PERFORMING AMBIVALENCE: A STUDY OF JOHN WILMOT, 2ND EARL OF ROCHESTER

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Georgetown University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English

By

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Washington, DC
September 25, 2008
Thank you to my advisor, Professor Mimi Yiu, Ph.D., and to Professor Jason Rosenblatt, Ph.D. for their help and support.
And, thank you to the many scholars who have come before me and whose work made this paper possible. They are specifically acknowledged in both the Appendix of Works Consulted and in the Bibliography of Works Cited.

Many Thanks,
Cheryl Foodman
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INTRODUCTION

AMBIVALENCE, PERFORMANCE, AND SELF CONSTRUCTION

Conflict and contradiction are a constant of John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester’s self and poetry. One could describe his attitude as ambivalence, locating Rochester between two extremes. By “ambivalence” I mean “the coexistence in one person of contradictory emotions or attitudes (as love and hatred) towards a person or thing” (OED). This includes “a balance or combination or coexistence of opposites, oscillation, fluctuation, variability” (OED). A person or attitude may be “characterized by ambivalence; having either or both of two contrary or parallel views, qualities or meanings; intertwining contradictory emotions (as love and hatred) towards the same person or thing; acting on or arguing for sometimes one and sometimes the other of two opposites” (OED). Ambivalence explains Rochester’s inconsistency and most critics’ difficulty with him. Most (the majority being biographers) grapple with placing Rochester because his ambivalence generates a flip-flopping between extremely disparate opinions so that his personality and beliefs become nearly impossible to trace or explain. His waffling leaves little solid ground to anticipate fully or understand Rochester’s personality, making him potentially dangerous or threatening. While alive,
Rochester’s ambivalence caused a great deal of difficulty for others, King Charles II for example, to know exactly where the man’s loyalties were.

The ambiguity inherent in an ambivalent person surfaces in his constant effort to construct a solidified mask that hides the confusion within. Rochester is veiled under layers of irony, paradox, and innuendo—all side-effects of ambivalence. Note here that I do not mean to construct Rochester, nor argue for a cohesive definition or description of who he was. My suggestion is that his ambivalent psychological status absolutely informed his poetry. The only secure way to access Rochester is through his work and accounts his contemporaries preserved of him; anything more would fall under historical reconstruction and conjecture, thus easily falsifiable. In attempting to construct an understanding of Rochester via his poems yet another problem arises. Critics find that his poems, even at their most masked or complex, can be decoded and understood. Therein lies the issue, because pinning an identity on Rochester directly negates his ambivalent nature, undercutting the discussion and devaluing the alluring ambiguity inherent to him. Critics are not to blame—Rochester makes it incredibly difficult to separate the man from his work, let alone examine the connections or disconnections between both. Under his mask, Rochester can constantly evade classification through the multiple layers of masquerade and performance. His ability to successfully produce a version of himself at any given moment,
fulfilling the role at hand, provides modern readers with a Rochester that is nearly indistinguishable from his performances. By examining strands of ambivalence running throughout poet and poetry and their relationship to performativity, a more cohesive viewpoint of this poet will emerge (literally co-hesive as in the binding of two parts, which is the ambivalent person by definition).

Because ambivalence pulls the subject between two extremes, whatever those may be, it constructs an economy of duality. Somewhere between the two extremes, in the oscillation and wavering from one to the other, a gray area of overlapped opposites develops. There, a “both/and” locus occurs and such a paradox begets the need for performance and simulation. Instability results from ambivalence because in the transition there is a crossing from one border to another, transgressive, and connotatively rebellious. Note that while transgressive has negative connotations, it literally parses out to mean crossing over, implacably from one thing to another. Rochester’s ambivalence, as the poem will display, can both amuse and destroy those around him.

Rochester uses the common trope of transgression, that violence against boundaries, whether it be a mere pushing or picking at them via satirical remarks or a downright breaking of them. His psychological ambivalence also provides for his standpoint that the fluctuation between extremes could and had taught him the varied parts he had to play—son, friend, husband, father, royal subject, Lord,
and lover— during his life. Duality is so cousinly to duplicity, hypocrisy, and the
simulation of truth that the gray area between the two extremes allows for
performance and self-construction as (role)play. His own ambivalence becomes
tied to and conflated with hypocrisy so that he often actively chooses to play the
ambivalent role and simultaneously indicates that he is compelled by
ambivalence’s rule.

Integral to Rochester is duplicity and hypocrisy because, based on his
poetry and prose, this is arguably his sense of what (un)consciously occurs at
court and at large. Many of his letters reveal an anxiety over the true intentions of
his surrounding peers and the idea that all people are merely playing a role.
Rochester seems to ask repeatedly “What is masked by masquerade?”; and his
answer is often foppery or simply: a vacuity of self (Butler 71). If all of
Rochester’s world, including himself, seems structured on that difference between
reality and its lack, on ambivalence and duality, then everything can seem merely
representational, metonymic, and ultimately a failure in signifying anything
substantially real. Moreover, if division between two extremes “is shown to be
duplicitous precisely because of the artificiality of its division, then there must be
a division that resists division, a psychic doubleness or inherent bi[furcation] that
comes to undermine every effort of severing” (Butler 75). The historical and
political readings of Rochester’s writing yield a doubleness that nevertheless results in an indivisible whole.

