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Author
Wynhoff, Casey

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Casey Wynhoff

The Potency of Impotence: Political and Social Negotiation in Rochester’s “The Imperfect Enjoyment”

Restoration-era poetry’s fascination with reimagining and parodying earlier Roman forms was not limited to heroics, georgics, and pastorals. Poetry about male impotence or sexual dysfunction, also known as “imperfect enjoyment poems,” sustained a popular revival among Early Modern, Restoration, and Augustan era writers, both British and continental. Impotency poems represent an intriguing facet of Restoration literature due to their often obscene content, which assaulted concepts of civility and decency in poetic language, and their consistent engagement with issues of social and political authority. This concern with political and social authority proves to be a generic convention of the impotency poem dating back to the impotency narratives that appeared in Roman love elegies, especially Ovid’s *Amores*.

From within the poetic tradition of the impotency poem, Rochester’s “The Imperfect Enjoyment” exploits the underlying tensions of masculinity in its relation to civil and political authority through a re-imagination of an Ovidian dramatic narrative about a male lover’s inability to sexually perform at the critical moment. Ultimately, Rochester’s poem uses the structure of the sexual anti-climax to create a pattern of reversal in agency and association, to subvert gender roles, and to reinforce socioeconomic structures through a failure of genteel masculinity. Although Rochester’s impotency poem affirms contemporary political authority as opposed to the subversion of Augustan politics seen in Ovid’s piece, both writers engage in a negotiation of political spaces within the intimate context of a failed romantic encounter.

In order to gain an appreciation for how Restoration era impotency poems like Rochester’s respond to Ovid’s, one must examine the poetic conventions that appear in the *Amores*. The *Amores*, consisting of three books of an intended five, represents Ovid’s first major
work and contains a series of connected love elegies, detailing the speaker’s affair with the poetic object Corinna. Among the speaker’s discussion of various romantic episodes, quarrels, and exchanges with Corinna are larger discussions of soldiers, warfare, and the nature of epic versus elegiac poetry. In Elegy VII of the third book, the speaker experiences “A Problem!” when “I could get no more from my exhausted parts” (Ovid l.6). With the sexual failure occurring at the very beginning of the poem, the speaker enters a reflective mode, vacillating between despair at the failure of masculine virility and anger at organ that has led to his humiliation. Within this reflection, certain structures—such as beginning the poem in media res, the affirmation of Corinna’s beauty and seductive charms (ll. 7-10), the apostrophization of the male member (ll. 68-71), and references to earlier occasions of potency (ll. 22-26)—become conventions that appear again in Rochester’s “The Imperfect Enjoyment,” creating structural parallels that align Rochester’s poem with Ovid’s elegy. That Rochester’s poem would imitate these features particularly—features which are somewhat unique to Ovid’s piece—indicates that engaging with Ovid’s impotency elegy was part of Rochester’s poetic project. Like Pope, Swift, Gay, Lady Montague, and many other Eighteenth century writers, Wilmot’s re-creation of a classical genre derives from modeling his piece after a specific classical work, a strategy which suggests his investment with the concerns of that particular work. In the case of Ovid’s “imperfect enjoyment” piece, that concern is as much political as it is intimate.

To read the Amores as a political text requires a defense as the poem does not deal with political themes in largely obvious and explicit ways. The association of the epic with political and military valor and the elegy with personal themes and passivity becomes a point by which Ovid can subvert political discourse through the adoption of the elegiac mode. Because the epic poem was so powerfully aligned with the creation of military heroes and the justification of
political conquest, the decision “to write elegy was to reject the most prestigious of all literary
genres, epic poetry... for Augustan poets, to renounce epic was also to renounce Augustan
themes”(Davis 436). Reading the choice of the elegy as a political action in and of itself, Davis
demonstrates how Ovid’s rejection of the epic form in favor of the elegy represents a concern for
the speaker in Book I Elegy I and reappears throughout the Amores.]

