DIGITAL ACCESS TO SCHOLARSHIP AT HARVARD
DASH.HARVARD.EDU

HARVARD LIBRARY

# Refining Rochester: Private texts and public readers

## Citation

Love, Harold. 1997. Refining Rochester: Private texts and public readers. Harvard Library Bulletin 7 (1), Spring 1996: 40-49.

## Link

http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:42665459

## Terms of use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material (LAA), as set forth at
https://harvardwiki.atlassian.net/wiki/external/NGY5NDE4ZjgzNTc5NDQzMGIzZWZhMGFlOWI2M2EwYTg

## Accessibility

https://accessibility.huit.harvard.edu/digital-accessibility-policy

## Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. Submit a story

# Refining Rochester: Private Texts and Public Readers

*Harold Love*

HAROLD LOVE holds a personal chair in English at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia.

Our planet, considered vertically, contains two hemispheres, one of them about to be swathed in ice and fog and the other, from which I have just come, bathed in glorious sunshine. It would have been deeply wrong if Hugh on his retirement had been saluted by only one of these. So as the representative of one half of the globe, more than one half of the world's oceans, and certainly the great majority of its penguins and albatross, I have great pleasure in extending that salutation. I should also mention that Hugh has many admirers among the bibliographically inclined featherless bipeds of my patch of the southern hemisphere whose salutations I would like to add to mine, particularly those of Wallace Kirsop, Brian McMullin, and Clive Probyn.

My subject today is the Earl of Rochester. Rochester is a good poet, and the attention he is getting today is long overdue.[1] But the reason for my own continuing fascination is not so much the writings as the history of their transmission and transformations. This history has four points of interest. The first is that it originates in scribal publication. Like many other members of the British governing class of his time, Rochester wrote to be circulated in handwritten not printed copies. David M. Vieth was the first scholar to alert us to the enormous consequences of this fact for the reading and editing of Rochester.[2] His major concern was with a celebrated manuscript—Osborn b 105—at Yale, but there is a no less interesting one in the Houghton library—fMS Eng 636.[3]

1 Currently editions by David M. Vieth, Keith Walker, Paddy Lyons and Frank Ellis are all in print. My own Oxford English Texts edition will be appearing in 1998. Marianne Thormählen's admirable *Rochester: The Poems in Context* (Cambridge, 1993) has provided an up-to-date scholarly commentary.

2 Especially in his *Attribution in Restoration Poetry: A Study of Rochester's "Poems" of 1680*, Yale Studies in English, no. 153 (New Haven, 1963); *The Gyldenstolpe Manuscript Miscellany of Poems by John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, and Other Restoration Authors*, ed. Bror Danielsson and David M. Vieth (Stockholm, 1967); and *The Complete Poems of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, ed. David M. Vieth (New Haven, 1968).

3 The status of the texts of Osborn b 105 is discussed in my "Two Rochester Manuscripts Circulated from the Charterhouse," *Library*, 6th ser, 16 (1994): 225–29. I now judge that their relative freedom from obvious error owes more to careful editing than to closeness to the author's originals. fMS Eng 636 is a miscellany of slightly earlier date, which draws on much the same body of texts circulating as "separates," but presents them in a more "sincere" form because of its greater tolerance of apparent error and anomaly. Readings from this "commercial" tradition also need to be assessed against those of private transcripts deriving from the poet's immediate circle.

The second point is that Rochester's verse was in its origins coterie writing: like Donne and a number of others before him, he wrote to be read by a small circle of intimate friends, most of whom were also poets or patrons, or clients of those patrons. The poems quickly spread beyond this coterie, and in some cases survive in dozens of manuscript copies; but it was always to the coterie that the verse was addressed, putting other readers in the position of onlookers or eavesdroppers. Arthur Marotti has explored the consequences of this writing practice for the generation of Donne, and I have tried to do so for Rochester's time.[4]

The third point arises from the fact that the members of Rochester's coterie—or was it the Duke of Buckingham's coterie?—were also members of the court of Charles II. We urgently need to understand the relationship of Rochester's kind of writing to the power struggles—personal as well as political—that were a permanent feature of life within the royal household.[5] Only in the light of such an understanding can we assess the significance of Rochester's frequent obscenity, a matter that is, stylistically, more complex than it may appear. Lastly, we need to know what happened to these coterie writings when they made their way out of the private circle to a wider public, first in manuscript and then in print. Marotti has documented this transition for scribally publishing poets from the earlier part of the century, but only Keith Walker has given thought to its implications for the reception history of Rochester.[6] This is my main topic today, though I will also return to some of the others I have raised.

