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IV

“That Lost Thing, Love”: Women and Impotence in Rochester’s Poetry

Butler’s *Hudibras* depicts powerful women who attain that power by aping men, and women who refuse to perform the traditional functions of the sex. Like Butler’s satire, the poems of John Wilmot, Second Earl of Rochester, mock men’s romantic idealizations as much as they mock the sex itself. Rochester never attacks the whole female sex in a poem like Oldham’s “Satyr Upon a Woman,” but in several of his poems that concern women (notably “Fair Chloris,” “The Imperfect Enjoyment,” “Timon,” and “A Letter from Artemisia to Chloe”), Rochester blames women for the vacuous and ambiguous relationships between the sexes. These satires seem more comic, more witty than the popular diatribes against women, and Rochester frequently maintains that tone by creating considerable distance between the poem’s narrator and the women who inhabit the text. Women in Rochester’s poems exemplify the satiric myth of the Amazon in their ability to be autonomous, to inspire love, to cause men to lose control; but more than Butler’s Trulla and the Lady, Rochester’s women remind men of an unattainable ideal of love and womanhood. Love is both the culprit and the longed-for ideal: to love a woman is to fear her power. But Rochester does not seem to pose alternatives to love or to set forth any satiric norm against which we can

judge women or the love of them. The satires, lacking in resolution, create a very temporary illusion of power, and instead of becoming forceful weapons against the sex (as in the case of the popular satires), they are monuments to the impotence of a narrator who is forced to confront his desires.

Rochester wrote to his friend Henry Savile (1642-87) on 22 June 1674 that "I have seriously considered one thinge, that of the three buisnises of this Age, Woemen, Polliticks & drinking, the last is the only exercise att wch. you & I have nott prou'd our selves Errant fumlbers, if you have the vanity to thinke otherwise, when wee meete next lett us appeale to freinds of both sexes & as they shall determine, live & dye sheere drunkards, or intire lovers; for as we mingle the matter, it is hard to say wch. is the most tiresome creature, the loving drunkard or the drunken lover."¹ The confidence to his friend is, of course, the casual statement of a libertine philosophy, but it also emphasizes the libertine's sense of powerlessness, his apparent lack of control over his "buisniss." Rochester as poet and satirist reveals his recurring sense of powerlessness in a world of uncertainty. As Carole Fabricant has written, "Rochester's portrayal of impotence implies that it is not so much the temporary result of particular circumstances as the inevitable condition of all human existence: a comprehensive metaphor of man's failure to realize his desires in the mortal world."²

Rochester mocks both those who seek the ideal of loving relationships between the sexes, and those who have relinquished the possibility of love in this world. Rochester often makes unconventional use of the conventions of the love lyric or the antifeminist satire (such as the dream vision, the aging coquette, the *memento mori*) as part of his assault on our expectations.³ In his love lyrics and later satires, Rochester seems to invent new "rules of love" while he undermines the very possibility of romantic love and romantic conventions. For example, in "Upon Leaving His Mistress" the poet claims that to insist on the constancy of his mistress would damn her rather than praise her. He affects to praise his mistress for being a fecund whore who services an entire nation. The poet mocks the reader's expectation that to call

her a nurturant mother earth will be a compliment, when he makes her "universal influence" obscene and lustful:

See, the kind seed-receiving earth
To every grain affords a birth.
On her no showers unwelcome fall;
Her willing womb retains 'em all.
And shall my Celia be confined?
No! Live up to thy mighty mind,
And be the mistress of mankind.⁴ [ll. 15-21]

Further, some of what is treated as unique to Rochester consistently appears in misogynist satires, Cavalier love lyrics, or Restoration comedy. For example, some critics have cited Rochester's association of the vagina with eating metaphors and its image of an enormous, insatiable cavern as possible evidence of Rochester's castration fear; but such metaphors are quite commonplace in late seventeenth-century satires.⁵

Women's beauty, the object of praise according to romance conventions, may paradoxically cause men to be damned in Rochester's poetry. The poet in "On the Women About Town" pleads, "Make the women more modest, more sound, or less fair!" The whores may doom man to "The loss of his heart and the fall of his nose." Similarly prostitute Sue Willis becomes the object of attack because she so readily enslaves men in "On Mrs. Willis": "Against the charms our ballacks have / How weak all human skill is, / Since they can make a man a slave / To such a bitch as Willis!" (ll. 1-4). The libertine narrator of various songs alternately attempts to extricate himself from women's power and to deny that their power exists. He denigrates women as "the silliest part of God's creation" (l. 4) in the song "Love a woman? You're an ass!" Woman ranks at the lowest level of society as the unworthy companion to fools and wits. The libertine prefers almost anything to a lowly lady: "Then give me health, wealth, mirth, and wine, / And, if busy love entrenches, / There's a sweet, soft page of mine / Does the trick worth forty wenches" (ll. 13-16).

