

## Carnavalesque Resistance in Restoration Theatre: Morality, Eroticism, and Discourse in the Film, *The Libertine*

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**Abstract:** This study aims to examine, within a multilayered theoretical framework, the theatre of Restoration-era England as represented in the film *The Libertine* (2005), directed by Laurence Dunmore. Adapted from the eponymous stage play (1994) by Stephen Jeffreys, this cinematic work foregrounds the life story of John Wilmot, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Rochester, an intellectually and literarily provocative figure, and reveals how theatre functioned as a space of cultural, aesthetic, and political contestation in seventeenth-century England. The film not only portrays Wilmot's individual moral decline and hedonistic lifestyle but also exposes the discursive functions of theatre in relation to structures of power and the mechanisms of public representation and ideological domination. Following the reopening of English theatres after the Restoration, particularly within the royal patronage of court theatres, an aesthetic climate emerged in which moral boundaries were transgressed and theatrical space became infused with eroticism, satire, and political critique. In this context, *The Libertine* dramatically illustrates how theatre could be appropriated both as an instrument for the ideological reproduction of hegemonic authority and as a subversive arena for the testing of expressive freedom. A striking example of this tension can be seen in Wilmot's theatrical production, which, though initially commissioned by King Charles II and subsequently transformed into a satirical attack on the throne, is presented not merely as a personal act of literary defiance but as a historical example of how theatre could influence public consciousness while simultaneously confronting mechanisms of censorship. Thus, *The Libertine* configures the stage as a space of confrontation and reckoning, where social, sexual, and political tensions converge, thereby inviting a renewed critical engagement with the dramaturgy of the Restoration period. Through the character of Elizabeth Barry, the film interrogates the representation of women on stage, examining how female bodies are positioned within a patriarchal economy of spectatorship and how they are simultaneously rendered both as objects of desire and as emergent subjects through the act of performance. Barry's transition to the stage is explored not merely as an aspect of her acting career but as a symbolic process of transformation tied to questions of public visibility, gendered performance, and the construction of female subjectivity in the Restoration theatre. The interplay between bodily exhibition, theatrical renderings of moral decay, and the transformative power of performance art constitutes one of the film's core dramatic concerns.

### Keywords:

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### Restorasyon Tiyatrosunda Karnavalesk Direniş: *Hovarda* Filminde Ahlak, Erotizm ve Söylem

**Öz:** Bu çalışma, Laurence Dunmore'un yönetmenliğinde sinemaya uyarlanan *Hovarda* (*The Libertine*, 2005) adlı film ekseninde, 17. yüzyıl İngiltere'sinin Restorasyon dönemi tiyatrosunu çok katmanlı bir kuramsal çerçevede değerlendirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Stephen Jeffreys'in aynı adlı tiyatro oyunundan beyaz perdeye aktarılan bu yapım hem biyografik hem de edebî düzlemde çarpıcı bir figür olan John Wilmot'ın (2. Rochester Kontu) yaşam öyküsü aracılığıyla, tiyatronun o dönemde nasıl bir kültürel, estetik ve siyasal mücadele alanına dönüştüğünü gözler önüne sermektedir. Film, yalnızca Wilmot'ın bireysel ahlaki çöküşünü ve hedonistik yaşam tarzını değil, aynı zamanda dönem tiyatrosunun söylemsel işlevini, iktidar yapılarıyla olan çatışmalı ilişkisini ve kamusal temsiller üzerindeki tahakküm mekanizmalarını da görünür kılar. Restorasyonla birlikte yeniden açılan İngiliz tiyatrosu, özellikle kraliyet himayesinde şekillenen saray tiyatrolarında, ahlaki sınırların esnetildiği ve teatral alanın erotizm, hiciv ve siyasal eleştiriyle yüklendiği bir estetik atmosfer yaratmıştır. *Hovarda* filmi, bu bağlamda, tiyatronun hem tahakkümün ideolojik yeniden üretiminde bir araç olarak kullanılabileceğini hem de ifade özgürlüğünün sınındığı bir karşı söylem alanına dönüşebileceğini dramatik biçimde temsil eder. Filmde Wilmot'ın Kral II. Charles adına sipariş edilen ve daha sonra tahtı hicveden biçime evrilen oyunu, yalnızca kişisel bir edebî başkaldırı değil, aynı zamanda tiyatronun kamuoyu üzerindeki etkisini ve sansür mekanizmalarıyla nasıl karşı karşıya kaldığını gösteren tarihsel bir örnek olarak sunulmaktadır. Böylelikle *Hovarda* filmi, sahneyi toplumsal, cinsel ve siyasal gerilimlerin iç içe geçtiği bir çatışma ve yüzleşme mekânı olarak kurgulamakta, Restorasyon tiyatrosunu yeniden düşünmeye davet eden çok katmanlı bir sanat metni niteliği kazanmaktadır. Film, Elizabeth Barry karakteri üzerinden sahnedeki kadın temsiline odaklanmakta, kadın bedeninin ataerkil seyir ekonomisi içinde nasıl konumlandığı, hem arzu nesnesi olarak nasıl nesneleştirildiği hem de sahne pratiği aracılığıyla nasıl özneleştiği süreçlerini çok katmanlı biçimde incelemektedir. Barry'nin sahneye geçişi, Restorasyon tiyatrosunun kadın temsiline dair dönüşümlerini görünür kılmakta olup bu süreç, oyunculuk pratiğinin ötesinde, kamusal görünürlük, cinsiyetlenmiş temsiliyet ve edebî öznellik inşası bağlamlarında da okunabilecek çok katmanlı bir sahneleme olarak yorumlanmaktadır. Bedenin teşhiri, ahlaki çöküşün teatral gösterimi ve sahne sanatının dönüştürücü gücü arasındaki etkileşim, filmdeki dramatik yapının temel belirleyicilerindendir.

