

“INTO SOME DIRTY HOLE ALONE”¹: THE EARL OF ROCHESTER PERVERTS MILTON

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According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to *pervert*—in its earliest known appearance, dating from 1374—indicates “turning aside from the right course.” During the short lifetime of John Wilmot, second earl of Rochester (1647-80), the word was already in use as a noun, and commonly meant “one who has been perverted; one who has forsaken a doctrine or system regarded as true for one esteemed false; an apostate.”² Having been raised by his mother, Anne St. John, the pious³ daughter of a prominent Wiltshire Puritan family,⁴ Rochester would have been familiar with this meaning. Would

¹ From “A Ramble in St. James’s Parke,” p. 68, line 162. Citations of Rochester’s poems are from *The Poems of John Wilmot Earl of Rochester*, Keith Walker, ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), unless otherwise indicated. Citations are by page and line number/s.

² The OED’s earliest reference to *pervert* as “one who suffers from a perversion of the sexual instinct” is from 1897.

³ In his discussion of the background of Rochester’s *Satyr Against Reason and Mankind* Dustin H. Griffin suggests that as a child Rochester had been “force-fed” on the writings of Puritan divine Richard Sibbes by his “pious Puritan mother, and carried with him a distasteful memory” of such writings (195). Yet according to Pinto, Rochester’s first tutor, Francis Giffard, “an enthusiastic loyalist,” had been hired by the boy’s mother after being ejected by the Puritans from a Wiltshire living (4). Lacking specific biographical information, it might be well to avoid overemphasizing Puritan leanings on the part of Anne St. John.

⁴ It is not known for sure whether Rochester ever met his father, since the latter was employed in various diplomatic missions on the Continent during his son’s boyhood. Scholars have discussed the possible effects of this lack of paternal contact from the stance of modern theories of child psychology. Pinto suggests possible effects of Henry Wilmot’s putative visit to his family at Ditchley, Oxfordshire, when John was eight years old: “It needs no strong effort of imagination to conceive the emotional disturbance that such an encounter would have produced in a sensitive, delicate child of eight. An historical novelist might give a moving picture of the only meeting of the

he have been amused by a claim that in his life and writings he may be said to respond to and pervert *Paradise Lost*, John Milton's great didactic project?

Readers of Rochester's poetry are often offended to the point of anger by explicit references to human excreta, menstrual blood, seminal fluid, as well as to the processes which produce these materials. This is often the case even for the twenty-first-century reader, who is expected to be inured to the explicit depiction of bodily sights, sounds and smells. "But still, but still" —in the words of R.T. Jones—"there is a kind of gratuitous indecency that contributes nothing to truth, and involves the reader, by the very act of reading and by the honest attempt to follow the argument in good faith, in a transient complicity that leaves him soiled and resentful" (444); and Simon Dentith finds paradoxical the almost stubborn refusal of readers to allow themselves to be shocked by Rochester's frank obscenity (97). It is only fair, however, to recall that Rochester, who unlike his elder contemporary John Milton did not claim to have a didactic purpose in his writings, would have assumed a severely limited readership for his erotic and scatological verse. Yet Rochester's decision to deny his verse public exposure may be seen not merely as "face saving," or if one may be allowed to use the more explicit term (which Rochester would surely have appreciated), "ass covering," but as a perversion of Milton's engagement with the dominant sense pertaining to the didactic endeavour: hearing and its converse—speaking.

This essay is an examination of Rochester as pervert. His frank bisexuality, his sexual promiscuity, his open depiction of the sights and smells of the human body's secretions and excretions, may be said to respond to and pervert *Paradise Lost*, Milton's great narrative-didactic project, in which various characters—Satan, Adam, Eve, Raphael, Michael—narrate and listen to the story of humankind's downfall and future redemption. Despite the ease with which John Wilmot, an Oxford undergraduate at the time of Charles II's assumption of the throne, adopted the cultural patterns of the Restoration period, the Interregnum and Puritan culture to which *Paradise Lost* may be said to pertain must have left their mark on such a liminal personality as Rochester.

fat, jovial cavalier in disguise with the bright-eyed, intelligent little boy who was to inherit the title" (3) a mere three years later. David M. Vieth claims that "John Wilmot's relationship with a father he saw rarely, if ever, may partly explain his later distrust of father-figures like Charles II, whose true greatness as king he seems not to have understood" (xix).

As Marianne Thormahlen suggests, Rochester was familiar with *Paradise Lost* (81);⁵ and Dustin H. Griffin also believes that the poet had read *Paradise Lost* (215). Indeed, in a letter to Rochester his close friend Henry Savile writes of his own “venereall pains,” which forced him to subsist on “dry mutton & dyett drinke” (June 2, 1678; 201). During this period Rochester was himself lying ill at his country home in Adderbury. The two friends, to whom we might apply Raphael’s description of the rebel host—“Purest at first, now gross by sinning grown” (6.661)—commiserate with each other by post as to the rigors of the then-current treatment for venereal disease, which involved the ingesting of mercury. After joking about the “chains of quicksilver” and the “loathsome banks of a dead lake of diet-drink,” Rochester suggests that Savile “should break the horrid silence and speak” (July 1678; 202). The latter, needless to say, recalls the opening scene of *Paradise Lost*, in which Satan and his associates lie in “adamantine chains” (1.48), “vanquished, rolling in the fiery gulf” (1.52), until Satan breaks the “horrid silence” (1.83) and addresses his nearest mate Beelzebub.

For Rochester anger was a primal emotion, and the primary device for the expression of anger was open depiction of the human body and its various products. Given the methods by which his work was circulated, the poet must have known that he had only limited control over the constitution of his readership. At the same time, he would have expected his writings to reach a small, perhaps even chosen body of readers. Vis-à-vis his readership Rochester might have willingly pleaded guilty to a charge of perverting the doctrine of predestination by his own “election” of his destined readers. It might not, therefore, be perverse to suggest that this selection of readers constituted his revision of Milton’s “fit audience though few.”