On the other hand, woman's seeming autonomy merits

violent curses in an earlier poem, "A Ramble in St. James's Park." The narrator enters the crowded satiric scene of St. James's Park, "this all-sin-sheltering grove," to relieve his drunkenness with lechery, "To cool my head and fire my heart," but he becomes a voyeur who observes Corinna's ability to attract every man who passes. The divine Corinna drops to earth because she scorns a god, and the narrator curses her enticingly divine appearance: "But mark what creatures women are: / How infinitely vile, when fair!" (ll. 41-42). He is appalled at her welcoming the advances of three amorous knights, and he berates her with a scatological curse. The divine goddess is reduced to "the savory scent of salt-swoln cunt." He curses himself as well: "Gods! that a thing admired by me / Should fall to so much infamy" (ll. 89-90). He would have preferred that her going with the three knights had resulted from the lust he had aroused in her:

There's something generous in mere lust.
But to turn damned abandoned jade
When neither head nor tail persuade;
To be a whore in understanding
A passive pot for fools to spend in! [ll. 98-102]

The narrator then solicits pity by playing the role of a scorned lover who has long suffered the promiscuous activities of his mistress. He is, in fact, angered because she is not, even in some perverse way, faithful to him. Now he curses her ability to dissolve his powers of reason and subject *him* to the mindless powers of love. She is all lust, he all love. In the remainder of the poem the narrator seeks unrelieved revenge with a curse on her womb which parallels the narrator's curse on his useless penis in "The Imperfect Enjoyment":

May stinking vapors choke your womb
Such as the men you dote upon!
May your depraved appetite,
That could in whiffling fools delight,

Beget such frenzies in your mind
You may go mad for the north wind. [ll. 133-38]

The scorned lover, the narrator, will reserve his most vitriolic revenge for her until after she is married. He will make her feel his misery by making her spouse jealous, by making her "chew the cud of misery / And know she owes it all to me" as he tears her away from her husband in the very act of sex. Rochester is using the conventional curse against the sex as the conventional retribution of a lover scorned. He returns her scorn, using his power "To plague this woman and undo her." As in Oldham's "Satyr Upon a Woman" (written about five years later), the object of love becomes the object of the satirist's hate. The satirist is hurt that Corinna does not return his love, and he expresses the hurt through anger rather than weeping. The satirist sees himself as sexually impotent when faced with Corinna's lack of feeling, and the only power remaining to him is that of the pen. Chaos will reign before he ceases his attempt to contain her:

Crab-louse, inspired with grace divine,
From earthly cod to heaven shall climb;
Physicians shall believe in Jesus,
And disobedience cease to please us,
Ere I desist with all my power
To plague this woman and undo her. [ll. 147-52]

Rochester turns the conventional curse against the sex to condemn Corinna's lack of feeling. While Oldham, Gould, Ames, and countless other satirists attack women for their lust and inconstancy, the libertine narrator here inverts the reader's expectation and condemns Corinna's resistance to emotion and her resistance to loving him, but he masks his pain with angry curses. Rochester parodies the pastoral model and the Cavalier love lyric;⁶ he also elaborates on the standard antifeminist curse and condemns Corinna for her disinterest in him as much as for her lust.

"Fair Chloris in a Pigsty Lay," one of Rochester's early

songs, also appears to be an antifeminist poem. It mocks the idealized shepherdess, Chloris, and the pastoral tradition which created her. The lovely nymph with "snowy arms" and "ivory pails" sleeps against a background of the "murmuring gruntlings" of her pig herd. "Fair Chloris" mocks the reader's expectations, pastoral conventions, the idealization of women, and the illusions of men who seek power over them. Rochester does not provide an explicit norm against which the reader can balance his attitudes toward Chloris, and in that way the poem ends without resolution. The originality of the poem rests in part in its balance of comic and serious elements—the concept of pigs' gruntlings as complaints of the scorching day; the passionate, even sensual, devotion Chloris apparently feels for her pigs; and the swain's plot to rape her which inspires her fear. The poem avoids the celebratory resolution of comedy, though it is filled with comic elements; it skirts the dissolution into chaos that the dark vision of apocalyptic satire would require. Only Chloris, who masturbates to ease the excitement inspired by the dream, is satisfied, and the reader feels the uneasiness of having been tricked, the uneasiness of irresolution. While it is true that Chloris "has it both ways, so satisfying our 'Fair Chloris' and our 'pigsty' expectations,"⁷ the reader may catch himself sharing the antifeminist sentiment, and wishing, perhaps with Chloris, that the rape had taken place.