## From MS to Print

Although this process of transition is a large subject, one part of it can be isolated in a way that makes it manageable. In the course of their movement from the private to the public sphere, the poems were subject to a continuous process of refinement. Indeed, at one time or another, attempts were made to refine Rochester in almost every way imaginable—sexually, morally, politically, linguistically, stylistically, metrically, spiritually. And in some cases with good reason! This process had a number of aims and stages but its culminating achievement was to bring the corpus to a state in which Rochester could be ranged beside his great contemporary, Dryden, as a printed classic of English poetry, and as a model of how to write in certain standard genres—particularly verse satire, the imitation, and the song. Needless to say, this was not something he had ever anticipated. To the extent that he became aware of it he did his best to stop it.

Shortly before his penitent death at the age of thirty-four, Rochester held a public bonfire of the autograph manuscripts of his writings. Most of the poems we know him by were already circulating widely in scribal manuscripts; however, others may well have been lost through this action. Shortly after his death a scribally-published anthology containing a large selection from the already-circulating verse was put into print as *Poems on several occasions by the E. of R—* (1680), which gave this part of his work very wide circulation indeed. But Rochester's

4 See Arthur F. Marotti, *John Donne, Coterie Poet* (Madison, Wisc., 1986) and *Manuscript, Print, and the English Renaissance Lyric* (Ithaca, 1995), and my own *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-century England* (Oxford, 1993).

5 A few suggestions are put forward in my "Hamilton's *Mémoires de la vie du comte de Grammont* and the Reading of Rochester," *Restoration* 19 (1995): 95–102.

6 See his "Jacob Tonson, Bookseller," *The American Scholar* 61 (1992): 424–30.

act indicates that these were problematic texts even to their creator. Fire was simply the most drastic form of a widely felt need to refine them in all the senses mentioned, but specially with regard to their sexual content, to their allusions to individuals, and to their anti-clericalism. Three whole printed editions of the play *Sodom*, which may or may not be by Rochester but certainly bore his name, have disappeared without trace,[7] and of the 1680 printed collection of the verse only a handful of copies survive from what James Thorpe famously demonstrated were at least fifteen separate editions.[8] We can safely assume that quite a few copies of *Sodom* and the 1680 *Poems* went up in smoke. After fire, there was the knife: in a number of manuscript miscellanies, poems or parts of poems by Rochester have been excised by later readers. Others are so heavily scrawled through as to be unreadable. Still others are lined through as an indication of disapproval, while still remaining legible—an understandable compromise.

Rochester's indecency hardly needs to be demonstrated: some of it still shocks in our own liberated times. The practical issue in the 1680s was that, if the poems were to be legally published in print, they would have to be a cleaned up. Three ways of doing this were tried: offensive words might be replaced wholly or partly by dashes; offensive expressions might be replaced by inoffensive ones; or whole passages and poems might simply be suppressed. The "1680" editions referred to were surreptitious—which is to say that they were published in defiance of the law, though possibly with the connivance of the Stationers' Company, which was supposed to enforce that law. Their title pages insist unblushingly that they were printed in Antwerp. Because they were in effect published as works of pornography, Rochester's obscene words were generally allowed to stand.[9] But we lose virtually all the proper names in the text. These are systematically replaced with the initial letter followed by a dash. The result is strange passages like this from the end of "An Allusion to Horace":

> I loath the *Rabble*, 'tis enough for me,
> If S——, S——, S——, W——,
> G——, B——, B——, B——,
> And some few more whom I omit to name,
> Approve my sense, I count their censure *Fame*.[10]

In the manuscript versions this is a very important passage because it is where Rochester names the individuals whom he regards as the guarantors of good taste and sound sense in a society where literature is being corrupted by intemperate aesthetic experiment. All that the printed version tells us is that an act of naming once took place. Even the namer of these names has been reduced to the "E. of R——." The reader of the printed text, already an outsider or eavesdropper with regard to the coterie, is now pushed back to an even more remote position

7 The authorship issue is discussed in my "But Did Rochester *Really* Write *Sodom*?," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 87 (1993): 319–36. A comparative statistical analysis of word frequencies is being conducted by John Burrows in consultation with the author.

8 *Rochester's Poems on Several Occasions*, ed. James Thorpe, Princeton Studies in English, no. 30 (Princeton, 1950), xi–xxvii.

