date seems to be 1674. Another date postulated, 1673, conflicts with Rochester's known whereabouts, state of mind, and the personal quality of the satiric pieces he wrote in that year. He claims that Rochester's narrator/persona as observer/participant gives the satire biographical dimensions along with dramatic immediacy (2004: 193). Johnson, then, sees a close relation between Rochester's life situation and the outcome of the poem.

The poem consists of a series of brief episodes where the speaker passes from one group of people to another and describes the scenes of foppery. The speaker, Griffin notices, satirises 'affectation, clerical corruption, awkward boobishness, infertility and cuckoldry, boisterous swaggering, and even – what the victims cannot help – being born ugly and Irish'

(1973: 43–44). It begins as an attack on the follies of humanity and concludes by counting the speaker among the fools. Griffin claims that the speaker consciously satirises himself, and that we appreciate him for the knowledge of his own folly (1973: 42–47). Rochester has frequently been judged to be a self-aware writer, and scholars have argued that he often satirised himself in his poetry. Farley-Hills believes that ‘Tunbridge Wells’ is a comment on the manners of the day and ‘reaches out beyond the subject of social behaviour towards a general vision of human depravity’. He argues that the speaker is presented more clearly as comically splenetic than in ‘Timon’, and that the associations with the author is less in evidence. He states that we are watching the effect of the disease of being human, and that Rochester’s ultimate purpose is to use the canvas of the popular watering place to paint his own feelings about mankind. Farley-Hills concludes that ‘the theme of mankind’s inanity becomes entirely explicit at the end of the poem as the commentator at last merges indistinguishably with the poet himself’ (1978: 191–97). Lamb agrees that Rochester describes himself visiting Tunbridge Wells, and argues that he does so in order to observe human beings at play. One strongly suspects, he writes, that he based the satire on a real visit, and the view of the people he describes is enhanced by the alcoholic’s loss of touch with reality (1994: 162–65). Both Lamb and Pritchard argue that the poem reflects Rochester’s own view on society. Pritchard states that ‘Rochester sees his society as perverting the genuine and natural with posturing and hypocrisy (2012: location 1991).

In contrast, Love reminds us that Rochester’s authorship is not fully confirmed, and that Savile may have contributed (2004: 208). Likewise, Larman argues it is unlikely that ‘Tunbridge Wells’ is the work of Rochester, at least by him alone, because ‘the episodic accumulation of its structure lacks the discipline and ironic control that Rochester’s greatest work is known for’ (2014: location 2652–59). He admits it is likely that Rochester was at least involved in the poem, and that the last ten lines act as a prologue to ‘A Satire against Reason and Mankind’. One of his arguments against it being Rochester’s is that he was engaged on ‘Timon’ about the same time, a work which feels more in the spirit of his mature poetry (2014: location 2672–78). However, the poem is commonly regarded as Rochester’s work. Larman published his biography in 2014, and the attribution has not been much discussed earlier. The exceptions are Love, who writes that the authorship is not fully confirmed, and Greer, who writes that ‘As *Tunbridge Wells* is one of the most confused texts associated with Rochester and exhibits all the signs of gradual accretion by several hands, it cannot be said to provide incontrovertible evidence that the poet was writing from his own



observation' (2000: 21). Whether 'Tunbridge Wells' is Rochester's work or not will not be further discussed, but one should keep in mind what Larman is pointing at here: he did cooperate with other court wits, and it is a challenge to know which poems are by Rochester or him alone. However, Lamb has argued that the poem is an account of a real trip to Tunbridge Wells, and the pessimistic and dark feelings have frequently been related to Rochester and his alcoholism. Again, the scholars widely disagree about the connection between the poet and the poem.

### **[In the Isle of Britain] / *Satyr on Charles II***

(Love pp. 85–90)

This poem is included because it attacks a person very close to Rochester: King Charles II. Scholars do not agree whether it is a sincere and serious attack or a good-humoured joke, though most seem to conclude with the latter. One of the most heated discussions is whether he handed it over deliberately or by accident. Scholars have pointed at various sides of the relationship between Rochester and Charles II, and discussed what it was that he attacked in the poem. Lastly, scholars disagree whether the hate belongs to Rochester or if the speaker is a purely fictional character.

Charles II was regarded as fairly open minded when it came to personal comments and jokes on his expense. Larman writes that he regarded it as a sport and that he took much pride in returning the comments. One evening, Rochester was told to provide an impromptu poem about Charles, and so he did:

God bless our good and gracious King,  
Whose promise none relies on;  
Who never said a foolish thing,  
Nor ever did a wise one.

In good spirits, Charles answered him 'That's true; for my words are mine, while my actions are those of my ministers' (2014: location 2555). However, the merry Charles II had his limits too, and Rochester crossed them with 'In the Isle of Britain'.

The satire starts as a panegyric on Charles II; the comparison between the peace-loving monarch and Louis XIV, who repeatedly plunged his country into protracted wars, is entirely in Charles' favour. The actual satire begins in line 12 with the charges levelled at the King for his neglect of his royal duties. Thormählen calls this a political satire and claims that '[a]s always, Rochester's political satire is interwoven with personal attack' (1993: 295–303). Similarly, Johnson calls the poem 'a medley of perspectives, visual and mental, and a farrago

of the satirist's conflicting emotions toward the King' (2004: 179). Charles is presented as 'a merry Monarch, scandalous and poor' whom is willing to break through safety, law, religion and even life to reach his goal. Charles is an appendage to his penis; a once-mighty conqueror which now must be played with to be aroused. The two women who manage the arousal are 'Carwell, dearest of all Deares!' (l. 23) and 'laborious Nelly', who is 'Implying Hands, Armes, Fingers, Mouth and Thighs / To raise the Limb which shee each Night enjoyes' (ll. 31–32). This portrayal of weakness and decline undercuts the virtues that were admired in the opening section. Johnson argues that:

The quasi-son witnessed the continuing preoccupations of his surrogate father and judged them foolish [...] At twenty-five, Rochester was himself father or acting father to a sizable family. His fatherly affection for his own son had led to a last act of trust in and test of the King's superior paternal powers; but despite Charles's touch, little Charles Wilmot remained a victim of the King's-Evil. Rochester was thoroughly disillusioned. Weary of his dependence on the grace and favour of the Father-King, he was frustrated by his continual need to court it. His growing desire to rebel had to stay hidden. By the end of 1673, however, the restraints were more than Rochester could maintain. He made an Oedipal break. (2004: 180).

Johnson is influenced by psychoanalysis in his study of Rochester's poetry, and believes this poem to be an 'Oedipal break'. Greene, in contrast, says it is difficult to believe that there was no fondness at all between them, though some argue that Rochester was only the King's pimp and that 'the King loved his company for the diversion it afforded better than his person' (1974: 88). Lamb sees faults in Charles as a father-figure, and argues that 'for a biographer of Rochester it is frustrating to note that the King, wrapped-up in his own intrigues, never seriously attempted to discipline the Earl or halt his decline' (1994: 140). It is widely agreed, then, that Charles II was a kind of father-figure to Rochester.

