



“Thou idle Wanderer, about my Heart”: Rochester and Ovid

by M. L. Stapleton,

Had he been to the *Roman* Empire known,
 When great *Augustus* fill'd the peaceful Throne;
 Had he the noble wond'rous Poet seen,
 And known his Genius, and survey'd his Meen,
 (When Wits, and Heroes grac'd Divine abodes,)
 He had increas'd the number of their Gods;
 The Royal Judge had Temples rear'd to's name,
 And made him as Immortal as his Fame;
 In Love and Verse his *Ovid* he'ad out-done,
 And all his Laurels, and his *Julia* won.

(Behn, “On the Death of the Late Earl of *Rochester*” 49)¹

Rochester’s “cynicism” seems a mere by-product of the personae that his work encourages its readers to invent: “There’s not a thing on Earth, that I can name / Soe foolish, and soe false, as Common Fame” (“An Epistolary Essay” 88-90). Even so, some might surmise that he would have snorted at Aphra Behn’s overstatement of his potential. Yet he may have appreciated her zeal to memorialize him and forgiven her attempt to make literary capital out of his demise. He may also have enjoyed her (unintentional) implication that the monarch whom poets publicly flattered as a second Augustus was privately regarded as scandalous and poor in comparison to his Roman predecessor, who filled a more peaceful throne.² And surely if Rochester knew that Charles failed as Augustus, he understood that he himself did not qualify as Ovid. A banal if charming utterance such as “I’d Fart just as I write, for my owne ease” (36) does not predict a *Metamorphoses*, *Fasti*, or *Remedia amoris*.³ Nor does this speaker’s angry injunction to a recalcitrant member presage an author as immortal as his fame:

May *Strangury*, and *Stone*, thy *Days* attend,
 May’st thou ne’r *Piss*, who didst refuse to spend,
 When all my joys, did on false thee depend.

(*The Imperfect Enjoyment* 68-70)

This curse, of course, comes horribly true for Rochester, but he bears his strangury with unexpected grace:

Much purulent matter came from him with his Urine, which he passed always with some pain; But one day with unexpressible torment: Yet he bore it decently, without breaking out into Repinings or impatient Complaints. He imagined that he had a Stone in his Passage; but it being searched, none was found. (Burnet 154-55)

As virtually all commentators on “The Imperfect Enjoyment” remind us, the poem represents a ferocious and subversive reconfiguration of *Amores* 3.7. So Behn’s panegyric may allude to a competitive kinship between her hero and the classical *auctor* that some contemporaries recognized but that remains relatively unexplored in recent criticism.⁴ Ovid wanders idly about the poetic heart of the “noble wond’rous” Earl, who lacked the arrogance to write “Iamque opus exegi” (*Metamorphoses* 15.871), content instead to say, “I’ll owne, that you write better than I doe, / But I have as much need to write, as you” (“An Epistolary Essay” 38-39), this constituting his *exegi monumentum*.⁵ In some senses, Rochester outdoes the predecessor who imitates that Horatian commonplace and affixes it to his greatest work.

For this reason, Behn’s “out-done” provides an excellent word with which to examine Rochester’s species of classical borrowing, a competitive medieval-Renaissance type of imitation, *aemulatio*.⁶ Most important discussions of Carolean classicism distinguish sharply between *imitatio* and the Imitation, the former infrequently discussed in criticism over the past two decades, the latter a specific form in which a poet writes a free translation of an ancient author and reconfigures the style and subject matter into those of his own time. Commentators from Dr. Johnson to Harold F. Brooks praise Rochester for inventing and developing the Imitation:

A Jeast in Scorne, poynts out, and hits the thing,
 More home, than the Morosest Satyrs Sting.
 Shakespeare, and Johnson, did herein excell,
 And might in this be Immitated well;
 Whom refin’d Etheridge, Coppys not at all,
 But is himself a Sheere Originall:
 Nor that Slow Drudge, in swift Pindarique straines,
 Flatman, who Cowley imitates with paines,
 And rides a Jaded Muse, whipt with loose Raines.

(“An Allusion to Horace” 28-36)

Rochester’s satire surely fulfills the criteria for a recasting of Horace’s *Sermonum* 1.10.⁷ Yet his writerly practice reflects a more pervasive intertextual

use of *aemulatio* in the medieval-Renaissance sense, as his praise of his friend Etherege's "originality" clarifies.⁸ He expands and in some sense attempts to outdo his great models. Horace may deride poetasters for their inept reanimations of Catullus and Calvus, but Rochester, with the whining triplet, obliterates the clownish Thomas Flatman for his benighted Pindaric pass at Cowley. His approximation of Horace's grand old men who wrote the *comedia prisca* features a name one would expect at the end of the seventeenth century, Jonson's, as well as one less expected, Shakespeare's, whose satirical aesthetic might be imitated well. Rochester's implicit emulative theory corresponds rather closely to his despised cohort Dryden's definition of imitation in the preface to *Ovid's Epistles* (1680),

where the Translator (if now he has not lost that Name) assumes the liberty, not only to vary from the words and sence, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion: and taking only some general hints from the Original, to run division on the ground-work, as he pleases. (I: 114-15)⁹

This archness suggests that Renaissance concepts of imitation inform Restoration poetics. It, like the passage from the "Allusion" above, also implies that Carolean theory seeks to distinguish between metaphrase, paraphrase, and imitation (this last term sometimes denigrated as "sordid" and "servile") and begins to recognize the differences between borrowing and plagiarism, a dichotomy that led eventually to the Copyright Act of 1709.¹⁰ In the manner of most other seventeenth-century poets, Rochester worked from an implied concept of imitation that Burnet probably summarizes as well as anyone: "Sometimes other men's thoughts mixed with his Composures, but that flowed rather from the Impressions they made on him when he read them, by which they came to return upon him as his own thoughts; than that he servilely copied from any" (8).

