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A Very Hopeful Youth

1647–1664

To begin at the end: the manor house in Woodstock Park in Oxfordshire, at the end of July, 1680: an old lady, with strong but anguished features, dressed in black. Despite the summer heat a great fire is blazing, as she throws on it, with occasional cries of disgust, sheaves of paper – letters, lyric poems, satires, lampoons, memoirs, philosophical speculations, erotic drawings, a scandalous *History of the Intrigues of the court of Charles II* – all the imaginings of a brief, gaudy life, now reduced to smoke and fluttering ashes. They constitute the intellectual remains of her last son, John Wilmot, second Earl of Rochester, dead, aged only 33, of the combined effects of syphilis, gonorrhoea and alcoholism. In his last days, his ‘confessor’, the Revd Gilbert Burnet, who had helped bring about Rochester’s spectacular repentance and conversion, writes, ‘the agonies of his mind sometimes swallowed up the sense of what he felt in his body’, as the terror of divine judgement combined with the dreadful agonies of his rotting body. In his desperation, he had asked for his indecent writings to be destroyed, and his mother was anxious to protect his reputation as far as possible.

To some extent, it was too late: everyone – all London – knew of his scandalous life: the extravagant behaviour, the professed atheism, the excessive drinking, the reckless sexual promiscuity. Some made the most of that, so, unfortunately, further blackening his reputation in order more to emphasise the ‘miracle’ of his death-bed repentance (so Samuel Holland: ‘The mighty Rochester a Convert dies, / He fell a Poet, but a Saint shall rise.’); others sought to profit from it by publishing ever more indecent writings attributed to him – as William Empson later wrote, ‘Any obscene poem would be ascribed to

him, like a proverb to Solomon. His extraordinary legend, dubious at best, has lived on, unstoppably. Dr Johnson, his polar opposite (overbearing, moralistic, sexually inhibited, middle-class, Tory), thundered (as the cliché has it) in his *Lives of the Poets* how ‘with an aroused contempt for all decency and order, a total disregard to every moral, and a resolute denial of every religious obligation, he lived worthless and useless, and blazed out his youth and his health in lavish voluptuousness, till, at the age of one and thirty, he had exhausted the fund of life, and reduced himself to a state of weakness and decay.’ One could expect little less from Johnson; a recent successor, the popular film reviewer, Barry Norman, is equally trenchant, writing of Rochester’s portrayal in the film, *The Libertine*: ‘A degenerate is what he was; a philandering, sexually voracious whoremonger, verbally abusive and the author of obscene poetry.’

If that is all Rochester was, he would be worth no more than a few paragraphs in some prurient popular history of the Court of Charles II. Others, however, have thought differently. In 1678, the satirist Samuel Butler wrote in *The Court Bursqued* :

This noble Peer, so famed for writing
 Satires, so bawdy and so biting,
 Who for lampooning Church and Crown
 Usurps the Bays from all the town,
 May boast himself, we must allow it,
 Lord, atheist, mountebank and poet,
 Rake, coward, libertine, but yet
 A man of learning and of wit.

Also among his contemporaries, the poet Andrew Marvell thought he was ‘the only man in England that had the true vein of satire’; the woman dramatist Aphra Behn called him ‘a Genius as sublime / As ever flourished in Rome’s happiest time’; the dramatist Nathanael Lee called him ‘the spirit of wit’; Robert Wolseley, a minor poet, praised him as a ‘useful person’ for his ‘consistent good sense ... the reach and compass of his invention ... the wonderful depth of his retired thoughts.’ One might not expect the Romantics to care for him, but William Hazlitt did well enough by him in his *Lectures on English Poets*: ‘Rochester’s poetry is the poetry of wit combined with the love of pleasure, of thought with licentiousness. His extravagant heedless levity has a sort of passionate enthusiasm in it; his contempt for everything that others respect, almost amounts to sublimity.’ Early in the last century, Ezra Pound, in the *ABC of Reading*, wrote, ‘There is nothing as good as Rochester, even when he is not writing lyrics, until ... ? (Let the student determine when).’ Insisting that Rochester, unlike most of his contemporaries, does not ‘date’, he continues, ‘Rochester is London 1914. Not only by the modernity of his language but by his whole disposition or ... “point of view.”’ From Graham



Portrait of Lord Wilmot, Second Earl of Rochester, by Sir Peter Lely.