Rochester allows the reader to believe he is a voyeur, unobserved in his vicarious excitement, and then turns the poem to give power to the supposedly passive "Fair Chloris." Very much in the manner of minor Restoration boudoir poems, the poem allows the reader to intrude on a woman's secret and perverse rituals. Rochester allows interplay between the reader's pastoral expectations, turned sensual, and the hidden power of Chloris. In the first stanza it seems Chloris guards the pigs, but we learn that the grunts inspire her sleep. She dreams of gently tending the pigs, but she also has the power to capture a swain:

She dreamt whilst she with careful pains
Her snowy arms employed

In ivory pails to fill out grains,
One of her love-convicted swains
Thus hasting to her cried: [ll. 6-10]

The present tense of Chloris's dream makes it seem even more immediate. The swain runs to tell her that her "bosom pig" hangs in danger at Flora's cave, and Chloris's preference for the pig rather than the swain makes her the object of mockery.

Stanza six creates an abrupt turn in the reader's attitude. The swain becomes the villain as the story of the endangered pig is revealed to be a plot against Chloris's honor. The "love-convicted swain" turns into "the lustful slave" as he throws himself on her at the entrance to the cave. Transforming the pigs' groans into the erotic sounds of rape, she awakes fearing that she has lost her virginity. But Nature intrudes to release her, and she realizes she has dreamed. Through masturbation she is restored to the same fair innocent Chloris who lay sleeping in stanza one:

Frighted she wakes, and waking frigs,
Nature thus kindly eased
In dreams raised by her murmuring pigs
And her own thumb between her legs,
She's innocent and pleased. [ll. 36-40]

The reader remains the voyeur—he sees that in her most secret dreams she does desire the swain she has denied. Rochester suggests that Chloris's innocence is not legitimate, and that she shares the mindless morality of her pigs. But she still retains the appearance of power, for the poet seems resentful that a woman can satisfy herself without a man and still remain innocent.⁸

The dream vision of the virgin is, of course, a convention Pope employed most successfully in the eighteenth-century work "The Rape of the Lock." On the day of Belinda's rape, her guardian Ariel conjures up a vision of a beautiful youth who whispers the gentle warning that men may seek to steal her honor. She awakens still innocent, but there is a some-

what muted suggestion that the dream arouses her. The beau's words "ev'n in Slumber caus'd her Cheek to glow" (I.24), and her lapdog, a surrogate lover, awakens her: "when *Shock*, who thought she slept too long, / Leapt up, and wak'd his Mistress with his Tongue" (I.115-16).⁹

Dream visions in minor antifeminist satires of the period frequently recall Eve's fall from innocence, which was brought about by Satan's disguised urgings, and thus such visions become a metaphor for the Fall of mankind. For example, the anonymous "The Maiden's Dream" (1705) describes a virgin's vision as wish fulfillment, though it ends with the maiden being less satisfied than Chloris:

Once slumb'ring as I lay within my Bed,
 No Creature with me, but my Maidenhead,
 Methought a Gallant came, (as Gallants they can do
 Much with Young Ladies, and with old ones too)
 He woo'd, he Su'd, at length he sped,
 Marry'd methought we were, and went to Bed.
 He turn'd to me, got up, with that I squeak'd,
 Blush'd, and cry'd oh? and so awak'd.
 It wou'd have vex'd a Saint, my Flesh did burn,
 To be so near, and miss so good a Turn.
 Oh! cruel Dream, why did you thus deceive me,
 To shew me Heaven, and then, in Hell, to leave me?¹⁰

"Fair Chloris" creates extraordinary sensuality in a woman's masturbation by making the reader a voyeur. The poem concludes with the contraries still fluctuating. What Anne Righter says of "The Earl of Rochester's Conference with a Post Boy" may be extended to "Fair Chloris": "It manages simultaneously to magnify and deflate *both* its subject and the orthodox values by which that subject is judged, to invite belief and to undercut it."¹¹ In "Fair Chloris" we are invited to feel relieved that the rape was only a vain imagining and that her virginity has been preserved. The romantic belief that she remains innocent is also mocked, for Chloris attains sexual satisfaction without succumbing to a man's sexual power. Chloris, like Corinna in "A Ramble in

