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## **John Wilmot, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Rochester (1647-80): Poet and Man about Towne**

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**Abstract:** The influence of the Court and theatre on the life and work of the Earl of Rochester (1647–80) has long been recognised, but little attention has been paid to the extent to which London itself was an inspiration for his poetry, including the remarkable *A Letter from Artemiza in the Towne to Chloe in the Countrey* and *A Ramble in Saint James's Parke*. This essay indicates a symbiotic relationship, as Rochester correspondingly affected London society through his involvement with the theatre and through the frequency with which he was the subject of often scandalised gossip. Rochester's poetry also reflects the changing political, social and religious context that developed during the Restoration period, allowing the conclusion to be drawn that while Rochester was in no small way defined by the capital, to the same degree he helped to define the London of his time.

**Keywords:** Rochester, Restoration, London, poetry, satire

On 17 December 1664, Samuel Pepys recorded in his diary that 'Mighty talk' was being caused by the appearance of a comet in the London sky, such that even the King and Queen had stayed up the previous night in order to watch it (Latham and Matthews 1970–83: 5.348).<sup>1</sup> Comets were still often held to portend, or even to be the cause of, some great event or disaster, and it was in the middle of this feverish atmosphere that the seventeen-year-old Earl of Rochester was received at the glittering court of King Charles II on Christmas Day. Fresh from study at Wadham College, Oxford, and a Grand Tour of Europe, the young nobleman, 'like a comet . . . wonder'd at', attracted immediate attention by delivering to the King a letter from his beloved youngest sister Henrietta ('Minette'), Duchesse d'Orléans (Ellis 1994: 312; Greene 1974: 37).<sup>2</sup> For the next decade and a half, the activities and writing of this most brilliant luminary of King Charles II's Court would be the staple of often

incredulous London gossip until, like the trajectory of the 'Blazing Commet in a winters Sky'<sup>3</sup> that had greeted his arrival, the 'wicked earl' abruptly disappeared from sight, dying at the early age of 33, his body having been destroyed by the effects of alcohol and syphilis.

In the epilogue beginning 'What vaine unnecessary things are men' that Rochester wrote in 1672 for a performance by an all-female cast of a now unknown play, he describes the 'Woemen Fayres' in London provided by 'Pell Mell, Playhous and the drawing roome' (lines 8–9). These three milieux of the town (Pall Mall), the theatre (the playhouses), and the Court (the Great Withdrawing Room in Whitehall Palace) act as a bourdon that underlies and links together Rochester's creative output. Of special significance for Rochester was the Great Withdrawing Room, for it formed the principal public gathering place of the gentry and nobility, and was effectively the main social space at Court (Love 1999: 409); it became the custom for anonymous lampoons to be left lying around there, or pinned to its door, and by this means Rochester circulated many of his satires, in full awareness that they would be read, copied, collected and circulated by and amongst the glitterati.

In the public mind, Rochester has always been particularly associated with the theatre, and above all the Court, of Restoration London. Two examples will suffice to illustrate this. Around 1675, he famously took as his mistress the initially unsuccessful seventeen-year-old actress Elizabeth Barry, and during the course of their short but stormy relationship famously trained her to become the greatest tragedienne of the day (Highfill 1973–93: 1.3); and, secondly, Rochester's 'best-known lines' satirising King Charles have come to epitomise the period:

God bless our good and gracious King  
Whose promise none relyes on  
Who never said A foolish thing  
Nor ever did A wise one;

(to which the King is said to have replied good-humouredly, 'My words are my own, but my acts are my ministers') (Love 1999: 495; Greene 1974: 88; Walker and Fisher 2010: 135–36). The environments of theatre and Court are wittily combined in Rochester's reworking of John Fletcher's Jacobean drama *The Tragedie of Valentinian* (probably written in 1613 or 1614) in which he makes the palace of the Roman emperor subtly suggestive of the palace of Whitehall and provides in the lustful Valentinian a veiled satiric portrait of King Charles (Fisher 2009; Love 2000: 179–80, 188).

But the extent to which London itself influenced such a large proportion of Rochester's writing—approaching two-thirds of his *œuvre* of satires, lyrics and squibs, play and two prose writings (Love 1999: 54–57, 112–17)—has not been so widely recognised.<sup>4</sup> For his contemporaries, Rochester's reputation lay as much as a lyric poet as a satirist: one-third of the poems, especially the lyrics (of which over two dozen survive, many simply entitled 'Song' in the manuscripts) were probably written for sung performance during Court entertainments rather than as abstract love poems,<sup>5</sup> and almost another third have either an overt London backdrop, or incorporate references to well-known members of London society. Rochester's

engagement with the world of the 'Metropolitan' outside the Court and the theatre, and its inspiration for some of his most remarkable poetry, has not hitherto been closely examined. This essay will survey Rochester's literary relationship with the city to show how his writing revealingly reflects the changing political, social and religious context of London during the Restoration Period.