To make the step from ambivalence into play-acting and performance is Rochester in his most consistent form--if nothing is certainly real then everything is potentially performable. In this environment where everything seems simulated, dissimulated, or at least highly suspect, the dubious Rochester senses that the culture is entirely staged, one great theatrical event full of fops, fakery, and deception. Particularly abhorrent to Rochester is the fooling of one’s own self into thinking this performance represents reality or serves one at all. His hugely sarcastic tone results from these thoughts as he moves between Whitehall and the countryside, writing poetry to satirize all. George Burnet, Rochester’s religious advisor and final confessor, describes the court which:

fell into much extravagance in masquerading; both king and queen, and all the court, went about masked, and came into houses unknown, and danced. People were so disguised, that without being in on the secret none could distinguish them (quoted in Johnson 107).

James Johnson further argues that:

For Rochester, since it was habitual, masquerading came easily. Burnet wrote that Rochester was so clever at disguising himself and acting as a porter, beggar or carman (chair-bearer) that even those in on the secret
could ‘perceive nothing by which he might be discovered.’ . . . Rochester’s life was an incessant attempt both to succeed by the aristocratic conventions of his era and to break free of, even destroy them (108).

In his early life Rochester “grew accustomed to separating the elements of selfhood: boy and youth, innocent and experienced, open and secret” and concealing his “‘true’ identity from others forced John Wilmot to contrive personae and play roles that would inevitably become part of a larger, highly complex self-image” (Johnson 35). Thus he exploits performance of libertinism and plays that role fully while simultaneously struggling against that libertine role. It joins the list of parts—gentleman, friend, agnostic, husband, subject—he must play in life. They seem useless, all man-created constructs that he nevertheless must participate in to succeed and have a place in society. For Rochester, “every effort to establish identity [of himself or others] within the terms of this binary disjunction of [ambivalence] . . . mark[s] the incommensurability of the Symbolic and the real” (Butler 60). To be ambivalent and to perform ambivalence is to be “both/and,” which is accomplished through masquerade.

To examine Rochester through terms of ambivalence and performance “A Satyr Against Mankind” will illustrate Rochester’s abilities and affinity for performance as fueled by his ambivalence. The satire goes from reviling his
human form (preferring animals, including a monkey) to direct stabs at the English monarchy. As a preface to the poem, below is one of the most well-known images of Rochester, his portrait with a monkey:
This portrait highlights Rochester playing the director, the satirist, the intellectual, the wit, the lord, the pathetic clown, and so on. He “directed” the portrait, choosing the monkey and deciding to have it hand him a scrap of paper torn from the book it holds while Rochester crowns him with the bays. The painting began as a traditional family portrait and Rochester turns the work into a multilayered performance. Rochester is director and actor, satirizing the so-called “wits” and lords of his time while recognizing that he belongs in that group as well by showing himself holding the bays used to crown the poet laureate of the English court and his garb denoting aristocracy.
“A Satyr Against Mankind”

Looking at the portrait of Rochester, it becomes clear that his sense of man is that they are equal to if not bested by animals. The “Satyr Against Mankind” corroborates that hypothesis in its list of beasts grouped in the first stanza:

Were I (who to my cost already am
One of those strange, prodigious creatures, man)
A spirit free to choose, for my own share,
What case of flesh and blood I pleased to wear,
I’d be a dog, a monkey, or a bear,
Or anything but that vain animal
Who is so proud of being rational (ll. 1-7)

The “I” in the poem remains and should remain unidentified. It could be Rochester but it does not have to be. The poem suggests animal species are merely costumes that may be worn. The “case of flesh” that embodies “spirit” shapes the spirit to fit in the husk (ll. 4; 3). The idea of a true self being masked or trapped in a mask derives from Rochester’s perception of performance in the world. Suffice it to say that the “I” presents one voice out of Rochester’s personality, psychological self, and expresses the man’s beliefs (ll.1; 4; 5). But discussion should not make the leap into saying that the “I” belongs to Rochester fully; instead he should be separated out and allow for this “I” to become a semi-
independent character, one constructed with pieces of but not entirely Rochester.

While “‘The ‘Satyr’ may not represent the author’s state of mind with total consistency it reveals John Wilmot at a crucial point of intellectual transition” (Johnson 202). Through the poem Rochester is in flux, transitioning in his beliefs about mankind. In:

Exploring his changing attitudes by writing a ‘Satyr’ on false beliefs and practices, Rochester used the rhetorical techniques of the classical orational argument. . . . His conflicted selves lent force to the disputatio. His “I” (ego) argued for experiential or sensate reason against a clerical adversarius, who condemned wit and eulogized mankind. The

adversarius need not be identified as an actual clergyman; it was a moralizing superego formed as part of his breeding. . . . (Johnson 204).