As only, orphaned son of a prominent supporter of Charles II, John Wilmot rejoiced at the restoration of the monarchy while interrogating the court hierarchy to which he belonged in his *oeuvre* as a whole. In his *Satyr against Reason and Mankind*, *Tunbridge Wells* and *A Ramble in St. James’s Park*, in the Speaker of his poems, in his own life, and in the Restoration rake character as embodied on the stage in *Dorimant*,⁶ Rochester may be seen as a perversion of the

⁵ Thormahlen also notes that Rochester was apparently familiar with Dryden’s *The State of Innocence and the Fall of Man*, a rhymed operatic play based on *Paradise Lost*. The latter was not staged, but hundreds of printed copies were circulated during 1675-6 (318).

⁶ See Nancy Rosenfeld, “*The Man of Mode: The Mode of Man*,” *Mc Neese Review*, 2004, 20-40.

creation of the greatest poet of the period. Scholars, however, would do well to beware of committing themselves to overly-rigid definitions of historical periods, and as Harold Love has warned, this is especially true for the seventeenth century:

Those Renaissance specialists who concern themselves with Caroline authors further define themselves as studying the end of a process of development which reached its highest point with Shakespeare, while Restoration scholars see themselves as occupied with the beginning of a process which is to reach fruition in Pope and the eighteenth-century novelists. [...] Differences in interest and professional approach become hypostatized into a belief that there was a sharp and decisive break in the development of English culture in 1660—a year which, in actuality, saw a massive attempt to obliterate all political change that had taken place since 1641. (8)

The earliest poem ascribed with any degree of certainty to Rochester is “Virtue’s triumphant shrine!”; the latter first appeared in a volume of poetry published at Oxford on May 29, 1660 in honor of Charles II’s return to the throne. The final lines of this offering remind Charles that the writer is the son of one who had died while in the king’s service:

Great Sir, approve
My manly wishes, and more vigorous love;
In whom a cold respect were treason to
A Father’s ashes, greater than to you;
Whose one ambition ’tis for to be known
By daring Loyalty Your WILMOT’s Son. (3;13-18)

Although John Wilmot came of age after Charles II’s return to the throne, he can usefully be viewed as a liminal figure, both spanning and blurring the border between the Civil War and Restoration periods. Indeed, Ronald Paulson has termed Rochester “the difficult transitional figure, in some ways the father of the Augustan mode of satire, in others still an Elizabethan in the tradition of the melancholy satyr-satirist of Jonson and Marston” (104). Perhaps viewing his life and work as a perversion of the great epic of the interim period can fulfill the scholar’s need for creating order out of confusion.

Since the onset of the early modern period in the West, as noted by Stephen J. Greenblatt:

the archetypal rules, the earliest and most systematic to which the child is exposed and in which he is trained, are those governing the definition and control of wastes. The behavior manuals of the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries return again and again to codes elaborated for the management of the body’s products: urine, feces, mucus, saliva, and wind. Proper control of each of these products, along with the acquisition of the prevailing table manners and modes of speech, mark the entrance into civility, an entrance that distinguishes not only

the child from the adult, but the members of a privileged group from the vulgar, the upper classes from the lower, the courtly from the rustic, the civilized from the savage. (60-1)

An examination of Rochester's use of imagery based on the bodily processes of reproduction and digestion, and the anger expressed by the poet and fostered in his readers by such use, can shed light on a hidden fear of writing, a sense that the narrative endeavour itself is suspect, that it may contain elements of the satanic which can also be found in the Miltonic narrator's invocations of his muse in books 1, 3, 7 and 9 of *Paradise Lost*.

Milton had, of course, a stated didactic aim in writing his great epics, and despite his disclaimer—“still govern thou my song,/ Urania, and fit audience find, tho' few” (*Paradise Lost* 7.30-1)⁷—surely hoped that his works would be widely circulated and discussed. Yet the very act of speaking could lead the speaker, willy-nilly, into evil ways. William Kolbrener describes the “slippery slope”:

Just as Milton argues for the sufficiency *and* insufficiency of reason in *Areopagitica*; just as he simultaneously articulates providentialist *and* republican discourses in *The Readie and Easie Way*; so Milton in *De Doctrina* [. . .] simultaneously advocates the God of Will *and* Reason. This strategy permits the positing of a God who is at once present and absent to his creation, at once constrained and beyond constraint. [...] The coincident monism and dualism of Miltonic cosmology will therefore have specific consequences for theodicy: just as God is simultaneously present and absent to his creation, so 'God's ways' are simultaneously implicit within, though always in part inaccessible to, the language of poetry—even the inspired poetry of *Paradise Lost*. (137)

Milton's theodicy, in other words, may only be fit for distribution to a limited audience precisely because couched in the language of poetry.

Rochester, on the other hand, partook of a distribution culture predictive of postmodern methods of transmission, i.e. those currently developing via the Internet. The latter technology may be said to pervert previous conventions: publication is possible without the intermediary, the “jury” of editors and publishers who choose works worthy of being distributed, while culling out the supposedly unworthy. Simultaneously, the published text itself is not permanent: unlike a printed text, which can only be changed when a new edition is issued, reader and author alike can make changes in the original text at will. Paul Hammond has called attention to the scholar's difficulties

⁷ Citations of Milton's epic are to *Paradise Lost*, Alastair Fowler, ed. (London: Longman, 1991). Citations are by book and line number/s.

in definitive attribution of authorship resulting from seventeenth-century manuscript transmission of poems and other writings.⁸ Such transmission, whether necessitated by subversive political content or explicit sexuality, also had serious ramifications for the reception and interpretation of the text: “In this network of poems which pass from hand to hand in the coffee houses,” as Hammond notes, “there is a loss of authorially-sanctioned meaning, which is replaced by a network of meanings generated by readers and scribes: hence multiple political significations became possible, and yet every interpretation is elusive, deniable” (41). According to Rochester editor Keith Walker, the poet himself apparently authorized the publication of only three poems (from among his *juvenilia*); he usually distributed his work by giving copies to friends (xii, xvi). Rochester could not have known that after his death his poems, and many which he did not write but which were attributed to him in an attempt to cash in on the cachet of his name, would be published and circulated, often in pirated texts and inexactly-rendered copies.