## I

London, or 'the Towne', is specifically mentioned in sixteen of Rochester's eighty-two poems.<sup>6</sup> Almost entirely, these references are brief and serve simply to provide background colour and a shared environment with his society readership, as in the description of the 'brisk insipid Sparke / That Flutters in the Towne' ('To A Lady, in A Letter') or a rival poet being 'shun'd by every girl in Towne' (*On the supposed Author of a late Poem in defence of Satyr*); the reader is left to determine whether it is the metropolis, the fashionable part of the capital or the membership of either that is being referred to, but however interpreted, the use of the word 'Towne' is not emotionally loaded. Even so, in two of the poems—the long satires *A Letter from Artemiza in the Towne to Chloe in the Countrey* and *A Ramble in Saint James's Parke*—'the Towne' is more closely woven into the fabric of the composition and the allusion is critical to the satiric effect of the poems.

*Artemiza to Chloe* has long been recognised as probably Rochester's finest poem (Danielsson and Vieth 1967: 321; Sheehan 1980: 72; Fisher 1991: 337, 353). Although its eleven references to 'the Towne' are more extensive than in any of his other poems, no specific location within the capital is provided for the narrative; nevertheless the title alone raises the reader's expectation that the subject of the poem will be based on a pejorative contrast between the worldliness (or loss of innocence) of the town and the wholesomeness of the country. What is totally unexpected is the craftsmanship with which Rochester weaves together a Horatian detachment and self-effacement with a Juvenalian scourge of vice to create a superbly original work; in it he encompasses divergent but potentially valid perspectives, some or none of which he might endorse at the same time, thus giving the satire the typically 'idiosyncratic complexity of tone' that Jeremy Treglown (1982) has identified as one of the distinguishing features of Rochester's writing (76).

Rochester's contemporary and antiquary John Aubrey (1958) recorded that 'He was wont to say that when he came to Brentford the Devill entred into him and never left him till he came into the Country again' (321). The London depicted in *Artemiza to Chloe* is a cruel, unsympathetic and exploitative place in tune with this self-analysis, and a similarly inhuman environment to that Samuel Johnson would portray in his Juvenalian satire *London* in 1738. With irony and sharp observation, Rochester's female *persona* Artemiza breathlessly and engagingly propels the narrative downward as she describes a progress of love in the capital:

Y'expect att least, to heare, what Loves have past  
In this lewd Towne, synce you, and I mett last.  
What change has happen'd of Intrigue, and whether  
The Old ones last, and who, and who's together.

But how, my dearest Chloe, shall I sett  
My pen to write, what I would faine forgett,  
Or name that lost thing (Love) without a teare,  
Synce soe debauch'd by ill-bred Customes here?  
Love, the most gen'rous Passion of the mynde,  
The softest refuge Innocence can fynde . . . . (lines 32–41)

The themes of love, innocence and debauchery will be developed through the portrayal of the descent of woman from innocence to degeneracy in four women by turn—the artless and apparently innocent Chloe, the writer (the 'arrant' Artemiza), the 'fine lady' from the country, and lastly 'lost-Corinna'. Artemiza is already one step along that decline when she admits to making herself 'the Fiddle of the Towne' and, as a poet and a woman, being 'Pleas'd with the Contradiction, and the Sin' (lines 21, 30); the 'fine Lady' from the country shows a further stage in the descent, one 'who had turn'd o're / As many Bookes, as Men, lov'd much' and advocates that women should hide their 'frailtyes' from their lovers (lines 112,162–3); and the final stage of the downward spiral is revealed by 'That wretched thinge Corinna', who is 'Diseas'd, decay'd', 'scorn'd by all, forsaken and opprest . . . a Memento Mori to the rest' (lines 189, 200–203).

The sophistication of the poem is enhanced by the splicing into the narrative of various ironic perspectives. There is the primary incongruity of Artemiza and the other women speaking lines that have been penned by a male author, as, for example, when the 'fine lady' pronounces:

A Woman's ne're so ruyn'd, but she can  
Be still reveng'd on her undoer Man.  
How lost so e're, shee'l fynde some Lover more  
A lewde abandon'd Foole, then shee a whore. (lines 185–88)

Then as the narrative unfolds, it is unclear how innocent and unfamiliar with London Chloe really is, given that Artemiza evidently anticipates that she will understand her references to 'Bedlam' (line 17—Bethlehem Hospital comprised the London madhouse); the unattractive Sir Ralph Bovey (line 70); an unidentified woman named Foster and the comic actor James Nokes (line 183); and the prostitute Betty Morris (line 184). Might indeed Artemiza's purpose in her letter be to encourage Chloe to join her in order to participate in the seamy side of London life? And additionally, the tension between country innocence and town corruption is exploited both by the dishonourable 'fine Lady' from the country and by 'my young Masters Worship', the latter having a country estate, 'noe Witt, and a younge Wife' and foolishly 'Turnes Sparke' to willingly acquiesce in his ruin at the hands of Corinna (lines 210, 220, 223).