There have been discussions whether Rochester handed over this satire deliberately or by accident. Larman argues that:

[...] given the authenticity of the sentiments expressed within the poem and the weariness with which he writes about the false life of court in his letters, it is likely that Rochester, summoning up a moment of self-destructive bravado, decided deliberately to hand over the 'wrong' poem and be damned. (2014: location 2563–70).

Several other scholars have also suggested that it is likely Rochester deliberately handed over the wrong satire, but the reason is unknown. However, it is perhaps just as likely that it was handed over by accident, and the question is what difference it makes. Another question is who the hate belongs to, and the scholars do not agree on this either.

Farley-Hills says that amongst Rochester's most devastating personal attacks are those on Charles II. He believes that the falseness and hypocrisy of Charles' position was particularly galling to Rochester who hit out the harder that he himself had nothing to complain of, and that some of Rochester's venom in these poems might stem from self-laceration. He believes that this is hardly a serious satire because Rochester is not really complaining of Charles' sexual prowess. On the contrary, Farley-Hills states, he seems to enjoy exaggerating it (1978: 122–23). Pritchard argues that the final couplet, like the rest of the poem, should not be taken as considered judgement, but a fictive speaker's expression of disgust at self-indulgent, abusive, degrading power (2012: location 1734). Adlard has a slightly different take and argues that Rochester generally treated Charles with good-humoured banter, but at times he is contemptuous of the man that 'may be controlled by anyone who knows how to play with his penis' (1974: 13). Thormählen has a rather different and nuanced view on the poem and their relationship. Her impression is that Rochester started out by writing a good-humoured squib on his King, and it included all the usual charges against him 'but attenuating them by references to his love of peace and his lack of personal vainglory' (1994: 299). Both characteristics, Thormählen argues, are qualities valued by the poet whose most cutting satire is directed against human vanity. Moreover, the attribution of one of his own foremost personal traits, restlessness, implies sympathy rather than rejection. She suggests that for a young man with Rochester's rebellious disposition, such a description could be undertaken for fun with no real malice intended. The charges made against Charles in the canonical poems are merely the conventional ones, and even they are sometimes touched with half-admiration and tolerance. Several malicious passages on Rochester's satires are directed against people and phenomena that were particularly obnoxious to the King. Thormählen states that this bespeaks some degree of loyalty. However, she admits that Rochester's writings about Charles contain little respect and affection (1993: 295–303). Though Thormählen admits that there are some true stings towards a King he did not entirely respect, she does not believe he wrote his libels out of personal hatred. The relationship between Charles and Rochester is complicated. Some believe their relationship to have been close and affectionate, whilst other are convinced it was rather cold and complicated. The scholars disagree on the relationship between Rochester and the King, as well as the relationship between speaker and the King. This complicates a possible connection between the poem and the poet, as both relationships are interpreted in widely differing ways.

Whether the poem was meant to be a serious attack or a harmless joke, it is closely related to a historical and probably personal context. Though it reveals ‘the usual charges against him’, the motivation to write it must have been fired by some personal feelings. However, it appears that Rochester handed over copies to several of his friends at court, which insinuate that the poem was written mainly for entertainment.

### ***An Allusion to Horace***

(Love pp. 71–74)

This poem is included because it is a personal attack on a man Rochester once was quite close to, as well as literary criticism with roots to *Ars Poetica*. The questions are what he is attacking, and how serious and personal the attack is. The main weight of the attack falls on Dryden, whilst ‘lesser lashings are meted out to Lee and Otway, while Shadwell and the court poets of the Buckingham faction are solemnly commended’ (Love 2004: 82). Rochester responded to a range of people in several poems, and it was perfectly normal to attack each other in literary works, usually so-called lampoons.

Scholars have attempted to identify a specific reason for the feud between Rochester and Dryden. However, it was probably a gradual process which culminated with this satire (Lamb 1994: 160). Rochester resented that Dryden sought the patronage of John Sheffield, third Earl of Mulgrave, whom was one of Rochester’s chief enemies (Farley-Hills 1972: 41). In 1675, Dryden dedicated his publication of *Aurengzebe* to Mulgrave, where he also made a subtle sting at Rochester by writing of ‘the character of a courtier without wit’ (Lamb 1994: 199). Rochester’s response was more direct, and his criticism is harsh when he states that ‘For by that Rule I might as well admitt / Crowns tedious Scenes for Poetry and Witt’ (ll. 10–11). For Dryden to be passed over even by someone whom Rochester thought wrote ‘tedious scenes’ was a horrible insult. The speaker criticises Dryden’s ‘Essay on the Dramatic Poetry of the Last Age’, in which Dryden is defending himself against a charge made by Shadwell that he has arrogantly maligned the great of the past. Rochester’s poem picks up the dispute between Dryden and Shadwell by using Horace’s poem to Dryden’s disadvantage. Rochester inverts the relationship between Dryden and the writers of the past by criticising Dryden for his coarseness in sentiment and expression.

But does not Dryden find even Johnson dull,  
Fletcher and Beaumont uncorrect, and full  
Of Lewd lines (as he calls ‘em), Shakespeare’s style  
Stiff and affected; to his own the while  
Allowing all the Justness that his Pride

So arrogantly had to these deny'd?  
(ll. 81–86)

The speaker ends by dismissing the worth of popularity, and says he would rather have the approval of those few writers he respects (Lamb 1994: 199–202):

I loath the Rabble; 'tis enough for me  
If Sydley, Shadwell, Shepheard, Wicherley,  
Godolphin, Butler, Buckhurst, Buckinghame  
And some few more, whome I omitt to name  
Approve my sence, I count their Censure Fame.  
(ll. 120–24)

These were all personal friends of Rochester. As an assessment of his contemporaries, Farley-Hills concludes, the poem is interesting, but believes it remains stubbornly particular, except in its general accusation of the age as lacking in refinement (1978: 197–204). Pinto, on the other side, argues that the poem is a powerful protest against playing to the gallery and seeking for cheap applause. This is also the core of Rochester's quarrel with Dryden, 'he saw him as a man of genius who prostituted his great gifts by grinding out verses to order, becoming an industrious producer of popular artefacts instead of a creator of works of art'. However, it is easy for a man in Rochester's position to judge a writer who had to live by writing (1962: 98–100). Johnson argues that the poem not only assesses specific poets and playwrights; it also sets forth principles of composition. He states that these resemble the 'rules' of writing in the *Ars Poetica*, which is the real allusion to Horace (2004: 237–38). Pinto and Johnson, then, do not read the poem as 'stubbornly particular', though they do indeed see a clear connection between Rochester and the poem.

Thormählen elaborates on this and believes that Rochester is the speaker in this poem. She explains that 'in the *Allusion*, for once, Rochester appears to me to be speaking *in propria persona* without any disguises or reservations; hence, the sometimes awkward term "Rochester speaker" is dispensed with' (1993: 338). However, she does not believe all poems written to or about specific people are spoken by Rochester, one example being 'An Epistolary Essay from M. G. to O. B. upon their mutual Poems'. Vieth believed this poem to be a satirical self-expose, and to this Thormählen comments that it cannot be convincingly argued that the 'Epistolary Essay' expresses Rochester's personal views'. She believes a comparison with 'An Allusion to Horace' will dispel such a notion:

My assumption that the speaker of the poem is Rochester himself is not one for which hard evidence could be adduced, but a comparison between it and the *Epistolary Essay* shows that the latter is a much less ambitious effort. The *Allusion* lashes the lack of substance and self-discipline, arguing that natural aptitude and painstaking

craftsmanship make a good writer. The poem's speaker refrains from venturing to hold any sort of opinion regarding his own work; he submits it to a select 'jury' whose members pay him a compliment merely by considering it. The contrast between this stern, but in respect of his own poetry decidedly modest, judge and the complacent 'M.G-' could not have been more striking. (1993: 338–39).