As part of this focus, Ovid’s impotency narrative becomes a means of expressing a failed
masculinity that corresponds to a failure or, in Ovid’s case, unwillingness to respond
appropriately to certain civic and political duties. In this way, Ovid establishes another
convention of the impotency poem by demonstrating how the failure of a form of masculinity
within a personal context becomes a means of expressing anxieties or frustrations about
masculine performance within a larger political context. Rochester’s “The Imperfect
Enjoyment” adopts this convention along with many other Restoration era writers in the
impotency poem genre.

Rochester’s “The Imperfect Enjoyment” functions as a direct response to the impotency
poem in Ovid’s Amores, but it also works in concert with contemporary “imperfect enjoyment”
poems, responding to the anxieties of a political discourse through a narrative account of a failed
sexual encounter. The political function of Restoration era “imperfect enjoyment” poems has
been traced by Early Modern eroticism scholar, Hannah Lavery. In an essay entitled “Social and
Political Satire in the Impotency Poems of Remy Belleau and Thomas Nashe,” Lavery explores
the way that political themes emerged in seventeenth century impotency poems as well as how
those themes became translated into the genre during the eighteenth century. Using the poetry of
Thomas Nashe and Remy Belleau as a case study, Lavery maintains that “within impotency
poems, then, we see some of the pressures felt by those who enacted public voice at times of
particular political and cultural pressure” (Lavery, “Social and Political Satire” 3). As Lavery illustrates, Early Modern and Restoration era “imperfect enjoyment” poems were often tied to anxieties about public position and perception, and this anxiety is often presented as a political or social impotence that is clothed in terms of sexual impotence in the narrative. It is this intersection between sexual masculinity and social definitions of masculinity that Rochester will explore in “The Imperfect Enjoyment.”

Lavery’s work, along with Davis’s, establishes a critical context by which impotency poems as a genre are understand as responding to political discourse through a playful collusion between sexual virility and political potency, one which—according to Lavery—originated with Ovid’s Book III Elegy VII. Lavery also draws connections to Ovid’s impotency poem in her analysis of these two authors, supporting Davis’s assertion that the choice of an elegy or an erotic poem “allegorically explore[s] the significance of movements between action and inaction, power, and impotence” (“The Development” 172). These complicated intersections are bound inextricably within the genre of “imperfect enjoyment” poetry, creating a literary tradition from which Rochester’s poem can be understood. The rich literary context and poetic conventions which Rochester subscribes to in his impotency poem provides a framework by which one can appreciate the structural and stylistic innovations that Rochester uses in adopting and adapting this form.

“The Imperfect Enjoyment” represents a sophisticated response to the tradition of impotency poetry through its incorporation of conventional generic tropes as well as its innovative structure, which uses the sexual anti-climax as a point of reversal for the hierarchies and associations crafted within the poem. At the beginning of the poem, Rochester establishes a somewhat egalitarian power relationship through the structure of his lines. Like Ovid before him,
Rochester produces a sexual encounter that emphasizes the equal engagement of the couple involved. Arguing that both lovers were “equally inspired with eager fire” (Rochester l. 3), the speaker of the poem stresses the mutuality of their affection, creating a tangled image of “arms, legs lips close clinging to embrace” (l.5). The structure of line 5 creates a zeugma which catalogs the body parts in a chaotic order, highlighting the frenzy of activity of the romantic encounter but minimizing the textual focus on a specific subject or agent. If at all, the grammatical agent of the poem in the early lines is the female lover, Corinna, who “clips me to her breast, and sucks me to her face./ Her nimble tongue, Love’s lesser lightening, played/Within my mouth, and to my thoughts conveyed”(Rochester 6-8). In this section, Corinna is placed in the active subject position and the speaker is the object of her affectionate caresses.