Part of the impact of this remarkable satire results from Rochester's careful endowment of 'the Towne' with the negative associations of corruption, debauchery, vice, intrigue, deception and exploitation, rather than with equally applicable positive associations of freedom, order, enterprise, intellectual stimulation, culture and sophistication. The word 'Towne' in the title is used neutrally, but from its first two appearances in the text—in the phrase 'the Fiddle of the Towne' (line 21, 'Fiddle' being glossed as 'whore') and 'lewd Towne' (line 33)—these negative associations underlie

the succeeding appearances of the word, until shortly before the end of the satire the 'lewd' quality of the town is for the last time re-emphasised in the phrase 'Vices of the Towne' (line 229). It is significant that in parallel with this, the word 'lewd' acts to reinforce the disreputable linkage of 'Towne' in its three further appearances: 'Some Fopp, or Other fond, to be thought lewd' (line 182), 'more / A lewde abandon'd Foole, then shee a whore' (lines 187–88) and 'Turnes Sparke, learns to be lewd, and is undone' (line 223). It is brilliant writing, and the satire ends with a superb shift of tone from tragedy to bathos, while once again the contrast between innocence and corruption is emphasised as the garrulous Artemiza promises more scandal in her next letter. The abrupt ending gives the impression that she has almost literally run out of breath:

By the next Post such storyes I will tell,  
As joynd with these shall to a Volume swell,  
As true, as Heaven, more infamous, then Hell:  
But you are tyr'd, and soe am I. Farewell. (lines 261–64)

The corruption inherent in London life is also the main component of the corrosive *A Ramble in St James's Parke*, with its violently contrasting language, tone, and tetrameter evident in the brutal aggression of the opening lines:

Much wine had past with grave discourse  
Of who F—cks who and who does worse,  
Such as you usually doe hear  
From those that diet at the *Beare*,  
When I who still take care to see  
Drunkenness Reliev'd by Leachery  
Went out into Saint James's Park  
To coole my head and fire my heart. (lines 1–8)

In the Restoration Period, the word 'ramble' could imply a search for sexual pleasure, and in *A Ramble* Rochester depicts a vicious scene far from his deliberate allusion to the rapt pastoral vision embodied by Edmund Waller in *A Poem on St. James's Park as lately Improv'd by His Majesty* (1661) (Patterson 1981: 209–10). Rochester's poem is as accomplished in its way as *Artemiza to Chloe*, but this time the narrative is firmly anchored in a specific part of London this time involving a male speaker, this 'satiric observation of a self-conscious libertine' (Griffin 1973: 26; Thormählen 1993: 100–102). Whereas the handful of local allusions in *Artemiza to Chloe* does not greatly detract from an outsider's enjoyment of that poem's wit and satire, this is not the case with *A Ramble*, which relies for its effect on an extensive local knowledge and awareness. The reference to 'the *Beare*' is likely to relate to the noted eating house in Bear Yard near Drury Lane called 'The Bear and Harrow' (although possibly the famous tavern at the Southwark end of old London Bridge near the Bear Garden), but there is no doubt about the location of St. James's Park. This area, bordering Whitehall Palace, had originally been enclosed by Henry VIII for the purpose of hunting, but early in his reign Charles II had opened it to the public, by this action turning it into a popular place of recreation and, during the hours of darkness, assignation.

Rochester certainly expects (and needs) the reader of the poem to be familiar with the unsavoury reputation of the park, and to understand the density of his allusion. The trees in the park witness regular scenes of debauchery in which, reflecting no credit on 'the Towne', all strata of its society are represented, even to the extent that both higher and lower class prostitutes are distinguished.

. . . nightly now beneath their shade  
Are Buggeries, rapes, and Incests made:  
Unto this all-sin-sheltring Grove  
Whores of the Bulk, and the Alcove,  
Great Ladies, Chamber Mayds, and Drudges,  
The Ragg picker, and Heiress Trudges  
Carrmen, Divines, Great Lords, and Taylors,  
Prentices, Poets, Pimps, and Gaolers  
Footmen, Fine Fopps, doe here arrive,  
And here promiscuously they sw—ve. (lines 23–32)

Elsewhere, Rochester adds local colour with his reference to Gray's Inn (line 63—one of the four Inns of Court where lawyers were trained) and 'Banstead Mutton' (line 50—mutton from Banstead Downs in Surrey), along with three references to Court officials: the 'Mother of the Mayds' (line 46—a member of the Queen's household who looked after the Maids of Honour), 'waiters' (line 48—high status individuals who formed part of the King's retinue) and Sir Edward Sutton (line 49—a Gentleman Usher of the Privy Chamber, with consequent access to the King).