Greene (who wrote his biography) onwards, more and more modern readers have come to see him as the most brilliant, witty, insightful and powerful poet of his time, limited only by the cruel brevity of his career, with particular interest and relevance for our own unstable ‘gaudy world’ (to use his phrase).

In coming to his poetry, one needs to see it – as with all poetry, especially of the past – in its proper context: his culture, and other writers of his time. Rochester was one of ‘the mob of gentlemen who wrote with ease’ (in Alexander Pope’s phrase) at Charles II’s court; one of a coterie of aristocratic ‘holiday writers’ as Pope called them, including Sir Charles Sedley, Charles Sackville, Earl of Dorset, John Sheffield, Earl of Mulgrave and George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham. Men of the court writing for the court about the court and its hangers-on, who

could be bawdy too, and nick the times
 In what they dearly love, damned placket-rhymes,
 Such as our nobles write —

as John Oldham remarked. Writing for an initially familiar readership enabled an easiness of reference and tone, ranging from an indeed courtly refinement to insouciance, humour and direct colloquiality, down to coarse vulgarity. Perched on top of the social tree, they indulged a fashion of using such language as evidence of their freedom from the inhibitions and restraints of more middle-class, professional writers for the general public. Oldham, in his ‘Satire concerning Poetry’, points out the difference between wealthy amateurs and professionals, and the consequences:

Sedley indeed may be content with fame
 Nor care should an ill-judging audience damn,
 But Settle, and the rest that write for pence,
 Whose whole estate’s an ounce or two of brains,
 Should a thin house on the third day appear, [at the theatre]
 Must starve, or live in tatters all the year.

Likewise, when writing about libertine courtiers, such as Rochester, in their style, he felt he should apologise, explaining that his Muse

When she a Hector for her object had,
 She thought she must be termagant and mad;
 That made her speak like a lewd punk o’th’Town,
 Who, by converse with bullies wicked grown,
 Has learnt the mode....

Rochester’s intermittent obscene language was matched and overgone on occasion by others, such as Robert Gould and Oldham; its purpose was not to titillate, as his enemy Mulgrave supposed, nor to restore ‘tenderness’ to the words, like D.H. Lawrence, for whom ‘a proper reverence for sex ... means being able to use the so-called obscene words’ (the publication of whose *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* eventually made possible the modern printing of unexpurgated editions of Rochester), nor casual coarseness, so common nowadays. Often, it was set against conventionally poetic language to provide a contrast, to insist on an increasingly reductive view of sexual relationships, a ‘tell it like it is’ sentiment shared by others — an anonymous contemporary wrote, how Priapus (the phallic god) is

the beginning and end of our wooing;
 Your smiles, and your ogles, and alluring grimaces,
 They all do but end in feeling and doing.

As he wrote in a letter to his friend, Henry Savile, ‘Expressions must descend to the nature of things expressed.’ It is worth pointing out that Rochester did not write pornography, in the sense of writing intended to excite sexually (though the word literally means, writing about whores, which of course he did), and relatively little bawdy (cheerily comical about sex). Often coarse, even brutally so, often charming and elegant, frequently cynical, a sceptical exposé of cant, a master of irony and indirection, and at his best, subtle and exploratory of complex feelings of moral uncertainty and inadequacy in sex, love and life. He seems to have felt, with Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1651), that ‘there is no such thing as perpetual tranquillity of mind while we live here, because life itself is but motion, and can never be without desire, nor without fear, no more than without sense.’ More than once there is the suggestion that sexual love, his recurrent topic, was, like human relationships generally, at times supremely important, and yet desperately inadequate and unfulfilling; his almost frenetic activity belied a deeper desire for (impossible?) truth, security and stability. Rather than remembered as ‘our great bawdy poet’, as a contemporary described him, perhaps he should be thought of as the poet of insecurity.

Especially in a biography, it is worth remembering that the speaker in a poem is not simply equivalent to the writer, nor the situation evoked a record of actual events: rather, both are creations (it was his practice to invent personae to express attitudes that he could present and entertain and also distance himself from). Conversely, both grow out of the writer’s experience. As William Empson wrote, 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.’ This book is intended to provide a wider readership a more nuanced and helpful account of a complex and demanding character and writer, who is worth understanding and knowing better. Spelling and punctuation have been modernised as seemed appropriate.