John Milton devoted precious years to the antimonarchical cause; his questioning of the legitimacy of the monarch was general, related more to faults in the system rather than in the man. Although Rochester is not commonly categorized as a “political poet,” he composed a number of verses which bitterly lampoon the monarch. His attacks on Charles II, his beloved patron, were aimed at the king’s personal faults, and may thus be seen as a perversion of Milton’s broader anti-monarchy stance. The publication of such attacks as *Dialogue* (“When to the King I bid good Morrow”); *Impromptu on Charles II* (“God bless our good and gracious King”); *A Satyr on Charles II* (“I th’ Isle of Britaine long since famous growne”) would not have been acceptable to any political regime which had censorship in its power. So explosively bitter is the *Satyr on Charles II* that Rochester prudently fled from court after he had inadvertently allowed a copy of it to reach the king.⁹ In a sarcastic comparison of the warlike Louis XIV of France and the peace-loving Charles II, the latter stands accused of formulat-

⁸ David M. Vieth’s *Attribution in Restoration Poetry: A Study of Rochester’s Poems of 1680* details the grave difficulties involved in constructing a reliable Rochester canon.

⁹ See Vieth’s note in his edition of the *Complete Poems* for details of this affair (60). Given the shameless exuberance of the poem’s depictions of the royal member, which is both “the swaucyest,” the “proudest, peremptoriest Prick alive” (74; 18, 19) and simultaneously the “dull, graceless Ballocks” (74; 27) of a man of declining years, the king’s willingness to forgive Rochester for writing this lampoon indicates a high degree of affection for his young protégé.

ing his policy of peace, desirable in itself, according to the dictates of his paramours: “His Scepter and his Prick are of a Length,/ And she may sway the one who plays with th’other” (74;11-12). His Majesty restlessly “roalles about from Whore to Whore/ A merry Monarch, scandalous and poor” (74;14-15). Should “merry” seem to indicate a lusty, potent ruler, however, the poem’s third stanza bemoans the “Paynes itt Cost the poor, laborious Nelly [Nell Gywn, the king’s mistress],/ Whilst shee imployes, hands, fingers, mouth, and thighs/ E’re she can raise the Member she enjoys” (74-75; 29-31).

The mouth, as Rochester suggests in the above, or more specifically the tongue, is an organ of sexual stimulation. It is also a primary organ of speech, whose use in speaking may be evil: His Majesty may be led to make important political decisions by the tongue of a woman. The very act of speaking, in other words, may itself be evil. As a peer and member of the House of Lords, Rochester had the opportunity to be involved in the politics of the time; and he seems, according to Vivian de Sola Pinto, to have been fairly regular in his attendance at the House during extended periods of residence in London (165). In his discussion of Rochester’s *Very Heroicall Epistle in Answer to Ephelia*, Duane Coltharp suggests that the poem’s exotic images of an Oriental court “register some of the pressing anxieties of seventeenth-century constitutional debate: anxieties concerning the power of tyrants, despots, or absolute monarchs to violate subjects’ rights and to dominate their very bodies” (36); yet Rochester’s criticism remains aimed at the individual king. The “happy sultan” of the poem reigns “Secure in Solid Sloth” and feels “the joys of Love, without the paine” (113; 41-42). This and more:

Noe lowd reproach, nor fond unwelcome sound
Of Womens Tongues, thy sacred Eare dares wound;
If any doe, a nimble Mute strait tyes,
The True-Love-Knot, and stops her foolish cryes. (114; 49-52)

Unlike the English king who allows himself to be henpecked by his outspoken mistresses, the Oriental monarch employs tongueless servants to silence the tongues of the women, of those whose reproaches might be unwelcome. Death is accomplished by strangulation; the image of the silenced tongue lolling outside the mouth is evoked. According to Coltharp: “Conveying a hyperbolic, parodic image of the absolute monarch, Rochester thus satirizes the absolute self: the self that would expunge the world of all its pain, struggle, and otherness, that would deny its own positionality within the dense networks of bodies and wills that Rochester’s poetry so often acknowledges” (37).

As Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clement aver, “the desire to see—but ultimately all desire—is the sign, the first sign, of the devil” (10). When speaking and writing openly of the human body without recourse to euphemism, the artist enables the reader to see what should be hidden, to envision the organs of reproduction of the species (male and female genital organs; women’s breasts) or maintenance of the individual body (organs of ingestion, digestion and excretion). William Kerrigan argues that “There is no work of art in our language, perhaps not in any language, that creates a more ample mythology of the mouth [as does *Paradise Lost*] —the Satanic mouth that first whispers rebellion in the ear of Beelzebub, the mouth of the serpent entered by Satan and inspired with speech, the mouth of the Muse who brings the poem nightly to Milton’s ear, the mouth of the poet-singer, the mouths that take both spiritual matter and forbidden fruit into the human body” (118). Although the tongue is used in speaking and tasting as well as in sexual stimulation, it is not surprising that its sexual function has accumulated a plethora of euphemisms. Indeed, a legion of euphemisms and taboos adhere to discussion and depiction of those parts of the human body used in the sex act and in digestion. The Puritans, U. Milo Kaufmann notes, gave high priority to the sense of hearing (233), and by extension to the spoken word/ Word itself: “[I]mages deriving from an aural approach to a ‘speaking’ Word can function to gird narrative with the imperious authority of revelation. [...] Revelation in word rather than spectacle or event enjoyed the determinacy and rationality as well as the intimacy of personal address so desired by the Puritan” (240, 249). Yet a clear line had to be drawn between the validity of the act of listening and that of speaking. Every believer could hear, but not all were empowered to speak.

Milton was aware of possible dangers inherent in the narrative act, and his late start as a writer of epic may be the result not only of his preoccupation with political activity during the 1650s, but of a sense that the narrative endeavour itself contains the potential for evil. The Invocations at the beginning of books 1, 3, 7 and 9 of *Paradise Lost*, in which the poet appeals for help, not to his God, but rather to a “celestial patroness” (9.21), have as their source the epic convention; but they can also be understood as Milton’s engagement with the frightening possibility that the desire to speak and write comes from an evil source. Should this be the case, an appeal to a female guide rather than the male-gendered Deity may be less blasphemous.