This satire differs from Rochester’s earlier works for its being generically set rather than pointed at a specific person or institution. For its breadth of subject matter and to describe the poem with the simplest terms, “the ‘Satyr Against Mankind’ belongs to the long tradition of human self-disparagement” (Griffin 158). Therefore the poem, which is “often considered the definitive statement on the libertine circle’s views and beliefs,” exists generically both in itself and of its attacks on humankind (Webster 53).
The narrator begins his complaint against man with a subjunctive wish that he knows cannot come true. If he could, he would be an animal than man, which he describes as “strange,” “prodigious,” “vain animal,” and “proud” (ll. 2; 6; 7) He senses an evil in man envisioned through the adjective “prodigious,” which “implies amazing in a monstrous, nearly criminal sense” (O.E.D.). Humans are curiosities, “strange” both in the sense of alien and yet highly interesting for its unusual nature. Thus correlating to the sense that the narrator has pinned man down and put him under glass for examination. Once under the glass and through the narrator’s lens the reason humans are so awful is that “our ratiocination is vain both in its egoism and in its ultimate incompetence” (Combe 72). The bitter disillusionment expressed in the satire fits with evidence from Rochester’s life by 1674, when he was exiled to the English countryside (as described in further detail later), so that his satire’s:

confrontation is played out not only at the abstract, philosophical level of ideas, but principally at the social and political level of Restoration England-- that is, on the target fop’s home turf. The particularities of Charles II’s oppressive governmental rule and libertine court culture provide the ultimate source of both rational failure and textual disorientation . . . . Charles’s regime of truth appears as a vast masquerade,
an elaborative cognitive and factional shame that benefits some to the
great cost of most (Combe 70)

The vanity and pride of life is a typical point to rail against, yet Rochester’s
narrator speaks of a deep cynicism towards the masks, the “case[s] of flesh,”
surrounding him in recognition of the lie inherent in believing in the performances
(l. 4).

In his next lines the narrator turns to give a deeper argument against man,
all of it boiling down to a disgust for reason, a sixth sense “which fifty times for
one does err” (l. 11). Man, in his vainglory, has convinced himself that the natural
five senses are insufficient and thus worthless. Mankind “contradict[s]” his
proper sense(s), which they perceive as “too gross,” and instead fashions
(“contrives”) a replacement which opens the way for mankind to mask their true
natures (ll.9; 8). The narrator rejects human reason as a tool that gives flight to
imagination, a faculty which in turn allowed mankind to pretend, self-fashion,
perform, and, in the end, be counterfeit versions of what the narrator perceives to
be natural or human. Reason is described as “an ignis fatuu in the mind” that
causes the mind to “leave [the] light of nature, sense, behind” and give free reign
for it to meander through “Pathless and dangerous wandering ways. . . / Through
error’s fenny bogs and thorny breaks” (ll. 12; 13; 14-15). By ignis fatuus the
narrator means ephemeral, baseless, will o’ the wisps that mankind mistakes as
logic and reason. Philosophers are the worst type of human the narrator could accuse of the folly of reason. The path of philosophy is ridiculed for its “misguided follower[s]” who “climb with pain / Mountains of whimseys, heaped in [their] own brain” (ll. 16-17). Only humans would develop this type of thought, not animals which, for all their bestiality, have more common sense than to “Stumbl[e] from through to though, fall[ing] headlong down / Into doubt’s boundless sea” (ll. 18-19). The trope of philosophy as light and the belief that reason is a valuable skill are torn down completely, ridiculed as “bladders of philosophy” that help the reasoning man to “bear him up a while” and avoid drowning in a sea of doubt, darkness, and despair (ll. 21; 20). Man uses books to “bear him up a while” all “in hopes still to o’ertake th’ escaping light” but the books have no such power (ll. 20; 22). The will o’ wisp, the “vapor” continues to entice man “danc[ing] in his dazzling sight” so much so that the individual has wasted an entire lifetime pursuing the unattainable(l. 23). Relentlessly, the narrator leaves the lost pilgrim to “eternal night” (l. 24). Time passes until “old age and experience” lead the person “to death” and “make him understand” what the narrator has observed and foreseen all along: despite “a search so painful and so long / . . . all [the man’s] life he has been in the wrong” (ll. 25; 26; 27-28). It was not ignorance that pulled the man towards reason, this sixth sense, but prideful vanity. These philosophers raise such a bile-full denouncement because:
They waste their lives asking themselves pointless and unanswerable questions, only to discover in the end that all their lives they have been wrong. Their ‘reason’ exists to condemn pleasure; Rochester’s ‘reason’, that is ‘sense’ (sensuality, as well as common sense), exists only to provide pleasure. Rochester was not always truthful, but he was true to his own beliefs, (Goldsworthy 10).