9 One of the few exceptions is in the couplet from "My Lord All-Pride": "Bursting with *Pride*, the loath'd *Impostume* swells, / Pr—k him, he sheds his *Venom* strait, & smells" (p. 144), where "prick" has brought on an unnecessary attack of modesty.

10 *Rochester's Poems*, ed. Thorpe, 44.

in which vital information is ostentatiously withheld. Print, in this respect, reinforces the sense of exclusion rather than challenging it.

Another class of names—those of authors—disappears entirely from these editions. We can be pretty sure that the manuscript that was printer's copy for the first of the 1680 editions correctly attributed most of the poems in it that were not by Rochester.[11] But in the printed text these names have all been removed: it is not just a question of dashes. This suppression was understood by Vieth as an attempt to pass off the entire contents of the collection as being by Rochester, and of course it had this effect. Removing the names can be seen as an expression of a print-culture ideal of authorship as unitary rather than collective, which in turn springs from a desire to anchor the ownership of the text in rights derivable from a particular individual. But I would also see it as an expression of the broader desire, already evident in the dashes, to avoid naming any names at all. This, in turn, was partly prudential. Although Rochester was safely dead, most of the other individuals named either in the poems or as their authors were not, and might have sought redress through the law or the cudgel. But this omission and truncation of names also has an implied aesthetic rationale. At the same moment that the printed text is reinforcing the reader's sense of being excluded from the social world of the coterie, one becomes aware of a countervailing suggestion that perhaps the names do not really matter—that it is even a kind of impertinence to wish to read these poems in a way that exposes their origins in trivial court feuds. Even in these shabby, surreptitious editions, the claim is somehow being made that the poems have come to occupy a new place in the symbolic order in which they are to be enjoyed, if not quite as literature, at least as models of wit—models whose original occasions have become irrelevant.[12]

## Thorncome's Edition

The next stage in refining Rochester was the first at which a serious attempt was made to grapple with the problem of indecency. In 1685, when the available printed editions were still restricted to the illegal end of the book trade, a refined version was prepared for open sale. This appeared with the imprint "for *A. Thorncome*, and are to be Sold by most Booksellers." Thorncome is a shadowy figure, possibly an early example of the trade publishers about whom Michael Treadwell has written so illuminatingly.[13] His edition is for long stretches no more than a page-for-page reprint of one of the 1680 editions—the one known, following Thorpe, as the Harvard edition. Thorncome omits nine poems as being irredeemably indecent and adds a further five of unknown provenance, of which two are definitely not by Rochester. He takes over all the 1680 dashes but

11 As is the case in Osborn b 105 which is closely collateral with the lost manuscript anthology that provided the copy for the 1680 *Poems*. The matter is extensively discussed in Vieth, *Attribution*.

12 Marotti, *Manuscript, Print*, 209–65 identifies a related process at work in the print publication of poets such as Donne and Cowley.

13 D. F. Mckenzie, *Stationers' Company Apprentices* 1641–1700 (Oxford, 1974) lists an Andrew Thorneum [*sic*] as 'Fd by [Thomas] Taylor 1.10.1683. Apparently never formally bd' (4418; p. 163). His only other known publications are Wing S4108D (John Smith, *Profit and Pleasure United; or The Husbandman's Magazine* (1684)) and Wing T1887B (*The Tongue Combatants* (1683)). Hugh Amory informed me, after hearing this paper, that in 1686 Thorncome had visited New England with a consignment of books (no doubt including his refined Rochester). For trade publishers, see Michael Treadwell, "London Trade Publishers 1675–1750," *Library*, 6th s., 4 (1982): 99–134.

does not add many new ones. Instead, when he feels a word or section is likely to be offensive, he simply rewrites it, sometimes quite radically. This allows him to retain poems such as "The Imperfect Enjoyment" and "A Ramble in St James's Park" that we would not expect to find in a refined edition.