#### Anahtar Sözcükler:

Söylemsel direniş,  
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Karnavalesk estetik,  
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## Introduction: Theatre, Power, and the Carnavalesque in Restoration England

The Restoration of the English monarchy in 1660, marked by the ascension of Charles II, inaugurated a period of intense cultural and ideological transformation. Nowhere was this shift more dramatically felt than in the domain of the theatre, which re-emerged after nearly two decades of Puritan proscription as a powerful arena for political representation, moral negotiation, and aesthetic experimentation (Hume 2; Canfield 11). The lifting of the ban on public performances not only revived a long-suppressed form of communal artistic expression but also fundamentally reconfigured the relationship between the state, the stage, and the body. Theatres reopened under royal license and frequently catered to aristocratic patrons, developing into sites where political loyalty was staged, gender roles redefined, and transgressive content cautiously explored under the veneer of entertainment (Harris 46; Howe 72). It is within this intricate cultural, historical, and ideological context that *The Libertine* (2005), directed by Laurence Dunmore and based on Stephen Jeffreys's (1950–2018) stage play (1994), locates its dramatic and philosophical inquiry. Centred on the scandalous figure of John Wilmot, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Rochester (1647–1680), a poet, satirist, libertine, and courtier, the film dramatises the contradictions of Restoration culture, particularly as they crystallise in the performative dimensions of identity, authority, and resistance. Rochester, as both a celebrated wit and a reviled provocateur, embodies the volatile conjunction of cultural capital and political defiance that typified the Restoration era (Love 149–150; Keeble and McDowell 6). His life serves not simply as a biographical curiosity but as a prism through which the theatrical, sexual, and discursive complexities of his time can be explored.

This article contends that *The Libertine* should not be viewed merely as a period drama or a biographical sketch but as a meta-theatrical exploration of Restoration theatre's cultural tensions, in which performance becomes a means of staging carnivalesque resistance, moral ambiguity, and discursive subversion. Drawing from Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, the study investigates how the film stages a Bakhtinian inversion of official discourse through grotesque imagery, satirical transgression, and embodied dissent (Bakhtin 18–19). The Restoration stage, adorned with theatrical masks, exaggerated bodily gestures such as feigned fainting, oversexualised postures, and overt references to bodily functions or intoxication, as well as erotic postures and sexual and political double entendres, functions as a liminal space where normative power structures are both reproduced and undermined. In this context, Rochester's decaying body, lascivious speech, and performative nihilism operate as carnivalesque interventions into the spectacle of monarchy and the moral pretensions of "polite" society (Greenblatt 81; Vance 203). Michel Foucault's conceptions of discourse and biopower further illuminate the theatrical mechanisms of control and rebellion depicted in the film. The Restoration theatre, as shown in *The Libertine*, functions as a microcosm of sovereign authority, not through overt prohibitions or legal censorship, but through subtler mechanisms such as the modulation of public taste, the enforcement of moral decorum, and the calibration of aesthetic acceptability. These forms of cultural

control, as Foucault argues, reflect biopolitical governance wherein discourse becomes a tool for regulating not only what can be said, but what can be seen, staged, and imagined (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 25; Henderson 103). The film dramatises a theatrical performance attributed to Wilmot's imagination, though fictionalised for narrative purposes. While it does not correspond to a historically verified play authored by Wilmot, this moment echoes the libertine ethos and satirical defiance that defined his poetic voice. In the film, this fictional play, initially commissioned by Charles II, transforms into a grotesque parody of the monarchy, exemplifying what Foucault would call the subversive potential of discourse operating at the very site of power's production (Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* 94). Another vital dimension of the film is its engagement with gender and the politicisation of female visibility on the Restoration stage. The character of Elizabeth Barry, portrayed as Rochester's protégé and an eventual theatrical icon, enables a reflection on the anxieties provoked by the emergence of women as professional performers. Prior to the Restoration, female roles were played by young boys, and the arrival of actual women on stage provoked moral panic, voyeuristic fascination, and regulatory discourse (Howe 65; Dolan 39). Barry's journey from obscurity to artistic brilliance is presented not merely as personal development but as a symbolic process of negotiating visibility, eroticisation, and agency within a patriarchal theatrical economy. The film's framing of Barry, oscillating between object of desire and subject of artistic expression, can be read through Laura Mulvey's seminal notion of the "male gaze," whereby the female figure is both positioned as spectacle and rendered ambivalently powerful through performance (Mulvey 837–39).