Too late in life, the philosopher is made to see his delusions, confusion, mistakes, and conjectures about life that have distracted him from actually living life. What remains is entirely abject, “huddled in dirt,” literally brought down to earth as a wretched, destroyed husk of a human(l. 29).

The narrator observes that part of what fuels the pursuit of reason, the much hated sixth sense, is the environment surrounding mankind. Here pieces of Rochester’s life blend into the narrator’s voice:

And wit was his vain, frivolous pretense
Of pleasing others at his own expense.

For wits are treated just like common whores:
First they’re enjoyed, and then kicked out of doors.

The pleasure past, a threatening doubt remains
That frights th’ enjoyer with succeeding pains (ll. 35-40)
The “he” referred to in these lines remains vague, leaving room to attribute it to a variety of persons, including the poet. Clearly, who ever he is, this man’s environment is unstable and frustrating. Despite its vanity and frivolity, the wit, like a whore, uses what tools he has to gain security and approval, which in King Charles II’s reign meant money. The court provides no stability so that any individual will attempt to gain notice for an increase in status, no matter what it may cost him materially or immaterially (ie: moral). Moreover, the whole relationship between the wit and others is a farce, a lot of insubstantial noise all voiced in an effort to find pleasure. One should pause here to consider Rochester’s experience just prior to his composition of this poem. In the month of December, 1673, Rochester “mistakenly” handed the king a deeply ribald lampoon. This is one of those shining moments of libertine legend that secure Rochester’s reputation, both in his time and now in ours, as a rebellious and intriguing man. Knowing full well what the consequences of his poem would be, he still pushed at the boundaries of courtly decorum, broke down the veiled truths and laid them bare. Part of this demi-legend is that Rochester delivered his poem while a group of Charles’s queen’s family was present, leaving the king no recourse but anger and embarrassment. For a period of time Rochester had been deeply enjoyed and praised as one of London’s greatest wits and the relationship with the king was one of an “indulgent but demanding father to [a] capricious but
charming son” (Johnson 182). The king’s experience this time was not pleasurable and caused Rochester to be expelled from Whitehall. While this was not his first time in exile, it was his first time exiled without a sense of secure return as the anger typically expressed by the king was “tempered by a measure of tolerant amusement,” which allowed Rochester to return to London and be “restored to full favor” (Johnson 182). The drive to participate in the economy of patronage set up by Charles can be seen in Rochester’s satire.

The wit experiences an extremely negative outcome despite his best efforts as “the enjoyer of the man of wit is somehow vitally threatened by his pleasure and threatens the man of wit in return” (Combe 73). The narrator compares a wit’s status to that of a common whore, typically carriers of venereal disease, which both enticed and threatened those who sought them. The wit, like Rochester, goes too far and his performance is no longer amusing. The combination of pleasure to “threatening doubt” and “succeeding pains” shows that the wit may be exploited and just as quickly discarded by his patron (ll. 39; 40). The narrator explains that “Women and men of wit are dangerous tools” (l. 41). They represent a double-edged sword, the pleasure of their wit being alluring but potentially “fatal to admiring fools” (l. 42). Like the whore, the exchange between the wit and his audience is all business; there is no love for the wit because he carries with him the dangerous potential to reveal what the patron
“fear[s at heart” and so he hates (l. 45). Again, as with the philosophers, so with the wits, particularly court wits, it seems, a life is wasted in fruitless effort that ironically only works against the fool. And, through the narrator’s eyes, these individuals and those who follow them are fools: the first striving for nothing but a mere will o’ wisp of favor while the second cannot resist the pleasure the wit may offer and so, falls prey to the pain that can and will result.

At this point Rochester shows his capacity to perform multiple voices as the narrator acknowledges a new voice, that of “some formal band and beard” there to “take [him] to task” (ll. 46; 47). Now what was at first a satiric monologue becomes a dialogue. Rochester dramatizes his dispute, interrupting the narrator with an adversary. It should be clear that, in his ability to play out both sides in his head and on paper, Rochester at least has the capacity to think in complete opposition. His ambivalence serves here to further support his primary argument by challenging the dissenting voice and then debunking claims. Through both the narrator and the adversary, Rochester shows his psychological tendency towards ambivalence, which provides him with a successful performance of two completely opposing personas. Rochester, for the sake of his satire’s argument, can see the other side’s viewpoint and delineate it. While he clearly dismisses it here, the Christian orthodoxy described by the adversary is nevertheless what Rochester converts to at least twice in his life, both at times
when he believed he was dying and the latter being his infamous deathbed conversion. Rochester certainly enjoyed the perks of and suffered the pains of having a predominantly ambivalent mindset.