Let us look at some examples of this rewriting, beginning with two changes made to "The Imperfect Enjoyment." First of all, a simple toning down. Clearly something would have to be done to a description of premature ejaculation that read:

> In liquid *Raptures*, I dissolve all o're,
> Melt into Sperme, and spend at ev'ry Pore:[14]

Thorncome's solution was to alter to

> In liquid *Raptures*, I dissolve all o're,
> Mel[t]ing in Love, such joys ne'r felt before

This seriously misses the point that the poem is about *not* feeling joys—about an *im*perfect enjoyment. In fact, insofar as Thorncome is making an unsatisfactory experience sound like a satisfactory one, one could argue that he is making the line more pornographic rather than less. In another problem couplet, the speaker is trying to compensate by phallic bragging for his failure to satisfy his partner:

> This *Dart* of love, whose piercing point oft try'd,
> With *Virgin blood, Ten Thousand Maids* has dy'd

Thorncome gives us:

> This Dart of Love, whose piercing point oft try'd
> With Virgin Blood, a hundred Maids has dy'd

The only change here is the numerical one, by which 10,000 is replaced with its square root. But why? Does it make the couplet less indecent? Again, rather the reverse, since ten thousand is clearly an impossibility while a hundred is bringing the description into the realm of the humanly feasible. I suspect the influence of the Royal Society is at work here, together with what Alvin Kernan calls "print's remarkable ability to confer authoritative being and firm truth on its texts."[15] The adapter must have paused to consider how many maids (or what passed for them in the bawdy houses of the day) a parthophilic peer might realistically have unmaided in a lifetime of thirty-four years. Characteristically of such transitions between script and print, and between the private world of the coterie and the public world of the coffee house, carnivalesque extravagance has been reinscribed as sexological data-gathering and hyperbole as squalor.

Thorncome's treatment of "Against Reason and Mankind" is particularly interesting. This poem had been issued for manuscript circulation in two stages, the first (lines 1-173) being followed later by an "Addition" (lines 174-221), sometimes found as a separate poem. It is not so far clear whether Rochester ever issued a unified text or whether this was done for him by subsequent copyists. Certainly in some unbroken versions the earlier and the later parts are demonstrably from different branches of the textual tradition. Whereas the main section

14 Thorpe, *Poems*, 28.

15 Alvin Kernan, *Printing Technology, Letters and Samuel Johnson* (Princeton, 1987), 144. Rochester probably wrote "have dy'd", significantly altering the meaning.

concentrates on philosophical questions, the "Addition" modulates into hard-hitting social satire. A modern reader might well suppose that it was the dark, earlier, philosophical section that would have caused offense; and that the continuation would have been read in a more tolerant, light-hearted spirit. This earlier part is the section that gives us the famous tragic lines:

> Then Old Age, and experience, hand in hand,
> Lead him to death, and make him understand,
> After a search so painful, and so long,
> That all his Life he has been in the wrong;[16]

(I should note here that none of this applies to Hugh, who is unfailingly right about all scholarly matters.) But my point is that the profound skepticism of the first section of the poem was not found offensive in its own time. In fact, several manuscript copies of the first part were made by clergymen and university dons. On the other hand, Jacob Tonson, in his 1691 edition of the poems, omits the second section of the poem entirely, and when we look at Thorncome's text, we find that this section has been very heavily rewritten while lines 1-173 are virtually untouched. Moreover, we find from the nature of the rewriting that the real source of offense is not indecency but anticlericalism. Towards the end of the second section (ll. 191-205) there is a passage which begins with a portrait of a parish priest who has affairs with the wives of his parishioners. Rochester then moves on in lines 206-211 to attack an ecclesiastical politician who has been persuasively identified by Thormählen as Gilbert Sheldon, the then Archbishop of Canterbury.[17] Thorncome's rewritings of these passages are designed to remove all indication that the targets of the satire are clergymen. The offensive words are not four-letter ones but "Church-Man," "Prelatique," "Livings," "Pulpit" and "Bishop" (already reduced in 1680 to B——), all of which are replaced with vague filler terms. Indeed, Thorncome would not even like us to think that the passage could be about a politician: the phrase "domineering at the *Councel Board*" becomes "domineering when at's hight he's soar'd." The uninformed reader must have wondered just what was being satirized in this passage. As with many of Thorncome's changes, the basic aim has been to evade trouble by voiding the text of meaning.

This tenderness towards the clergy extends into Thorncome's amazing rewriting of "A Ramble in St James's Park." In the couplet

> Had she pickt out to rub her Arse on,
> Some stiff-Prick'd *Clown*, or well hung *Parson*

the first line stands, but the second becomes

> Some well hung clown or Greasy Boason,

So at least it was allowable to satirize the navy! In this case indecency does not seem to be a problem, but in other passages the refiner's quill has been busy soft-

16 *The Poems of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, ed. Keith Walker (Oxford, 1984), 92.