This study argues that both Stephen Jeffreys's stage play and Laurence Dunmore's film adaptation *The Libertine* frame the theatre not as a passive reflector of Restoration ideology but as a contested site in which political dissent, aesthetic experimentation, and bodily transgression converge. The film invites viewers to reconsider theatre as a form of historical discourse, one that not only stages narratives of power but also exposes the performative contradictions of authority itself. Through an intertextual layering of performance, biography, and satire, *The Libertine* reconstructs the Restoration stage as a complex cultural field in which hegemonic values are simultaneously enacted and resisted. Accordingly, this article unfolds in five extended analytical sections. The first contextualises the Restoration theatre within its socio-political and aesthetic upheavals, emphasising its transformation into a cultural instrument of both conformity and rebellion. The second section scrutinises Rochester's libertinism not only as a historical disposition but also as a discursive strategy embedded within performative self-fashioning. The third probes the carnivalesque elements of the film, analysing how grotesque embodiment, satirical inversion, and festive derision function as subversive techniques. The fourth section centres on gendered embodiment and the theatricalisation of female subjectivity through Elizabeth Barry's character. The fifth explores the fraught interplay between satire and censorship, revealing the limits of expressive freedom in a regime that both patronised and policed the arts. The conclusion synthesises these

strands to argue that *The Libertine* constructs the theatre as a paradoxical space, at once haunted by historical memory and charged with liberatory potential, where conflicting forces such as authority and resistance, the past and the present, the flesh and the word, collide in a performative act of reckoning. In sum, *The Libertine* invites a renewed exploration of Restoration theatrical forms, not merely as historical artefacts but as dynamic sites of ideological negotiation, aesthetic innovation, and embodied subversion. By tracing the film's complex layering of historical detail, theoretical resonance, and aesthetic ambition, this study aims to contribute to ongoing conversations in literary, film, and performance studies concerning the political valences of theatrical space, the gendered politics of spectatorship, and the enduring subversive potential of the carnivalesque.

### Historical and Cultural Context of Restoration Theatre

The Restoration period in England (1660–1688), marked by the return of Charles II to the throne, catalysed a renaissance of the English stage. Following the Interregnum, during which theatres were closed and performance art was condemned as immoral by the Puritan regime, the Restoration reintroduced theatre as both a royal institution and a contested cultural arena. This patronage integrated theatre into the sociopolitical structure of the monarchy and transformed it into a space where loyalty, dissent, and ideology were performed before increasingly diverse audiences. The reopening of the theatres not only revived dramatic traditions but also introduced radical shifts in aesthetic and social representation. One of the most consequential developments was the appearance of professional actresses on the English stage. Until the Restoration, all female roles were played by boys or young men. The emergence of actresses like Margaret Hughes (1630–1719) and, later, Elizabeth Barry (1658–1713) challenged prior conventions of gender performance and provoked both public fascination and moral anxiety (Howe 11–13; Dolan 57). As Elizabeth Howe notes, the inclusion of women on stage heightened the erotic intensity of Restoration theatre while simultaneously enabling new forms of female agency and critique (48). Consequently, theatre became a site of gendered contestation, where the female body was displayed, disciplined, and politicised.

Restoration drama was characterised by its ambivalence. It balanced courtly flattery with satirical irreverence, offering audiences a dramaturgy that combined political deference with coded critique. Prologues and epilogues often paid homage to the monarch, yet the plays themselves frequently mocked aristocratic decadence and sexual hypocrisy. Playwrights such as John Dryden (1631–1700), William Wycherley (1641–1716), George Etherege (c. 1636–1692), and Aphra Behn (b. 1640–1689) developed a style that merged libertinism with formal innovation, creating narratives that were as critical as they were entertaining (Canfield 87–88; Bevis 213). These dramas, many of which belonged to the genre of Comedy of Manners, reflected a society suspended between absolutist authority and nascent modernity. They indulged the very values,