Corinna’s activity in Rochester’s poem is also coupled with her portrayal as a thoroughly physical and embodied figure. The speaker of Rochester’s “The Imperfect Enjoyment” creates a dichotomy between materiality and immateriality, establishing himself as immaterial. The speaker describes: “My fluttering soul, sprung with the painted kiss,/Hangs hovering o'er her balmy brinks of bliss./But whilst her busy hand would guide that part/Which should convey my soul up to her heart, (Rochester ll. 11-14)”. Here the speaker describes himself as a “soul” who is positioned, “fluttering” above the sexual scene. Corinna, on the other hand, is emphasized materially as “balmy brinks of bliss” (l. 12). The use of the word “balmy” in particular emphasizes the physicality of Corinna, drawing attention to the qualities of the physical senses. These paired images abound within these short lines, appearing again in line 14 as the speaker’s “soul” is juxtaposed with Corinna’s “heart.” The contrast between the immaterial and material images creates a hierarchy which subjugates Corinna to her own physicality, a gendered assumption which would have, nevertheless, been fairly common in Rochester’s time.
The culmination of Corinna’s embodiment, when her “hand, her foot, her very look’s a cunt” (l. 19), occurs shortly after the speaker’s premature ejaculation and illustrates that her materiality has become so extreme that her vagina has become her metonymical representation, conflating her very identity with her sexual organ. That this exaggerated moment of materiality occurs shortly before the poem’s reversal suggests, also, the instability of the hierarchy between immaterial and material.

The speaker’s premature ejaculation becomes a textual moment from which the assumptions and patterns of the first fifteen lines are reversed, initiating the impotency reflection. Similar to Ovid’s impotence poem, where the speaker’s failure occurs near the beginning of the poem, Rochester’s speaker enjoys the loving encounter only briefly before “In liquid raptures I dissolve all o’er, /Melt into sperm, and spend at every pore” (ll. 15-16). The speaker adopts the active position in the line “I dissolve all o’er,” functioning as the grammatical agent of the sentence. This stands in contrast to the passivity of the speaker before his dissolution. As the poem progresses, the speaker will retain this active position on a fairly consistent basis, almost entirely abandoning Corinna; he makes scattered references to her as an object, but almost never as a subject.

The speaker also begins to emphasize his own physicality, culminating with the absurd equivocation between the speaker himself and his member. Beginning at line 46, the speaker establishes a separation between his penis and himself, apostrophizing his penis as “Thou treacherous, base deserter of my flame” (Rochester). This apostrophization, another poetic convention derived from Ovid’s apostrophization of the male member, might seem like a rhetorical strategy designed to distance the speaker from his masculine failure. As the narrative
continues, however, it becomes apparent that the character of the penis has become a synecdoche for the speaker himself.

Recalling previous sexual conquests—yet another trope derived from Ovid, the speaker asks: “What oyster-cinder-beggar-common whore /Didst thou e'er fail in all thy life before? /When vice, disease, and scandal lead the way,/With what officious haste dost thou obey! (Rochester ll. 50-54)” Although the speaker refers to these incidents as if they were the recollections from the penis’s experiences, their metonymic effect informs the reader that it is the speaker’s past that is actually at stake; the conquests and failures of the penis are the conquests and failures of the speaker himself. It is at this moment that the materialization of the speaker is complete. The speaker has effectively become his penis and is now utterly physical. By contrast, Corinna is made immaterial when she becomes “Love,” for which the impotent member is unable to perform (Rochester 1. 60). Equally extreme, Corinna’s transformation into the immaterial effectively removes her from the poem in body and presence. Instead, the idea of Corinna remains hovering above the reflections of the speaker, much in the same way that his soul hovered over their lovemaking before the reversal.