In her discussion of the Invocations, Anne Davidson Ferry explicates the Miltonic narrator’s use of birds, which both sing and fly, as metaphor for a human narrator who tells/ sings of his striving for redemption while at the same time sensing his fallen state:

Because a bird is a creature—mortal and limited—and because its song can have moral meaning only if that meaning is endowed from a source outside itself, the bird can be a metaphor, (a part as we shall see of an elaborate pattern of metaphors) for the speaker as fallen man, whose song must be inspired by the “heav’nly Muse.” (25)

The bird’s flight—its ability to aim for the heavens while of necessity returning to earth—, also figures the human’s journey between heaven and earth. In the Invocation to book 1 the narrator appeals to the muse who “from the first/ Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread/ Dove-like sat’st brooding on the vast abyss/ And madest it pregnant” (1.19-22). The muse who is to be the source of the poet’s enlightenment, thus enabling him to “justify the ways of God to men,” apparently hails from the primeval ooze, from the chaos which preceded the creation of an orderly universe. This muse is envisioned as a dove, a quiet bird not known for the beauties of its song. In Milton’s rendition it is also androgynous, both male and female, impregnating and nesting; it has laid its eggs and is now brooding on primordial material, in an explicit image of reproductive processes with which Rochester would have been comfortable.

Bird imagery is repeated in the Invocation at the beginning of book 3; the narrator again recalls that the muse, this time addressed as “holy Light,” had existed during the pre-creation chaos: “Before the sun,/ Before the heavens thou wert, and at the voice/ Of God, as with a mantle didst invest/ The rising world of waters dark and deep” (3.8-11). This time the muse is not a dove, but rather a song-bird, “the wakeful bird” in its nest which “Sings darkling, and in shadiest covert hid/ Tunes her nocturnal note” (3.38-40). The act of narration again finds its inspiration in a dark, hidden, even chaotic stage of existence which predates heavenly attempts at imposition of order. Lucifer, son of the morning, bearer of light, had previously heard the voice of God and then descended to a dark, chaotic underworld where he created a city. On hearing the voice of God, the muse— “holy Light” —also descended to the dark chaos in order to take part in the process of creation.

The Miltonic narrator’s endeavour, however, bears satanic potential: the poet’s journey to heaven can end in a fall into error; he may fall victim to loss, to confusion which he has brought upon himself by presuming to leave his earthly nest and venture uninvited up to heaven. Rochester, too, recalls the fragility of man’s place in “*Sab: Lost*”:

Shee yeilds, she yeilds, Pale Envy said Amen
The first of woemen to the Last of men.
Just soe those frailer beings Angells fell

Ther's noe mid way (it seemes) twix't heav'n and hell,
Was it your end in making her, to show
Things must bee rais'd soe high to fall soe low? (26; 1-6)

For Rochester women are, perhaps ironically, stronger than angels; yet both angels and women will ultimately fall. If, as Rochester claims, there is no midway between heaven and hell, where is the place of the human? Milton accepted the biblical narrative, according to which the earth was created to provide a home for humans, in which the latter and their non-human animal companions would exist in symbiosis. Rochester, however, appears to deny the existence of this home with a cavalier wave of his pen.

In his explication of the Invocations of *Paradise Lost* Noam Flinker has shown how the “mythic allusions to the four blind ancients [Thamyris, Maeonides, Tiresias and Phineus: 3.35-36] help to establish a psychological struggle within the narrator that is best understood as the wise shaping of the unconscious or *Fansie* by his artistic ‘reason’ which recognizes the importance of sexuality and wishes to govern or mold this ‘Wild work’ (5.112) into an acceptable artistic experience” (96). In the person of the Speaker of his poems, on the other hand, Rochester may be said to reveal what should be hidden, to give voice to sexuality, without wishing to replicate the Miltonic narrator’s experiment whose aim was, in Flinker’s words, “lay[ing] bare the traditional mythic sources that link sexuality and poetic endeavour to recreate the sublimative process for the narrator” (97).

The Rochesterian narrator refrains from sublimating, and in so doing may cast doubt on the *bona fides* of the Miltonic narrator’s plea to his muse for aid in carrying forward what he hopes will be a successful sublimative artistic experience. Rochester’s Speaker did not find it necessary to govern or mold the raw material, the “wild work” of his sexuality, into an acceptable artistic experience since, according to Geoffrey Hughes, Rochester was not subject to the same sociolinguistic constraints as was Milton. In his social history of what is termed “offensive language” Hughes argues that language such as that employed in *A Ramble in St. James’s Parke* could not have been used in public during the lifetime of Shakespeare, nor, for that matter, between 1700 and 1900: “Rochester’s is a world seen from crotch level, a world stripped of pretence to leave the sole dominating force that of frantic sexual energy.” This frantic sexual energy, moreover, is the energy, not so much of a human as of an animal. In referring to one of the female denizens of St. James’s Park as a “prowd Bitch” who leads about the “Amorous Rout” of “humble Currs” (83-84) (terms recalling Milton’s “savage clamour” of the “wild rout” [7.32-37]) the poet gives vent to “contemptuous animal insult” (140).

In its vibrant orality, Milton's political prose is a rich source of Hughes's "contemptuous animal insult," whether *animal* refers to the nonhuman creature or to the human body in all its physicality. Insult is arguably the clearest, most direct verbal expression of anger, and Milton's political writings contain, in the words of John K. Hale, "voluminous insults," which "cover the entire range of mudslinging." Such anger would be even clearer to current "humanist readers," according to Hale, if they were in the habit of reading aloud: Milton was apparently known for his "fierce" pronunciation of the letter R, generally known to Elizabethans as "the growling letter"; and Hale cites Milton's *First Defense* in the original Latin as a text in which "the sound of his insults did more for his argument than we can recover except in principle" (167-168). Hale's discussion of the orality of Milton's political prose is highly significant. It indicates a blurring of boundaries between poetry and non-fiction prose: in Milton's day much prose was read aloud as a matter of routine, as of course was poetry. Hale's argument also hints at the extent to which a written insult is envisioned as an oral communique; the reader imagines the speaker standing face-to-face with an enemy, even if he is in fact seated at his desk writing to an opponent who is far away. Milton's insults, Hale notes, "are well described as what the Greeks called *parrhasia*, meaning simultaneously 'loose [public] talk' and 'free speech'" (159).