The classical tradition in Rochester has received little attention besides specific (and excellent) articles on the imitations and translations that ask the inevitable question: how much Latin or Greek did he know? The contemporary record seems just as unreliable as the ledger of gossip by which readers once attempted to elucidate his poetry.¹¹ Besides, the polite conjectures of Burnet, Robert Parsons, Thomas Hearne, and Anthony à Wood concerning Rochester's relative mastery of ancient languages cannot compete for interest with the spectacular accounts of sundial smashing, arranging to have Dryden caned, kidnapping heiresses, carrying on with Elizabeth Barry, or suffering a knockout punch at the hands of the Duchess of Cleveland.¹² Those who discuss his classicism use it to lead into another, "more important," subject.¹³ Many *auctores* underlie him, but he owes a particular debt to the *Ars amatoria*

and *Amores* of Ovid, an unexamined part of Carolean Ovidianism that constitutes an intertextual discussion of relations between the sexes.¹⁴ Like any other theory that attempts to account for Rochester's more remarkable features (obscenity, misogyny, lampoon, an obsession with the Bakhtinian "lower bodily stratum"), his Ovidianism cannot elucidate everything. But it can, I think, explain a feature of his poetics, one that wanders, in the phrase that Rochester translates so handsomely, "in corde meo desidiose" (*Amores* 2.9.2).¹⁵

I

ossa mihi nuda reliquit Amor
(*Amores* 2.9.14)
And I was long agoe, disarm'd by Love.
(*"To Love"* 14)

Some commentators describe Rochester's translation of *Amores* 2.9 (and 2.9b), "To Love," as a painfully literal rendition of its ancient source (which its modern editor splits but which early modern editors print as a single elegy). However, his small but significant variations foretell the more pronounced competition with Ovid that informs his later poetry.¹⁶ In its dichotomous structure, "O numquam pro me satis indignate Cupido" epitomizes the *desultor amoris*, the delusive and delusionary speaker in the *Amores* who wistfully evokes the pleasing billows of debauch as he welcomes and dismisses love, worships and despises women. The congeniality of Rochester's poetics to Ovid's bitterly dubious polyvocality is complete. The epigraph above typifies his *aemulatio* of his predecessor. His colloquial mournfulness freighted with overtones of dysfunctional sexuality overturns and displaces the subtle savagery of Ovid's implicit metaphor (love as denuding predator) that delineates the same concept more urbanely. Even in lines that appear to border on metaphrase, Rochester charges certain terms with sexual overtones. The first main verb in the line "Often may I enjoy, oft be deny'd" ("*To Love*" 50) proves to be an ingenious translation of Ovid's "fruur" (*Amores* 2.9b. [46]) that encompasses two Restoration slang terms referring to orgasm, "enjoyment" and "fruition."¹⁷

This bluntness informs more obvious instances of "out-doing" that become revisionary substitution in their fruition. The delicate courtliness of the following nautical-military distich may have appealed to troubadours, in whose *cansos* and *sestinas* float any number of ships manned by gloomy crusaders ravished by the storms of love: "longaque subductam celant naualia pinum, / tutaque deposito poscitur ense rudis" (*Amores* 2.9.21-22); [the long docks conceal the ship drawn out of the water, the harmless foil is requested when

the sword has been put aside]. Rochester leaves the ships and gladiators in antiquity and supplies a phrase more befitting to his poetics: "The Harrast Whore, who liv'd a Wretch to please / Has leave to be a Bawd, and take her ease" ("To Love" 21-22). Again he reanimates the Ovidian convention into an utterance more directly sexual and, perhaps, decadent. The noble soldier in love's service whom the troubadours appropriated becomes the madam of a London brothel. This same desecrating principle helps revitalize the *Amores*-speaker's attempt at self-definition: "totiens merui sub amore puellae" (2.9.23); [I have served many times for a girl's love]. Rochester's persona thinks of himself as one who has

freely spent my blood
 (Love) in thy service, and soe boldly stood
 In Celia's Trenches.
 ("To Love" 23-25)¹⁸

Rochester reinvigorates Ovid's military metaphor by a graphic reference to the masculine broaching of biological femaleness, womb as tomb, an entity into which a man "spend[s]" his soul along with his vital fluids. The metonymy of "Celia" emphasizes that one woman cannot (and need not) be distinguished from another, as the narrator of "A Ramble in St. James Parke" implies: "mark what Creatures women are / How infinitely vile when fair" (41-42). Having readjusted the Ovidian coordinates, Rochester does not content himself with describing such "Creatures" as sweet evils, "dulce puella malum est" (*Amores* 2.9b. [26]), but as "sweete, deare tempting Devills" ("To Love" 30) that pursue, seduce, and cannot be satisfied however often a man may "serve . . . up" his "Ballock full" ("A Ramble" 121-22). Physical love becomes something to be endured, not enjoyed, military gruntwork, ditchdigging: "Let the *Porter*, and the *Groome*, / . . . Drudge in fair *Aurelias Womb*" ("Song [Love a Woman! y'are an Ass]" 5, 7) (Weber 99-117). And the end of "To Love" subtly revises the end of Ovid's elegy by distilling the misogyny that emanates from the classical source:

accedant regno, nimium vaga turba, puellae;
 ambobus populis sic venerandus eris.
 (*Amores* 2.9b.[53-54])
 [may girls, that too-fickle crown, accede to your reign; in this way you
 ought to be venerated by both populaces.]