The satire is a superb depiction of the savagery of sexual jealousy prompted by the speaker witnessing his mistress Corinna betraying him through her entertainment of 'Three Confounded Asses . . . Who most obsequiously doe hunt / The savory scent of salt swoln C—t' (lines 81, 85–86). In writing that brilliantly depicts a lover as only just able to keep control of his extreme emotions and remain coherent, the speaker almost screams at Corinna:

Did ever I refuse to bear  
The meanest part your Lust coul'd spare?  
When your lewd C—t came spewing home  
Drench't with the seed of halfe the Town,  
My dram of sperm was sup't up after  
For the digestive surfeit water.  
Full gorged at another time  
With a vast meal of nasty slime,  
Which your devouring C—t had drawn  
From *Porters Backs* and *Footmens* brawn,  
I was Content to serve you up  
My Ballock full for your Grace cupp. (lines 111–22)

The outrageous exaggeration of the thought (would a lover *really* be willing and content to rationalise sharing his mistress with others?), accompanied by the vigour of the expressions, produce a richly comic scene in which the town is shown to be a full participant. The same features continue in the closing lines of the satire, which

contain the speaker's curse in the other poem's mention of 'Town', as he makes the preposterous suggestion that Corinna could, in the sordid circumstances described earlier, be guilty of profanity:

I'le make her feel my scorn and hate,  
Pelt her with scandalls, Truth or lies,  
And her poor *Curr* with Jealousies  
Till I have torn him from her Breech  
While she whines like a Dogg-drawn Bitch,  
Loath'd, and despis'd, Kickt' out o'th Town  
Into some dirty Hole alone  
To chew the Cudd of Misery,  
And know she owes it all to Mee.

And may no *Woman* better thrive  
That dares prophane the C—t I sw—ve. (lines 156–66)

While Corinna and her namesake in *Artemiza to Chloe* are unattractive figures—and each is similarly condemned in one way or another to lie in a dark or dirty hole — Rochester skilfully manipulates his reader's response to enable both women to attract some sympathy from the reader for seeking to survive through making the most of their sexual attractiveness. The contrasting styles Rochester adopts in these two major poems from the models provided by Horace's epistolary style and Juvenal's satires respectively, however, serve to emphasise the range of inspiration for his writing that he found in the concept of 'the Towne'.

Other aspects of 'this lewd Towne' which add to the remarkable vitality of Rochester's writing include both places and individuals. The extent to which other parts of the capital reveal Rochester's engagement with his environment is evidenced in 12 poems (six of which have not been noted earlier) and the two prose writings. The references are surprisingly numerous, and include an anonymous tap room in a London alley off Fleet Street (*Mistress Knights Advice to the Dutchess of Cleavland in Distress for a Prick*, line 5); Covent Garden (in line 62 of the epilogue to Francis Fane's play *Love in the Dark*); 'Smithfield's wondrous fair' (i.e., Bartholomew Fair) in *Epigram upon my Lord All-pride*, line 23; The Houses of Parliament ('Too longe the Wise Commons have been in debate' and *A Satyre against Reason and Mankind*, line 120). In Alexander Bendo's prose brochure there is mention of the Exchange (Love 1999: 113).

The list of individuals mentioned who were well known to Court and London society is led, of course, by the 'easiest King and best bred Man alive' ('In the Isle of Brittain long since famous growne', line 4) and continues with his mistresses Nell Gwyn, the Duchess of Mazarin, the Duchess of Portsmouth and Mary King (*Dialogue. L:R*, lines 3, 4, 7, 10); the courtiers Henry Bulkeley (Master of the Household; see *Allusion to Horace*, line 112), the Comte de Gramont (*Dialogue. L:R*, line 16), the Earl of Mulgrave (*A very Heroicall Epistle In answer to Ephelia*, line 53), Sir Carr Scroope (*Allusion to Horace*, line 115) and George Porter (Groom of the Bedchamber; see *Dialogue. L:R*, line 11); the poets and playwrights Buckingham, Butler, Cowley, Crowne, the Earl of Dorset, Dryden, Etherege, Flatman, Godolphin, Otway, Shadwell, Sedley, Settle, Shepherd, Waller and Wycherley (*Allusion to Horace*, passim); actors

Joseph Haines and Michael Mohun (epilogue to Francis Fane's play *Love in the Dark*, heading and line 35) and actress Jane Long (*Dialogue. L:R*, line 12); the prostitutes Betty Morrice (*Allusion to Horace*, line 111) and 'Mother' Moseley (*Timon. A Satyr*, line 77); and the headmaster of Westminster School, Richard Busby (*Allusion to Horace*, line 40) (Walker and Fisher 2010: 64, 65, 86, 98–102, 103, 116, 151).