Along the same lines, Griffin believes the poem to be a personal satire, but also more than that; the attack on Dryden is based on the principle that a poet should scorn common fame '[a]nd be content to please those few who know' (l. 103), and Dryden admitted that he appealed to popular taste in his early work (1973: 257). The quarrel is undoubtedly personal, and it is probably Rochester's personal judgements. Moreover, the poem is highly situated in its historical context and Rochester's social environments. However, his judgements and literary criticism are also influenced by *Ars Poetica* and a literary tradition. The poem is both personal and general. All scholars point at the fact that Rochester attacks Dryden in the poem, even Thormählen believes that Rochester is the speaker. How serious the attack was, on the other hand, is disagreed upon. It was probably written partly to attack Dryden and partly to entertain his fellow courtiers; the language, tone and accusations are sometimes highly exaggerated. Hence, it is reasonable to suspect that though the poem is based on actual points of view, the arguments are probably too exaggerated to be taken very seriously.

### **Song ('Give me leave to raile at you') and *The Answer***

(Love pp. 18–19)

These two poems are included because they are commonly regarded to be a correspondence between husband and wife. In Rochester's age, poetic correspondence was not unusual; it was particularly common amongst lovers. One would assume that a poem not only written about, but also to a specific person, would be immensely personal and revealing. However, not even personal letters are always sincere. Pritchard warns us that '[l]etters by, or even to, Rochester were rarely causal scrawls, but performances' (2012: location 1175). Lamb states that Rochester was a 'superb letter-writer' who felt obliged to perform with his wit in his correspondence with others (1994: 151–52). Furthermore, it is suggested that they might have written the poems together, and 'Give me leave to rail at you' is entitled 'Song by Severall Hands' in Walker and Fisher's edition. Though it is, probably, a poetic correspondence between husband and wife, we should not apprehend it uncritically as a sincere and revealing comment on their relationship and innermost feelings.

The poem begins with the demand that the lady should allow him to abuse her verbally without retaliating by being ungracious. Thormählen believes the stanzas to be

remarkable because they argue that the husband's aggressiveness, accusations and boasts of inconstancy are only a pose. If the lady will ignore them and stay generous to him, she will keep him faithful to her. Thormählen argues that Elizabeth was made wise by experience, but rewarded him by revealing her self-protective devices with great frankness. The correspondence, she claims, confirms the emotional bond between them (1993: 39–41). Along with Thormählen, Wilders emphasises that the 'boasts of inconstancy' is really a pose. His self-confidence fails him and he confesses that he cannot help but to be true to her and begs her to be kinder to him, since without her love he must expire. There is little in this first stanza to distinguish it from courtly cavalier love poems. As the lyric concludes, however, Wilders believes that the kindness for which he begs is made to appear less conventional. He states that 'Lady Rochester, it now appears, is being asked to act in collusion with her husband in order to induce in him a state of satisfying but despicable self-deception' (1982: 51). This concluding argument seems to undermine the cause it is ostensibly being used to support. In her 'answer', Lady Rochester argues that the 'kindness' he begs for is not the way to secure his affections. She feigns contempt for him to keep him true to her:

Tho' you still possesse my heart,  
 Scorne, and Rigour, I must feigne.  
 Ah! forgive that only Art,  
 Love, has left your Love to gaine  
 (ll. 29–32)

Wilders wonders whether the ultimate motive behind the plea for gentleness is the need not for servitude but for that promiscuity which, according to his wife, it encourages. He concludes that the two poems hint at the simultaneous and irreconcilable desires for fidelity and infidelity expressed elsewhere and at the contradictions for his motivation (1982: 50–52).

Lamb writes briefly about Elizabeth's 'The Answer', but he does not mention Rochester's 'Give me leave to rail at you'. This might suggest that he either did not see the two poems as a correspondence or that he did not find this significant. About the cause of Elizabeth's poem, Lamb writes that Rochester was drinking heavily and by the end of the summer of 1667, Elisabeth knew she was losing control over him. Lamb states that whilst Rochester rarely wrote a love poem expressing complete contentment or lasting happiness, his wife expressed the grief that his absences were causing in verses. Mistrust, according to Lamb, was a problem for Rochester, and 'he observed the double dealings and infidelities of couples at Court with a disgust and cynicism which affected his own relationship and served to fuel his helplessly jealous nature' (1994: 93–94). Along the same lines, Larman claims that

the poem conveys the idea of a man frustrated by his supposed lover's refusal to commit to him, as Elizabeth delayed her acceptance of Rochester. The parallel between Rochester and Elizabeth, he argues, is irresistible, and suggest that it was probably around this time that Elizabeth wrote one of her poems in a letter to Rochester, which feels like a response to 'Give me leave to rail at you' (2014: location 1600–22).

There are several theories and arguments around how the poems came into being, and by whom they were brought into being. Pinto points out that a manuscript copy of this poem survives in Lady Rochester's handwriting and believes it is probably her composition. He states that the two lyrics 'form a record of delicate, courtly technique of love-making which contrasts curiously with the coarse libertinism with which gossip has commonly associate Rochester's name' (1962: 49). Farley-Hills nuances this and writes that 'Give me leave to rail at you', amongst several other poems, *may* be addressed to his wife. He also points at the 'answer' in Lady Rochester's handwriting in the Portland MS (1978: 29). Greer argues that Elizabeth realised that the way to her husband's heart was through poetry. She suggests that perhaps Rochester and Elizabeth sat down to 'ditty together', and that each may have had a hand in the other's verse (2000: 14–15). Similarly, Love argues that 'Give me leave to rail at you' originally is a joint work of Rochester and his wife using the then-popular musical form of a 'dialogue', but without the conventional concluding duet or chorus (1999: 335–36). In *Attribution in Restoration Poetry*, Vieth categorises 'Give me leave to rail at you' as 'Probably Rochester' (1963: 414). In his edition, he writes that Elizabeth was literary, which is illustrated in some of her poems that have survived in her own handwriting, amongst them 'The Answer' (1968: xxii).

There seems to be little doubt that the two poems are a correspondence between husband and wife. The question is if they represent their true feelings or are performances, or something somewhere in between. Some scholars believe the two poems were written in company, others point at the fact that even his letters were performances, whilst others again believe the two poems prove the emotional bond between husband and wife.

