Considerably more than a libertine

The Libertine, directed by Laurence Dunmore

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The Libertine, directed by Laurence Dunmore; screenplay by Stephen Jeffreys, based on his own play

"In the course of drunken gaiety and gross sensuality, with an avowed contempt of decency and order, a total disregard to every moral, and a resolute denial of every religious observation, he lived worthless and useless, and blazed out his youth and health in lavish voluptuousness."

So wrote Samuel Johnson about John Wilmot, Second Earl of Rochester (1647-1680), a remarkable figure and the subject of an unsatisfying new film, *The Libertine*. The movie is the directorial debut of British filmmaker Laurence Dunmore and based on a play written by Stephen Jeffreys, first performed by Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Group in 1996. Actor John Malkovich, associated with the well-known theater company, was a prime mover in the film's production.

Johnny Depp plays Rochester—poet, playwright and libertine—whose father had been ennobled during the aftermath of the English Revolution by the exiled court of King Charles II (Malkovich). Rochester's first notorious exploit occurred when, at the age of 18, he abducted the heiress Elizabeth Malet. Remarkably, despite the resistance of her family and a delay of some months during which he distinguished himself in sea-battles with the Dutch, she married him.

Dunmore's movie concentrates on Rochester's lascivious and debauched adventures in London, gallivanting about with other aristocratic hedonists. With his wife tucked away in the countryside, Rochester encounters a young, apparently talentless actress, Elizabeth Barry (Samantha Morton). Under his tutelage, Barry becomes the country's leading thespian and the love of the unrepentant carouser's life. ("I cannot feel in life, only in theatre. Theatre is my drug.... Every act has consequences," says Rochester in the movie. In his actual writings, the poet sees the theater as a place "Where fools of either sex and age/Crowd to see themselves presented.")

Rochester is banished from the court for writing and mounting a play that ridicules Charles II. He eventually reconciles with the king, a convert to Catholicism who for political reasons did not openly proclaim his conversion. Rochester's years of lampooning the monarchy cease when, in failing health, he speaks out against attempts by Scottish Puritanical rebels to exclude Charles's brother James, a more demonstrative Catholic, from succession to the throne. Consumed by the dual ravages of syphilis and alcohol, Rochester undergoes a religious conversion on his deathbed at the behest of his wife and Puritan mother.

The Libertine, upon occasion, acknowledges the historical reality that Rochester was not only an irreverent critic of the monarchy, but also routinely lambasted the hypocritical respectability of the nascent bourgeoisie. Unfortunately, the film mainly preoccupies itself with depicting, in a superficial manner, the protagonist's excesses, sexual and otherwise.

In the movie's opening sequence or prologue, a wraith-like Rochester, presumably speaking from the grave, tells the audience that no woman or man is safe from his depraved sexual longings. The same ghostly version of the character returns to deliver an equally inane epilogue. The script's generally one-sided and inadequate presentation of Rochester is in small measure mitigated by Depp's talents, which impart to the movie a modicum of authenticity.

Aesthetically, the film has many weaknesses, not the least of which is its musical score. The interludes during which Rochester races around London grate in large part due to an annoyingly repetitive and harsh motif. As a general rule, the film is clumsily assembled—more like the product of a bologna slicer than an editing machine.

Although the film is a "period piece," it never really bothers with a historic context. Such a complex, iconoclastic figure as Rochester can only be studied and understood as the product of the enlightened age of Newton and Locke. He lived in a pivotal time when philosophy and science were emerging to combat religion and mysticism. The Royal Society was founded for the pursuit of science in 1662. Culture was no longer dominated by the court and the landed aristocracy—it was being appropriated by the rising bourgeois class of merchants, gentry and professionals.

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Rochester is not an entirely attractive figure. A supporter of the restored monarchy of Charles II (1660-1685), despite his lampooning, he presumably stood against the efforts of the movement that came to be known as the Whigs—an alliance of wealthy merchants and landlords and more radical urban elements—to oppose the absolutist ambitions of the king. Charles, strengthened with subsidies from Louis XIV, defied Parliament and insisted on the succession of his Catholic brother, James. The conflict came to a head in the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688, which insured the economic and cultural hegemony of the new bourgeoisie. Rochester's writings embody many of the contradictions of this intermediary era.

Rochester, who was an atheist and consistent philosophical materialist, was especially influenced by Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and the ancient philosophers Lucretius and Seneca. Lucretius's *Concerning the Nature of Things* asserts that human beings are not held hostage by the whims of supernatural beings.

However, perhaps most importantly, Rochester was a brilliant poet, one of the great lyricists of his age. No less a luminary than Voltaire admired his works—his poems, songs and satires—describing him as "the man of genius, the great poet."

Regarding Rochester's licentiousness, one perceptive commentator writes: "Also he wrote freely about sexual intimacy, both in its pleasurable and disgusting aspects, flouting bourgeois prudery and linguistic censorship.... But his obscenity is more often psychologically profound and philosophically disturbing.... [It] offers a profound psychological study of the relationship between lust and love, subjective ideal and objective reality.... Rochester's obscene writing says more about the complexities of eroticism and love than is usually possibly within the conventions of the neo-Platonic courtly tradition."

The film makes much of the contested legend that Rochester renounced atheism in his syphilitic, deathbed delirium. According to the same commentator, the argument over his repentance is "irrelevant to his poetry, all of which is consistently materialist and libertine. The pious poems attributed to his last days are not by him and lack the quality of his genuine work."

Rochester's extraordinary poem, *A Satyr against Reason and Mankind*, is a criticism of the growing consensus equating Reason and Puritan moral persecution. In opposition to this belief, he contends that the true nature of reason is to guide the senses to their proper, instinctual pleasures.

"Thus, whilst against false reasoning I inveigh,
I own right reason, which I would obey,
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.
Your reason hinders, mine helps to enjoy,
Renewing appetites yours would destroy.
My reason is my friend, yours is a cheat:
Hunger calls out, my reason bids me eat
Perversely, yours your appetite does mock;
This asks for food, that answers, 'What's o'clock?'
This plain distinction, sir, your doubt secures:
'Tis not true reason I despise, but yours."

A further sampling of Rochester's verse reveals more of the man than the two-hour Dunmore-Malkovich project.

On death:

"After death nothing is, and nothing, death,
The utmost limit of a gasp of breath.
Let the ambitious zealot lay aside
His hopes of heaven, whose faith is but his pride;
Let slavish souls lay by their fear
Nor be concerned which way nor where
After this life they shall be hurled.
Dead, we become the lumber of the world,
And to that mass of matter shall be swept
Where things destroyed with things unborn are kept."

On the monarchy:

"God bless our good and gracious King,
Whose promise none relies on,
Who never said a foolish thing,
Nor ever did a wise one."

On religious hypocrisy:

"If Rome can pardon sins, as Romans hold,
And if those pardons can be bought and sold,
It were no sin t'adore and worship gold.
If they can purchase pardons with a sum
For sins they may commit in time to come
And for sins past, 'tis very well for Rome.
At this rate they are happiest that have most;
They'll purchase heaven at their own proper cost.
Alas! The poor! All that are so are lost.
Whence came this knack, or when did it begin?
What author have they, or who brought it in?
Did Christ e'er keep a custom-house for sin?
Some subtle Jesuit without more ado
Did certainly this sly invention brew
To gull 'em of their souls and money too."

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