So, to go back to the beginning — or even just before: his parents, one important for her persistent and determined presence, the other for his absence. For both, it was a second marriage, a not uncommon experience in those times of shortish life expectations, and one probably more for convenience than romance. His mother, Anne, the daughter of Sir John St John of Lydiard Tregoze, in Wiltshire, first married, in 1632, Sir Francis Lee of Ditchley in Oxfordshire, by whom she had a daughter and two sons. Though her family had Puritan sympathies and Parliamentary connexions, as did Sir Francis’s mother and stepfather, Anne and Sir Francis were both Royalist supporters; after his death from smallpox in 1639, she supplied arms to the Royalists for the battle of Edgehill, and later hid her kinsman Edward Hyde (the future Lord Clarendon) at Ditchley. Henry Wilmot of Adderbury in Oxfordshire was born

in 1613, the year before Anne; his first wife, by whom he had a son, Charles, died in 1632. A second son, he unexpectedly succeeded as heir to his father's title of Viscount Athlone in that year. A brave, hard-drinking cavalry officer, he fought for the King at Breda; Newcastle, where he was wounded and captured; Edgehill (October, 1642); and Cropredy Bridge, where he was wounded twice, captured and eventually rescued by Sir Robert Howard, who would later be helpful to his son. Clarendon described him as 'a companionable wit ... [who] swayed more among the good fellows ... [and] loved debauchery [drink], but ... rarely miscarried it.' Some of John's characteristics seem to have been inherited, despite his pious mother's care. In 1644, Henry was made Baron Wilmot of Adderbury and succeeded as second Viscount Wilmot of Athlone, and in spring of that year married Anne, but was almost immediately sent to France and the Court-in-exile. Nevertheless, he made return visits, and on April Fool's Day (perhaps appropriately for her mocking son), 1647, Anne gave birth to John, at the age of 33. As her last, and – for those days – rather late child, he would have had her special attention as the baby of the family — and his father's heir (Freud wrote that 'the youngest son ... protected by his mother's love, could ... replace [his father] after his death.').

At Charles II's court in exile, Henry was made Gentleman of the Bedchamber and Privy Councillor, and fought again at Worcester in 1651. After this débâcle, he accompanied Charles in his escape. While Charles was in disguise as a servant, his face blackened, and suffering agonies in shoes that were too small for him, Henry declined to wear any disguise, on the grounds that he would 'look frightfully in it', as the King reported, and even rode with a hunting hawk on his wrist. At least he did not look like someone skulking about trying to avoid notice. After various adventures and misadventures, he was successful in using his contacts as Charles's principal cavalry officer in organising their escape, and got them to the coast, at Shoreham, when, in October 1651, they sailed off for France in the brig *Surprise*. In December, 1652, he was created Earl of Rochester.

In 1654, Anne and her children went over to join him in France at the Court of Henrietta Maria, but it is not clear that they saw much of Henry, who was busy in Germany, trying to raise money and support for Charles; eventually, she gave up and came back. Soon she was busy herself, arguing against the Parliamentary Committee seeking sequestration of Royalist supporters' property, using considerable legal ingenuity and sophistry, and her Puritan and Parliamentary relatives, eventually saving the Ditchley estate and some of that at Adderbury. In 1655, Henry briefly returned to England for the abortive Royalist insurrection in Yorkshire, and may then have seen his eight-year old son. On 19 February, 1658, he died in Ghent; with John's half-brother Charles having died in 1653, John replaced his father as Earl of Rochester, and Anne became the Dowager Countess — with

four children to bring up and less money than she might have hoped for, but with useful contacts among both Parliamentarians and Royalists. The effect on young John of the early death of the father he had hardly known is open to – largely futile – speculation. The absent father would have been held up for admiration, as a model of courage, but could have been of negligible formative influence, certainly by comparison with the strong-willed mother. It seems obvious that he looked for substitute father-figures, in tutors and notably – for a while – in the King. Throughout much of his later years, especially towards the end, fear of separation from, and punishment by, a dominant Father-God shaped his actions and thinking.