### ***To the Post Boy***

(Love pp. 42–43)

This poem is included because of its particularly peculiar nature; the biographical relation is perhaps harder to evaluate than in any other poem by Rochester. It seems almost obvious that it is an autobiographic poem considering Rochester mentioning his name and an important



incident from his life, but it has proved to be far more complicated than so. Johnson argues that if his letters did not prove how ironic Rochester could be about himself, it would be difficult to believe this poem to be his (2004: 251–52). There have been several challenges considering attribution, and the poem has been read as both boastful and remorseful.

There is no holograph to this poem, and the manuscripts in which the poem is ascribed to Rochester also include numbers of poems which Burns believes seem ‘uncharacteristically crude’ (1995: 67). Similarly, Vieth writes that the poem has a curious textual history. No part of the poem reached print until 1926, and until 1963 the text had never been published in full. The disagreements concerning the poem’s authenticity may be due to titles in some early texts which could imply either that Rochester wrote the poem or that it was a lampoon on him. There is no clear evidence that Rochester did not write the poem, nor is there any ascription to another author. Vieth believes that considerations of style strengthen the case for Rochester’s authorship, as few poets had the same flair for the dramatic. Love suggests that internal signing may have begun with this poem; some contemporaries read Rochester’s name as a surrogate signature and dropped it to a line of its own (2004: 159).

There existed several lampoons on Rochester; hence he was working in a tradition of lampoons written against him. Vieth believes Rochester must have been a frustrating target, and that no poet equalled the force of this poem (1963: 199–203). The poem starts with the speaker enquiring a post boy: ‘Son of a Whore, God Damn you, can you tell / A Peerless Peer the Readiest way to Hell?’ (ll. 1–2). He goes on to confess, or perhaps brag, about his past:

I’ve out swilld Bacchus, sworn of my own make  
Oaths would fright furies and make Pluto quake.  
I’ve swiv’d more whores more ways then sodoms walls  
E’re knew or the Colledge of Romes Cardinalls  
(ll. 3–6)

The speaker recalls how

Frighted at my own Mischiefs I have fled  
And bravely left my Lifes Defender dead;  
Broke Houses to break Chastity and Dy’d  
That floor with Murther which my Lys denyd.  
(ll. 9–12)

Thormählen argues that one of the most intriguing features of the poem is the mixture of bragging and reality. He poses ridiculous exaggerations of the charges often levelled at him (1993: 357–58). Vieth calls the poem ‘half-boastful, half penitential’. Griffin believes that the phrase is apt, though it exaggerates the penitence. The speaker asks the boy about ‘The

Readiest way to Hell? come quick, nere stir!' (l. 15). The witty answer, 'The Readiest Way, my Lord's by Rochester' (l. 16), prevents us from reading the confession as sincere remorse. Griffin sees this as self-punishment, but at the same time the last heroically outrageous act of sending oneself defiantly to hell. He believes this poem is the most theatrical of all of the satires (1973: 54–55). Similarly, Farley-Hills believes there is as much boastfulness in the poem as genuine penitence, and states that Rochester is the comic butt (1978: 1 and 96).

Lamb, in contrast, does not appear to perceive Rochester as boasting. He links the poem to the following characteristics of an alcoholic: low self-esteem, shame, guilt and remorse. He claims that Rochester's self-disgust became an increasingly blatant part of his poetry, accounting for verses like 'The Disabled Debauchee' and 'To the Post Boy'. In the latter, he argues, Rochester combines his arrogance with guilt and a frightening degree of self-flagellation (1994: 220). Larman also believes that Rochester was full of self-loathing, which he expressed in this 'cuttingly autobiographical' poem. He argues that it stands out as a scream of self-laceration and that it could be termed 'A Satire: On myself'. Larman claims that if his friends had read the poem they might have assumed that it was a 'theatrical parting shot from a man destined to die by his own hand' (2014: location 3368–84). Whether the poem was purely self-laceration or if it was boastful as well, the scholars believe it was grounded in Rochester's own feelings and experience. Tempting as it is, the poem should not be read as a sincere confession, but as a performance. Burns argues that the textual situation effaces what might be behind the mask, but the performance is so complete that we allow the poem to be Rochester:

'Rochester' becomes a theatrical persona split off from the assumed writer, insistent on establishing his identity by reference to events in the life of the historical Rochester. The effect is as if the writer had created a puppet of himself who then tries to present credentials entitling him to his creator's identity, an effect Vieth's edition compounds, by adding 'Rochester' as a speech-heading at the start of the poem. (1995: 67).

Burns believes the writer has effected a kind of alienation between the figure who stands in for the writer and the writer himself. Along the same lines as Farley-Hills, he argues that Rochester becomes a caricature of vice, as '[t]hose orthodox values by which the wicked Earl of Rochester stands self-condemned are themselves mocked' (1995: 67–72). As we have witnessed, this is not the first time scholars have claimed that Rochester is practicing self-mockery. In 'To the Post Boy', Rochester appears to be seeing himself from the outside. It might be with a remorseful glance or with mockery. The most reasonable thing is perhaps to read it as partly boastful and partly repentant.

## **Rochester and society**

‘A Satire against Reason and Mankind’, ‘Timon’ and ‘Tunbridge Wells’ have all been related to Rochester in various ways and degrees. Though few have named the speakers ‘Rochester’, they have found strong relations between the poems and the poet. Some argue that Rochester’s biography can ‘spice up’ the poems, but the biography is not always absolutely necessary to read, understand and enjoy these satires. What we do need to know a thing or two about, however, is the historical context, which perhaps is of greater importance in several of Rochester’s poems. Thormählen states that ‘a study of the historical context of ‘Tunbridge Wells’ helps a present-day reader develop a greater awareness of the ironical dimensions that Rochester’s contemporaries recognised and enjoyed’ (1993: 264–65). This can be applied to most of Rochester’s satires. A substantial part of the love songs can be read without a wide knowledge of the historical context, though several allusions and references are being made in these works too. The satires include so many allusions and references it is almost impossible to understand and enjoy them without the in-depth commentaries.

The poems directed to specific people are perhaps more challenging to tear loose from a biographical context. Are poems directed at specific people more biographical than love poems or other satires? On the one side, one would assume them immensely personal, and the speaker to be Rochester himself. Highly personal they might be, but to assume the speaker to be Rochester has proven more controversial. First, it is the satire on Charles, who might have no real malice intended. Then there is the poem on Dryden which, like the satire on Charles, is immensely exaggerated and meant to entertain as well as scorn. The critic is probably genuine, but the performance in the poem and the relation to *Ars Poetica* makes it less personal. The correspondence between Rochester and his wife is also problematic; is it a real correspondence and are their sincere feelings expressed? Yet, the greatest challenge is perhaps ‘To the Post Boy’, as we cannot know how performative and sincere Rochester was, or if the speaker should be connected with Rochester at all.

## 6 Conclusion

It is time to review the relationship between Rochester and his poetry. The chapter will start with a summary of how scholars have found Rochester in the poetry; this section also explains why their approaches and arguments are valuable and should be acknowledged. The second section will examine the challenges with relating Rochester too closely to his poetry, whilst the third section will summarise, compare and discuss the discoveries. The conclusion will include some new arguments, but only when they support, strengthen and explain more clearly those who are already presented in the preceding chapters.