From his masculinist perspective, Ovid's lines imply that "ambobus populis"—that is, both (sensible) men and (capricious) women—should fall under Cupid's spell, albeit the latter may prove somewhat harder for the former to entrace.

Rochester modifies the smooth Latin elegiacs to the rough hypnotics of iambic tetrameter:

And let th'Inconstant, Charming Sex
 Whose willfull Scorne, does Lovers vex;
 Submit their Hearts before thy Throne
 The Vassal World, is then thy owne.
 ("To Love" 57-60)

The playful epithet "Inconstant, Charming Sex" predicts the arias in *Così fan' tutti*. Yet "willfull Scorne" reflects a consciousness that presupposes something malicious in women that requires subjection, and not with gentle sway, an unruliness that Rochester makes his speakers (female as well as male) censure so bitterly in the later lyrics and satires. The poet's contemporaries noticed. As one of his enemies, Mary Hobart, put it so well: "a woman cannot escape him since he can enjoy her in his writings if he cannot have her in any other way" (Pinto 86).

II

quo tua non possunt offendi pectora facto,
 fortisan hoc alio iudice crimen erit.
 (*Remedia amoris* 427-28)
 The same that one doth not mislike at all,
 A great deformity, some others call.
 (Overbury, *The First and Second Part of the Remedy
 of Love* B2v)
 You Men would think it an ilnatur'd Jest,
 Should we laugh at you when you did your best.
 (Rochester, Prologue to Elkanah Settle's *The Empress
 of Morocco* 7-8)

Hobart's anxieties that concern escape, enjoyment, and writing comment on Rochester's most notoriously obscene poem, "Song [By all *Loves* soft yet mighty *Pow'rs*]," his most ill-natured jest at women's expense. He humiliates his "Fair nasty *Nymph*" who, frozen in the toils of the lines, cannot escape him. He has his way with her. Not incidentally, this instance of savaging the cavalier lyric also provides an intense emulation of Ovid, in this case the concept of *remedia amoris* (cures for love). Rochester distills the ironic gender politics of the ancient extended jeu d'esprit (men should cure themselves of the desire for women by focusing on their "flaws") into sixteen venomous lines.¹⁹ And he fully investigates the idea in the Latin couplet above: what is, or should be, offensive?

Ovid's commentators tend to overstate his sexual frankness and underestimate his eroticism. In the manner of his medieval and Renaissance imitators, he prefers to imply (and therefore encourages his readers to infer) the existence of physical unions in his poetry. *Amores* 1.5 and 2.12 feature an afternoon encounter and reflect the speaker's triumph in a successful seduction, respectively; *Ars amatoria* 2.717-32 recommends to men the courtly gesture of attempting to attain mutual climax. One will hardly find a description of a nipple, let alone the graphic and transgressive physicality that epitomizes the later Rochesterian corpus, rife with "pornographic monsters" (Burns, "Lady Betty" 73). His insults and descriptions of the great, few more astonishing than "Mistress Knights Advice to the Duchess of Cleavland in Distress for a Prick," seem to be the equivalent of defacing the portraits of Peter Lely. This passage from the *Remedia amoris* proves an exception to Ovid's usual tact and subtlety. His somewhat addled *magister Amoris* counsels "luminaque in vitiis illius usque tene" (417); [Let thine eyes her body note, till they / Do something finde amisse and thereon stay] (*Remedy* B2r) to the man who would fall out of love:

ille quod obscenas in aperto corpore partes
 viderat, in cursu qui fuit, haesit amor;
 ille quod a Veneris rebus surgente puella
 vidit in inmundo signa pudenda toro.
 (*Remedia* 429-32)

[Love came to a halt once when a man who was in the middle of sex saw the woman's indecent parts spread open; another because he saw the signs of womanhood on the befouled bed when she she rose up after the sports of Venus.]

There are further indignities. Ovid's crowning distich reads, "quid, qui clam latuit reddente obscena puella / et vidit quae mos ipse videre vetat?" (*Remedia* 437-38); [As that nice youth, that did his loue with-draw, / Because his Mistresse he at Priuy saw] (*Remedy* B2v). The culture in which Ovid wrote allowed him to assume that his readers (presumably male) would share his vision that a woman's biological identity—"obscena" and "pudenda," foreign, unruly, messy, and therefore shameful—provides an occasion for manly amusement. Rochester's own culture allowed him to make the same assumptions. However, doing the *Remedia* one better, he eschews the convention of a man speaking to other men about *vitia feminarum*, preferring to address the fair nasty nymph directly, with *lumina* fixed and pitiless:

By all Loves soft, yet mighty Pow'rs,
 It is a thing unfit,

That Men shou'd Fuck in time of Flow'rs,
 Or when the Smock's beshit.
 Fair nasty Nymph, be clean and kind,
 And all my joys restore;
 By using Paper still behind,
 And Spunges for before.
 My spotless Flames can ne're decay,
 If after ev'ry close,
 My smoaking Prick escape the Fray,
 Without a Bloody Nose;
 If thou wou'dst have me true, be wise,
 And take to cleanly sinning:
 None but fresh Lovers Pricks can rise,
 At Phillis in foul linnen.