hedonism, wit, and social manipulation, that they simultaneously sought to critique and undermine. Robert D. Hume observes that Restoration comedy “both indulged and indicted” the libertine ethos, serving as a mirror to its audience’s contradictions (29). The Restoration stage also embraced spectacle and technological innovation. Elaborate scenery, movable stages, artificial lighting, and rich costuming turned theatre into a synesthetic experience. These visual and sonic effects were not merely aesthetic but deeply ideological. As Tim Harris argues, the Restoration court deployed theatrical spectacle as a means of consolidating authority and seducing the public into a politics of visibility and performance (164). Theatre thus operated as an instrument of statecraft and seduction, shaping the sensibilities of audiences from both the aristocracy and the rising bourgeoisie. Despite being endorsed and regulated by the monarchy, the Restoration theatre remained subject to strict censorship mechanisms. The Licensing Act of 1662 required all dramatic texts to be approved by the Master of the Revels prior to performance. This legal framework sought to curb the subversive potential of the stage and ensure alignment with royal ideology (Loftis 51). Nevertheless, playwrights routinely evaded such constraints through allegory, innuendo, and layered irony. Stock characters like the fop, the rake, and the cuckold functioned as vehicles for oblique critique, allowing dramatists to address themes of desire, power, and corruption under the guise of comedy. Harold Love remarks that Restoration audiences “relished these ambiguities,” taking pleasure in the oscillation between surface and depth, virtue and vice (102).

Beyond its political and aesthetic functions, Restoration theatre served as a cultural mechanism for rendering bodies visible and governable, especially through staged performance, which functioned as both a mode of embodiment and a tool of social surveillance in Foucauldian terms. The visibility of bodies, particularly female bodies, intersected with broader cultural anxieties about sexuality, morality, and national identity. Judith Butler’s theory of performativity is particularly applicable to this period, as Restoration performance foregrounded identity as a stylised repetition of acts subject to societal regulation (185). The stage became a venue for the production and interrogation of gender norms, where the actor’s body was both a canvas and a battleground for competing ideologies. Jean E. Howard emphasises that Restoration theatre represented a continuous negotiation between personal expression and state-sanctioned decorum (23). In conclusion, Restoration theatre was a dynamic and polyphonic institution. It was hierarchical in structure yet dialogic in content, invested in both social order and carnivalesque inversion. Its dramaturgy combined eroticism, satire, and visual splendour, creating a cultural form that was as politically charged as it was aesthetically bold. Understanding this historical context is essential for analysing *The Libertine*, which draws upon the theatrical codes, contradictions, and tensions of the period. Rather than merely reconstructing the past, the film reframes the Restoration stage as a site of cultural conflict and performative transformation.

### John Wilmot and Libertine Discourse: Between Biography and Performance

John Wilmot, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Rochester, occupies a liminal space in the cultural imagination of Restoration England. He is remembered as a poet of dazzling wit, a libertine committed to unrelenting hedonism, and a dramatist whose works traverse the boundaries of satire, obscenity, and political defiance. In *The Libertine*, Rochester is presented not simply as a historical figure but as a site of philosophical, aesthetic, and ideological provocation. The film's portrayal does not conform to the conventions of a traditional biopic; instead, it constructs his life as a performance of excess, a dramaturgy of rebellion, and an inquiry into the limits of pleasure, authorship, and mortality. Rochester's historical identity is shaped as much by his literary production as by the mythology surrounding his persona. His poetry, ranging from bawdy epigrams to existential meditations, embodies both the exuberance and disillusionment of Restoration culture. As Love notes, Rochester's writings "operated at the intersection of libertine ideology and political skepticism," mocking both religious orthodoxy and aristocratic affectation (89). Among his most provocative works, "A Satyr Against Reason and Mankind" exemplifies his philosophical libertinism by casting rationality as a thin veneer masking base desire and self-interest (Rochester 143–147). This synthesis of Epicurean materialism and Hobbesian cynicism becomes a key thematic axis in *The Libertine*, where Rochester's disdain for decorum is framed as a form of intellectual resistance that borders on self-destruction.

In the film, Rochester's libertinism is embodied not only in his texts but in his performative comportment and theatrical interventions. His lifestyle, marked by sexual indulgence, blasphemous wit, and physical decline, is rendered as a sustained critique of Restoration morality. A particularly striking example occurs in the scene where Rochester delivers a monologue to Parliament while disguised in women's clothing. When he declares, "You will not like me," he enacts a performance that disrupts social decorum and mocks the performativity of political power. This instance of cross-dressing transcends comic spectacle and functions as a philosophical provocation. As Bakhtin argues, the grotesque body "does not obey the rules of classical aesthetics; it is a body in the act of becoming" (317). Rochester's body, historically marked by venereal disease (most likely syphilis), and cinematically framed through decadence, theatrical excess, and physical deterioration, emerges as a grotesque emblem of philosophical Libertinism, a worldview that embraces excess, transgression, and self-undoing as modes of defiance.