### The connections

The first edition on Rochester's poetry was 'rushed out in a bid to capitalize on Rochester's notoriety' (Davis 2013: xliii), and less than half of the poems were in fact written by him. The second edition was almost certainly instigated by Rochester's mother and sought to improve her son's reputation. In short, they were both published to present two very different images of Rochester. Hayward's edition from 1926 was limited and insufficient as an edition, but it is of interest as it was the first modern edition. Pinto's edition of 1953 placed Rochester in the canon of English poetry, and contains a biographical introduction. He was highly constrained by the obscenity laws and was forced to omit important poems. As Hammond states, this edition took over the respectable version of Rochester that the editor Tonson promoted in 1691. However, it was the next major editor, Vieth, who made the closest connections between the biography and the poetry with his edition in 1968. He attempted to arrange the poems in chronological order, and Love states that Vieth's edition might be called a surrogate biography (1999: xliii). In the later editions, this relation between the poet and the poetry is remarkably less in evidence. They do include introductions with biographies, some choices of titles make relations in themselves and there are made some relations in notes and commentaries, but the texts are not attached to biographical categories. The editors, in large, seem more detached from a biographical approach after 1968 than biographers and critical scholars have been.

There is no surprise that a biographer is concerned about a poet's biography, but the extent to which the biographer relates the content of the poems to the life of the poet is another matter. Burnet, who published his biography shortly after Rochester's death, did not concern himself much with the poetry, but all the major biographers coming after him, whom

I have consulted in this thesis, do. The only biographer who challenges this tendency is Pritchard. He published his biography in 2012 and makes it clear that he does not want to make a relation between the poetry and the poet, but he does not deny that Rochester's life and character influenced his poetry. Graham Greene wrote his biography on Rochester in the early 1930s, but it was not published until the late 1970s. This biography has been taken less seriously than any other biography on Rochester by scholars, but it has been widely read and praised by others. In his introduction, Greene states that 'I have tried to show the life and character of Rochester always in relation to his poetry' (1974: 10). Pinto's biography of 1962 also uses the poems and prose works frequently in its portrait of Rochester. As he writes in his introduction, 'we must let Rochester speak for himself in his poetry' (xxii). John Adlard uses the poetry frequently when writing Rochester's biography from 1974, and the subtitle to his book is *John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, in the eyes of his contemporaries and in his own poetry and prose*. This book should be called partly edition, partly biography, as it quotes a wide range of poems and letters. Jeremy Lamb, writing in 1994, is mainly concerned with presenting Rochester as an alcoholic and uses the poetry frequently whilst narrating Rochester's life and character. Johnson is fond of a psychological approach, though more moderately than the scholar Griffin. He uses the poetry to explain certain aspects of his life and character in his biography from 2004. Larman, who published his biography in 2014, is clearly 'too excited about the naughtiness of his subject' (Jones: 2014), and appears to be enchanted by the Rochester myth.

Broadly speaking, the critical scholars have tended to yield to historical, biographical and sometimes psychological approaches. Of the three published critical full-length studies of Rochester's poetry, Marianne Thormählen is most critical when it comes to connecting the poems to Rochester. However, she also admits that the connections are sometimes too evident to disregard. Perhaps it is more or less impossible not to make relations when dealing with Rochester's poetry as a whole; one might ask oneself why New Critical readings have never gained the same popularity as historical, biographical and psychological. It might be at least partly due to our desire for the relations to exist. Most of the scholars agree that we need to be critical when it comes to identifying the speaker of the poems with Rochester. However, as the previous chapter illustrated, they give in to the temptation themselves, though they seldom directly call the speakers Rochester. The remaining articles and essays I have examined usually concentrate on a limited number of poems or themes, and do not treat Rochester's poetry as a whole. When focusing on for instance one poem as an individual unit, it appears to

be easier to detach it from its contexts. However, only a handful of scholars have managed to do so with some of the poems, and these studies have seldom gained much recognition. What the scholars have in common is that they are all critical in their relations between the poet and the speakers of the poems. Though most warn about seeing a too close connection, several still tend to struggle with following their own warnings.

I am less critical to historical, biographical and to some extent psychological approaches than when I started planning this thesis. First of all, one cannot ignore the undeniable fact that episodes in Rochester's life are easily transferable to a substantial part of the poetry. The scholars examined in 'Finding Rochester' did find the historical Rochester in several poems, by connecting them to episodes in his life or attitudes and opinions associated with Rochester. We have learned that poems have been connected to for instance Rochester's life as a soldier, the murder of Mr. Downs and Rochester's own view on society. A number of themes and points of view are frequently repeated in the poems, and they are also often repeated in letters and conversations. The question is how sincere Rochester was in letter correspondences and in the conversations with Burnet, and what was Burnet's intention behind publishing the biography? Lastly, the utterances from his contemporaries are also of interest, as some confirm a connection between Rochester and the poetry. However, Rochester had dear friends and fierce enemies, and neither were objective.

### **Repeated themes and attitudes**

Several themes and attitudes are brought up more than once in Rochester's poems, letters and in conversations. Neither the themes nor the attitudes are always simple and obvious, and several poems express highly contradictory attitudes. However, scholars have pointed at characteristics with Rochester that can be connected to his poetry, and some of the most relevant will be presented in this section as an illustration. The first characteristic is wide and complex: it is generally agreed that Rochester praised honesty and detested hypocrisy, artifice, pride and folly, and that he was of the opinion that one should always live according to natural reason and natural instincts. This is illustrated with for instance compulsive wandering and inconstancy. All these attitudes are well represented in poems such as 'Satire against Reason and Mankind' with its attack on false reason and hypocrisy, 'Tunbridge Wells' with its critique of those who are not honest and passionate when it comes to love and sexual matters, and 'Absent from thee' and 'Against Constancy' which explore the theme of constancy. The second characteristic is jealousy, as Rochester repeatedly has been presented as a jealous man, and several of his poems present jealous speakers. They are particularly well

illustrated in 'The Mistress' and 'A Ramble in St. James's Park'. The theme of boredom is also worth mentioning in a few words. Several scholars have argued that Rochester feared boredom and turned to a debauched lifestyle to avoid it. Lamb is particularly concerned about how Rochester feared and loathed boredom, and believes that 'Against Constancy' illustrated this well with its ridicule of the 'duller fools'. In addition to these personal characteristics, we have witnessed that there are some recurring features in his poems and letters when it comes to politics, religion and philosophy. Moreover, he often refers to contemporary leaders, churchmen and philosophers that he might have had reasons to either dislike or admire. He also refers to events and places we know he had connections with.

### **The letters**

Rochester was known to be quite an entertainer in his letters. Treglown explains that he sometimes wrote mock-elevated letters:

He was, as has often been pointed out, an actor, fond of practical jokes in which he dressed up as other people [...] The small comic disguises adopted in some of his letters were appreciated, as Savile's thanking him for 'two letters of different styles' shows (p. 62), and they are related to Rochester's almost instinctive use of parody in many of his poems. (1980: 24).

