

Dunmore, Laurence dir. 2005. *The Libertine*
Screenplay by Stephen Jeffreys. Performed by Johnny Depp, Samantha Morton, John Malkovich. The Weinstein Company/Entertainment Films

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Laurence Dunmore's *The Libertine* attempts to entice the audience with the promise of a walk on the wild side. "He didn't resist temptation. He pursued it," the tag-line runs. The character who inspires these words is John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester, wit, poet and debauchee at the court of the "merry monarch," Charles II. Those familiar with this character will readily grant that the claim in the tag-line is not much overstated. On his death at the early age of 33, the family chaplain wrote of him: "so confirm'd was he in Sin, that he lived, and oftentimes, almost died, a Martyr for it" (Parsons 1680: 9). For those who may never have heard of the Earl the publicity released by the studio provides the necessary clues, with some helpful *aggiornamento*; it presents the story as the "sexy, irreverent and ultimately moving adventures of a man who broke all the rules," and describes the hero as "rebellious", "scandalous", a "wily and talented rogue who lived his short, wild life like a Restoration rock star." Put him in the shape of a charismatic, unconventional actor like Johnny Depp and it seems that this cannot fail to be, as the theatrical trailer announces, "the most controversial film of the year."

The script for this unorthodox biopic was adapted by Stephen Jeffreys from his play *The Libertine*, staged at the Royal Court, London, 1994. In 1996 Jeffreys' work was produced by the Steppenwolf Theatre, Chicago, with John Malkovich in the title role. It was Malkovich's idea to turn the play into a motion picture, and it was his impulse that saw the project through, though it was fraught with difficulties. Among other problems, the actor/producer has pointed out in interviews that the sexually explicit nature of the script made distributors recoil. This is hardly surprising, since the playwright's focus is largely conditioned by the work that first sparked his interest in the topic: *Sodom, or The Quintessence of Debauchery*, a burlesque playlet – often labelled pornographic – which is associated with Rochester, though authorship is uncertain

(Love 1999: xxviii). As Jeffrey's explains in the Press Notes, he came across this piece in the dentist's chair, of all places (his dentist was giving away his most scandalous books to keep them out of the reach of his teenage daughter). Jeffrey's found *Sodom* "the filthiest play" he had ever read and was intrigued to know more about the author. The character he discovered seemed to him surprisingly "fresh and contemporary," a rebel who "refused to obey any of the rules and dictates of his own age." His tragic end, which Jeffrey's saw as the result of a process of self-destruction, exerted a special fascination; it made him look at the story as representing "the darker side of human nature in the middle of the Enlightenment" (2005: 6).

This interest in the tragic end dictates Jeffrey's approach to his material. He chooses to begin in the mid-1670s, when the Earl had already carved a reputation as the maddest of the court wits, and chronicles the final years of his life. Even so, Jeffrey's manages to cram in a good share of the episodes that forged the Rochester legend, though some of them must be presented in recollection: his abduction of heiress Elizabeth Malet (who would eventually become his wife), his banishment from court on account of a lampoon mocking the king's sexual practices, his affair with actress Elizabeth Barry, his posing for a portrait crowning a monkey with the bays, the infamous Epsom incident (in which after drunk and disorderly rioting he fled, leaving one of his friends to die), his masquerading as a mountebank in Tower Hill, or his death-bed conversion, which caused considerable impact at the time (the account written by Bishop Burnet ran through at least five editions in print before the end of the century). All these elements are integrated in a picture to which *Sodom* is curiously central, as the narrative line weaves three different strands that come to a climax in an aborted performance of this piece: a transgressive penchant for the obscene, a passion for the theatre, and a love-hate relationship with King Charles.