The discourse of libertinism also articulates broader anxieties regarding censorship, authorship, and the limits of representational freedom. Michel Foucault's notion of the "author-function" helps illuminate how Rochester's legacy oscillates between autonomous genius and political liability (Foucault, "What" 108). This tension is dramatised in the film's pivotal scene where Rochester presents a play commissioned by Charles II. Instead of glorifying the monarch, the performance degenerates into a scathing parody. The king, initially intrigued, recoils as grotesque caricatures parade across the stage. Rochester, masked and theatrical, orchestrates the spectacle with perverse delight.

This moment crystallises the conflict between artistic patronage and satirical autonomy. As Lisa A. Freeman observes, Restoration drama “was always haunted by the threat of its own intelligibility,” that is, by the risk that subversion might be understood too clearly by those it critiques (67). Rochester’s physical and existential decline is portrayed not as divine punishment but as the logical endpoint of a libertine philosophy untethered from ethical limits. In the film’s final sequences, his declaration that he has “been dead for a long time” articulates a profound disillusionment with the discourse of freedom. His body, once a vehicle of transgression, becomes a stage for its own dissolution. Yet, as Catherine Gallagher argues, “the libertine’s body remains the most potent political text of the Restoration” (102). In *The Libertine*, this body is exposed in its fragility, publicly staged as both spectacle and lesson, thereby refusing the closure of moral redemption.

The character of Rochester is constructed in the film as a fluid, performative subject, whose identity is continually rehearsed through acts of speech, seduction, and satire. Butler’s theory of performativity clarifies this phenomenon by positing that subjectivity is not a pre-discursive essence but an “effect produced by the stylization of the body” (Butler 191). Rochester’s existence in the film is constituted through this very stylisation. His gestures, costumes, and language all participate in the construction of an identity that remains elusive, contradictory, and ultimately self-negating. In conclusion, Rochester emerges in *The Libertine* as both a historical figure and a conceptual site through which broader questions about authorship, power, and embodiment are interrogated. His libertinism, far from being merely licentious, functions as a sustained engagement with the aesthetics of collapse, of the self, of language, and of authority. The film stages this collapse as a form of radical theatricality, making Rochester not only a figure of historical curiosity but also a paradigmatic subject of philosophical and cultural critique.

### **Carnavalesque Aesthetics and Subversive Laughter**

In *The Libertine*, carnivalesque aesthetics functions as a critical mechanism for exposing the contradictions of Restoration society, unmasking ideological pretences, and disrupting the performative rituals of power. Drawing on Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque, this section explores how the film utilises grotesque imagery, bodily transgression, and subversive laughter to construct a theatrical space in which hierarchical order is temporarily inverted. Rather than functioning solely as decorative or sensational elements, these carnivalesque strategies are essential to the film’s epistemological and political critique. They allow *The Libertine* to stage not only the collapse of moral codes and social decorum but also the emergence of a performative subject who resists containment through excess, parody, and aesthetic provocation. Bakhtin defines the carnivalesque as a social and literary mode in which dominant structures are suspended and official truths destabilised through grotesque humour, bodily exaggeration, and the ritualised breakdown of decorum. He writes that in the carnivalesque, “laughter is not an individual reaction to some isolated comic event. It is



the laughter of all the people. It is universal in scope" (Bakhtin 11). This laughter, however, is not benign. It is destructive, regenerative, and politically volatile. *The Libertine* channels this Bakhtinian energy most directly in the infamous court performance scene, wherein John Wilmot stages a grotesque parody of the monarchy before the horrified gaze of King Charles II and his courtiers. The performance begins as a seemingly loyal tribute but quickly descends into satirical chaos: Masks fall, props distort, and bodies twist into caricatures of royal excess. The king himself is represented by an absurdly effeminate puppet, lurching across the stage with exaggerated gestures and lewd remarks.

This theatrical sequence exemplifies the carnivalesque's power to unmask authority by transforming it into the object of ridicule. The scene rejects decorum and replaces it with a grotesque theatricality that exaggerates the king's corporeality and undermines the symbolic aura of sovereignty. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White suggest, "the grotesque body is the body in which the social hierarchy collapses into materiality" (23). In this moment, the divine right of kings is reduced to farce, and the courtly audience is forced into the uneasy role of spectator to its own debasement. Rochester's manipulation of this theatrical form is not merely personal rebellion but a dramatisation of the carnivalesque logic whereby power is undone through laughter and aesthetic vulgarity. Throughout the film, Rochester himself embodies the grotesque in both form and function. His body, ravaged by venereal disease, saturated with alcohol, and ultimately disintegrating, is framed as a grotesque text. In multiple scenes, his speech is slurred, his gestures theatricalised, his presence both magnetic and repulsive. One notable instance occurs during the scene in which he rehearses with Elizabeth Barry. Slouching, sweating, and barely upright, he instructs her in the nuances of emotional exposure, insisting that truth lies not in technical precision but in visceral openness. This pedagogy of excess aligns with Bakhtin's idea that the grotesque body "is a body in the act of becoming... never finished, never completed" (Bakhtin 317). Rochester teaches Barry not to conceal, but to erupt, to explode with meaning through gesture, tone, and rupture. His grotesqueness becomes a medium for artistic authenticity, even as it forebodes physical and existential decay.

