

THE ECLECTIC NATURE OF RESTORATION LIBERTINISM

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Restoration comedy, as Thomas Fujimura has argued, reflects the intellectual trends that influenced the mind of the upper class by realistically portraying their life and conduct. (1) Primarily, the gentility was influenced by the French philosophical libertines like Saint-Evremond, Fontenelle and Gassendi, who were, rather than moral degenerates, sceptics in the name of experience, reason and free thought. However, during the Restoration, libertinism became to be synonymous with Neo-Epicureanism. It was also affected by classical naturalism and Renaissance scepticism. These philosophical attitudes, however, have been so intermingled and so much blurred in the character of the Restoration rake that it is now almost impossible to differentiate them. Yet the characteristics of each attitude will be pointed out in order to clarify the various systems of thought that contributed to the emergence of the Restoration libertine and consequently affected his way of life.

Because of the modes of thought that form the Restoration libertine's consciousness, it would be an oversimplification to define him simply as a debauched person in pursuit of the gratification of his desires regardless of the wellbeing of others. As Dale Underwood comprehensively defines him, philosophically the libertine is

— an anti-rationalist, denying the power of man through reason to conceive reality... Accordingly the libertine rejected the orthodox medieval and Renaissance con-

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(1) See *The Restoration Comedy of Wit* (1952; rpt. New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1968), p. 57.

cept of universal order and of man's place and purpose therein... His ends were hedonistic, 'Epicurean,' and he embraced the satisfaction of the senses in accordance with the reasonable 'dictates' of nature - that is, in this case, one's 'natural' impulses and desires... At least three philosophic lines of thought are involved: Epicureanism, skepticism, and a type of primitivism or naturalism for which unfortunately there is no other received name.» (2)

One of the Restoration court wits, (3) John Wilmot, the Earl of Rochester, who exemplified the libertine ideals both in his life and writings, was the perfect true-to-life specimen on which the rake in the Restoration comedies of the period was modelled. (4) The notorious story of his lewd affair which he had slyly plotted in the manner of a Boccaccian novella when he decided to seduce a married woman and consequently caused her husband to commit suicide is quite sufficient to display his moral carelessness, his irresponsible pursuit of pleasure at the expense of deranging social order, his Machiavellian urge for power, and Hobbesian aggressiveness. (5) As to his art, Rochester, in his poem «The Debauchee,» paints a realistic portrait of the futile and profligate life of a rake:

I rise at eleven, I dine about two,
I get drunk before seven, and the next thing I do,
I send for my whore, when for fear of a clap,
I dally about her, and spew in her lap;
There we quarrel and scold till I fall asleep,

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- (2) *Etherege and the Seventeenth-Century Comedy of Manners* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1957), pp. 13-14.
- (3) Among others were the Duke of Buckingham, Sir Charles Sedley, Lord Buckhurst, Sir George Etherege, Earl of Mulgrave, William Wycherley and Henry Savile. See John Harold Wilson, *The Court Wits of the Restoration* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1948).
- (4) It is known that Sir George Etherege had modelled Dorimant in *The Man of Mode* (1676) on his friend Rochester.
- (5) See Graham Greene, *Lord Rochester's Monkey* (New York: The Viking Press, 1974), p. 93.

When the jilt growing bold, to my pocket does creep ;
Then slyly she leaves me, and to revenge the affront,
At once both my lass and my money I want.
If by chance then I wake, hot-headed and drunk,
What a coy! do I make for the loss of my purk?
I storm, and I roar, and I fall in a rage,
And missing my lass I fall on my page.
Then crop-sick, all morning I rail at my men,
And in bed I lie yawning till eleven again. (6)

Also, in his «A Satire Against Marriage» Rochester presents the typical libertine's rollery against marriage :

Marriage, thou state of jealousy and care,
The curse of wife, what flesh and blood can bear?
.....
Of all the Bedlams marriage is the worst,
With endless cords, with endless keepers curst.
Frantic in love you run, and rave about,
Mad to get in, but hopeless to get out. (7)

Both Rochester's life and writings make it clear that the most influential system of thought on the libertine mind was Epicureanism, not, however, in the classical philosophical meaning of the term (8) but in its hedonistic or subsequent connotations. Thus, the libertines were carelessly extravagant in their wanton pursuit of the gratification of their mainly physical desires. With the glorification of pleasure over virtue, the libertines simply reduced the Epicurean philosophy to the motto «Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.» An illustration of this attitude in Restoration drama is Shadwell's Don Juan in *The Libertine* (1675), who states :

(6) *Ibid.*, p. 73.