In his collection of Rochester's letter, Treglown mentions Thomas Sprat, an English divine, who said that in the letters that pass between friends, 'the souls of men should appear undressed; and in that negligent habit they may be fit to be seen by one or two in a chamber, but not to go abroad into the streets'. However, Treglown explains that his aristocratic Restoration contemporaries did not all share his inhibitions. He argues that 'because even their negligence was calculated, their private life ostentatious, the correspondence of the "Court wits" – the clever, self-destructive group that surrounded Charles II, - was quickly treated as public property' (1980: 1). It is reasonable to suspect that at least some were written with this knowledge in mind, and hence were written at least partly for the purpose of entertainment.

Though Rochester's letters to his wife and Savile appear to be genuine and passionate, they cannot be read as sincere confessions. It has been argued that Rochester did not dare to lie to his wife, which might be correct, but his letters were probably not sincere exposures of every feeling and sin. The letters were partly performances, where Rochester was director and decided what to include and leave out. Poetic correspondence was common and is even more problematic than ordinary letters, the correspondence made up by 'Give me leave to rail at you' and 'The Answer' being a fine example. However, this dramatic correspondence is not

that different from their normal letter correspondence, which makes it more problematic to determine how sincere and personal poems were in poetic correspondences as well as normal letter correspondences.

Treglown claims that there was a humorous and metaphorical energy in Rochester's imagination, which charged his letters and poems alike. He also sees Rochester's hilarity as related to his seriousness, 'and particularly to the intensity with which he questioned traditional, metaphysically-based notions of goodness and tried to find workable empirical alternatives to them' (1980: 4). He explains that this search, most fully articulated in the last part of the 'Satire against Reason and Mankind', is carried on in the letters and particularly movingly in those he wrote to his wife. He argues that there is a poignant intersection between the life and the poems in a fragment in which he complains that human existence involves 'so great a disproportion 'twixt our desires and what it has ordained to content them' (1980: 241). Treglown believes that almost all his poems relate to this disappointment in some way. The correspondence between Rochester and his friends lent itself to publication because of the ambivalence of the relationship between the men's private lives and their pleasure in notoriety. Rochester's letters to his wife, Treglown argues, are intensely intimate, and cannot easily be read without some knowledge of the poet's life and background (1980: 3-5). Some poems have been read just as much as entertainment as the poems, and some poems have been perceived to be just as personal as the letters. Themes and attitudes in the poems have been repeated in the letters, which make it reasonable to think that the letters sometimes can confirm elements in the poetry, and therefore also the biographical connection.

### **The conversations with Burnet and statements from contemporaries**

The biography based on the conversations with Burnet has been perceived as a valuable source. However, Rochester's sincerity and Burnet's motivation for publishing the book, and not least how accurate the reconstruction of the conversations is, have been widely and heatedly discussed. Whether we should read the biography as a reliable account or not is open to discussion, but there is no doubt that it has been consulted frequently in Rochester studies and hence been of influence.

Statements from Rochester's contemporaries are perhaps impossible to interpret and evaluate. Though there were an exceptional number of rumours about Rochester and highly exaggerated retellings of his actions already in his own lifetime, some were most likely founded on facts. Farley-Hills writes that during his lifetime, any compliment to Rochester is undoubtedly suspect, though sometimes the compliments were sincere (1972: 6-7). However,



most comments concerning Rochester were partial, and both his friends and his foes were participating in constructing and keeping the Rochester myths alive. Consequently, neither Burnet's biography nor the comments from contemporaries should be read as hard facts.

## **The challenges**

Scholars have connected the poetry to Rochester in various ways, as the examples in the previous chapter illustrate. Historical, biographical and psychological approaches are popular when dealing with Rochester's poetry, and though I can understand and support the scholars' reasons, it is necessary to look through the arguments for why we should be suspicious of making too close relations. Firstly, Rochester's insufficient biography should make any reader suspicious and critical to the connections that have been made. The greatest challenge, however, is perhaps the frequent acts of masquerading and the use of personas, which is closely linked to the innumerable and immeasurable exaggerations and Rochester's theatricality. Challenges of attribution due to anonymity and the tradition of collaboration are also of significance, so are the challenges that rise when we learn that Rochester often imitated in various ways, made allusions and wrote in clear traditions. Moreover, the contradicting tones and points of view within the poetry as a whole, but also in individual poems, prevent us from reaching firm conclusions. The differences between love songs, satires and poems written to or about specific people presents new problems. Lastly, we need to consider the intention and motivation behind the writing.

### **Rochester's insufficient biography**

Clearly, to use an insufficient biography in the exploration and explanation of a poet's work triggers challenges. Myths and speculations have been used to fill the missing spots, but also the poetry has been a significant contributor. The insufficient biography has been used to 'solve' the poetry, and the poetry has been used to fill in the gaps in his biography. This is, indeed, a vicious circle. However, it is wrong to claim that we do not know enough about Rochester's life to make a decent survey over the major events. The problem is perhaps that biographers seldom make the reader aware, or are aware themselves, what are based on facts and what are speculation, myths or even downright lies. To relate the poetry to specific events in Rochester's life might be questionable enough, but to relate it to Rochester's assumed thoughts and feelings is even more problematic.

## **The Masquerading and the ‘I’**

It has been suggested that actorly inclinations in Rochester found an outlet in his poems, and that the major satires in particular are written in dramatised voices as in character. That the speakers of Rochester’s poems are dramatised could mean that their attitudes are to be clearly distinguished from Rochester. Davis, however, declares that ‘it would be perverse to deny the resemblances between Rochester and his satirical protagonists’ (2013: xxvii). What is needed is an approach that recognises overlap between Rochester and his libertine speakers. Davis argues that libertinism was itself essentially theatrical and agrees with James Turner that it was not so much a philosophy as a set of performances (Turner 2002: x). He claims that the performative element is central to Rochester, and ‘in their differing ways, the disabled debauchee, the speaker of the “Satire against Reason and Mankind” and M. G. are all self-dramatized characters who, we feel, can only be themselves when they have an audience to impress or offend’ (2013: xxix). Davis explains that the philosophical premises of libertinism entailed a view of the self as actor, adopting a succession of discrete roles (2013: xxviii–ix).

Rochester was often in disgrace; in such times he disappeared to France or went into hiding and disguise. The ability to assume another’s role is often considered a striking feature of Rochester’s poetry and life, but

To don the mask is an old instinct in man who longs at some time or other (if only in childhood) to assume a secondary personality, or to appear as the personality he mostly conceals. The freeing of the conventional self...when he dons the mask, is an illustration of his need for expression of the other self who may indeed be the basic truer self. (Kay Dick quoted in Johnson 2004: 108).

It is an old instinct in man, and was a natural part of Restoration life. George Burnet described a court which ‘fell into much extravagance in masquerading; both king and queen, and all the court, went about masked, and came into houses unknown, and danced. People were so disguised, that without being in on the secret none could distinguish them’ (quoted in Johnson 2004: 107). Masquerading was so habitual that it came easily to Rochester. Griffin argues that the paradigm of his theatricality is the famous portrait of Rochester crowning the poetic monkey with laurel, and asks if he perhaps mocks the idea that there is anything lofty or spiritual about poetry. He states that ‘it is in the light of this similar self-dramatisation, designed to shock, to scandalise, to prompt attention or laughter, rather than of his often-noted fondness of impersonation, that we should view Rochester’s satires’ (1973: 23–24). The speakers of Rochester’s libertine satires, Griffin comments, should be seen not as personas, but as exaggerated versions of the poet himself; as self-projector rather than as impersonator.