John's early years were spent at Ditchley (demolished not long after his death by his successors), later described by the diarist John Evelyn as a 'low, ancient timber house, with a pretty bowling green,' decorated with portraits of ancestors, as well as of a pope and Christ (Lady Anne was a pious, orthodox Anglican, but tolerant) . Thomas Hearne later described a great hall 'adorned with old stags' horns'. His education began with private tutors, chiefly Francis Giffard, a young Cambridge clergyman who later became chaplain to the Countess; a man of severely Protestant views, which he would certainly have impressed upon the young boy. Years later, when Gilbert Burnet asked him why 'ill men' (such as him) felt such terror at the approach of death, when good men felt joy, Rochester 'was willing to ascribe it to the impressions they had from their education'. Of 'The Four Last Things,' seventeenth-century Puritan and Protestant writers tended to concentrate on Death, Judgement and Hell — few, indeed, were given much hope of passing the entrance examination for Heaven.

In later years, Giffard made a point of telling Hearne that, under him, his pupil had been 'a very hopeful youth, very virtuous and good natured ... and willing and ready to follow good advice' — so his later behaviour could not have been Giffard's fault. He also told Hearne that John 'had a natural distemper upon him which was extraordinary and he thinks might be one occasion of shortening his days, which was that he sometimes could not have a stool for three weeks or a month together. Which distemper his lordship told him was a very great occasion of that warmth and heat he always expressed, his brain being heated by the fumes and humours that ascended and evacuated themselves that way'. Contemporary theory believed that chronic constipation heated the brain, which John related to his own heated writing and living. Freudians might well relate Rochester's costiveness to his carefulness with money and reluctance to pay bills. Others have related excretory problems to creativity, costiveness to repression and diarrhoea to logorrhoea. Thus, Aristotle's theory of catharsis posits an emotional purgation; Pope in his *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot* comments on the would-be poet who 'strains from hard-bound brains eight lines a year'.

Rochester himself later suggested such a connexion in his 'Epistolary Essay', ostensibly from Mulgrave to Dryden:

What though the excrement of my dull brain
Runs in a costive and insipid strain,
Whilst your rich head eases itself of wit....

In addition, Hearne reported that 'Mr Giffard used to lie with him in the family, on purpose he might prevent any ill accidents'; perhaps John's health was never very strong. In any case, the practice of young tutors sharing their pupils' beds was not uncommon, as Lawrence Stone reports, remarking on the general apparent 'indifference to the dangers of adolescent sexual contact'. Giffard continued this when young John was in lodgings at nearby Burford School in 1656. Without wishing to make too much of this, it is possible that such experiences, here or at Oxford, whether physical or only emotional, may have led him, like others of his social set (for whom the practice appears to have been little more than an ostentatiously shocking amusement), to occasional homosexual diversions or, in Mrs Malaprop's entertainingly mistaken phrase, to 'a little good-humoured sodomy of an evening'. Meanwhile, at home, John received the upbringing of a country-bred aristocrat: riding, hunting, the breeding of dogs and horses.

At school, John furthered his Latin studies, started when he was seven — Virgil, Livy, Horace, Ovid; as an adult, he was considered a good Latinist. (Later, eager to extol the qualities of his trophy convert, Gilbert wrote that John 'acquired the Latin to such perfection that to his dying day he retained a great relish of the fineness and beauty of that tongue: and was exactly versed in the incomparable authors that writ about Augustus's time, whom he read often with that peculiar delight which the greatest wits have ever found in those studies.')

The school day began at 6 a.m. (7 in winter), with lessons until 11, then a two-hour lunch break followed by more lessons until 6 p.m. (4 in winter); each day included prayers, psalm-singing and Bible reading; on Sundays the boys went to matins in the adjacent church (recently a prison for Levellers, shot on Cromwell's orders in 1649). From an early age John was exposed to fairly intensive, orthodox Christian indoctrination, shaping many of his assumptions, despite his later vigorously expressed atheism and anti-clericalism.