A final illustration of the impact of the environment of London on Rochester's poetry is provided by his creative response to time spent in the out-of-town society playgrounds of Bath and Tunbridge Wells: both venues provided him with the opportunity or inspiration, and even both, for composition.<sup>7</sup> During the summer of 1674, for example, Rochester was in Bath, forming part of the retinue accompanying the Duchess of Portsmouth while she was taking the waters there. It seems that his poem *A Pastoral Dialogue between Alexis and Strephon, Written by the Right Honourable, The Late Earl of Rochester, At the Bath, 1674* was written for the entertainment of the duchess, who at the time was the leading mistress of Charles II. The verses comprise a polished, artificial conversation between two shepherds concerning the appropriate response to unrequited love (implicitly for the duchess), in which Strephon (representing Rochester) rebukes his companion for being willing to seek 'just Compassion' (line 38) rather than being determined either to 'Blest . . . expire' in her arms 'Or at her Feet despair' (lines 69–70). In *Observacions on Tunbridge Wells*<sup>8</sup> Rochester describes all levels of society attending for the waters or merely for pleasure: 'Lords, Knights, Squires, ladyes, and Countesses / Channdlers, Mum Bacon women, Semptressess' / Were mixt together' (lines 94-96), which lead him to his satiric conclusion (anticipating *A Satyre against Reason and Mankind*),

Bless me thought I what thing is man that thus  
In all his shapes he is rediculous?  
Our selves with noise of reason wee do please  
In vaine; Humanity's our worst desease.  
Thrice happy beasts are, who because they be  
of reason void, are so of Foppery. (lines 178–83)

'Humanity's our worst desease' could be an apt summary of the theme that underlies all Rochester's writing.

## II

Just as 'the Towne' had an influence on Rochester's writing, so Rochester had an impact on the wider London society. He was an active supporter of dramatists, contributing a prologue to Elkanah Settle's *The Empress of Morocco* (1673) and epilogues for Francis Fane's *Love in the Dark* (1675) and Charles D'Avenant's *Circe* (1677). The playwright John Crowne dedicated to him *The History of Charles VIII of France* (1672), as did Dryden, the greatest literary figure of the Age, his *Marriage à-la-Mode* (1673) and Nathanael Lee his *Nero* (1674). Rochester also unexpectedly obtained for Crowne, rather than for the poet laureate, Dryden, the prestigious commission to write for performance at Court the masque *Calisto, or The Chaste*

*Nymph*; performed in 1675 by members of the Royal Family, courtiers and members of the aristocracy in the Old Hall theatre, it is memorable for the fact that no other play during the Restoration 'was produced so magnificently and so successfully' (Boswell 1966: 178; Crowne 1675: a1<sup>r</sup>). In addition, Rochester was the model for the character of Dorimant in his friend George Etherege's major theatrical success *The Man of Mode* (1676) and, as noted earlier, he revised John Fletcher's play *The Tragedie of Valentinian* (Fisher 2009).

Rochester was frequently the subject of both credulous and incredulous gossip, no more scandalised a chronicler than the diarist Samuel Pepys. He noted first 'my Lord of Rochester's running away . . . with Mrs. Mallet, the great beauty and fortune of the North' (*recte*, West) while she was a minor, 'and the King mighty angry and the Lord sent to the Tower', being 'now declaredly out of hopes' of her (28 May, 6 June 1665); but eighteen months later Elizabeth Malet had finally 'after all this ado married him' (4 February 1667). The following year Pepys recorded a 'silly discourse of the King' about Rochester having had his clothes stolen while he was with a prostitute and later found 'stuffed into a feather-bed' (2 December 1668) and then early in 1669, an incident that particularly damaged the reputation of the King and would have international repercussions:

among the rest of the King's company . . . was that worthy fellow my Lord of Rochester and T. Killigrew, whose mirth and raillery offended the former so much, that he did give T. Killigrew a box on the ear in the King's presence; which doth much give offence to the people here at Court, to see how cheap the King makes himself, and the more for that the King hath not only passed by the thing and pardoned it to Rochester already, but this very morning the King did publicly walk up and down, and Rochester I saw with him, as free as ever, to the King's everlasting shame to have so idle a rogue his companion. (17 February 1669)

This episode aroused widespread condemnation at home and abroad, but a defence of the King's behaviour would be that he judged that Killigrew had been inappropriately offensive to Rochester. Nonetheless protocol had been flouted, and in consequence the King of France refused to allow Rochester to be presented to him at his Court a few months later (Johnson 2004: 114). Other reporters include the London bookseller John Starkey, Sir Ralph Verney, John Aubrey, Christopher Hatton, Andrew Marvell and Gilbert Burnet (the latter basing his account on Rochester's own testimony).

Interestingly, a further scandal involving Rochester has only recently been discovered in a newsletter written by Starkey, whose premises in Fleet Street operated as a centre for gathering and circulating news. In a manuscript dated 29 January 1670, he reports (and his crossing out of a subsequent emendation written above the line suggests a keenness to be accurate):

The Lord Rochester hath kild ~~or almost kild~~ [sic] a waterman only for saying to another as the Lord past by, that he was a very handsome man, who hearing it, turnd back and swore who made him Judge of beauty, and gaue the fellow a box on the eare, who seeming unwilling to take it, the Lord drew his sword and run him through. (Kelliher 2014: 119–20)

Given the presumption hitherto that Rochester was in the country at the time, coupled with the absence of supporting evidence for this allegation (which would surely have been expected, despite Pepys having by then discontinued his diary), this is probably a case of mistaken identity, but it is significant that Starkey felt that the allegation was entirely credible.