Moreover, the film's dialogic structure mirrors the polyphonic quality of the carnivalesque. Conversations between Rochester and other characters often take the form of performative contests, full of irony, double entendre, interruption, and inversion. The verbal sparring between Rochester and King Charles is especially illustrative. In one scene, the king chastises Rochester for his mockery, to which Rochester responds with a smile: "I am your creature, sire. Made in your image." This ironic echo of divine creation recasts the monarch not as a paternal figure but as a progenitor of corruption. The exchange exemplifies the Bakhtinian carnivalesque as dialogic irreverence: a mode of speech that does not seek resolution but thrives on contradiction, confrontation, and collapse. The presence of laughter in *The Libertine* is not confined to comic relief. Rather, it functions as a disruptive force that punctures ideological illusions. As Bakhtin notes, "laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object" (90). Rochester's laughter, often

bitter, sardonic, or excessive, performs this very function. In a key moment, he laughs uncontrollably while declaring his own poetic failure, surrounded by his disillusioned theatrical troupe. This laughter is not triumphant but corrosive. It signals the collapse of the literary ego and the disintegration of the self as a coherent agent. In such instances, the film visualises laughter not as levity but as the residue of epistemological rupture.

Additionally, the carnivalesque aesthetic informs the visual composition of the film itself. The cinematography embraces chiaroscuro, close-up distortions, and spatial instability, rendering bodies monstrous, spaces claustrophobic, and faces grotesquely expressive. The court is never shown in idealised grandeur; instead, it appears saturated with artificiality and decadence. The frequent use of candlelight enhances the sense of decay and moral opacity. These visual strategies underscore the Bakhtinian vision of the world turned inside out, where the sublime is rendered grotesque and the beautiful is contaminated by excess. In summary, *The Libertine* mobilises carnivalesque aesthetics not as historical ornament but as political method. Through grotesque imagery, parodic language, and destabilising laughter, the film stages a Bakhtinian revolt against official culture, dramatising the collapse of authority through theatrical excess. Rochester becomes both the agent and the victim of this revolt, his body and voice saturated with the paradoxes of a discourse that liberates through destruction. The film thus affirms Bakhtin's claim that "carnival is the people's second life, organised on the basis of laughter" (8), a life where power is exposed, laughed at, and momentarily overcome.

### **Gender, Spectacle, and the Theatricalised Body: Elizabeth Barry's Transformation**

While gendered spectacle may appear as a secondary focus, this section contends that Elizabeth Barry's transformation is integral to the film's exploration of theatrical resistance, particularly as it intersects with the politics of embodiment, visibility, and performance, a core concern of Bakhtinian carnivalesque aesthetics. The emergence of women on the English stage in the Restoration era constituted a radical reconfiguration of both theatrical practice and the public imaginary. Prior to 1660, female roles were conventionally enacted by adolescent males, and the sudden appearance of actual women on stage deeply unsettled contemporary gender norms and spectatorial conventions (Howe 12). Within this historical moment, *The Libertine* presents Elizabeth Barry not merely as an accomplished actress but as a symbolic figure through whom the film interrogates the intersection of gender, spectacle, and subjectivity. Her transformation from a novice performer reportedly lacking stage presence to a renowned tragedienne of the Restoration era has been well documented in theatre history (Howe 32; Dolan 57), and in the film, this transformation is rendered as a negotiation between objectification and agency, between aesthetic performance and embodied experience. Through Barry's evolution, the film renders the Restoration stage as a site of both patriarchal discipline and feminist emergence, where the female body is at once commodified and insurgent. From the outset, Barry is positioned within a patriarchal economy of visibility. She is first introduced as a marginal figure, selected by Rochester not for her talent but for her

pliability. In a pivotal scene, he tells her, “You have the rawness of truth,” a statement that objectifies her emotional transparency while simultaneously valorising it. Rochester’s instruction of Barry is intense and intimate, bordering on coercive, yet it also catalyses her performative awakening. As Mulvey argues, classical narrative cinema, and, by extension, stage performance, structures its gaze in accordance with male desire, producing women as “to-be-looked-at-ness” (837). Barry initially conforms to this logic, her body presented for Rochester’s tutelage and the audience’s consumption. Yet as her skill develops, she begins to resist this passive positioning, asserting herself as a subject capable of directing the gaze rather than merely receiving it.