Ovid names no parts and his euphemism absorbs the identity of bodily fluids so that a reader can only surmise what the sports of Venus produced. Oddly, Rochester does not name (female) parts, either, but in the implicit revulsion of lines 9-12 ("My spotless . . . Bloody Nose") he evokes that *pars* whose involuntary unruliness affects the complementary "smoaking Prick" so that the reader, presumably, can surmise less. If Ovid's convention of a man speaking to other men about women deliberately mystifies the female body, Rochester's variation on another type of masculinist discourse (a man talking at a woman) appears to demystify this physical site. However, he intends his gentle yet menacing mockery for male readership, also, as Robert Wolsey's nervous defense of him would suggest:

But tho' his obscene Poetry cannot be directly justified, in point of Decency, it may however be a little excus'd, and where it cannot challenge Approbation, it may perhaps deserve Pardon, if we consider not only when 'twas writ, but also to whom 'twas addressed . . . for the private Diversion of those happy Few, whom he us'd to charm with his Company and honour with his Friendship. (155)

Rochester shames the imaginary nymph for the shocking delectation of "those happy Few," the very real community of men, evidence that foretells the validity of Pope's "What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd" (*An Essay on Criticism* 298).²⁰ And, in Rochester's pseudo-Renaissance emulation of the *Remedia*, he may express himself too well.²¹

III

All a Lover's wish can reach,
 For thy Joy my Love shall teach:

And for thy Pleasure shall improve
 All that Art can add to Love.
 Yet still I love thee without Art,
 Antient Person of my Heart.
 ("A Song of a Young Lady to Her Antient Lover" 21-26)

The nature of Rochester's emulation manifests itself in a word that translates easily from Latin in exactly the same number of letters. As Helen Wilcox shows, his Young Lady echoes the title of the *Ars amatoria*, and in so doing both critic and persona suggest a correspondence between Rochesterian "art" and Ovidian *ars*, a word whose connotations of "craft," "guile," and "trickery" equal and perhaps overwhelm the lexical meaning "aesthetic creativity" (13).²² Therefore both poets evoke the delusionary nature of art and artistic production and suggest that for this reason poetic *ars* makes an almost perfect tool for seduction. In "I nevr Rym'd but for my Pintles sake" ("Satyr" [Timon] 22), Rochester claims that poetry is manipulation, composed to procure sex, and also implies the opposite, that the procurement of sex helps one write poetry.²³ Behn's noble wonderous Earl should have listened to Ovid: "carmina laudantur sed munera magna petuntur" (*Ars amatoria* 2.275); [poems are praised, but expensive presents are desired].

Ovid's notorious treatise discusses love as a skill, something to be learned: "arte citae veloque rates remoque mouentur, / arte leues currus: arte regendus Amor" (1.3-4); [by art swift ships are moved with sail and oar, by art the smooth chariots: love should be ruled by art]. To most twentieth-century readers, the equation of navigation and horsemanship with human relations makes men's interactions with women seem controlled, manipulative, coldblooded. Yet in any epoch, the extraction of sentiment from the process is a continual struggle, one that Rochester (like Ovid) undertakes in his poetry. He praises Sir Charles Sedley for his detached and manipulative *ars*:

Sidley, has that prevailing gentle Art,
 That can with a resistlesse Charme impart,
 The loosest wishes to the Chastest Heart
 ("An Allusion to Horace" 64-66)

The relative efficacy of the *ars poetica* dictates whether the art of seduction will succeed. Its resistless charms guarantee that the severest matron will forego her chastity, "cunctas / posse capi" (*Ars* 1.269-70); [all can be caught]. Rochester implies in this stanza that there are no exemptions, another revision of Ovid, who includes the disclaimer, "este procul, vittae tenues, insigne pudoris" (1.31); [keep your distance, slender fillets, emblems of modesty],

to signify that he does not intend his words for the aforementioned matrons. And, in a bold extrapolation from Ovid, he describes sexual acts as *artes*:

This Dart of love, whose piercing point oft try'd,
 With Virgin blood, Ten thousand Maids has dy'd;
 Which Nature still directed with such Art,
 That it through ev'ry Cunt, reacht ev'ry Heart.
 ("The Imperfect Enjoyment" 37-40)

Bravura and bluster undermine this artfully constructed boast of a man whose art and pintle have failed him, the Ovidian pattern to which Rochester adheres in his longer poems. The disappointed speaker in "A Ramble" praises Corinna (not accidentally the name of the mistress in the *Amores*) for her sexual adventurism, "There's something Genrous in meer lust" (98), but then hopes to see her "Loath'd, and despis'd, Kick't out of Town / Into some dirty Hole alone" (161-62) because she prefers the fruits of "Porters Backs and Footmens brawn" (120) to his own "Ballock full" (122). So Rochester symbolizes his skepticism concerning *ars*, poetry for the purposes of seduction, in the manner of Ovid's *desultor amoris*, who finds himself impotent and then supplanted by another man (*Amores* 3.7, 8). Rochester and Ovid reduce their speakers to vituperative fops drowning in misogyny-retarded sexuality.

The idea that art has no dominion haunts Rochester's poetry even in its phase of Latin juvenilia (composed in Ovid's erotic meter, elegiacs) and proves, like the passages on stone from "The Imperfect Enjoyment," oddly prophetic: "Ulcera cum veniunt, Ars nihil ipsa valet" ("Impia blasphemi" 4); [when the ulcers come, (medical) art has no strength]. And sometimes, *ars* can be used against him by those whom he intends to seduce, as they "inslave" him "with Love's resistless Art" ("Song [My dear Mistris has a heart]" 3-4). Rochester's male speakers generally reveal their anxieties concerning *artes feminarum* so that even Corinna's frown is suspect: "the silly Art / Virtue had ill design'd" ("To Corinna: A Song" 7-8). Burnet quotes (47) a well-known tag from the *Metamorphoses* to suggest that one can enslave the self, as well: "video meliora proboque: / deteriora sequor" (7.20-21); [I see the better, I approve it too: / The worse I follow] (*Metamorphosis* 232).

IV

Since 'tis Nature's Law to Change,
 Constancy alone is strange.