He believes that ‘Rochester presents theatrical yet carefully controlled extensions of his own personal libertinism (1973: 4). Griffin argues that some speakers should be seen as exaggerated versions of the poet himself instead of personas, and it appears that several scholars share his view, though it is true that they keep calling the speakers personas.

Rochester’s relationship to his speakers has always been a central problem in interpretations of his poems. Griffin claims that in some accounts, the poems are autobiographical documents and true confessions of a libertine. At the other extreme, it is argued that in two major satires Rochester makes use of ironical personas, whereby the egotistical speaker himself is unconsciously exposed (1973: 24). Griffin’s conclusion is that ‘in my view the libertine speakers of the poems are too much like the historical Rochester to be personae, and too self-consciously, too knowingly, scandalous to be, simply, the man himself’ (1973: 24–25). In contrast, Thormählen emphasises Rochester’s mastery of disguise and explains that this is one of the reasons she will not call the ‘I’ in the poems ‘Rochester’. She states that the difficulty of discovering the ‘real’ Rochester is compounded by his enjoyment of mask, imitation and self-parody, and ‘even where a speaker utters opinions which sound very like the Rochester we know from traditional sources, there are obstacles in the way of identification’ (1993: 5). The second reason is the lack of stability she believes characterises his work. She believes that even where the argumentation is persuasive and coherent, one cannot avoid to sense the irritable movement of an unquiet mind (1993: 4–5).

Larman argues that in the Restoration period, people took such time and pains to advertise themselves because they were all actors on an elaborately created set, with the king as producer, director and leading man (2014: location 1175). Along the same lines, Pritchard claims that the liberating effect of masking is well known, and mentions Hobbes who remarked that

*persona* in Latin signifies the disguise or outward appearance of a man [...] Throughout his life, he was to personate, to act or represent himself, or another, whether in sauntering through the streets of London, or in the varying personae of his poems. Throughout, there seems to have been an uncertain sense of coherent selfhood or identity, played out in a series of provisional identities. (Pritchard 2012: location 855).

In dying, as in life, Pritchard explains, Rochester would masquerade, concealing his true identity (2012: location 4179). Similarly, Lamb believes that Rochester was an actor more than any other kind of creature. He argues that Rochester was a sublime eccentric and relished the fact that he was both feared and widely thought about; Rochester offered ‘a dazzling kaleidoscope’ of versions of himself to whoever he happened to be in contact with (1994: 124

and 1690). Closely related to the question of masquerading and personas is that of exaggeration and theatricality. Sometimes, it is problematic to know when Rochester is exaggerating and why. It is perhaps even more challenging to unveil where the division between heartfelt emotion and theatricality goes.

### **The challenge of attribution**

That the wits often collaborated and the poems seldom were signed are perhaps the two main causes for the challenge of attribution. Broadly speaking, we are quite certain today what Rochester did and did not write. However, because it took so long to create a canon, the myths and his reputation have managed to take deep roots. The poems examined in this study have not been the cause of much discussion and disagreement, the exceptions being 'Timon and' 'Tunbridge Wells', and to some extent 'Give me leave to raile at you', 'The Answer' and 'To the Post Boy'. The challenge of attribution has highly influenced how we have perceived and read both the poetry and the historical Rochester, as well as the connection between them. Poems have been wrongly attributed to him, and because his poems were anonymous and several burned, there is reason to believe that a substantial part is lost. These facts are important to bear in mind, as we know how much the poetry has affected the construction of Rochester as both man and poet.

### **Tradition, imitation and allusion**

Rochester's poetry is marked by imitation, includes numerous allusions and several poems are written within various traditions. In the light of the poems explored in this study, it is hard to reach a firm conclusion whether these poems are less biographical than those who do not imitate, allude or are written in a tradition. However, it is not unreasonable to suspect that such elements have impaired a biographical reading.

Rochester wrote in several traditions, such as Greek and French satirical traditions and the Anacreontic and Petrarchan tradition. He also wrote in a domestic tradition, and in 'To the Post Boy' he is working in a tradition on lampoons written against himself. The famous poems 'A Satire against Reason and Mankind', 'The Imperfect Enjoyment' and 'Tunbridge Wells' are all parts of literary traditions, so are the poems which defend inconstancy as this is a traditional libertine departure strategy. Rochester also often made use of traditional language and traditional elements in his poetry. The imitation doctrine was prominent in the Restoration Age; though Rochester worked within it, he also challenged this literary tradition.

The question is where the line is drawn between influence and imitation, and sometimes, evidently, translations.

Some of the poems, particularly the satires, consists of numerous references to Rochester's own time and environment, he frequently uses allusions his audience were familiar with but which a modern audience usually finds challenging. The allusions do not cause the same challenges as tradition and imitation. Contrarily, the use of illusions can be argued to make the connection more noticeable. The allusions may reveal a great deal about the writer, the readers and the age in general. As pointed out in the preceding chapter, contemporary readers readily understood the allusions, whilst the modern reader is very much dependent on extensive textual notes.

### **The contradictions between and within poems**

The contradicting tones and points of view within the poetry as a whole, but also within individual poems, prevent us from reaching firm conclusions. The contradictions and uncertainties can either illustrate how Rochester was a product of his time or prove that it is too difficult to find the historical person Rochester in his poetry. Barbara Everett notes 'how necessary it was to Rochester not merely to be in the fashion but to excel in it, to transcend it almost – to do a thing so well that the mode itself broke under him' (1982: 2). Along the same lines, Farley-Hills focuses on Rochester's delight in paradox, and how apparent it is in much of his poetry. This might be a reason why one finds so many contradictions in his poetry. Rochester did not necessarily intend to purport a cohesive viewpoint in his work; then it would probably have been clearer. Similarly, Vieth argues that Rochester's distinctive technique as a poet involves the simultaneous manipulation of several conflicting levels or planes of experience. 'The Disabled Debauchee', for instance, turns upon an unstable equation of debauchery and heroic warfare, with a further twist in the concluding stanza. He believes that Rochester's discovery of the way to link discontinuous modes of experience in a poem may have been his great gift to the new literary sensibility (1968: xxxv–vi). The question is not only how related Rochester is to the speaker and comments in the poems, but also how to deal with the contradictory comments. Rochester himself is also often interpreted and presented as a man of contradictions. To draw a satisfactory picture of him is an immensely challenging project. A great many people have accepted the challenge, but as Griffin concludes, 'disagreement and confusion have resulted' (Griffin 1973: 2). Perhaps the confusion was Rochester's intention from the very start.

### **The question of categories**

The poems explored in this thesis can broadly be divided into the categories ‘songs and love lyrics’, ‘satires and lampoons’ and ‘poems written to or about specific people’. The main challenge is that there are no clear distinctions between the categories, as generic experimentation is a central feature in Rochester’s poetry (Davis 2013: xlv).