The narrator drops a challenge, “Come on, sire; I’m prepared” before allowing the other to speak (l. 47). The opposing argument, as aforementioned, is that of English Christian orthodox seventeenth century faith. Reason, in this man’s eyes, is a gift from God by which humans are “dressed / To dignify [their] nature above beast” (ll. 64-65). Picking up on the ignis fatuus the narrator calls attention to, the adversary takes and counter uses those metaphors to show how mankind’s God given reason breathes “aspiring influence” into our minds allowing us to “take a flight beyond material sense” (ll. 66; 67). Reason allows us to contemplatively soar and reach light, “the flaming limits of the universe” (l. 69). Of course, the narrator must cut in at this point, crying “Hold, might man” because the speech is something well rehearsed and reiterative of others (l. 72). The speech is prescribed or scripted by years of other philosophers and their work on justifying reason as a “supernatural gift” (l. 76). To the narrator this presumption is the greatest lie, mask, or simulation that man could believe in, one “that makes a mite / Think he’s the image of the infinite,” thinking himself equal to God and God’s omniscience (ll. 76-77). These fools end up “Comparing [their] short life, void of all rest, / To the eternal and the ever blest,” a delusion of
grandeur that is most despicable to the narrator (ll. 78-79). Humans believe they are the likeness, the “image,” of God and take that idea and expand it into believing that they then have the same capacity to reason as God (l. 63). But the narrator’s word choice makes it very clear that there is a short distance between “image” and imagine.

Against the argument made by the adversary, Rochester picks up the narrator’s voice again and gives a very different portrayal of mankind. The narrator strips off the “shining reason” humans are supposedly dressed in which makes them superior to all other creatures (l. 64). The philosophers or men of religion are instead “busy, puzzling stirrer[s]-up of doubt / That frames deep mysteries, then finds them out,” (ll. 81-82). The mockery of framing deep mysteries, of containing the uncontainable, and moreover the presumption that mankind can know the unknowable quickly (“busy”). For the narrator the process seems preposterous; literally it seems so backwards that he will refrain and reassert his anger at it. First, he levels the accusation that reasoning men fill “Those reverend bedlams, colleges and schools” with “frantic crowds of thinking fools,” –the oxymoron of “thinking fools” is another in that list of preposterous images or ideas the narrator cites (ll. 83; 82). The increasing irritation of the narrator begins to boil over as evidenced in the extended sentences and his reiteration of earlier arguments against reason, particularly that it leads men to
believe that they can do the impossible. The contradictory images include that of the philosopher, a “heavy sot” who nevertheless is airborne on “wings,” the ability to find “The limits of the boundless universe,” or to make “an old witch fly / And bear a crippled carcass through the sky” (ll. 84; 85;). The latter repeats the earlier imagery of “doubt’s boundless sea” and a deeply held belief of the narrator’s which drives his anger and his argument against reason (l. 19). Led astray by reason, man proudly believes he can comprehend the universe entirely, a skill would equate man close to divinity. Despite the religious reasoning the adversary takes, the narrator pulls off the argument’s mask and shows it to be among the oldest represent sins in English literature: Satan’s pride. For his lack of religious affiliation, the narrator actually takes a more pious position in turning away from one of Satan’s three tools, the pride of life. The “exalted power” humans believe they have achieved is nothing more than “nonsense and impossibilities” (ll. 88; 89).

Reason leads mankind to be made into “a whimsical philosopher” (another oxymoron), who then joins the “modern cloistered coxcombs who / Retire to think, ‘cause they have nought to do” (ll. 90; 92-93). It is this group of men “cloistered” from the world who nevertheless think up the rules and order of the world. They inveigh upon material reality while living detached from it. To bring Rochester back into the discussion momentarily, this point in the poem does
appear to be where the satire contains “practical and crucial issues of who should hold sway over whom and why” (Combe 76). Combe believes that “the poem represents Rochester’s most detailed portrait of political England, and it is a bleak picture indeed” (76). England’s leaders, in Rochester’s mind, are the worst example of delusional, vain, and proud creatures. Written during his exile from Whitehall, Rochester’s opinion of his king rings loud and clear, making Charles out to be the biggest fool of all mankind; “he who thinks beyond [life’s happiness: action], thinks like an ass,” both the animal and the fool (97). While his satire falls in the “long tradition of human self-disparagement” it also is highly specific to the 1670s in England as it “denounces reason and consistency and sets out with all the weariness of twenty-seven years the essential absurdity of a creature that supposes itself lord of the earth. It is fundamental to understanding the mind of the poet” (Griffin 158; Goldsworthy 6). The satire represents Rochester’s extreme disillusionment with his entire society as he eventually comes to believe that “Humanity was a disease rather than a post-lapsarian consequence of Original Sin” (Johnson 203).

In answer to the religious adversary, Rochester’s narrator offers an alternative view on reason and the governance of the world. The narrator states that he has been arguing about a particular type of reason: “false reasoning” (l. 98). Instead he claims: “I own right reason, which I would obey,” which he
qualifies with an explanation of how “right reason” differs from “false reasoning” (l. 99). Right reason is:

That reason which distinguishes by sense

And gives us rules of good and ill from thence,

That bounds desires with a reforming will

To keep ‘em more in vigour, not to kill, (ll. 100-103).