The insults to which Hale refers have their source in ancient traditions of insulting, dating back to the rites of Demeter at Eleusis, and given voice by the "denunciative force" of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible:

For the humanist, the power and joy of insulting, as of everything which a poet could express with force, lay in saying universal and everyday things with a finesse derived straight from antiquity. [...] While insult is virtually universal, therefore, particular forms in the early modern period might have influenced Milton, whether directly or environmentally. They include flyting, defamation actions, philippics, licensed fooling, and the London drama. (161, 162-163)

It is thus not coincidental that in *Areopagitica*, that great plea for a more open, and therefore rational system of press censorship,¹⁰ Milton employs violent sexual and digestive imagery in his attack on the censorship systems of the Roman Catholic Church:

¹⁰ *Christian Doctrine* editor Norman T. Burns calls attention to the many points in that text wherein Milton "gives broad latitude for hate," making it clear that "hatred and vengeance have a role in the moral life of a Christian" (n.p.), thus legitimizing open expression of anger in published material.

the Councill of Trent and the Spanish Inquisition, engendering together, brought forth, or perfered those Catalogues, and expurging Indexes that rake through the entralls of many an old good Author, with a violation wors than any could be offer'd to his tomb. [...] [T]heir last invention was to ordain that no Book, pamphlet or paper should be Printed (as if S. Peter had bequeath'd them the keys of the Presse also out of Paradise) unlesse it were approv'd and licenc't under the hands of 2 or 3 glutton friers. (2:502-503)

Digestive and sexual images are violently intermixed. The Council and Inquisition “engender together” and bring forth, but then are guilty of “violation,” of disembowelling the author as they “rake through his entrails”; such evil is perpetrated by “gluttons.” This and more; the “most Antichristian Council, and the most tyrannous Inquisition that ever inquir'd,” had, according to Milton, instituted a new, vicious form of censorship, figured as infanticide: “Till then Books were ever as freely admitted into the World as any other birth; the issue of the brain was no more stiff'd then the issue of the womb” (2: 505).

Current usage tends to muddle the boundaries between cursing, insulting and using language which many find offensive. English-speaking children often refer to the proverbial four-letter words as “curse-words,” and may not at first be aware of the earlier, and still extant meaning of *curse*: to invoke or wish evil upon. Then too, young children often do not understand the connection between words or expressions referring to body parts and bodily processes, and anger. The common denominator of cursing, insulting and using language which one assumes will make others uncomfortable is, of course, the expression of hostility, of anger. In his overview of traditions of insulting and their function as a channel for verbal, rather than physical expression of aggression, Hale differentiates insulting from cursing. The latter, Hale avers, “arises from deadly serious intent, whereas insulting is more peaceable, an aggression-channeling and harm-averting obverse of cursing” (161). Yet it could be argued that in Milton’s assault on the Church of Rome’s censorship mechanisms we find a muddling of strict boundaries between the two in order to express the anger which engenders both.

In *Rabelais and His World* Mikhail Bakhtin exposes the connection between explicit discussion of bodily processes and imagery based on the human body on the one hand, and abusive language—language intended to express anger—on the other hand. Images of the “material bodily principle,” in Bakhtin’s words, are central to what he terms “the concept of grotesque realism” (18):

[T]he body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people’s character; this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because it is not individualized. The

material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. This is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable. (19)

Bakhtin suggests, however, that the “essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (19-20). Bakhtin’s use of *degradation* is neutral; it does not herein bear the term’s current sense of dishonor or disgrace. Yet while the grotesque concept of the body does form “the basis of abuses, oaths, and curses” (27), it is of vital importance to add that:

Modern indecent abuse and cursing have retained dead and purely negative remnants of the grotesque concept of the body. Our “three-storied” oaths [Russian for *strong, coarse abuse*, as noted by the translator] or other unprintable expressions degrade the object according to the grotesque method; they send it down to the absolute bodily lower stratum, to the zone of the genital organs, the bodily grave, in order to be destroyed. (28)

The angry obscenity for which Rochester’s poems are noted, and which generations of readers and scholars have found both disturbing and amusing,¹¹ can, according to Ronald Paulson, usefully be viewed as the point of conflation of political and social satire, the wish to show the “real hollowness, human weakness, and corruption beneath the rich and respectable, supposedly divine, facade of the court,” (105) and the poet’s need to critique his own role within the court milieu. At the same time, Paulson suggests, Rochester’s uncompromising outing of the often unpleasant sights, smells and tastes of the human body may be taken as part of a general rethinking of values in which he was engaged:

¹¹ In what seems like an apology for the discomfort occasioned readers by Rochester’s lexicon, Samuel J. Rogal contends that in *A Ramble in Saint James’s Parke*, for example, “Rochester had no designs for drowning his reader in a sea of vituperation; he required only the quantity and frequency of baseness necessary to reflect his own despair and distaste, while openly lamenting the fact that his society—as well as he himself, as an active member of that society—saw fit to revel in the animal state to which it had sunk.” Of the 21,423 words found in Vieth’s edition of Rochester’s poems, “offensive language” comprises a mere 0.3 percent of the total: “vulgarisms” (specifically: *cunt, fart, frig, fuck, God damn, pissing, prick, shit, swive* and *turds*) are only found in nineteen of the seventy-five poems which Vieth confidently assigns to Rochester’s *oeuvre*; in other words, approximately 75 percent of the pieces actually assigned to the Earl of Rochester “may be declared essentially free from offensive language” (34-35).

The obscenity, for a start, was a facet of the low burlesque or travesty mode; the shock has the satiric function of awakening the reader and, by laying bare in the most vivid way his animal origins, making him reassess customary humanist values. Reacting politically and emotionally against the repressive years of the Commonwealth, many Englishmen—but most of all the Cavaliers—encouraged an attitude that was bent on exposing old pious frauds and treating grave subjects like life or love with disrespect. (105)

Such a reappraisal, however, may lead to conclusions for which one is not prepared. For Rochester, as Paulson avers, love originally became obscene and life scatological “in order to expose certain simpleminded illusions (or hypocrisies),” but then his own experience in life seemed to prove that “love and life are no more than obscene and scatological, that perhaps this is all there is” (106). If, moreover, “that is all there is” in love and life, “that may be all there is” in art as well.