St. James's Park," remains untouched by man within the present moment of the poem. Chloris and Corinna are observed from afar by the reader and the narrator, but the narrator's distance allows an illusion of control over the women. At the same time the narrator bemoans his lack of power to insist that Corinna love him, to rape Chloris, and even to consummate sex with his mistress in "The Imperfect Enjoyment." One sees why women should be kept at such distance in "The Imperfect Enjoyment," for their very touch causes the narrator to lose control, to subjugate reason to love. Disdain or even pain may paradoxically inflame the passions rather than deaden the feeling. The language of love and death may be exaggerated, both to evoke an ambiguous response to the narrator and apparently to animate love. In another poem, "The Discovery," a man in love may escape his feelings of impotence through the double entendre of "dying":

But Love has carefully contrived for me
 The last perfection of misery,
 For to my state those hopes of common peace
 Which death affords to every wretch, must cease:
 My worst of fates attends me in my grave
 Since, dying, I must be no more your slave. [ll. 31-36]

In "The Imperfect Enjoyment" the frustrated male narrator directs his satire against his own impotent organ rather than against the mistress. The genre of "the imperfect enjoyment" apparently originated in Ovid's *Amores* II.iii and Petronius's *Satyricon*, chapters 128-40; the Latin, French, and English sources for the poem have been thoroughly documented in recent years.¹² In both Ovid and Petronius the lover finds himself unable to perform for his mistress at the crucial moment. In Ovid the incident is made comic; in Petronius humiliation makes the lover consider castrating himself as punishment for his own inadequacy. The genre reached new popularity in seventeenth-century France and England, and apparently Rochester knew several modern versions. The Restoration examples of the genre vary in how

comic they are, who and what is to blame for the impotency, and the kind of curse on the offending organ.

The only action in Rochester's "The Imperfect Enjoyment" takes place in lines 1-18. "Both equally inspired with eager fire," the pair initially share in the foreplay. The woman actively urges consummation, she charms him, and the lover seeks to control his sexual response with his "thoughts":

With arms, legs, lips close clinging to embrace,
She clips me to her breast, and sucks me to her face.
Her nimble tongue, Love's lesser lightning, played
Within my mouth, and to my thoughts conveyed
Swift orders that I should prepare to throw
The all-dissolving thunderbolt below. [ll. 5-10]

He responds to her activity by ejaculating prematurely, and he suffers because he has failed her. She clearly causes his sexual excitement, but she is not blamed for the missed mutual gratification: "A touch from any part of her had done't: / Her hand, her foot, her very look's a cunt."

From this point the poem becomes somewhat static—that is, more satiric than comic, as the language of the poetry imitates the action. Its static nature increases as verbs turn to adjectives, and the distance between the lover's expectations and the reality of his experience increases. He finally despairs: "Trembling, confused, despairing, limber, dry, / A wishing, weak, unmoving lump I lie." At first the self and the organ are synonymously, the penis equated with the soul, and they remain identical for another attempt at satisfaction. But once the speaker acknowledges the futility of renewed attempts, he completely dissociates himself from his penis. The organ takes on a separate identity as the speaker sadly recalls its past days of glory. Called back to the present, the lover launches a violent curse against himself, and he addresses the penis as if it were a detached soldier deserting his military duty.

A central question in reading "The Imperfect Enjoyment" concerns the cause of the lover's impotence and just what

Rochester is suggesting about it. Richard E. Quaintance, citing sources in Montaigne's *Essais* and poems by Remy Belleau and Mathurin Regnier, suggests that in following his sources, Rochester distrusts "the interference of rational or imaginative faculties in a situation properly physical only."¹³ Dustin Griffin contests the idea of the mind as a cause of impotence since "indeed, the culprit is the unruly member which is imagined to have a will of its own. It is the offending organ, not the meddling mind, that is cursed."¹⁴ I agree that the lover's "thoughts" aid rather than impede the lover. Beyond that, the cause of the premature ejaculation, it seems to me, is quite clearly the touch of the mistress. The language of the first eighteen lines of the poem confines the cause of the ejaculation to the mistress's touch. "Love" inspires the lover "with eager fire," and the mistress's tongue, "Love's lesser lightning," brings about an ejaculation. The lover can maintain his potency only at a distance; the female's proximity threatens his power to perform, to be manly.