17 Thormählen, *Rochester*, 232–33.

ening obscenities. In a passage that grossly parodies Waller's "On St James's Park as lately improved by his Majesty," Rochester gives a description of the trees in the park, which includes the couplet:

> And Nightly now beneath their shade,
> Are *Bugg'ries*, *Rapes*, and *Incests* made

which in Thorncome becomes

> And Nightly now beneath their shade
> Are Amorous charming Dittyes made.

However, this change may not be quite so gratuitously silly as it seems. Waller, in the passage from "On St James's Park" that Rochester parodies, describing the same trees, had written:

> Methinks I see the love that shall be made,
> The Lovers walking in that amorous shade[18]

(the rhyme is the same but reversed) and then continues:

> Methinks I hear the Musick in the Boats
> And the loud Eccho which returns the Notes

Thorncome has restored Waller's adjective "amorous" and may also have been influenced by his reference to music. This and the other revisions offer valuable insights into the hermeneutics of refinement. Every time Thorncome replaces a dangerous word, passage, or phrase with an innocuous one, it alerts us to the possible function of that innocuous word or phrase in other, supposedly innocuous texts.

## The Tonson Edition

The final stage in the seventeenth-century refining of Rochester comes with Jacob Tonson's 1691 edition of the poems together with the play *Valentinian*.[19] This was an early example of a long series of collected editions of English poets and dramatists issued by this remarkable publisher. Tonson's classics were, to start with, Whig classics—even Dryden was marketed, despite his protests, as a kind of Whig.[20] It was helpful here that, in the period following 1688, Rochester could be seen, with a little help from Gilbert Burnet, as a Whig hero, one who had held up the glaring light of satire to an irredeemably corrupt Stuart court. But a classic in the form invented by Tonson had to be able to be put into the hands of the young and the virtuous of both sexes.[21] In the case of Rochester Tonson goes so far as to promise "a Collection of such Pieces only, as may be received in a

18 *Poems upon Several Occasions* (London, 1694), 159. The first separate printing has the variant text "Me thinks I hear the love that shall be made, / The gallants dancing in the Amorous shade" (*On the Park at St. Jamese's* (London, [1660]), 1).

19 *Poems, &c. On Several Occasions: With Valentinian, A Tragedy. Written by the Right Honourable John late Earl of Rochester* (London, 1691).

20 An example of this was the famous contretemps over the *Aeneid*. When Dryden refused to dedicate the 1697 *Virgil* to William III, Tonson struck back by having the face of Aeneas in the illustrations re-engraved to resemble the king. The effect of Tonson's repackaging of Dryden is one of the themes of William J. Cameron, "John Dryden's Jacobitism" in my *Restoration Literature: Critical Approaches* (London, 1972), 277–308.

21 Whereas unvirtuous ladies would be presumed to prefer the unrefined versions. One use to which they may have put it is suggested by a passage from Oldham describing what seems to be telephone sex before the invention of the telephone:

(continued)

vertuous Court, and not unbecome the Cabinet of the Severest Matron" (the "vertuous" court being that of William and Mary). To achieve this "the Publisher has been diligent out of Measure, and has taken exceeding Care that every Block of Offence shou'd be removed."[22]

How did Tonson go about securing this unprecedented degree of refinement? Nobly he spurned the dash. When individual words were unacceptable he replaced them, within reason, with other words; but he did not rewrite radically and destructively as Thorncome had. In fact Tonson's main weapon was the wholesale omission of all poems and passages that might require any more than slight reworking.[23] So his edition is much shorter than our standard editions today. His omissions must have been knowing and deliberate, since some of his texts derive or use readings from the uncensored 1680 versions. All this was necessary if Rochester was to be promoted as a classic, and even then it was not enough. For at the very moment when Rochester had finally been refined into propriety he began to be derefined. Tonson's collection was followed in the new century by two others, the originators of what Vieth calls the C and D series, which not only restored some material Tonson had omitted but supplemented it with generally spurious verse of an irredeemably trivial kind.