(Rochester, "A Dialogue between *Strepson* and *Daphne*" 31-32)

However there is nothing more dangerous than the insinuating ways by which he gets possession of your confidence. He enters into all your

tastes and your feelings, and makes you believe everything he says, though not a single word is sincere.

(Mary Hobart on Rochester, *The Memoirs of Count Grammont*; Pinto 86)

morimur et renascimur quotidie, neque iidem hodie et heri sumus, et personam quam transeuntem non sentimus, tandem pertransisse agnoscimus.

(Charles Blount to Rochester, 8 February 1679; *Letters* 256)

[we die and come alive every day, nor are we the same today and yesterday, and we do not know how our character changes until we at last understand that it has changed.]

Ars informs Rochester's most manifestly Ovidian characteristic, personae who deceive others and themselves in his anamorphic poetic body. His classical predecessor uses several speakers in his works: the bemused and garrulous calendar-maker (*Fasti*); the betrayed and eloquent *feminae antiquae* (*Heroides*); the deceitful *magister Amoris* (*Ars amatoria*) and his bungling disciple the *desultor Amoris* (*Amores*). And, of course, the *Metamorphoses* provides the paradigm of Ovidian polyvocality, the epic narrator (a parody, perhaps, of Virgil's) and his minions, the gods and goddesses who slither through his hexameters. Venus, Orpheus, and Medea interlace their tales with their own biases. Sometimes their yarns include other figures who themselves possess certain biases, *ad infinitum*, a seeming maze of indeterminacy. Ovid has very few successors in such narrative mastery. Rochester could not hope to compete, or to produce a *Decameron* or *Canterbury Tales* or *Henriad*. Yet he still dramatizes his culture's mythology in his lyrics and satires. If his poems and fragments constitute his Carolean epic, this dilapidated Orpheus provides the voices under the voice-over.

The idea of persona is essential in discussing Rochester's poetry.²⁴ This concept, in fact, forms the thesis of the essay that helped inaugurate the mid-century study of Rochester as a serious poet, Anne Richter's "John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester" (1968). As Burnet hints, such protean poetics were conducive to Rochester's nature:

He took pleasure to disguise himself as a Porter, or as a Beggar; sometimes to follow some mean Amours, which, for the variety of them, he affected. At other times, merely for diversion, he would go about in odd shapes, in which he acted his part so naturally, that even those who were on the secret, and saw him in these shapes, could perceive nothing by which he might be discovered. (33)²⁵

According to Thomas Betterton, Rochester was skilled enough to coach his mistress Elizabeth Barry "to enter into the meaning of every sentiment; he taught her not only the proper cadence or sounding of the voice, but to seize

also the passions, and adapt her whole behaviour to the situations of the characters" (Fraser 434). Rochester employs a bewildering number of speakers in his work: juvenile panegyrist, shepherd (and shepherdess), cavalier, satyr, Platonic lady, misogynist, crypto-feminist, theologian, pessimistic philosopher, Young Lady, Mistress Knight, the Duchess of Cleveland, Mistress Price, disappointed rambler, disgusted haunter of spas, Timon, Artemiza (and Artemiza impersonating the Fine Lady), disabled debauchee, Gwyn, Portsmouth, his King, Mulgrave, Scroope, and Martialian epigrammist. He changes guises and moods in the mode of Ovid, whose favorite god is, of course, Proteus:

qui sapit, innumeris moribus aptus erit,
utque leues Proteus modo se tenuabit in vndas,
nunc leo, nunc arbor, nunc erit hirtus aper.

(*Ars amatoria* 1.760-62)

[the wise man will be skilled in innumerable guises, and just as Proteus hides himself in the smooth waves, now he will be a lion, now a tree, now a bristly boar.]

That Ovid always weaves his mythology into his erotic poetry prompts Rochester to do the same. Although some critics use the idea of persona to distance Rochester from his poems in hopes of exculpating him from the obscenity and misogyny that makes him what he is, he inevitably uses this device to underscore or even to foment these qualities. It contributes in no small part to the "cynical" Rochester, the bitter, bemused, somewhat nihilistic satirist—the poet we love.

Rochester manifests his Ovidian polyvocality most densely and subtly in those dramatic monologues whose speakers ventriloquize the voices of others and thereby discredit them, or, in some cases, themselves with the device known as *prosopopeia* (cf. πρόσωπον, mask). The author functions as a master transmitter who deploys his personae for multiplex ironic purposes, as David Farley-Hills suggests (*Rochester's Poetry* 123). Satirists often (fiendishly) allow the person satirized to speak for himself or herself, as Dryden does with Shadwell and Flecknoe. In "A Very Heroicall Epistle in Answer to Ephelia," Rochester discredits his acerbic enemy the Earl of Mulgrave by impersonating him and having him defend himself against "Ephelia," the author of *Female Poems* (although "Ephelia to Bajazet," the occasion for the epistle, was the work of Etherege). Rochester's rakish personae who rail against constancy often utter lines such as "How is it then, that I inconstant am? / He changes not, who allways, is the same" (5-6), but "Bajazet-Mulgrave" manifests an egotism more spectacular than that of any pintle-waving monster that his maker usually imagines, a man who envies a "happy Sultan" (32) in his "Serail" (34) empowered to squelch the "foolish cries" of any woman with a

"True-Love-Knot" (52). Rochester compliments Etherege by answering his poem, discredits "Ephelia," savages his enemy, remains anonymous and expresses his own sentiments. This performance exemplifies the protean devices of the *magister*, whose ironies were not often sharper than "all Disguises, are below the greate" (2), he who leaves his readers to wonder whether he is lion, tree, or boar.