Some of the songs are sheer drinking songs, but the majority treat the unhappy lover. Griffin claims it is almost universally felt that the songs are intensely personal and that ‘like the libertine speaker of the satires, the libertine lover of the songs is a projection of the poet himself’ (1973: 79). He believes the erotic activities and concerns of the lover are recognisably those of the historical Rochester, whom was notorious in his own age for whoring and sexual profligacy (1973: 79–115). Why were songs written at court? Greer believes that songs were written to be sung and not to seduce women. However, some were probably written with that intention in mind. Singing, Greer argues, is a natural companion of drinking (2000: 32). Several poems were written for music, Charles II’s court was still a major centre for composition. Entertainment was probably the motivation behind several songs. How is one to distinguish between the songs written merely for entertainment and the personal and passionate love songs? Sometimes, it is possible to distinguish between songs and love lyrics, but the distinction is seldom rock solid. Some poems have the word ‘song’ in their title, but even they have been read as just as personal as the passionate love lyrics.

The satires and lampoons are mainly concerned with politics, society, philosophy or personal rivalry. Satires are normally exaggerated and written for entertainment, though they often treat serious themes. The language is usually obscene and the tone always fierce. The themes and people under attack are never spared, and ‘there had been a time when Rochester’s satires [...] were feared. Even his friends were not safe from his pen. He had held a mirror up to his age, a mirror that distorted a little but in the cause of truth’ (Greene 1974: 116). Rochester’s defence of his satires was that there are some people that could not be kept in order ‘but in this way’. He also told Burnet that ‘the Lyes in these Libels came often in as Ornaments that could not be spared without spoiling the beauty of the *Poem*’ (1812: 26). The interesting word here is ‘lies’. It is widely acknowledged that Rochester’s poetry is filled with exaggerations, but this comment reveals that the poems may also contain downright lies. The challenge is to distinguish the lies from the truths and not least from the exaggerated truths. It appears that several of his satires belong to a more deeply reflected Rochester, whilst most of his songs are the products of strong emotions and sometimes entertainment and spontaneity at

court. However, both his songs and satires are too inconsistent to make any firm arguments. It is immensely difficult, perhaps even impossible, to conclude that satires and lampoons belong to the serious and Rochester whilst the love lyrics and the songs belong to the emotional lover and court wit. One would assume that love songs were far more personal than satires, but that cannot be the case if they were written to be sung at drunken festivities at Whitehall. Poems written to or about specific people have also proven far more problematic and less personal than anticipated. This is generic experimentation, and it was probably Rochester's intention.

### **Intention and motivation**

Though critics such as Wimsatt and Beardsley would protest against the possibility for knowing an author's intention, Rochester might prove a different case. Satires and lampoons were written to entertain the King and the court, or to entertain friends on the expense of the King. Lampoons were written to foes, and love songs to be sung or to seduce ladies. Such facts are necessary to be aware of in order to understand the poetry of Rochester. The assumed inspiration and motivation behind the poems have often been 'revealed' in the historical context and Rochester's personal life.

The greatest question is perhaps not what the intention behind each poem was, but why Rochester wrote poetry at all. We have learned that most court wits of the age wrote poetry, and that it was a common exercise in their position. Love writes that Rochester did not regard himself as an author or poet, and that writing was a manifestation of the aristocratic self. Further, he argues that an important part of this mind set was a belief that writing was grounded in conversation and a kind of inspired spontaneity. The reason they wrote, Love explains, was that there was an occasion.

Perhaps it is wrong to approach Rochester as 'any other poet' if he did not consider himself as a poet. Though I have found several reasons to be critical to a too close connection between the poet and his poetry, I understand why scholars have tended to adopt historical, biographical and psychological approaches.

### **Is there a poet in this poem?**

There is no doubt that at least parts of Rochester's poetry can to some extent be related to Rochester's historical context, to his biography and to his psychology. If we decide that it is wrong to read the poems with such approaches, important discoveries and readings might be lost. The question is how we should read poetry by writers with such an infamous reputation

as Rochester's. There are critical articles on Rochester's poetry where the importance of biography and historical context is almost non-existent, and it is possible to read some of the poems without relating them to the authorship as a whole, or to a personal and historical context. However, I think this is possible only when discussing selected individual poems and not when discussing Rochester's poetry as a whole; there are too many obvious repetitions, traces and threads that cannot be dismissed as mere coincidences. The few who have chosen approaches not related to Rochester's biography, historical context or psychology have not gained the same acknowledgement as their fellow scholars. Does this prove that Rochester's poetry is, in the overall picture, more or less impossible to detach from its historical context and creator despite the challenges mentioned above? Scholars have admitted that Rochester's biography lends spice and extra excitement to the poetry, the myths and his reputation might contribute to an unwillingness to detach the poetry from its author and it has been argued that his writing was a manifestation of his self. He was also first and foremost a court wit, a member of a group that was expected to be entertainers, and he did not consider himself a poet. Rochester proves a complex and challenging case because he is highly situated in his own time, and the same can be said about his poetry. It seems reasonable to call Rochester both a product of the Restoration and a child of his age.

As a rule, it is unfavourable to relate poetry too closely to its author and the historical context. Poetry, as a work of art, can never be fully solved. Literary works are not autonomous quantities, but they are not completely revealing accounts of the world either. If you need a biography to understand the poem, is it then a true work of art? Who is to decide what art is? It is even more unfortunate to separate a poem completely from its author and context; poetry is made by individual human beings living in the same world as the poetry they produce. The following quotes from Robert D. Hume's book *Reconstructing Context* (1999) puts it well in words. He argues that 'literature is a cultural phenomenon, not a world unto itself' (112) and explains that 'only a fool would want to go back to the literary-critical world of 1960' (158). All writers leave traces in their works, whether they are abstract poems or cutting lampoons. One cannot dismiss all relations between Rochester and the poetry, Rochester and the age, or Rochester, the age and the poetry. There is a difference between reading a poem as autobiographical and acknowledging that parts of Rochester are traceable in the poems. Autobiography and biographical relevance and influence are not two sides to the same story.



Critics have talked about Rochester's personas, and I believe this conception is crucial when treating Rochester's poetry. All human beings are wearing different masks and playing different roles, but Rochester is perhaps taking the role-playing to the extreme, as he apparently did with most things in life. We need to see the speakers as personas, as the scholars undoubtedly have done, though most of them have tended to exaggerate the degree to which Rochester can be identified with the personas. It is interesting that the majority of the scholars warns about naming the speakers Rochester, but still make such close connections between the historical Rochester and the speakers. Nevertheless, I have realised how difficult it can be to detach Rochester from his poetry, and why it is often tempting to name the various speakers 'Rochester'.

I will not claim all the poems by Rochester to be personal or historical related. However, the poems mentioned in this thesis are related to Rochester and his age to varying degrees. Though I am more in favour of historical, biographical and psychological approaches to Rochester's poetry than I expected to be a year ago, I still believe that editors, biographers and critical scholars have made too close connections between Rochester and his poetry. However, I also firmly believe that Rochester is in his poetry. He is lurking between the lines, leaving traces, prints and dead ends. Sometimes we suspect that he is speaking through the protagonists, other times we understand that he is playing and directing, using the poetry as his stage. In any case, the poems cannot be completely detached from the infamous John Wilmot, second Earl of Rochester.

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