In contrast, there is no doubt about the accuracy of John Aubrey's record of Rochester's involvement in the destruction of the great glass sundial in the Privy Garden of Whitehall Palace. This occurred on 25 June 1675, when Rochester, along with the Earl of Dorset (then Lord Buckhurst), Fleetwood Shepherd and some other drunken courtiers were passing by after a convivial evening in the King's apartments (1958: xcv). The political significance of this was enormous, because the dial incorporated glass portraits of the King, Queen, Duke of York, Queen Mother and Prince Rupert, and destroying their images equated to a treasonous assault on their persons. Unsurprisingly, the King was outraged, and Rochester chose to absent himself from Court yet again in order to allow the King's inevitable fury time to abate.

Nor was this all. Almost exactly a year later, having regained the King's favour, Rochester was in Epsom for the mid-June races. Late at night on Saturday, 17 June, he with Sir George Etherege, Captain Billy Downs and some other companions were participants in a drunken brawl in which the constable and an armed night-watch became involved. Rochester drew his sword on the constable; Downs seized Rochester to prevent further trouble, but was himself tackled by the watch, and while Rochester and the others ran away, he received injuries to his head and side from which he died a few days later. These 'fatal midnight frolicks', as Sir Carr Scroope witheringly described the episode in his lampoon 'In defence of Satyr' (line 52), brought discredit and public disapprobation upon Rochester more than any other action by him, provoking censure from the Earl of Mulgrave, Andrew Marvell, and Christopher Hatton (Walker & Fisher 2010: 118, 124; Johnson 2004: 250).

It is likely that it was during his ensuing disgrace at Court during that summer that he

disguised himself, so that his nearest Friends could not have known him, and set up in *Tower-street* for an *Italian Mountebank*, where he had a Stage, and practised Physick for some Weeks not without success. (Burnet 1680: 27; see Love 1999: 439)

At the end of his stay, Rochester absconded from his 'Lodgings in *Tower-Street*, next door to the sign of the *Black Swan*, at a *Goldsmith's House*' (Rochester 1691: 154) without settling the rent (Love 1999: 440) so it is questionable how much Rochester would have wanted to publicise this charade and lay himself open to claims for payment after he was accepted back at Court. Even if his friends were not actually aware of this specific episode, however, it would seem that they would have known that he regularly adopted disguise, for Burnet continues:

He took pleasure to disguise himself, as a *Porter*, or as a *Beggar*; sometimes to follow some mean Amours, which, for the variety of them, he affected; At other times, meerly for diversion, he would go about in odd shapes, in which he acted his part so naturally, that even those who were on the secret, and saw him in

these shapes, could perceive nothing by which he might be discovered. (Burnet 1680: 27–28)

In a variety of ways, therefore, Rochester's engagement with 'the Towne' from his arrival at Court until shortly before his death was a regular source of entertainment, speculation and comment for residents and visitors alike.

### III

The decade and a half during which Rochester spent much of his time in London—at the centre of town, theatre and Court life—coincided with the middle period of Charles II's 25 year reign. Major political, social and cultural changes were in progress, and illuminating a larger canvas, Rochester uniquely and with enormous vitality conveys the inherent tensions experienced in the course of living through a time of such significant upheaval.

The most far-reaching change that was played out during Rochester's lifetime was the evolvment of the way political influence was exercised. For the first half of his reign, Charles II was widely believed to be unduly influenced by the Court wits and other 'atheists' and 'libertines', that is, by courtiers largely without a shared and focused political agenda (Turner 1985; 2002).<sup>9</sup> It was against these men that Burnet, in the final pages of his remarkable biography of Rochester in 1680, launched a virulent personal attack against their pernicious influence on society:

Such Persons are a Plague where ever they come; they can neither be trusted nor beloved, having cast off both Truth and Goodness, which procure Confidence and attract Love: they corrupt some by their ill Practices, and do irreparable Injuries to the rest; they run great Hazards, and put themselves to much trouble, and all this to do what is in their power to make Damnation as sure to themselves as possibly they can. What Influence this has on the whole Nation is but too visible; How the Bonds of Nature, Wedlock, and all other Relations are quite broken. Vertue is thought an Antick Piece of Formality, and Religion the effect of Cowardise or Knavery: These are the Men that would Reform the World, by bringing it under a new System of Intellectual and Moral Principles, but bate them a few bold and lewd Jests, what have they ever done, or designed to do, to make them be remembered, except it be with detestation? They are the Scorn of the present Age, and their Names must rot in the next. (Burnet 1680: 170–71)