The film visually underscores this transformation through staging, lighting, and camera work. In early rehearsal scenes, Barry is filmed in low light, her face partially obscured, her movements hesitant. As she matures, however, she is increasingly centred in the frame, her gestures confident, her voice unwavering. The culmination of this visual arc occurs in her performance of a tragic queen, a role that mirrors her own ascent. Here, Barry’s command of the stage becomes a declaration of authorship, a moment in which her body is no longer a spectacle but an instrument of expressive agency. Butler’s concept of performativity is instructive in this context. As she notes, “gender is not a stable identity but an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (191). Barry’s transition is precisely such a repetition, one that moves from imposed form to conscious embodiment, from rehearsed vulnerability to authored presence.

The mentorship dynamics between Rochester and Barry is likewise emblematic of Restoration theatrical culture, wherein male playwrights and patrons often shaped the careers of actresses, yet also became unsettled by their success. Rochester’s simultaneous attraction to and discomfort with Barry reflects a broader cultural anxiety: that the woman on stage might cease to be a mirror of male fantasy and become a voice of her own. This ambivalence is captured in Rochester’s own deterioration. As Barry’s star rises, his body collapses. In this symbolic inversion, the female performer ascends into cultural prominence while the male libertine fades into aesthetic and political irrelevance. This narrative arc gestures toward what Catherine Belsey describes as “the subversive potential of female performance to unravel patriarchal coherence” (104). In the final scenes of the film, Barry stands alone on stage, her image illuminated against a darkened auditorium. The camera slowly pulls back, emphasising her solitude and sovereignty. This visual composition reframes the theatrical gaze: No longer objectifying, it becomes contemplative. Barry’s presence invites not consumption but recognition, not desire but reflection. Her theatricalised body has moved beyond the binary of spectacle and substance and now functions as a site of epistemological challenge, a body that speaks, acts, and commands. In conclusion, Elizabeth Barry’s transformation in *The Libertine* is emblematic of the theatricalised negotiation between gender, power, and representation in Restoration culture. Her journey from passive object to performative subject disrupts conventional narratives of female visibility and asserts the stage as a space of embodied resistance. Through its portrayal of Barry, the film foregrounds the subversive potential

of performance, illustrating how the spectacle of the female body can be rearticulated into a discourse of agency, authorship, and aesthetic self-determination.

### **Discursive Power, Satire, and the Limits of Censorship**

In *The Libertine*, the theatre emerges not simply as a space of entertainment but as a politically charged arena where discursive power is negotiated, resisted, and at times, silenced. The film foregrounds the Restoration stage as a site of ideological conflict, where satire becomes a weapon against absolutist authority and censorship operates both as a juridical mechanism and as a cultural anxiety. By dramatising John Wilmot's subversive engagement with theatrical discourse, particularly through the infamous court performance that leads to his political exile, *The Libertine* interrogates the fragile boundary between artistic expression and sovereign tolerance. This section examines how the film renders satire as a discursive force capable of unsettling dominant power structures, while also illuminating the institutional mechanisms that seek to contain it. Foucault's theory of discourse provides a critical framework for analysing the power dynamics embedded in the Restoration theatre. Foucault asserts that discourse is not merely a vehicle for conveying meaning, but "a system of representation that produces knowledge and regulates social practices" (*The Archaeology of Knowledge* 49). In *The Libertine*, Rochester's theatrical interventions, particularly his use of satire and grotesque parody, exemplify the disruptive potential of discourse when mobilised against the symbolic economy of kingship. His court-commissioned play, intended to glorify King Charles II, instead devolves into a scathing satire in which the king is represented by a debauched puppet, the court is mocked as a theatre of absurdity, and language itself collapses into obscene mockery. The performance, framed as a public humiliation of power, materialises Foucault's notion of "counter-discourse," a speech act that threatens the hegemonic production of meaning (Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* 101).

This moment of theatrical insurrection is visually and narratively central in the film. As the grotesque parody unfolds, the camera pans across the faces of the court: bewildered, enraged, humiliated. Charles II, initially bemused, quickly recognises the threat embedded in the spectacle. His authority is not assaulted through military or juridical means, but through language, rhythm, and laughter. As Linda Hutcheon argues, "satire derives its power from the very systems it contests, using the tools of representation to undermine their legitimacy" (57). Rochester's manipulation of theatrical form is thus not merely artistic provocation but a political act that reveals the performative construction of royal sovereignty.