With life in Restoration England so precarious both financially and socially, the narrator instead points to those aspects of life that belong to man naturally if he would only use them. Mankind has the capacity but does not employ its ability to use reason correctly: to be sensible and generate rules of governance that are based on “good and ill” not favor (l. 101). False reason pushes mankind into a vicious position where it must vie for the most insubstantial or immaterial of things: a man’s favor. Mankind is kept busy working at this purposeless task and has become so enmeshed in it that any could “kill” or destroy another man blocking his path (l. 103).

The list of comparisons then begins and focus mainly on the most material and primal aspect of human life: appetite, hunger, and eating; not appetite or a passion for the unattainable, but rather actual hunger for food. False reason “hinders” while the narrator’s “helps to enjoy / Renewing appetites yours would destroy” (ll. 103-104). The hunger that drives mankind by and large is destructive
and consumptive in a profoundly negative way while right reason provides enjoyment, renewal, and vigor or life. As the narrator puts it “My reason is my friend, yours is a cheat; / Hunger calls out, my reason bids me eat; Perversely, yours your appetite does mock” (ll. 106-108). That mankind's' reasoning will play falsely or “cheat,” as the poem states, is the narrator’s opinion and the crux of his issues against reason. This is the second time the narrator has likened reason to cheating, the first being “Pride drew him in, as cheats their bubbles catch, / And made him venture to be made a wretch” (ll. 31-32). The parallel language continues such that in the beginning “His wisdom did his happiness destroy, / Aiming to know that world he should enjoy,” gets repeated with the later words “happiness,” “destroy,” and “enjoy” as part of the narrator’s distinction between false and right reason (ll. 33-34; 96; 105; 104). False reason is “perverse” and “mock[s]” in such a ridiculous fashion that “This plain distinction, sir, your doubt secures: / ‘Tis not true reason I despise, but yours” (ll. 108; 110-111). The satire does not move against all reason but rather a type of reason that is based on whimsy not experience, on imagined concepts not reality learned through the five senses.

The world Rochester lives in and portrays through his narrator is an English society that “is inextricably ensnared in a Hobbesian and Machiavellian web of fear and hypocrisy; the only way to rise above it is not to be part of it—in
other words, not to be English, even arguably human. Such an elective is hardly feasible” (Combe 70). So while the narrator “think[s] reason righted” he insists “but for man, / I”l ne’er recant; defend him if you can” (ll. 112-113). The narrator concedes that man has reason but because of “his pride and his philosophy” mankind has lost its place of superiority above all other creatures. Humans no longer employ right reason or common sense and have neglected or refused intellect and instinct whereas “‘Tis evident beast are, in their degree, / As wise at least, and better far than he” (ll. 115-116). The best of earth’s creatures are those who “attain, / By surest means, the ends at which they aim” (ll. 117-118). In juxtaposing man and beast again, the narrator supposes:

If therefore Jowler finds and kills his hares

Better than Meres supplies committee chairs,

Though one’s a statesman, th’ other but a hound,

Jowler, in justice, would be wiser found, (ll. 119-122).

Critics generally agree that “Meres” refers to Sir Thomas Meres, a member of the Whig party who served as a member of parliament in Westminster. A dog would do a better job of governing England and generating its laws than Sir Thomas Meres has because the hound possesses right reason, working diligently to get exactly what is needed (“finds and kills his hares”), and in lacking the sixth sense
contrived by man, the dog would be more just and wise than a human. At this juncture the narrator lays down a challenge, stating:

You see how far man’s wisdom here extends;
Look next if human nature makes amends:
Whose principles most generous are, and just,
And to whose morals you would sooner trust.
Be judge yourself, I’ll bring it to the test:
Which is the basest creature, man or beast? (ll. 123-128).

Obviously the narrator’s question is a loaded one and his audience’s answer prescribed by what has already been argued and what will follow. The test is unnecessary for the audience but not for the narrator and arguably not for Rochester. For Rochester this satire is a venting of jaded rage at the world as a whole and given that emotional aspect, the poem does rant and ramble on the same argument made clear by the first seven lines. The extensively repetitive diatribe must be doing some other work, namely acting as a performance exploiting ambivalence. The “test” the narrator provides, especially when combined with the previous sections of the poem, seems like a necessary release of anger and tension through reiteration. The “test” is highly performative in nature and our reaction, according to the narrator’s point of view, is already pre-scripted and prescribed.
From lines 129 through 167 the narrator provides his test, his examples, and arguments against mankind. While the essential argument is repetitive, the imagery and descriptions the narrator uses vary and expand through repetition. The first statement made is: “Birds feed on birds, beasts on each other prey, / But savage man alone does man betray” (ll. 129-130). Out of all the creatures on earth, the narrator deems man to be the most savage for his betrayal of his own kind. While, “Pressed by necessity, [animals] kill for food,” man’s pursuit of man, guided by false reason, “undoes man” and “do[es] himself no good” (ll. 131; 132). These first two sentences are couplets but the couplet has increased value poetically, in this instance: it generates binary pairings that end in a likeness (rhymed words) that nevertheless describes a complete disparity. Animals “prey” on each other for “food,” a necessity that the narrator has previously argued for with the line “Hunger calls out, my reason bids me eat” (ll. 129; 131; 107). Mankind “betray[s]” out of desire, falsely reasoned necessity, and in the end the betrayal serves no purpose but to have the negative fall out of “do[ing] himself no good” (ll. 130; 132).