Although Milton’s Adam spends much of his time in Eden listening to Raphael’s and then Michael’s narratives, in book 8 the First Father himself tells the story of his own early consciousness, both of himself and of his Edenic surroundings, and then recalls discussing his loneliness with God. Adam’s first reason for requesting a partner, or in today’s terms a lover, is that he lacks an equal, someone with whom he can converse:

of fellowship I speak
Such as I seek, fit to participate
All rational delight, wherein the brute
Cannot be human consort; they rejoice
Each with their kind, lion with lioness;
So fitly them in pairs thou hast combined;
Much less can bird with beast, or fish with fowl
So well converse, nor the ox with the ape;
Worse then can man with beast, and least of all. (8.389-397)

Adam imagines love as fellowship, as a relationship between equals. The repeated use of *fit/ fitly* here is salient: true companionship can only be with another of one’s kind.

In the painting *Rochester and his Monkey*, in which the poet is shown face-to-face with what is presumed to be a pet monkey,¹² the painter, as Paulson points out, has captured a sense of reciprocity, perhaps even of equality, between the species. Rochester offers the ape a bay-tree branch while “the ape (emblematic of imitation) offers

¹² *Rochester and his Monkey* (c. 1675) is exhibited in the National Portrait Gallery in London. Its provenance is not certain, although both Pinto and Treglown note that it is attributed to Jacob Huysmans (173; *Rochester’s Letters* Fig. 2).

the poet a page he has torn out of a book; he is aping the poet, sitting on a pile of books with another book in his hand, a finger marking the place where he has stopped reading or has torn out pages. Rochester himself, however, is holding in his other hand a number of manuscript pages, aping the ape" (116). This reciprocity may be said to interrogate, or even parody, Milton's claim that the brute cannot be human consort. The figure of the leaf can be carried forward: man and monkey both, by proffering to the other a leaf (whether of bay or paper), are sharing a coverup—a mask—for nakedness.

For Bakhtin the mask is "the most complex theme of folk culture. The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself" (39-40). In a reversal of what would be the expected order, i.e. that masks are fixed representations of various facial expressions, Bakhtin suggests that "such manifestations as parodies, caricatures, grimaces, eccentric postures, and comic gestures per se derived from the mask" (40). Yet masks also serve to hide the face, to muddle the identity of the wearer, both in his own eyes and in the eyes of others, and were used for the latter purpose in the cultural milieu to which Rochester belonged. The leaves which Rochester and his monkey are caught in the act of exchanging may indicate the need to cover up that which is too ridiculous, perhaps too discomfiting, too intimate to be shown.

If the narrative endeavour opens up possibilities of evil, the act of seeing, of observing, which must precede the narration may also be tainted. As Flinker has pointed out, for Milton: "Night and light are not opposites but rather different aspects of God's creation. It is fallen experience that introduces dualism into the universe and much of the justification of the 'wayes of God to men' (1.26) is a vision of the potential unity in the cosmos despite the divided nature of post-lapsarian reality" (96). At the same time, "[t]he route from blindness to heavenly or 'Celestial light' is traversed by the narrator with the guidance of Urania" (95), and in this sense the muse becomes a liminal figure, at once marking and blurring the border between fallen and unfallen nature.

As R.T. Jones notes vis-à-vis Rochester, the observer of the human body in all its possible ugliness may feel himself soiled by the very act of observing what had best be hidden (444). Yet Allen Dunn contends that there is a "sublime effect" in the spectacle of power combined with vulnerability, as presented, for example, in figures of the criminal hanged or tortured, Milton's Satan cast down from heaven, or the suffering Job: "The mangled bodies of Job, Satan, and the

hanged man [...] contain elements of grotesquerie and repulsiveness, and, like the bodies anatomized by the satirists, they dramatize the absolute distance that separates human reality from human aspiration"; these spectacular bodies are immanent in the diseased bodies of the "fops, whores and hacks" depicted by Rochester (102). These bodies pose the question: "Is this all there is?"

During the Restoration men as well as women employed masks to hide their identity, commonly wore wigs, and used cosmetics. Such means of hiding one's unadorned appearance bore more than a whiff of the satanic when employed by women, since the latter were presumed to aim at entrapping men by upgrading their appearance with the assistance of perfumes, cosmetics, wigs, corsets and other so-called beauty aids. However, simply looking at the undisguised, undressed body might have been seen as evil. In an anonymous comment at the end of a private collection of seventeenth-century verse and prose (in the handwriting of Sir William Haward [d. c. 1690], a knight from Surrey who had served as a gentleman of the privy chamber to Charles I), we are told that Haward's manuscript is "Of an exceedingly lewd and scurrilous nature." *The Looking-Glasse*, one of the verses in the collection, is couched in the form of a man gazing at and describing his newly-awakened lover. It begins:

Mee-thinkes I see you newly risen
From your Embroyder'd Bed, & pissing,
With studyed meene, & much Grimace,
Present your selfe before your Glasse,
To varnish, & rubb o're those Graces,
You rubb'd off in your nights Embraces;
To sett your hayre, your Eyes, your Teeth,
And all the powers you conquer with,
Lay frames of Love, & State Intrigues,
In powders, Trimmings, Curles, & wiggs. (1-10)

The woman's conventional use of "powers to conquer" and of "state Intrigues" is reminiscent, of course, of Rochester's *Satyr on Charles II*, in which the king's paramour is said to exercise power over the monarch's policy-making by means of her sexual favors. The observer/ poet of *The Looking-Glasse* does not, however, ponder and portray the previous night's activities, during which the woman was probably undressed, but rather her morning routine. The observer details his lady's toilet-toilette with mock seriousness, reflecting the seriousness with which she is simultaneously observing herself in the glass. He recalls that at night the woman lay down upon an embroidered bed, having previously varnished and and rubbed her own body, as if she, too, was merely a piece of furniture, an adjunct of the bed. There is, moreover, another piece of furniture involved,

or even invoked: the looking glass which gives the work its title. The observer is presumed to be lying in bed, observing the woman gazing at herself in the looking glass; perhaps he even sees the woman in the glass. The glass, not transparent but covered on one side by a layer of silver, serves as an extra layer of mediation between the “newly risen” sun (cf. Milton’s holy Light) and the man; it is, after all, unwise to look at the sun directly, as Milton knew. Looking and describing, that is, narrating what one has seen, can be threatening.