The consequences of this performance also illuminate the limits of Restoration tolerance. Though Charles II is portrayed in the film as a ruler with a taste for decadence and theatricality, his reaction to Rochester's play reveals the conditionality of his permissiveness. When art ceases to flatter and begins to expose, censorship reasserts itself. Rochester is banished from court, his company disbanded, and his name erased from public favour. This punitive response underscores the fragile coexistence of

aesthetic experimentation and political control. As J. Douglas Canfield notes, “the Restoration stage was a tolerated subversion, permitted only so long as it rehearsed rather than ruptured the spectacle of authority” (34). Rochester’s failure lies not in excess but in precision; his satire lands too accurately, his critique too intelligible. Censorship in *The Libertine* is not only an external force but also an internalised anxiety. The characters frequently police their own speech, hesitate before uttering political critiques, and resort to coded language. In one scene, Rochester is advised by his peers to tone down his verse lest he attract further royal disapproval. The aesthetic of self-restraint, cloaked in decorum, functions as an invisible mechanism of control. Foucault calls this the “internalization of surveillance,” wherein individuals regulate their own behaviours in anticipation of disciplinary consequences (*Discipline and Punish* 219). The Restoration theatre, despite its bawdy reputation, was a deeply surveilled space, shaped by both official legislation, such as the Licensing Act of 1662, and informal mechanisms of social censure (Loftis 78).

Yet the film also illustrates the resilience of satire. Even in exile, Rochester continues to write, perform, and critique. His bodily deterioration parallels the erosion of his public influence, but not his discursive potency. In one striking scene, he recites lines mocking both himself and the society that cast him out. Here, satire turns inward, transforming into a mode of self-reckoning. As Dustin H. Griffin explains, “satire is not only a weapon but also a mirror, reflecting back the satirist’s own implication in the systems he critiques” (22). Rochester’s late-stage reflections are marked by ambivalence, remorse, and insight, yet they retain the acerbic precision of his earlier provocations. His voice, weakened yet unwavering, affirms the enduring power of satire to confront, unsettle, and endure beyond institutional suppression. In conclusion, *The Libertine* dramatises the intricate relationship between discursive power, satire, and censorship within the Restoration theatrical landscape. Rochester’s theatrical insurgencies challenge the performative nature of royal authority, illustrating the potential of satire to dismantle ideological constructs through aesthetic means. Yet the film also acknowledges the fragility of this power, the ever-present risk of repression, and the thin threshold between laughter and exile. By situating theatre as a site of both subversion and surveillance, *The Libertine* reminds us that the most potent critiques are often those that emerge from within the spectacle they seek to disrupt.

### **Conclusion: Theatre as Resistance and Transgression in *The Libertine***

The film *The Libertine* positions the theatre not as a neutral site for historical re-enactment or passive entertainment, but as a dynamic and volatile arena of ideological contestation. Within the spatial, bodily, and discursive tensions of the Restoration stage, the film constructs performance as an act of resistance, a space where speech can wound, bodies can revolt, and representation can rupture the coherence of sovereign authority. Through the figure of John Wilmot, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Rochester, and his protégée Elizabeth Barry, the film traces a trajectory of aesthetic subversion that is inseparable from the politics of

embodiment, authorship, and social transgression. The Restoration theatre depicted in the film functions as both a mirror and a mirage: It reflects the contradictions of its time, absolutism and libertinism, decorum and debauchery, hierarchy and carnivalesque inversion, while simultaneously distorting those very structures through theatrical exaggeration and satirical disarticulation. The stage becomes a battleground not of armies but of utterance, where language and performance pierce the symbolic stability of the state. The aesthetic becomes the political not by direct opposition, but by ironic mimicry, grotesque parody, and unapologetic visibility.

Rochester's descent, both physical and ideological, does not signal the failure of theatrical resistance but its existential cost. His refusal to capitulate to royal decorum, his investment in obscene truth, and his commitment to aesthetic irreverence ultimately exile him from the circuits of privilege. Yet his downfall affirms a deeper fidelity, to a vision of theatre as a sacred profanity, a mode of speaking the unspeakable, of staging the unstageable. His body, diseased and defiant, is the final performance: a reminder that artistic integrity and political dissent are often sustained through corporeal vulnerability. Parallel to Rochester's trajectory is Elizabeth Barry's ascension, a performative and ontological evolution that reconfigures the female body from passive spectacle to expressive subjectivity. Her transformation exemplifies the subversive capacity of theatrical labour to undo the gaze, to destabilise patriarchal authorship, and to claim space not merely as a figure on stage but as a presence that defines the conditions of representation. Barry does not inherit Rochester's discourse; she reclaims it, reformulates it, and rearticulates it within the grammar of her own embodied sovereignty.

*The Libertine*, therefore, is not a mere period piece but a philosophical reflection on the poetics and politics of performance. It reimagines the Restoration stage as a site of both historical specificity and contemporary relevance, where resistance takes form not only in content but in gesture, posture, voice, and decay. The theatrical becomes ontological: a mode of being that exists in tension with the world's scripts and insists on improvisation in the face of ideological closure. It is not only a space of illusion, but of intervention. Through its carnivalesque imagery, performative excess, and gendered ruptures, *The Libertine* reclaims the stage as a crucible of aesthetic defiance, where resistance is neither heroic nor victorious, but necessary, corporeal, and defiantly unfinished.

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