Rochester's "A Letter from Artemiza in the Towne to Chloe in the Countrey" demonstrates a similar type of multiplex ventriloquism. This *ars* of female impersonation (doubtless an aid in training of Barry) resembles Ovid's verbal transvestism.²⁶ Rochester's group of poems with women speakers resembles a miniature *Heroides*, with Artemiza the most developed, although an impetus for her may be drawn from the *Fasti*. Therein the narrator asks Flora to tell her terrible tale of rape and degradation. His directive to her before she begins is something that Rochester seems to have internalized whenever he creates a female persona, especially one as masterfully drawn as Artemiza:

"ipsa doce, quae sis. hominum sententia fallax:
optima tu proprii nominis auctor eris."
(*Fasti* 5.191-92)

[Tell me who you are. The opinion of men is treacherous: you will be the best surety of your own name.]

Like most other speakers in Rochester's poetry, Artemiza is half-self-aware. She functions as a spokeswoman for Rochester and makes many of his characteristic observations about poetry, satire, culture, gender, and sex, certain that "Whore is scarce a more reproachfull name, / Than Poetesse" (26-27). At the same time, she is an object of mild satire: "Our silly Sexe, who . . . hate restraint, though but from Infamy" (56, 58). Chloe's correspondent is herself a young woman from the country agog at the town machinations that her urban counterparts would have been bored with from birth—those that Rochester, though surprised at nothing, still wishes to hold up to ridicule. And Artemiza serves as a believable medium for the endless and self-absorbed rantings of the Fine Lady (85-91; 95-135; 143-45; 169-255); one woman can impersonate another well. Yet not everything the Fine Lady says deserves censure. The terrible tale of Corinna (that name again) and the booby squire (189-250) reticulates to any number of sentiments in Rochester's poetry: "Fooles are still wicked att their owne Expece" (225). She knows that men are treacherous and that she is the best surety of her own name; in her multiplicity, Rochester again attempts to outdo the *magister*.

Poetic misogyny may be one inheritance from Ovid, which this letter to Barry reflects: "I thank God I can distinguish, I can see very woman in you,

and from yourself am convinced I have never been in the wrong in my opinion of women" (*Letters* 181).²⁷ Yet one ought not to view the *magister* as a culprit but as an enabler who wanders idly about Rochester's heart. He is also an eminent predecessor with whom Rochester found himself in deliberate and conscious competition, the Scoopes and Mulgraves proving at last too puny for him, *aemulatio* a better description of his method than *imitatio*, the "neoclassical Imitation," or Dryden's paraphrase. This may explain his occasional stridency and rough edges, calculated (especially in "To Love" and "The Imperfect Enjoyment") to make his personae sound more colloquial and flippant, especially when they speak *in propria persona* and extend Rochester's ventriloquism. And, in what may be a comment on Ovid's delicacy about sex and tact with regard to parodying his own contemporaries and forebears, Rochester will eschew euphemism and "cry Cunt," an interesting prognostication of Pope's "Still make the *Whole* depend upon a *Part*" (*An Essay on Criticism* 264).²⁸ In the ways I have argued, Rochester lives up to Behn's lofty praise and "out-does" Ovid in his emulation of him. Finding himself good for nothing else, it is his way of being wise.

NOTES

¹Two other Behn poems praising Rochester include one to his niece, Anne Wharton, "To Mrs. W. On her Excellent Verses (Writ in Praise of some I had made on the Earl of Rochester) Written in a Fit of Sickness" and another "To Mr. Creech (under the name of *Daphnis*) on his Excellent Translation of *Lucretius*" (*Poems upon Several Occasions* 50-60). There were many other tributes, such as "On the Death of the Earl of Rochester, by an Unknown Hand" (*Miscellany* 136) and "A Pastoral, in Imitation of the *Greek of Moschus*; Bewailing the Death of the Earl of Rochester," which follows Thomas Rhymer's preface to *Poems, &c.* (i-xv). If *A Session of the Poets* is indeed Rochester's, the remarks on Behn are mixed. It is hard for readers at the end of the twentieth century to imagine that she appreciated the comparison between poetical skill and biological femaleness:

The Poetesse Afra, next shew'd her sweete face,
And swore by her Poetry, and her black Ace;
The Lawrell, by a double right was her owne,
For the Plays she had writ, and the Conquests she won.
(73-76)

Keith Walker summarizes the authorship controversy (*The Poems of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester* 312; all references to Rochester's poetry are taken from this edition). The author of *A Session* suggests that Apollo made Nathaniel Lee "his Ovid, in Augustus's Court" (44). Lee's *Gloriana, or the court of Augustus Caesar* (1676) includes Ovid as a character just as Jonson's *Poetaster* (1602) does.

²For an example of Augustus-identification for Charles, see Dryden's *Threnodia Augustalis: A Funeral-Pindarique Poem Sacred to the Happy Memory of King Charles II* (1685). Yet the contempt in which the King's observers held him is apparent in Henry Savile's remark to Rochester in a letter dated 17 December 1677: "that known enemy to virginity & chastity the Monarke of Great Brittain" (*Letters* 174). Pepys's distaste for both monarch and Rochester is clear in his aside (17 February 1669) on the episode of the boxing of Thomas Killigrew's ears, which gave much "offence to the people here at Court, to see how cheap the King makes himself and the more, for that the King hath not only passed by the thing and pardoned it to Rochester already, but this very morning the King did publicly walk up and down, and Rochester I saw with him, as free as ever, to the King's everlasting shame to have so idle a rogue his companion" (*Diary* 9: 451-52). And the scathing tone of Rochester's "A Satire on Charles II" speaks for itself: "Love, he loves, for he loves fucking much" (9); "I hate all Monarchs, and the Thrones they sit on / From the Hector of France to the Culley of Britaine" (32-33).