Considered a good student, he was sent up to Wadham College, Oxford, in January 1660, his aristocratic status — though still officially Wilmot, as Cromwell declined to acknowledge titles bestowed by either Charles — making him a Fellow Commoner, with a superior gown and the right to dine at High Table. The College was not 50 years old, but was intellectually advanced and lively, associated with such figures as Christopher Wren, Professor of Astronomy, and Thomas Sprat, later author of *The History of the Royal Society* in 1667. The college was soundly Protestant in sympathy, the

Warden later being made Bishop of Oxford and Worcester. His first tutor was Phineas Bury (or Berry), later made Canon of Chester Cathedral, a Hebrew scholar and ‘great coffey-drinker’, and not over-demanding. John would have been expected to continue his Latin studies, and possibly some Greek; whether he actually did, is another matter. Certainly, his later writings show extensive acquaintance with Latin authors, from Cicero, Horace, Epicurus and Livy to slightly less respectable authors such as Ovid, Catullus, Lucretius and Petronius. As it was, the restoration of King Charles in 1660 was met with wild, orgiastic celebrations in the royalist city of Oxford — ‘they were like them who are out of their wits, mad, stark, staring mad’, wrote Stephen Penton. Burnet later wrote how ‘when he went to university, the general joy which over-ran the whole nation upon his Majesty’s Restoration ... produced some of its ill effects on him.’ He was soon transferred to the supervision of Robert Whitehall of Merton College; a genial if eccentric wit and drinker, somewhat of a buffoon, his ruddy features ‘loined with sack and faced with claret’, and possible early father-substitute (a Falstaff for the youthful aristocrat). It is perhaps worth remarking that tutors often had students to sleep in their chambers; pederastic and homosexual activity was by no means unknown in Oxford at the time — supposedly especially at Wadham, which unfortunately rhymes with Sodom. Two deplorable rhymes from early in the eighteenth century survive:

There once was a Warden of Wadham
 Who approved of the manners of Sodom,
 For a man might, he said,
 Have a very poor head,
 But be a fine Fellow, at bottom.

On the occasion of the college taking out fire insurance:

Well did the amorous sons of Wadham
 Their house secure ’gainst future flame:
 They knew their crime, the crime of Sodom.
 And judged the punishment the same.

In any event, Whitehall used to lend young John his own academic gown as a disguise and protection for nights out on the town; a possible early instance of Rochester’s taste for disguising and masquerading as well as drinking. Anthony à Wood, writing of early Restoration Oxford, commented on ‘bawdy houses and light huswives giving divers young men the pox, so that disease is very common among them, and some obscure pocky doctors obtain a living by it.... Multitudes of alehouses ... lying and swearing much used — atheism....’ Not surprisingly, we are told that ‘when my lord came to Oxford he soon grew debauched’.

Whitehall had a taste for verse as well as for drink, and, having previously courted the Cromwells in Latin verses, now opportunistically contributed a long piece of Latin verse to a volume of poems, *Britannia Rediviva*, welcoming the King on his restoration; young Rochester also provided a competent poem on (punning) ‘sedentary feet’, ‘To His Sacred Majesty’. The poem was signed with large capital letters, ROCHESTER, and regretted that he was too young ‘to bear the weight of arms’ (like his father), concluding with a reminder that he wished to be remembered as ‘your Wilmot’s son’. This, and more verses on the King’s mother and newly-dead sister paid off, and in February 1661 he was granted an annual pension of £1,500, back-dated to the preceding spring. In April, the young Earl probably rode in the King’s coronation procession; by then, study was not at the forefront of his mind: ‘The humour of that time wrought so much on him, that he broke off the course of his studies, to which no means could ever effectually recall him’, wrote Burnet. In September, his mother’s old friend, Edward Hyde, now Lord Chancellor and University Chancellor, bestowed on him the degree of M.A., together with a kiss on the left cheek. When Rochester went down, he neglected to pay his bills, but gave his college – appropriately – four silver tankards.