(7) *Ibid.*, p. 162.

(8) The Epicurean belief that «Pleasure is the highest ethical good» has often been misinterpreted. Epicureans were not sensualists. 'Pleasure', for them, meant the relative absence of pain from mind and body, that is, both physical well-being and peace of mind.

My bus'ness is my pleasure, that end I will always compass without scrupling the means; There is no right or wrong, but what conduces to my pleasure. (9)

The hedonistic libertine's exaltation of the senses over reason was such that he eventually seemed to resemble a senseless beast.

This image of man bearing resemblance to animals perfectly fitted into the libertine's concept of Naturalism, according to which he, after Thomas Hobbes, believed that man was a brutally aggressive, egoistic fighter in «the State of Nature» while freely and spontaneously pursuing the satisfaction of his sensual desires. As the egoistically aggressive libertine, who in accordance with his belief in the Hobbesian lupine concept of man, was careless of his means while achieving his aims, he was constantly in strife with society and often referred to as «brute» and «wild.» This reference was related to «the libertine ideal of man the animal, man purged from the restraint of society...» (10) Thus ethical life was reduced to the level of amoral animal behavior.

In compliance with classical Naturalism, as the libertine believed that all that was spontaneous and free was good, he exalted personal freedom. In order to preserve his much-valued freedom, the rake, like Don Juan in *The Libertine*, rejected the laws and institutions imposed upon him by society: «Of Nature's freedom we're beguil'd / By laws which man imposes.» (11) The institution which he was especially opposed to was marriage, for he considered it:

— A Trap set for flies, [which] may possibly be ointed at the Entrance, with a little Voluptuousness, [and] under which is contained a draught of deadly wine, more picking and tedious than the Passions it pretends to cure. (12)

(9) *The Complete Works of Thomas Shadwell*, ed. Montague Summers (London: Fortune Press, 1927), III, 28.

(10) Maximilian E. Novak, «Margery Pinchwife's 'London Disease': Restoration Comedy and the Libertine Offensive of the 1670's,» *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 10 (1977), 17.

(11) *The Complete Works of Thomas Shadwell*, p. 60.

(12) Francis Osborne, «Advice to a Son,» in *The Collected Works of Francis Osborne* (London: n.p., 1673), p. 35.

By limiting the free expression of man's natural impulses, marriage rendered life dull. This view was especially explicit in William Ramsey's (William Seymour pseud.) most influential book **Conjugium Coniugium, or Some Serious Considerations on Marriage** (1673). This book, which defended libertine principles, referred to marriage as «slavery,» «Bondage,» «a yolk,» and «a heavy burthen.» (13)

Together with the restrictions imposed by marriage, the naturalist libertine also rejected the conventional social codes of the highly artificial précieux tradition which was based on Petrarchan ideals that diminished the lover into the slave of the woman. This Petrarchan concept which idealized love had almost developed into a religion in which the virtuous lady was given a semi-divine status and placed upon a pedestal to be worshipped by the whining and sighing lover, who was nearly always miserable, in pain, despair, and tears for not having been able to approach this chaste woman. This attitude which denied the reality of instinct and renounced the physical aspect of man was repudiated by the libertine who subsequently responded with cynicism towards love, thus reducing it to mere lust. Unlike the Petrarchan 'slave,' the libertine was freely unfaithful to his lady, whom he considered his equal. Again unlike the whining Petrarchan lover, the libertine was carelessly gay in his attitude towards love, which he irresponsibly believed to be nothing more than a game.