³Rochester has a comforting degree not exactly of incompetence, but of baldness: his technique only frays at the very edges, but fray it does on occasion" (Rogers 174).

4 I say "relatively unexplored" because no thorough and systematic study exists. For example, Dustin Griffin categorizes "The Discovery," "The Advice," "The Submission," "Could I but make my wishes insolent," "To Love" and "The Imperfect Enjoyment" as "Ovidian" without making any direct comparison to Ovid's poetry. He underestimates these as "poems . . . of little interest beyond demonstrating Rochester's roots in literary conventions" (91 n 25). In my estimation, only the latter two pieces show any traces of Ovid. Two decades later, Marianne Thornnählen suggests a number of analogues between Rochester and the *Ars amatoria* but refrains from claims of direct imitation or borrowing (12, 19, 23, 32). Several articles devoted to the "imperfect enjoyment" genre in which Rochester participates (along with Behn, Boileau, Petronius, and Ovid) include Richard E. Quaintance (1963); Carole Fabricant (1974); Reba Wilcoxon (1975); John H. O'Neill (1977, 1980); Jim McGhee (1995).

⁵ Horace: "Exegi monumentum aere perennius" (*Carmina* 3.30.1; *Q. Horati Flacci Opera* 86); [I have built a monument more lasting than bronze]. Translations from Latin are my own, with exceptions noted.

6 Martin L. McLaughlin traces the term to Quintilian and discusses its implications in Dante (19). Ernst Robert Curtius analyzes *aemulatio* as "outdoing" in Dante (165). George W. Pigman explains the concept thoroughly (1980). The word and concept are operative in Rochester's time, as well, particularly in terms of gender relations and poetical talent. *Triumphs of Female Wit, in Some Pindarick Odes; Or, the Emulation* (1683) encouraged a spate of answers and discussion lasting into the reign of Queen Anne. Sarah Fyge's *Poems on Several Occasions* (1703) also includes a poem titled "The Emulation" (Greer et al. 309-14).

illi scripta quibus comoedia prisca viris est
hoc stabant, hoc sunt imitandi: quos neque pulcher
Hermogenes unquam legit, neque simius iste
nil praeter Calvum et doctus cantare Catullum

(*Sermonum* 1.10.16-19)

[for those illustrious men who composed the old comedy, humor was essential, those whom dandified Hermogenes never read, nor that ape who can do nothing but sing Calvus and Catullus.]

Horace is distrustful of imitation elsewhere: "nec desilies imitator in artum, / unde pedem proferre pudor vetet aut operis lex" (*Ars poetica* 134-35); [nor should you as an imitator leap down into that well from which shame or the law of the work prevents you from extricating your foot]. "o imitatores, servum pecus, ut mihi saepe / bilem, saepe iocum vestri movere tumultus!" (*Epistularum* 1.19.19-20); [o imitators, servile herd, whose confusion has often excited me to anger and humor] (*Q. Horati Flacci Opera* 164, 257, 234, respectively).

§ Samuel Johnson's praise for his predecessor is stingy: "His Imitation of Horace on Lucillus is not inelegant or unhappy. In the reign of Charles the Second began that adaptation, which has since been very frequent, of ancient poetry to present times; and perhaps few will be found where the parallelism is better preserved than in this" (1: 224). Most commentators on the issue in criticism of Carolean literature inevitably refer to Harold F. Brooks (1949), Leonard Moskovit (1968), and Howard D. Weinbrot (1972). Although these three articles account for the Imitation thoroughly, none discusses *imitatio* in any detail.

In a related issue, Rochester may have known about the theories of free translation promulgated by John Denham in "To *Sir Richard Fanshaw* upon his Translation of *Pastor Fido*" (1648): "That servile path thou nobly dost decline / Of tracing word by word, and line by line" (38); and in the preface to *The Destruction of Troy* (1656): "Poesie is of so subtile a spirit, that in plucking out of one Language into another, it will all evaporate; and if a new spirit be not added in the transfusion, there will remain nothing but a *Caput mortuum*" (159-60). Rochester almost certainly knew the preface to *Pindarique Odes* (1656) of his poetical mentor, Abraham Cowley: "exact Imitation . . . a vile and unworthy kind of *Servitude*, is incapable of producing any thing good or noble. . . . I am not so much enamour'd of the *Name Translator*, as not to wish rather to be *Something Better*, tho' it want yet a *Name*" (2: 5). Griffin suggests that Rochester knew these critical texts and that he was the first producer of Imitations in the manner of Boileau: "neither free translation nor mere substitution of names, but an attempt to reproduce, in a second language, the equivalent for the spirit of the first" (250). Yet, as Thomas M. Greene shows, what critics label Imitation is a concept much older than Rochester, corresponding to a mode of writerly reproduction that medieval commentators label *contaminatio* (156-62). Poems such as the twelfth-century French romance *Eneas* and the thirteenth-century *La clef d'Amors* veer between transla-

tions of their Latin source texts (*Aeneid*, *Ars amatoria*) and reconfigurations of them as contemporary works that expound on, for example, the erotic lives of Parisians and the uses of chivalry. And, actually, the imitative theory and poetic practice of Cowley and Denham prefigure Rochester considerably.

¶⁶ Rochester's use of Ovid and others also approaches Dryden's preferred mean between imitation and metaphrase, paraphrase: "where the Authour is kept in view by the Translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not so strictly follow'd as his sense, and that too is admitted to be amplyfied, but not alter'd" (1: 114). Harold Love provides seven Restoration modes of translation with implications for the Imitation-*imitatio* issue: strict metaphrase; a slight relaxation of metaphrase with the verbal texture of the original, such as long lines or strange syntax; strict and free paraphrase; strict and free imitation; reconstruction (136).