Through these paralleled devices, Rochester emphasizes the completeness of the reversal following the anti-climax, bringing the connection between impotence and the disruption of hierarchies to the forefront of consideration. While his reversal of agency and materiality following his episode of sexual dysfunction clearly disrupts gender hierarchies and ideas about masculine sexual agency, his conversation is not limited to hierarchies within the personal sphere. Rather, in the tradition of Ovid, Rochester presents an image of failed masculinity that enters into the political realm, reinforcing hierarchies of political and economic authority through his inability to perform politically appropriate gestures of masculinity.
Rochester’s entrance into socioeconomic discourse becomes apparent through his assignment of a class-based significance to the various sexual episodes that his speaker recalls. Amidst the speaker’s diatribe against the failings of his sexual organ, he refers to his penis as being “Like a rude, roaring hector in the streets/Who scuffles, cuffs, and justles all he meets, /But if his king or country claim his aid,/The rakehell villain shrinks and hides his head (Rochester II. 54-57)” The reference to a “hector” denotes a particularly lower-class debauchee. The image of the rough, lower class bully is immediately contrasted with a specifically political and military act of valor that the penis fails to perform. In this way, the actual impotence of the penis becomes a metaphorical expression of his larger impotence in civil masculine valor. The impotence in Rochester’s poem, in spite of its generally subversive associations, reinforces a classed and politicized masculinity that supersedes the masculinity of lower classes because the speaker’s dysfunction framed as a failure to participate in higher order of elevated civil and political masculinity.

The notion of a political masculinity would have been significant in the Restoration era, especially for libertine writers such as Rochester. In From Courtesy to Civility: Changing Codes of Conduct in Early Modern England, Anna Bryson explores the figure of the libertine as a response to tensions about changing social mores in the face of the changing class structures of Restoration England. Arguing that the libertine, or rake, represented a form of “anti-civility,” Bryson maintains that the libertine reversion to lewd and uncivil excess was not a subversion of courtesy with the intention of destabilizing systems of civility, but was rather an expression of anxiety at changing codes of manners (252). For Bryson, the changes that proved so problematic to libertines like Rochester centered on the challenges they presented to the masculine autonomy of earlier codes of courtesy (274). The relation between libertine behaviors, political hierarchy,
and masculinity is affirmed by John Grantham Turner in *Libertines and Radicals in Early Modern London: Sexuality, Politics, and Literary Culture*. Although Turner ultimately views the challenges that liberties present as more carnivalesque in their negotiation of political forms of masculinity, he does conclude that the adoption of lower classed forms of masculinity is still, ultimately, a form of “reviling the unbridled gestures they associated with the whores and bullies of the underworld (223). Given the contemporary concern with political masculinity, the anxieties that “The Imperfect Enjoyment” possesses with regards to this failure to perform appear as a central to the poem’s project with impotence.

The anxiety that the speaker experiences in relation to shirking these political duties is, as Lavery will conclude, related to an implicit relationship between power and sexual desire. The power to maintain a socioeconomic authority requires that the power be demonstrated, and “a failure to do so necessarily leads to loss of status. The relationship drawn between phallic activity and power…is then ripe for exploration through the longer and well-established tradition of impotency poetry” (“The Development” 178). In these terms, the speaker’s failure to adequately demonstrate his sexual prowess, especially within the context of Love, becomes representative of a larger failure to maintain his socioeconomic status, expressed as a type of masculinity.

The tensions in Rochester’s poem—tensions that resemble those appearing in Ovid’s *Amores*—nevertheless create political stability through their assertion of a failure in masculinity. Rochester’s work deviates from Ovid’s project of satirizing political masculinity and undermining Augustan rule. Despite this variance—or, perhaps, because of it, “The Imperfect Enjoyment” remains a significant eighteenth century revival of a classical text not only because of its adherence to the generic conventions of Ovid’s work, but because of the way it engages
with the central questions and tensions of the genre. Through its close relation to the impotency
elegy in Ovid’s *Amores* particularly, Rochester engages with generic modes and conventions to
interrogate the rich literary tradition of impotency literature and revitalize it with the concerns of
his own time. As such, Rochester’s “The Imperfect Enjoyment” ultimately proves to be an
invaluable participant in a dominant eighteenth century literary project—a project where the
return to classical forms was not simply imitation, but an active means of negotiating a cultural
and literary context that lived in conversation with those classical context that shape western
literature.
Works Cited