The next comparative test presented increases in duration as the narrator moves from the succinctness of his first statements into a more emotionally driven venting of anger, in part fueled by the apparent sense that his point is not clear enough and that he must dissect it further. The animals are not just preying on
each other and killing; man is not just betraying and being self-destructive. Instead:

With teeth and claws by nature armed, they hunt
Nature’s allowance, to supply their want.
But man, with smiles, embraces, friendship, praise,
Inhumanly his fellow’s life betrays;
With voluntary pains works his distress,
Not through necessity, but wantonness (ll. 133-138).

The increased description begins to tell a story, becoming more performative (as in the tradition of oral storytelling), while simultaneously envisioning two opposite concepts of behavior. Clearly, the poem states that animals use what tools “nature” has provided them and they instinctively employ their tools “by surest means” to attain “the ends at which they aim” (ll.134; 118). Conversely, man uses the tools of expression and communication, whether by language or body language, uses it as a simulation to mask the true intent and thus, for the narrator and Rochester, the betrayal is qualified now as “inhuman” and provoked by “wantonness” (ll. 136; 138). The narrator and Rochester can overlap here because his letters during his banishment from Whitehall reveal how disappointed he had become with humanity in general:
What, then, was he to believe and where could he turn for reassurance when he experienced doubts at Woodstock in the late summer of 1674? Possibly to trust in friendship as “a reall good,” he told Savile, “the most difficult & rare accident of life . . . allsoe the Best, nay perhaps the only good one” (Johnson 203).

Considering the deep connections Rochester’s family had to the royal family, especially the older generation as they helped hide Charles’ father for a period at a time when being a Royalist let alone aiding and abetting the king was highly unpopular. By taking that risk, the fathers provided a close-knit kinship between their sons and Charles II was more Rochester’s godfather than king. The king’s angry dismissal of Rochester clearly pulled away whatever mask contrived true nature of man and king. Rochester, wits, whores, all received “smiles, embraces, friendship, praise” but once used, were expendable and held no value (l. 135).

The fabricated “necessity” under which man operates is all a charade guided by the false pretense that accord actions are just (l. 138). However, what is just, to the narrator, is fighting “for hunger or for love” whereas man fights out of “fear” (ll. 139; 140). Again, the simplicity of man’s motivation, delineated as “fear,” is not sufficient for the narrator so he must explain, parsing out the aspects of fear that drive mankind:

For fear he arms, and is of arms afraid,
By fear to fear successively betrayed;

Base fear, the source whence his best passions came:

His boasted honour, and his dear-bought fame;

That lust of power, to which he’s such a slave,

And for the which alone he dares be brave;

To which his various projects are designed;

Which makes him generous, affable, and kind;

For which he takes such pains to be thought wise,

And screws his actions in a forced disguise,

Leading a tedious life in misery

Under laborious, mean hypocrisy (ll. 141-152).

Everything that mankind typically praises itself for has been reversed by the narrator and turned into list of useless, tedious, pathetic endeavors all motivated by fear, not the vain, proud supposition that the motive originates from a pure, reasonable, or supposed right state of mind. Everything that man strives for in life—"his best passions," "honour," "fame," "power," and "brave[ry]"—all come from "base fear" (ll. 143; 144; 145; 146; 143). The entire apparatus of society is performative, fake, and simulated as fear "screws [man’s] actions, in a forced disguise" (l. 150). Society, particularly the court, is a "political life [that] is therefore a masquerade where in a fragile veil of sentimentality conceals a
predatory community of stupid brutality” (Combe 80). The anger and frustration, both of Rochester and his displacement of it onto the narrator, is extremely palpable. The length of this tirade illuminates more than just the issues set forth; it points more towards a need to express a deeply felt grievance that has nevertheless been pre-scripted since the first seven lines of the poem. This is Rochester scripting a persona. The narrator is a performance, a character venting tremendous amounts of anger at the state of mankind. Further elaborating, we are told to “Look to the bottom of his vast design, / Wherein man’s wisdom power, and glory join” so that we can see more evidence for the narrator’s test (ll. 153-154). There, at the “bottom,” man is pictured as combining all those inherent or perceived strengths and thinking that “the good he acts, the ill he does endure” has originated from a source of the desire to do good and to withstand hardship (ll. 153; 155). This false, will o’ wisp, *ignis fatuus* of mankind is really, in fact, “all from fear” and done “to make himself secure” (l. 156). The vitriolic tirade ends with a final couplet which, like the end of a sonnet, truly hammers home a sense of ending and conclusion. That statement becomes all the more powerful and unforgettable for its acting in such a manner. The portrait of mankind ends in controversy and disruption, disturbing all vain fantasies we have of ourselves. The narrator reduces man to complete abjection because “Merely for safety, after fame we thirst, / For all men would be cowards if they durst” (ll. 157-158). The
insult rings clear: mankind is so weakened by being guided by false reason that humans lack even the courage to be cowards.