Rochester was a sharp observer, both of human behavior and the often hidden, apparently insignificant actions which reveal the motives behind behavior, and he reproduced this behavior in his poetry. In *A Ramble in St. James’s Parke*, for example, the narrator credibly depicts the “*Whitehall Blade*” who “had heard *Sir Edward Sutton/ Say how the King lov’d Banstead Mutton;/ Since when hee’d nere be brought to eat/ By’s good will any other meat*” (65;49-52). And the “*Grays Inn witt*” is believable as “*A great Inhabiter of the Pitt/ Where Crittick-like he sits and squints/ Steales Pockett Handkerchers and hints/ From’s Neighbour, and the Comedy/ To Court and pay his Landlady*” (65;64-68). As Norbert Elias has argued, such powers of observation were an important aid to survival in the court milieu; the art of observing was not an amusing intellectual exercise, but was rather necessitated by the importance of understanding the character, motives, abilities and limitations both of one’s peers and of those above one in the hierarchy:

This courtly art of human observation is all the closer to reality because it never attempts to consider the individual person in isolation, as a being deriving his essential regularities and characteristics from within. Rather, the individual is always observed in court society in his social context, as *a person in relation to others*. [...] But the art of human observation is applied not only to others but to the observer himself. A specific form of *self-observation* develops. [...] Accompanying the act of observing people is that of *describing* them. (104-105)

The Miltonic narrator of *Paradise Lost* employs angelic narrators as a means of avoiding engagement with those satanic overtones which adhere to the narrative endeavour. As Murray Roston suggests, Milton “maintained that the poet or orator must first be worthy in himself, inspiring confidence in his sincerity, as well as offering a moral message. The image created by the speaker is thus an essential part of the whole” (137). For a being who is unfallen, the source of inspiration would not be a muse, but God himself; and an unfallen speaker like Raphael does not torture himself with questioning the validity of his mandate to speak. When besought by Adam to tell him about the creation, Raphael stipulates that, although he had witnessed the war

in heaven, he will reveal only as much as the divine censor permits: “such commission from above/ I have received, to answer thy desire/ Of knowledge within bounds; beyond abstain/ To ask” (7.118-121). Raphael then warns Adam against seeking forbidden knowledge:

But knowledge is as food, and needs no less
Her temperance over appetite, to know
In measure what the mind may well contain,
Oppresses else with surfeit, and soon turns
Wisdom to folly, as nourishment to wind. (7.126-130)

It is not coincidental, of course, that *appetite* is used both in its abstract sense, that is, to indicate a strong wish or urge, but also concretely in reference to its function as part of the process of ingestion/ digestion. Northrop Frye calls attention to the significance of Milton’s dual usage of this concept:

In the soul of man, as God originally created it, there is a hierarchy. This hierarchy has three main levels: the reason, which is in control of the soul; the will, the agent carrying out the decrees of the reason, and the appetite. [...] Of the appetites two are of central importance: the appetite for food and the sexual appetite. Both of these are part of the divine creation, and are therefore good. Even so, it is curious how emphatic Milton is about food as an element of both paradisaical and heavenly life. [...] Few can have read *Paradise Lost* without being struck by the curiously domesticated nature of the life of Adam and Eve in Eden before the fall. Adam and Eve are suburbanites in the nude, and like other suburbanites they are preoccupied with gardening, with their own sexual relations, and with the details of their rudimentary housekeeping.¹³ (60-61, 65-66)

In warning that a surfeit of knowledge turns wisdom to folly in much the same way as overeating turns gustatory pleasure into gas pains, Raphael defines the place of appetite in the soul of man. He then limits his narration, since participation in the narrative endeavour—whether observing, describing, listening or reading—can be dangerous for humans; or as Kolbrener notes in his discussion of Raphael’s “rhetorical assurances” (such as: ‘For where is not he/ Present’” [7.517-518]):

Milonic language, even in striving towards representing unity, in the attempts to assert “continuity” between the Creator and the created world, inscribes difference, “contiguity.” [...] Milonic representation is presupposed upon difference, upon the ultimate inadequacy of the signifier to the signified. (139, 140)

Audience response to Milonic depiction of angelic and Edenic meals has been decidedly mixed. In his earlier explication of angelic

¹³ Had Frye revised the above ten or so years later, he might have added dieting and fitness to the list of the suburbanites’ major concerns.

digestion (5.404-443) Raphael emphasizes its physical reality: both humans and angels “hear, see, smell, touch, taste,/ Tasting concoct, digest, assimilate,/ And corporeal to incorporeal turn./ For know, whatever was created, needs/ To be sustained and fed” (5.411-415). Generations of readers have been amused by the apparent naiveté of the Miltonic narrator’s explanation that Adam, Eve and Raphael could enjoy leisurely conversation before partaking of their vegetarian meal without concern that the food would get cold: “No fear lest dinner cool” (5.396); and Milton editor Alastair Fowler does not spare the “hypersophisticated critics [who] despise the domesticity of this line” (281n). Milton, however, seems to have been willing to be the butt of his readers’ amusement in order to muddle the boundaries between human and angel by contending that angels bear elements of human physicality which humans themselves often find ridiculous.

Twenty-first-century readers are sometimes disconcerted by the Miltonic narrator’s depiction of the First Mother “barefoot in the kitchen.” When explicating Eve’s housewifely preparations for the meal which she and Adam are to share with the archangel (5.308-349), even Fowler cannot resist commenting that it was only natural for Eve to have technical knowledge about the storage of food, since “she was in no position to leave such things to the servants” (276n). Readers have, moreover, not failed to notice that, while Eve and Adam appear to have a fairly egalitarian division of labor in their work outside the bower, when at home the wife fulfills the traditional housekeeping functions; the description of the preparation and serving of the meal which the First Parents share with Raphael serves to exemplify Eve’s prelapsarian acceptance of woman’s position in the family hierarchy.