By this means a double tradition was created: a "polite," classicizing one handled by respectable publishers, which followed Tonson, and a semi-pornographic, popular one obtainable at the other extreme of the trade. The nadir came when one of the C editions was bound up with an unashamedly pornographic collection called *The Cabinet of Love*. Under the weight of this, Rochester's reputation sank again, it being only in our own time that he has finally been allowed something like classical status. This brings us to the interesting case of the first substantial twentieth-century edition, that of John Hayward, published in 1926. Reading this edition from the front, one will probably be rather overwhelmed by its refinement. This is because Hayward took the early poems (3-55) directly from Tonson. When he had used up the poems available in Tonson, the text still remained a model of refinement because he simply switched to Thorncome (55-85), though this meant that it also became much less faithful to the originals.[24] In fact Hayward even felt obliged to make further alterations to some passages already rewritten by Thorncome. Thus, in "The Imperfect Enjoyment," in a continuation of the passage of phallic bragging cited earlier, *1680* has

> Stiffly resolv'd, twou'd carelessly invade,
> *Woman* or *Boy*, nor ought its fury staid
> (p. 29)

Thou Moorfields Author! fit for Bawds to quote
(If Bawds themselves with Honour safe may do't)
When Suburb-Prentice comes to hire Delight,
And wants Incentives to dull Appetite,
There Punk, perhaps, may thy brave works rehearse,
Frigging the senseless thing with Hand and Verse.
"Upon the Author of a Play Call'd *Sodom*," in *The Poems of John Oldham*, ed. Harold F. Brooks with the collaboration of Raman Selden (Oxford, 1987), 343.

22 *Poems &c.*, A6v.

23 Cuts were still being made during the printing of the volume, as we see in the cancellation of a version of "The Maimed Debauchee" containing an indecent stanza, and its replacement with a curtailed text.

24 In Thorncome's edition, Hayward judged, "the text has been improved considerably" (p. xi). The sources for individual poems are given in his "Textual Notes," 329–34.

Thorncome has:

> Stiffly resolv'd, twou'd carelessly invade,
> Where it essay'd, nor ought its fury staid
> (p. 29)

Here Hayward reads:

> Stiffly resolv'd, turn'd careless I invade,
> Where it essay'd, nor ought its fury staid.
> (p. 72)

Here Hayward has simply extended Thorncome's technique of making an embarrassing passage virtually devoid of meaning. Again, all was in vain. Once Hayward had used up Thorncome he had no option but to turn to the eighteenth-century C and D series and a variety of minor sources. Here, too, we will find Hayward softening indecencies from time to time; but, despite this, the experience of readers as they move through this edition is one of a progressive descent into the mire—or at least as deep as British law permitted in 1926.

One may see Rochester's next three significant editors—Vivian de Sola Pinto (1953), David M. Vieth (1968), and Keith Walker (1984)—as leading us deeper and deeper still. Pinto, though favoring Tonson's versions and acquiescing in several of his exclusions, does expand the authentic part of Hayward's canon. Vieth is uncompromising in his desire to establish an authorial text; but, as a disciple of the "best manuscript" school, he usually follows his copy-text in choosing between obscene and less obscene variants: the criterion is textual not sexual. Walker, on the other hand, when given a choice between an obscene word and a euphemism, seems nearly always to use the obscene word. This is not done from what Greg called "a superfluity of naughtiness" but from an honest conviction that the direct colloquial term is the one Rochester would have preferred; and yet it may be that this judgment has led to some coarsening of the poet's effects.

Rochester was in some respects quite a refined poet, perfectly capable of writing in a "polite" style. He has left us a number of charming, gentle songs and love poems that would never offend a soul. He could also do exactly the reverse—writing specifically to shock and disgust. But his favorite stratagem was to set up an illusion or expectation of refinement and then unexpectedly puncture it with an indecency: or vice versa—suddenly to modulate from indecency into delicacy and tenderness.[25] In other words the effect often stems from the unexpected switch between registers. An editor needs to consider the aesthetic effect aimed at in the particular context.

The language of Rochester's poems is a hieratic language, that of a courtier speaking to other courtiers. This language has its formalities as well as its vulgarities, but even the vulgarities are not for vulgarity's sake. Their function is to establish distance, to maintain barriers, and to assert privileged freedoms within an institutional discourse governed by rigid codes of deference. The fact that one could speak obscenely at Whitehall showed one was in the inner, inner circle: a nexus between obscenity and power that also characterized the Nixon White

25 Both methods can be seen at work in a single short poem, "By all Loves soft, yet mighty Pow'rs."

House. Often the implied message seems to be: "Just try saying this if you're not a lord!" It may be that we do not yet understand how that switching of registers worked in face-to-face encounters within the chambers and corridors of Whitehall. But granting that, it is clear that, when this court discourse is transported from manuscript into print, the whole set of reading relationships changes. As a result, the poems themselves change: they are to be read and used in ways that are quite remote from the coterie ways. I see no point in regretting this, since it is the condition of all communication of texts within and between cultures. Instead we should be trying to understand it.