For the most part the narrator has completed his experiment. The outcome is as any audience would expect it to be, thus the test is not as important as the disparagement and self-loathing set forth. After all, the narrator is human and Rochester is a part of mankind. Recognizing this fact, the narrator concedes that, while true, the “honesty’s against all common sense” (l. 159). If one wants to be human and a part of human society then “Men must be knaves, ’tis in their own defence” because “Mankind’s dishonest” (ll. 160; 161). No one else in the society will remove the mask or break the cycle of fear driven action so that if you attempt to play the game of life according honesty and fairness “You’ll be undone” (l. 163). Truth has no actual value in this society. Instead the majority, or might makes right so that “weak truth [can not] your reputation save” because “The knaves will all agree to call you knave” (ll. 164; 165). The most disappointing truth arrived at near the end of the satire is that “Wronged shall he live, insulted o’er, oppressed, / Who dares be less a villain than the rest” (ll. 166-167). If “Mankind’s dishonest” one and all, then human nature is that while “most men are cowards, all men should be knaves” (ll. 161; 169). His point proven in the distinction between man and beast, the narrator closes his argument with a new question. For him, if all of mankind is dishonest then “the difference
lies, as far as I can see, / Not in the thing itself, but the degree” (ll. 170-171). The final couplet of the satire ends with a question, raising yet a new and less emotionally driven question, that “all the subject matter of debate / Is only: Who’s a knave of the first rate?” (ll. 172-173).

Thus ends the satire in its original form. Manuscripts of it circulated in letters sometime between 1645 and 1647. What is not clear, based on all the critical research done on this poem, is when the additional lines, the “Addendum” also known as “The Apology,” were added to the satire. Out of the surviving, original manuscripts from the seventeenth century, some have the added text and many do not. It claims an “I” just as the satire did from the beginning, but the personality and emotions of that “I” have changed enough to deem this a different character and thus a different performance of opinion. Based on Rochester’s biography, historians know that he returned to London sometime in the autumn of 1674 at which point the satire began to circulate. Moreover, due to treasury records, it is known that Rochester received payments on a fairly regular basis and he managed to finish the year 1674 with success and a sense of triumph. The rising of his fortunes, both monetary and in life, is reasonable enough for him to reframe his satire with the near fifty lines of poetry. The section remains highly doubtful and disillusioned, containing tongue-in-cheek parenthetical remarks and his further description of the type of man surrounding him at Whitehall. There is
the same disparagement as well as prescription in that the bulk of the added lines have already been answered, despite the questions, making them more rhetorical and performed. The Apology is Rochester’s huge conditional statement that, by way of the previous satire and this sections’ insults, he believes to be impossible. Nevertheless, what marks the “I” as new and distinct from the previous narrator are the final nine lines:

But a meek, humble man of honest sense,
Who, preaching peace, does practise continence;
Whose pious life’s a proof he does believe
Mysterious truths, which no man can conceive.
If upon earth there dwell such God-like men,
I’ll here recant my paradox to them,
Adore those shrines of virtue, homage pay,
And, with the rabble world, their laws obey.
If such there be, yet grant me this at least:
Man differs more from man, than man from beast (ll. 212-221).

While the satirist can imagine and has imagined what a just and honest man might be, he has had no experience or proof of it in his life. That this creation is hypothetical gets driven home repeatedly and refuses to be ignored. Thus “even the presence on earth of such paragons . . . would not alter the gloomy view held
by the *Satyr* speaker of the vast majority of humans (Thormählen 236). Only his five senses, right reason, will ever persuade both narrators that any man even approximating this ideal exists.
CONCLUSION

One of the best summations of Rochester comes from James Johnson’s biography, which states that “Rochester’s life was an incessant attempt both to succeed by the aristocratic conventions of his era and to break from of, even destroy them” (108). The man’s ambivalence is clear and his struggle between duality is made even more apparent through his poetry, especially this satire. While the entire satire maintains a very consistent, its effect is achieved through the generation of multiple characters: protagonists and adversaries, the single man who interrupts the narrator and the entire audience (even mankind as a whole). Just as in his Portrait, Rochester has completely directed and staged his poem. The adaptation of playacting, a form of highly popular entertainment during Charles II’s reign, signals Rochester’s acknowledgment of and skill at role-playing while also illustrating his anger at the falseness and simulation surrounding him. Rochester’s ambivalence provides him with a double view, seeing both sides where he perceives that the bulk of his contemporaries focus only on one. Ambivalence gives him the ability to work within and transgress convention, to exploit but also disparage it.
APPENDIX A

WORKS CONSULTED


Burnet, Gilbert. Some Passages of the Life and Death of John Earl of Rochester. London: 1787


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