In “Freedom, service and the trade in slaves” Maureen Quilligan argues that “epic is that genre which, in making the ‘same’ into an ‘other,’ allows one group to fight, conquer, and subject an enemy. It is the genre of nation-building when the construction has imperial purposes” (214). Given the importance of the slave trade to England’s prosperity during the middle and later seventeenth century—Quilligan notes an estimate that by the end of the seventeenth century the slave trade accounted for more than a third of all commercial profits in England (221)—it is not surprising that Milton’s epic would imagine “the complications inherent in the duality between slave labor and free labor as a set of gendered relations, themselves forming a dichotomy constitutive of relations between the new subject and a redefined object of control, both the woman and the slave, those who do the physical labor of reproduction and production” (230).

For Rochester, women's sexuality, especially when put at the disposal of men, subverts the existing social hierarchy. While a man may actively wage war against his assigned place in a hierarchy, women blur boundaries between levels of hierarchy by their very passivity, their willingness to "accommodate" sexual partners from various strata. Pat Gill argues that in Rochester's writing of his "war against class intercourse" (334), what is perceived as women's sexual abandon "seems both a consequence and cause of social misalliances and always results in monstrous upheavals" (346). Critics must, according to Gill, connect Rochester's obscenity and scatology to a fear of class confusion, and then, coming full circle, connect that fear to his depictions of women:

[W]hat is indistinct, what is blurred and disordered, eventually becomes filthy. [...] [W]omen become conduits of, as well as symbols for, class ambiguity, and either explicitly or implicitly, women's anatomical attributes, their difference, become the foul passage to polluted equivocation. By allowing what is alien entry, women disintegrate by nature, and so by nature disintegrate social compositions. (347)

If a woman's body, and therefore her sexuality, was indeed tainted for Rochester as a "foul passage to polluted equivocation," homosexuality was an option, and the speaker of Rochester's songs appears at times to prefer male lovers to female: *Song* ("Love a Woman! y'are an Ass") ends with the claim that "There's a sweet soft *Page*, of mine,/ Does the trick worth *Forty Wenches*" (25;15-16). The Rochesterian speaker is as uninterested as the Miltonic narrator in "dissecting" the "long and tedious havoc" of "fabled knights/ In battles feigned" (*Paradise Lost* 9.29-31): the speaker of *Upon His Drinking a Bowl* entreats Vulcan not to decorate the cup with battle scenes (or pictures of the constellations), but rather to "carve thereon a spreading *Vine*,/ Then add Two lovely *Boys*;/ Their Limbs in Amorous folds intwine,/ The *Type* of future joys" (38;17-20); and in *Grecian Kindness* the speaker envisions the Greek victors embracing the Trojan women while "the kind Deity of Wine/ Kiss'd the soft wanton God of Love" (19;7-8). The poet's male lovers are soft, sweet, lovely; the god who is having sex with another male can be kind, and a carving of two embracing boys predicts future joys.

The male lovers clearly are not men, but boys, males whose sexual identity is not fully developed, and whose rank in society's hierarchy is correspondingly low; and as Harold Weber points out, for all their supposedly "liberated" variety, Rochester's poems never present a sexual relationship between two adult males of equal status (115). Rochester's engagement with homosexuality in his poetry is, according to Weber, highly unusual in its explicitness; yet Weber

claims that this homosexual content manifests itself “in ways that work against a coherent male homosexual subjectivity” (101-102). Even when “attempting to banish women from its sexual economy, Rochester’s homosexual verse cannot differentiate the female body from the male, its economy of desire predicated on a system in which boys and women are interchangeable objects circulating between men of equal position” (102).

Building on Weber’s analysis, Raymond-Jean Frontain contends that Rochester utilized biblical sources to construct a coherent homosexual identity. Frontain claims that by collaborating in the composition of the play *The Farce of Sodom* (whose attribution to Rochester is shaky at best)¹⁴ Rochester “takes one of the first steps towards the modern reclamation of the biblical narrative most often used to construct—or deconstruct—homosexual identity” (88). Yet while Frontain’s argument—that Rochester anticipates the use made of Genesis 18-19 by later writers in their attempts at creating a homosexual identity—bears traces of the tendentious, Frontain does not ignore the currents of darkness which underlie these attempts. Like Rochester, later artists would create:

worlds where the greater heroism is to transgress against biblical authority by indulging socially proscribed sexual desire even when to do so is fatal; indeed, the threat that hangs over the act guarantees its larger meaning and intensifies the pleasure of performing it. [...] [T]he characters in these works freely choose “buggery” because it enhances their sensation of being alive and allows them to enjoy a sexual carnival even while fully conscious of how dark that carnival may finally prove. (88-89)

When all is said and done—and it never is—the carnival is dark, as Frontain avers. The shadow is cast by the need to maintain hierarchy; or in Weber’s words, “Rochester’s male narrators, for all their ostensible freedoms, are libertines, not homosexuals, flaunting a deliberately provocative self-fashioning that depends on a conventional misogynous understanding of hierarchical relations between the sexes” (115).

For Milton, too, the carnival was indeed dark. The self-fashioned, self-imposed task of narrating heaven’s “distance and distaste,/ Anger and just rebuke,” (9.9-10) with the assistance of a female guide

¹⁴ See Note 1 in Frontain’s essay for his discussion of the play’s provenance (89). In his Introduction to the collected poems Keith Walker avers that it is possible, although not certain, that Rochester collaborated in writing *Sodom*; he adds that “To assert this twenty years ago would have damaged Rochester’s reputation as much as to deny it today” (x).

who could only be seen at night, was threatening to the poet himself. Milton might have discovered in the Speaker of Rochester's poems a reflection of his own fear of speaking, a sense that telling itself partakes of the satanic, that as a human speaker one is not only the object of Satan's attempt to seduce; one is also collaborator, subject, he whose attempt to speak to a clear, didactic agenda may prove to invoke and evoke the Satan which he had hoped, with the help of "holy Light," to defeat.

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