Strong as the language is, and no doubt sincerely expressed, Burnet was mistaking the surface for the substance, for in reality, the ascendancy of those rakehells had by then firmly declined. While in terms of visibility, the wits and libertines, probably displaying the damaging physical effects of syphilis, still flocked around Charles II, the earlier political influence of such court wits as Rochester, the Duke of Buckingham, the Earl of Dorset and Sir Charles Sedley had already long evaporated (even though the Earl of Dorset would resurface as William and Mary's Lord Chamberlain). Their influence had effectively passed when the Cabal collapsed in 1674 and Buckingham was dismissed from his court position: the real influence was in part exercised by the King's mistresses (perhaps politically to a degree, as the Duchess of Cleveland was

perceived as wielding, but without doubt indirectly through the financial demands they made of the privy purse) and overtly by the Earls of Arlington, Danby and Shaftesbury. These ministers drew at various stages on the sense of corporacy of one or other of the two shifting groupings of writers and other courtiers surrounding, on the one hand, Dryden and the Earl of Mulgrave, and on the other, the Duke of Buckingham, the Earl of Dorset and Rochester himself. During the 1670s, these groups were developing a more obviously political character that would lead to the emergence of a two-party political system—country versus Court, Whig versus Tory—that has continued and underpins the modern Parliament (Ogg 1967: 527-27).

These political developments lie behind Rochester's most infamous satire that begins 'In the Isle of Brittain long since famous growne / For breeding the best C—ts in Christendome'. It touched nerves both inside Court and elsewhere: after he had by mistake handed a copy to the King during the Christmas celebrations of 1673, Rochester was forced to flee the Court, and it became one of the most widely and rapidly circulated of all his poems (its presence in a manuscript miscellany compiled by the courtier Sir William Haward strongly suggests a distribution originating in the Great Withdrawing Room). Arguably more than in any of Rochester's poems, this biting, coruscating satire on the King both reflects national concerns and also evokes the intensity of life at Court;<sup>10</sup> perhaps Rochester was simply too close to the King, and knew him too well to be able to respect him, but the distilled savagery of these lines remains shocking:

The easiest King and best bred Man alive  
Him no Ambition mov'd to get Renowne  
Like a French Foole still wandring up and downe  
Starving his People, hazarding his Crowne . . .  
His Scepter and his Prick were of a length,  
And she may Sway the one who plays with t'other.  
Which makes him little wiser then his Brother . . .  
Restlesse he Rowles about from Whore to Whore  
With Dogg and Bastard, always goeing before  
A merry Monarch, scandalous and poore. . .

I hate all Monarchs and the Thrones that they sitt on  
From the Hector of France to th' Cully of Brittain.  
(lines 4-7, 11-13, 20-22, 33-34)

Through the ferocity of that portrayal of Charles II is communicated much of the public reputation of the King and the rumbling political concerns that were circulating in London at the time: the King's famous easy going nature and laziness; his excessive and prodigious sexual appetite; his thralldom to mistresses to whom he diverted enormous amounts of money (especially Barbara Villiers, Duchess of Cleveland and Louise de K rouaille [Carwell], Duchess of Portsmouth) and, Nell Gwyn excepted, who were widely suspected of exercising political power; the doubts concerning the Duke of York's fitness to rule; the King's numerous bastard children sired by a variety of partners; and, finally, anxieties concerning the intentions towards England, and influence over the King, of the autocratic Catholic King Louis XIV of France.

Nevertheless, although the shape of politics was changing during his reign, and despite the frequent frustration of his wishes by Parliament, King Charles exercised not only a political power but a cultural influence that would be unavailable to his successors. It was his aesthetic taste, especially in relation to the theatre and music, that was adopted by the Court and the capital. He re-opened the theatres after the Commonwealth, allowed the employment of women actors and supported the creation of the King's Company in a new theatre, built in the fashionable part of London, the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane. His creation at Court of an orchestra of twenty-four violins, mimicking the ensemble of *Les Vingt-quatre Violons du Roi* that King Charles had encountered at the French Court during his exile, led to the demise of the viol as the string instrument of choice. When James II ascended the throne, he revealed his political naivety (or intransigence) and a lesser enthusiasm than his brother's for the theatre and music; after his abdication, Parliament chose not to grant to William and Mary the authority they had allowed Charles and his brother. William III evidenced little interest in the Arts, least of all music, and in consequence, within less than a decade of Charles II's death, the political and cultural centre of the country had moved away from the Court to 'the Towne', not unassisted, perhaps, by the proliferation of coffee houses as respectable public meeting places. From the 1660s, Will's Coffee House in Covent Garden, for example, had attracted the Court wits, including Rochester, and was facilitating the distribution of satires and squibs; as the century progressed, similar establishments gained reputations as sources of libels and centres of radical thinking (Treglown 1980:164; Spurr 2000: 174–77).

There was also unease within the national Church about the impact or influence on it of the 'Church of Rome' and Nonconformism.<sup>11</sup> Concern was resulting from the suspected Roman Catholicism of King Charles, and the professed adherence of the Duke of York, which would lead in due course to the Glorious Revolution. In addition, there was continuing friction between members of the Church of England and non-conformists; despite the passage between 1661 and 1665 of the punitive legislation known (unfairly) as the 'Clarendon Code', Pepys observed successively 'the Nonconformists are mighty high and their meetings frequented and connived at; and they do expect to have their day now soon' (21 December, 1667); 'the nonconformists . . . will get the upperhand in a little time' (23 December, 1668); and 'the Bishops must certainly fall, and their Hierarchy; these people have got so much ground upon the King and Kingdom as is not to be got again from them' (16 March, 1669).