At various points in certain plays there are ironic usages of the Petrarchan vocabulary; that is, these words of false worship that are put into the mouths of the rake or fool do not serve the original purpose. For instance, a rake like Worthy in Sir John Vanbrugh's **The Relapse** (1696) uses them uncandidly, as compliments, for seducing the virtuous Amanda; he is not being sincere in what he is saying:

Worthy (kneeling). Thou angel of light, let me fall down
and adore thee.

(13) William Ramsey, **Conjugium Coniugium** (1674; rpt. New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1976), p. 7.

[or] My life, my soul, my goddess.
Oh, forgive me! (14)

With the fool, however, it is a totally different matter. When he uses such words of false worship, he is not just sincerely flattering the woman he loves, but also is actually prepared to practice what he is saying. For instance, when Lord Plausible in William Wycherley's *The Plain Dealer* (1676) is greeting Olivia, whom he loves, he says:

...madam, I am your eternal slave, and kiss your fair hands; which I had done sooner, according to your commands... (15)

In this case, the fool's speech is nothing more than a tool by means of which the dramatist satirizes the *precleux* tradition. Furthermore, in the rhetoric of the gay couple, the utterance of words to that effect often reveals the double irony in the libertine's speech. For instance, when Dorimant in Sir George Etherege's *The Man of Mode* (1676), is using the artificial pseudo-religious terminology in a speech with Harriet, he does it while seemingly making fun of the Petrarchan love tradition whereas he is actually trying to conceal the fact that he is in love with her:

The prospect of such a heaven will make me persevere and give you marks that are infallible. I will renounce all the joys I have in friendship and in wine, sacrifice to you all the interest I have in other women. (16)

While the naturalist libertine rejected the conventional courting code which reduced the lover to a whining slave and opposed marriage since he regarded it as an institution which practically turned the lover into a frustrated prisoner, he was, in fact, glorifying joys of free love. He claimed free love to be the law of Nature and argued that the pleasure, derived from the gratification

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- (14) John Vanbrugh, «The Relapse,» in *British Dramatists From Dryden to Sheridan*, eds. George H. Nettleton, et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1969), V. ii. 295, V.v. 300.
(15) William Wycherley, «The Plain Dealer,» in *British Dramatists From Dryden to Sheridan*, II. i. 216.
(16) Sir George Etherege, «The Man of Mode,» in *British Dramatists From Dryden to Sheridan*, V. ii. 191.

of physical appetites, was natural and therefore good and legitimate. It was for this reason that he wittily exposed the affected coxcomb, the coquette, the pretenders to wit of both sexes for forcing nature, the lewd woman who affected virtue for denying nature, and the old male and female lechers for deviating from nature. Since the libertine considered his unattached, pleasure-seeking conduct to be perfectly acceptable as long as he did not lose his social face, he was reluctant to change just to please the heroine. In order to keep his freedom, the libertine took care not to display his true emotions, be they affection or jealousy, for fear of being considered unnatural and consequently labelled a constant and therefore dull lover. Dorimant is among the libertines who follows this rule during his courtship :

I love her and dare not let her know it;
I fear sh'as an ascendant o'er me and revenge the wrongs
I have done her sex. (17)

Contrary to the pseudo-religious terminology of the *precleux* tradition, the vocabulary of the libertine's naturalistic approach to love is down to earth and the images are mainly from gambling, hunting or eating. This of course is suggestive of the reduction of love to a game or mere appetite. The most famous instance of such usage is in Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675) in the notorious china scene (IV, iii).

The naturalist libertine was also being a sceptic while indulging in pointed yet jocular criticism of established institutions like marriage and established customs like the *precleux* tradition. Furthermore, he was sceptical of the established belief in the power of reason to achieve knowledge, and glorified sensationalistic epistemology. Also, most libertines like Wycherley's Horner (*The Country Wife*) who believed that women were made constant «by good pay» were sceptical about females, and some like Dorimant were sceptical about love :

Love gilds us over and makes us show fine things to one
another for a time, but soon the gold wears off and
then again the native brass appears. (18)

(17) *Ibid.*, IV. i. 180.

(18) *Ibid.*, II. ii. 167.

In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that it was this overall scepticism of the libertine that made him the unorthodox person he was, for thus he developed a whole new set of dogmas that set him apart from the «honest man» who was the major embodiment of the established moral and social order.