Having been taken away from the dubious influence of Oxford, young John was given a different kind of education; the King, acting as a surrogate father, now appointed a 30-year old Scots classical scholar and medical graduate, Dr Andrew Balfour, to be his guide and companion on a Grand Tour of Europe, departing in late 1661. Burnet wrote that Rochester ‘often acknowledged to me, in particular three days before his death, how much he was obliged to love and honour this his governor, to whom he thought he owed more than to all the world, next after his parents, for his great fidelity and care of him, while he was under his trust.’ Perhaps the most important thing about the unstuffy, intellectually energetic Balfour was that he ‘drew him [by various ‘tricks,’ as Rochester later expressed it] to read such books as were most likely to bring him back to learning and study’ — the Latin classics and important contemporary writers. In 1700, Balfour published *Letters Write [sic] to a Friend*, outlining the course of a good Grand Tour, which gives a fair indication of the itinerary he and Rochester followed. From Dieppe, they would have gone to Rouen and then to Paris for the winter, staying in St Germain, visiting St Denys, Malmaison, and the Court at Versailles. Not all visitors were overly impressed with the French capital; in 1623, the poet Sir John Suckling wrote of

Paris on the Seine,
 It’s wondrous fair but nothing clean,
 ’Tis Europe’s greatest town;
 How strong it is, I need not tell it,
 For all the world may easily smell it,
 That walk it up and down.

Like many serious British Protestants, Balfour was intrigued by Catholic relics; Suckling, however, was more jaundiced:

And to St Denys first we came
 To see the sights at Notre Dame,
 The man that shows them snuffles:
 Where who is apt for to believe
 May see Our Lady's right-hand sleeve,
 And her old pantouffles.... [slippers]

There is one of the Cross's nails,
 Which whoso sees, his bonnet vails,
 And if he list may kneel:
 Some say it's false, 'twas never so,
 Yet feeling it, thus much I know,
 It is as true as steel....

In Paris, they could have encountered the fashionable dramatists Corneille and Molière, and perhaps the Comte de Gramont, with whom Rochester was to be acquainted later at the English Court. Then touring through France – Orléans, Blois, Tours, Avignon, the University of Montpellier – then back to Paris for the winter of 1662–3; then, in the summer via Provence, to Italy. There, they visited Pisa, Florence and Rome in early autumn, observing the Catholic Church there, where, as a protégé of King Charles he was given especially favoured treatment, and classical Roman remains — both significant influences on his imagination. Here also he could have come across the indecent poems of the early sixteenth-century satirist, Pietro Aretino (described by Thomas Nashe as ‘one of the wittiest knaves that ever God made’), illustrating the erotic drawings of Giulio Romano (the Renaissance’s favourite upmarket pornography) — his mother later burned his copies. Aretino’s sexually explicit pasquinades, or lampoons, with their wit and obscene colloquiality, could be seen as models for Rochester’s own later mocking verses. Up and down Italy they would have gone: Naples, Loretto, that supposedly contained the Virgin Mary’s birth-place, miraculously transported there by angels, Bologna, Ferrara with the tomb of the poet Ariosto, and other Roman sites and Catholic saints’ tombs. Summer 1664 saw them stay nine weeks in the wonder city of Venice, notorious for its innumerable courtesans (not that the good doctor dwells on the subject) that a young nobleman could hardly avoid; some dressed as men, to cater for all tastes. In October, John signed the register of the famous University of Padua, well known for its academic distinction and the hectic homosexuality of its many of its students, ‘singing sonnets of the beauty and pleasure of their bardassi or buggered boys’, as the Scots traveller

William Lithgow recorded earlier. Then, back through Verona, where the inhabitants had not yet got round to displaying Juliet's balcony, then Turin with its famous shroud, up and over the Alps by difficult and dangerous mountain passes, and back to Paris, which they reached that autumn. Here he attended upon King Charles's beloved sister, 'Minette', Henrietta, Countess of Orléans, who gave him a letter to deliver to her brother. She was to use such informal couriers to conduct her private, secret additions to the official negotiations between the two monarchs.

Now – after about three years of foreign, cultural travel and private, guided reading, with no doubt some private, independent activity, and greatly developed from the callow youth taken away from Oxford – on Christmas Eve, 1664, the young Earl of Rochester presented the letter to his king, at Whitehall Palace. As Burnet put it:

He appeared at Court with as great advantage as most ever had. He was a graceful and well-shaped person, tall and well made, if not a little too slender [again a hint of possible physical frailty]. He was exactly well bred' with 'a modest behaviour' and 'a strange vivacity of thought and vigour of expression.... No wonder a young man so made and so improved was very acceptable in a court.

He was indeed 'a very hopeful youth'. Within five months, he had been sent to the Tower of London.