For Rochester, his relationship with 'the Towne' was essentially symbiotic: he responded to the capital and in turn he helped to define London: it should come as no surprise, then, that after the King and perhaps Nell Gwyn and Samuel Pepys, Rochester is today the person most associated in the public mind with Restoration London. In his portrayal of the capital during the reign of Charles II, Rochester has left us one of its most vivid contemporary portrayals, in contrast to the more measured depictions of the diarists Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn. Without his experience of 'the Towne', Rochester could not have developed the singularity of his poetic voice – without Rochester, 'like a comet . . . wonder'd at', London and English poetry would be deprived of one of its most distinctive adornments.

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## Notes

1. Both Pepys and Evelyn had first seen the comet around 22<sup>nd</sup> November, and it was last seen on 10 March (Latham and Matthews 1970–83: 5. 346).
2. The quotation is from Shakespeare's *King Henry IV Part I*, III.ii.47, ed. by Wells and Taylor 1986; and see Andrew Fix 2003: 157.
3. The phrase (with 'Commet' in the plural) is used by Rochester in 'The Discovery', l. 12 (Walker and Fisher 2010: 7). Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are taken from the edition of Keith Walker and Nicholas Fisher.
4. In the introduction to the most recent edition of Rochester's poems, for example, specific headings are provided for exploration of his engagement with the locales of the Court and the theatre, but his association with the capital at large is denied similar attention (Davis, xvii–xxix).
5. Harold Love (1996) also suggests that Rochester may have kept a *liber carminum* for use of musicians (161–80, 165, 177).
6. *An Allusion to Horace*, ll. 6,118; *Epigram upon my Lord All-pride*, l. 25; *An Epistolary Essay Very delightful and Sollid from M:G: to O:B: Upon their mutuall Poems*, l.1.; 'How happy Chloris, were they free', l. 10; 'How perfect Cloris, and how free', l. 10; *The Imperfect Enjoyment*, l. 63; *A Letter from Artemiza in the Towne to Chloe in the Countrey*, title, ll. 21,33, 77 ('London'),98,178,184 ('Citty'),194,210,222, 229; *Mistress Knights Advice to the Dutchess of Cleavland, in Distress for a Prick*, l. 5 ('London'); *On Mrs. W–llis*, l. 13; *On the supposed Author of a late Poem in defence of Satyr*, l. 22; *A Ramble in Saint James's Parke*, ll. 114,161; 'Such perfect Blisse faire Chloris, wee', l.18; *Timon. A Satyr*, l. 29 (a less secure attribution); *To A Lady, in A Letter*, l. 18; *To His Sacred Majesty*, ll. 5 ('London'), 6 ('Metropolis'); 'What vaine unnecessary things are men', l. 35 (Walker and Fisher 2010: 1, 10, 21, 24, 26, 44, 61, 68, 70, 71, 73, 74, 75, 77, 85, 98, 102, 117, 119, 126, 152). See also the first page of *Alexander Bendo's brochure* ('Metropolis') (Love 1999: 54,112). The discussion in this essay of Rochester's engagement with London deliberately excludes evidence from his letters, because they were published nearly two decades after his death.
7. Newmarket, too, where the King regularly attended the races, inspired an especially playful and witty letter from Rochester to his wife (Treglown 1980: 50.)
8. While this poem is normally attributed to Rochester, it is possible that it was co-authored with his close friend Henry Savile.
9. The words 'atheist' and 'libertine' were slippery terms throughout the seventeenth century, frequently applied as a general term of abuse. See Fisher 2013: 167–68, nn. 3 and 4; Turner 1985: 75, 77–79; Turner 2002: x–xii).
10. Writing from his country estate in Oxfordshire to Harry Savile, Rochester refers to the country as being the place 'where only one can think, for you att Court thinke not att all or att least as if you were shutt up in a Drumme, [where] you can thinke of nothing but the noise is made about you' (Treglown 1980: 93).

11. A flavour may be detected, for example, in Rochester's comments in a letter to Henry Savile relating to the Popish Plot and Savile's 'high Protestantcy' while serving as Ambassador in Paris (Treglown 1980: 226).

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### **Note on Contributor**

**Nicholas Fisher**, Associate Fellow at the Institute of English Studies, University of London, has written extensively about the impact of Rochester in his lifetime and subsequently. A contributor to the recent collection of essays *Lord Rochester in the Restoration World* (2015), he edited *That Second Bottle: Essays on the Earl of Rochester* (2000) and revised Keith Walker's 1984 edition of the poems as *John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester: The Poems and Lucina's Rape* (2010). An expanded version of the performing edition of settings of Rochester's poetry that he produced with Steven Devine will be published shortly as *Singing to Phillis*.

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