Obscenity certainly looms large in *The Libertine*, not only in the verses that are quoted from the Rochester corpus, which are explicit enough, but also in the generous share of images director Laurence Dunmore regales us with – including the surreal multiple orgy scene that illustrates the recitation of lines from "A Ramble in St James's Park." A nude display or two seems *de rigueur* for the subject; yet, there is something oddly reductionistic in the way this is handled in the film. Dunmore seems to take obscenity as a signifier that can translate a wide variety of ideas and emotions with a single image. Thus, to establish at the beginning of the film that there is both love

and passion between Rochester and his wife, we have a scene in which he feels her up in their coach; to express his tender affection for his whore-mistress Jane Roberts, he brushes his hand over her breasts; to suggest his increasing obsession with Barry, we see him languish as Jane labours to arouse him with her mouth; to portray the wits as *enfants terribles*, we are treated to a shot of Charles Sackville baring his buttocks in the playhouse; to signify their defiance of authority, they piss on the constable's boots. All this may remind us of the lines in "An Allusion to Horace" in which Rochester mocks Dryden's attempts to imitate the "mannerly obscene" style of his circle of friends:

Dryden in vain tryd this nice way of Wit,
For he to be a tearing Blade thought fitt.
But when he would be sharp he still was blunt:
To frisk his frolick fancy hee'd cry Cunt. (Love 1999: 73)

The second element which articulates the story of the libertine is his involvement with the theatre. Like many of his fellow court wits, Rochester took an active interest in the stage: he was a patron of playwrights, a lover of actresses (besides Barry, he is also credited with an affair with Sarah Cooke), and also an author: he wrote prologues, epilogues and scenes for other poets, and produced his own version of Fletcher's *Valentinian*. The portrait this film gives of the theatre world in the 1670s aims at a true sense of period. There is a bustling energy to the playhouse scenes: we have a boisterous audience, orange wenches and prostitutes plying their trade in the pit and the boxes, and men of fashion visiting the tiring room to fondle the actresses. The production of Restoration dramatists is, for once, given some visibility: we hear lines from Otway's *Alcibiades* (1675) and Etherege's *The Comical Revenge* (1664). The script is accurate in placing Henry Harris and Mrs. Betterton as leading players in the Duke's Company, though it is intriguing that the most famous of Restoration actors, Thomas Betterton, should not appear (possibly because the storyline requires the leading man to be a prig, and a more shadowy figure seemed preferable). It also follows a well established tradition in presenting Elizabeth Barry as an actress who did not show much promise, but was coached by Rochester and turned into a huge success.

The training of Mrs. Barry, which smacks of Method acting, may seem anachronistic, but it conforms basically to the account

attributed to Betterton: Barry had no ear for music and could not reproduce the actors' declamatory style without "running into a Tone"; the Earl realized this and made her instead "enter into the Nature of each Sentiment; perfectly changing herself ... and feeling really, and being really in the Humour, the Person she represented, was supposed to be in" (1741: 16). Where the screenplay deviates from the records is in making Barry triumph in the role of Ophelia, a part she never played; she rose to stardom acting the suffering heroines in Otway's tragedies. As in *Stage Beauty* (2004), Shakespeare again steals the show, as if his works were the only touchstone for a player's talent. But if there is one thing that is completely out of place, that is the notion that a text like *Sodom* was ever intended for a public theatre. Dunmore, besides, goes over the top in the staging of this play and abandons all pretence to realism: he has a back-cloth representing female genitals, giant dildos for props and even a phallus-shaped chariot ridden by a midget.