10 Brean S. Hammond discusses many of these issues and cites testimony by Dryden, Shadwell, Gerard Langbaine, John Oldham, and Edward Howard. (184). For a detailed account of this legislation, see Raymond Astbury (1978). The anxiety on the issue of imitation regarding Rochester can be seen in the defenses of his "originality" after his death. See Parsons (8), Wolsey (142), and Rhymer (A6r).

11 See Burnet (3), Parsons (7), and à Wood (3: 654-55). Griffin argues that Rochester's Latin was adequate for the purposes of reading and translation. However, some disagree. See Dryden, preface to *All for Love* (Works 13:14, 16); Hearne (3:263); Dr. Johnson (1:221); and Porter (61).

12 See the Rochester editions by Vieth (224) and Ellis (18), and the biographies by Pinto, Graham Greene, and Lamb.

13⁶ For example, Nick Davis co-opts Wood and Dr. Johnson's comments on Rochester's classicism to show that he "engaged in—consistently and in all earnestness, if by unorthodox means—some of the more important debates of his time, and ones that have considerable modern resonance" (114).

14 Edward Burns (73-76) analyzes the phenomenon in which Rochester, Etherege, Dryden, and the circle of Aphra Behn participate.

15¹ Rochester translates this phrase and the rest of the line "Thou idle Wanderer, about my Heart" ("To Love" 2). All citations from Ovid's erotic poetry are taken from the edition by E. J. Kenney.

16¹ See *John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, ed. Ellis (324); Love (142); and Rhymer (A3v-A4r), who prints *Amores* 2.9 (as a single poem) and "To Love" on facing pages (110-17). Kenney divides Ovid's elegy, but provides continuous as well as separate lineation, representing both manuscript traditions (48-50).

17 For the first term, see Rochester, *The Imperfect Enjoyment*; and "The Platonick Lady": "I hate the Thing is call'd Injoyment, / Besydes it is a dull imployment" (7-8). For the second, see Behn's "To *Alexis* in Answer to his Poem against Fruition": "'tis a fatal lesson he has learn'd, / After fruition ne're to be be concern'd" (Works 6: 348-49).

18 Ellis (*John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester* 325) suggests that Rochester alludes to the *Priapea*: "fossas inguinis; ut teram dolemque" (46.9; Baehrens 1: 72); [let me dig and grind in the trenches of the groin].

- ¹⁹ Farley-Hills somewhat inexplicably suggests that this poem is not in the *Remedia* tradition (*Rochester's Poetry* 72). However, this meditation on the nymph's body surely qualifies; this Ovidian concept laces Rochester's poetry.
- ²⁰ I use *Pope: Poetical Works*, ed. Davis, for all references to this poet.
- ²¹ For example, see the treatise *De Imitationibus Eloquentie* (Avignon, Musée Calvet, MS 1054) by Antonio da Rho (1395-1451): "Imitatio simplex est et livorem atque invidiam non admittit. Emulatio autem habet imitandi studium sed cum militie operatione" (107r); [Imitation is straightforward and does not admit of envy or jealousy; emulation, on the other hand, embraces the desire to imitate along with an element of rivalry] (McLaughlin 109).
- ²² Although Wilcox provides no close comparison between Ovid's *ars* and Rochester's "art," many of the comments in her essay (see 15-17) suggest Rochesterian appropriation.
- ²³ For an intense treatment of this idea in a small part of the Ovidian corpus, see Alison Sharrock (1995).
- ²⁴ Although some poststructuralist criticism demonizes "persona" as a hopelessly essentialist term, Rochester's polymorphous poetics demand its use. David M. Vieth dismisses this kind of reading as "the old persona theory, now out of date for almost twenty years" (*Rochester Studies* 71). Yet it appears in virtually all past and present discussions of Rochester's poetry, which suggests that it is not so out-of-date: e.g., Main (1960), Knight (1970), Pasch (1979), Alsop (1988), Chernaik (1993), Wilcox (1995), Clark (1995), and Selden ("Rochester and Oldham" 1995).
- ²⁵ See also Johnson: "He often pursued low amours in mean disguises, and always acted with great exactness and dexterity the characters which he assumed" (1: 220).
- ²⁶ In some heat and jealousy Rochester wrote to Barry: "You have a character and you maintain it" (*Letters* 181), an ironic statement since he taught her this skill himself. In the *Fasti*, the divine wind Zephyrus rapes Chloris, which transforms her to Flora, goddess of spring (5.183-378). Farley-Hills (*Rochester's Poetry* 65) suggests that Rochester borrowed this tale and used it as background for the lyric "Fair Chloris in a Piggsty Lay," but mis-cites the locus as *Fasti* 2.183f.
- ²⁷ The issue of Rochester and antifeminism is naturally vexed in criticism. See Vieth (*Rochester Studies* xvi), Farley-Hills (*Rochester's Poetry* 16, 55), Clark (39), Wintle (161), Thormählen (23-24), and the work of Reba Wilcox (1975, 1976, 1979).
- ²⁸ Rochester uses this word twenty-three times in his poetry (Moehlmann 63), and, by my estimation, eight times by synecdoche, e.g., "Though Cunt be not Coy, reputation is Nice" ("Mistress Knights Advice to the Duchess of Cleavland in Distress for a Prick" 4). In an ingenious defense of Rochester's gynecological poetics, Simon Dentith explicates the final line of "Upon His Drinking a Bowl": "the extreme reductiveness of that last line, its crude defacing of the whole poem, marks an attempt to put a stop to the tradition embodied by the poem, of which Rochester has just proved himself the master" (86).

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