The lady too attributes the failure to love and rapture, not to thought or reason, but she gently chides him as she distinguishes between the love she has experienced and the pleasure she has been denied: "All this to love and rapture's due; / Must we not pay a debt to pleasure too?" But premature ejaculation is followed by impotence: "Eager desires confound my first intent, / Succeeding shame does more success prevent, / And rage at last confirms me impotent" (ll. 28-30).¹⁵ The eager desires exist in the present moment of impotence and "confound" the earlier failure. His *desire* is to swive, and the emotions of shame and rage further complicate that desire. Not surprisingly, her hand which caused the premature ejaculation cannot also relieve his impotence. Love inspired his first attempt to swive, and "love's lesser lightning" first inspired his thunderbolt. As the lover turns to the past, a time of pleasure and power, he creates greater dissociation between past success and present failure, between the self and his sex; he disgustedly curses the offending organ and fashions a metaphor. The self is a prince, the penis a warrior in his behalf who turns cowardly:

Thou treacherous, base deserter of my flame,
 False to my passion, fatal to my fame,
 Through what mistaken magic dost thou prove
 So true to lewdness, so untrue to love? [ll. 46-49]

But when great Love the onset does command,
 Base recreant to thy prince, thou dar'st not stand.
 Worst part of me, and henceforth hated most,
 Through all the town a common fucking post,
 On whom each whore relieves her tingling cunt
 As hogs on gates do rub themselves and grunt. [ll. 60-65]

The separation from the self is very complex, for the request is for disease or illness to ravage the penis. Love now becomes the culprit.¹⁶ Love created the erection, caused the premature ejaculation, and perpetuated the impotence. Once again Rochester mocks the lost ideal of love. Love creates rapture; it also creates destructive despair.

Two other recent readings of the poem deserve attention. Carole Fabricant argues that no clear reason for the lover's impotence emerges, and thus impotence seems "fundamentally inexplicable and uncontrollable, an inevitable fact of life liable to appear at any moment without warning and without particular reason."¹⁷ Her reading of the poem then is apocalyptic and tragic, a "vision of impotence and decay." Yet it seems more likely that the exaggeration of the curse, while consistent with tradition, adds comic elements to the lover's self-destruction, though the world of the imperfect enjoyment is not that uncertain. Rochester cites the touch of the lady, the lover's rage and shame, and love itself as sources for sexual failure. Nor can I agree when Reba Wilcoxon says that the lover "acknowledges an obligation beyond the mere satisfaction of self and an obligation to the needs and desires of another."¹⁸ Certainly the mistress is not cursed or degraded with other whorish members of her sex, but the lover's overwhelming preoccupation is with his own lack of ability to perform, not with relieving his mistress's frustration. Remembered only in the final line, "The wronged Corinna" becomes merely the spoils of battle to be thrown to

the potent and victorious: "And may ten thousand abler pricks agree / To do the wronged Corinna right for thee" (ll. 71-72). The balance of power shifts from the mistress to warriors who are more virile in the cause of love. The poem resists an antifeminist interpretation, for the lover flagellates himself rather than his mistress.



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Rochester follows the antifeminist traditions we have described with the inclusion of familiar conventions, such as the superannuated coquette, the writing whore, the *memento mori*, and the virgin's dream vision. The satires assume woman's lust, inconstancy, and vanity; they curse her fecundity, her sexual appetite, and her ability to disrupt men's expectations and illusions, while a simultaneous impulse describes her sexual autonomy and power. The satires deplore women's attractiveness and their ability to feminize men even as they lament men's self-hatred and emasculation. At the same time that the satirist narrator wallows in the satiric myth of impotence as a lover, however, the force of his words creates a potent weapon. The satires bemoan the narrator's lack of power while they attempt to establish power through language. The satirist longs for release from his desire, yet he clings to his need for passion. The satirist loves, yet he hates himself for loving and his mistress for inspiring that love. The popular satires of the Restoration transfer the responsibility for love to woman, and more and more to the sex as a whole, as an abstraction that can be attacked without so much reference to the male's own feelings of love. In Rochester's poems, however, the satires on women seem less a means to contain aggression than a means to contain men's pain and vulnerability, and in addition, to gain power through wit and language in the articulation of that pain. Women are satirized for their "killing pleasure" ("A Song," 1685)—their capacity to seduce, dominate, and destroy—but their worst offence, as they are characterized

in Rochester's poems, is their unwillingness to love the men who love them.

The poems document the conflicts inherent in experiencing love and sex when the rules have changed and the players, particularly the women, have refused to adopt their familiar roles. If pornography is the reflection of women as men want to affect them, but know they cannot, it is, to some extent, an instrument well suited to the impotent. The rhetorical stance Rochester adopts seems to suggest that he writes from the same impulse as the less artful seventeenth-century pamphleteers. Yet because the narrator allows the reader to recognize that very impulse from which the satires arise, he sometimes frees the reader to share the comic and witty lament for what once defined the relationships between passionate men and women, "that lost thing, love."