The performance of *Sodom* marks a climax in the protagonist's troubled relationship with King Charles. On this issue *The Libertine* gives us also an idiosyncratic mixture of truths and falsehoods. It is true that John Wilmot, the son of a loyal cavalier to whom the king was much indebted (he had been instrumental in Charles's miraculous escape from England after the battle of Worcester), was highly favoured, and also that he was repeatedly banished from court on account of some rash action or imprudent piece of writing. That he should be forgiven once and again was attributed by some to his personal charm and his ready wit; as Bishop Burnet wrote, "the King loved his company for the diversion it afforded" (1724: 264). Yet to suggest that the monarch had high hopes of the Earl, and felt betrayed that he failed to serve as his right hand, is stretching things too far; that role fell rather to the lot of the Duke of Buckingham, Charles's childhood playfellow, his companion in exile, his minister after the Restoration, and a veritable thorn in the king's side in the 1670s as a leader of the opposition. The picture is further muddled as the hero finally obliges, and rises from his sick-bed to redeem himself with a powerful speech in the House of Lords during the Exclusion Crisis. Here the film's historical researcher got her sources wrong, and followed Greene (1976: 202) or Lamb (2005: 252-53) in mistakenly attributing to John Wilmot a speech delivered in the Commons by Laurence Hyde (who would eventually be created Earl of Rochester) in November 1680. Wilmot had died in July.

The final act of a life marked – as is here suggested – by an irrepressible urge for self-destruction is chronicled in this biopic with some relish: we see the protagonist sink as a result of the combined effects of his own despondency, his addiction to alcohol and the sequels of venereal disease. Depp and the make up artist were both given free rein to exercise their talents, and we are shown the Earl in all the misery of his physical deterioration (complete with syphilitic sores, a decaying nose and incontinence of urine). It would be John Wilmot's fate to have his life used as an example to suit different interests; Germaine Greer has argued that Bishop Burnet's account of Rochester's death-bed conversion was a modest part of a propaganda campaign launched by the Whigs to denounce the corrupting influence of a debauched monarch, while the Jacobites fuelled the legend of his wit and charm to publicize a glamorous image of the banished court (2000: 4-6). In this film, even before Burnet appears to reclaim the libertine, the moral of the story suggests itself: you may live fast, die young, but you won't leave a good-looking corpse. The final scene, besides, seems designed to dispel doubts that the film may endorse self-destructive behaviour or substance abuse, as the funeral dirge (lyrics by Jeffreys, music by Michael Nyman) celebrates the penitent sinner's recantation and enjoins us to "pray for him, who prayed too late,/ that he may shine on Judgement Day." For a film that promises scandal and plays the rock-star note, this is surprisingly conservative.

Those who expect a period-piece set in the Restoration to be a rollicking romp will surely be disappointed. That was clearly not Dunmore's intention; the atmosphere of the film is dark and muddled, and the pervasive fog and jaundiced light seem designed to underline the corruption of the times. The star cast do not afford much mirth either: Depp and Samantha Morton give us fine acting, but they are required to play their roles with too much anger, and so is Rosamund Pike as Rochester's suffering wife. Malkovich never fails to offer a good performance, but his Charles II is weary and worn, and shows little trace of the "merry monarch." Comedian Johnny Vegas as Sackville might be expected to deliver some humour, but he is not given much scope besides pulling down his breeches. Only Tom Hollander, who is note-perfect as the urbane Etherege, and Richard Coyle as Rochester's servant (aptly named Alcock) are allowed to give us some true delight.

There is no denying that there is some fundamental truth to this bleak portrait of Rochester. It almost seems inspired by the

devastating vision of *A Satire against Reason and Mankind*. But the picture is too one-sided: we see the rake play the cynic and the daredevil, but never the suave, engaging seducer that allegedly inspired Etherege to write the part of Dorimant in *The Man of Mode* (1676). When Jeffreys' original play opened at the Royal Court, it was presented in a double-bill with Etherege's. This was a clever idea, as *The Man of Mode* gives us the side of the coin that is missing in *The Libertine*. "I know he is a devil, but he has something of the angel yet undefaced in him," says of Dorimant his cast-off mistress (2.2.15-17). There is, however, nothing undefaced about the hero of this film. In the theatrical opening shot, he looks into the camera and addresses the audience: "You will not like me," he states. Fans of Depp, or of Rochester, will think this impossible. They may be in for a surprise.

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