

Introduction:
Libertine Bodies or the Politics
of Baroque Corporeality

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If you enter the word *libertine* in Google Images, you will most likely, depending on your country of residence, stumble upon dozens of pictures of women exhibiting their own qualities as lovers. You would then, on your quest for academic knowledge, perhaps meet Martine, “une fille hard” (“a girl who likes its rough”), a voluptuous blonde posing in transparent dress in her private living room somewhere in Eupen, a small town in the Eastern part of Belgium. You would be able to see pictures of movies like *Le libertin* (2000), “une comédie sans costumes” (“a comedy without costumes”) directed by Gabriel Aghion and described by James Travers as a “daring attempt to combine the lavish historical drama (for which French cinema is particularly renowned) with bawdy farce” (Travers). Or you might be tempted to buy a “robe libertine” or to order a DVD copy of the erotic film *Lady Libertine* (1984), the front cover of which praises the film with the simple but effective phrase “great nudity.”

But most likely you would also stumble upon portraits of Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the former IMF director accused of forcing Nafissato Diallo, a housekeeper in one of New York City’s major hotels, into oral sex. Even though the charges were dropped, this highly publicized event brought about an endless string of speculations on the libertine networks of which Strauss-Kahn would have been a part. This led eager journalists to investigate his visits to the high-profile erotic club *Les Chandelles* in Paris or his participation in festive erotic events in Lille (France), where French captains of industry invited politicians like Strauss-Kahn to enjoy the beautiful women of a network operating in the north of France and Belgian cities such as Doornik and Renaix.

Suddenly the word *libertine* seemed to be everywhere, as the press eagerly speculated on the existence of a semi-aristocratic hidden network of high-profile libertines taking their inspiration from an imagined eighteenth-century universe of wigs, powdered faces, and voluptuous cleavages. The word itself underwent a far-reaching semantic hyperinflation as it became a synonym for *échangiste* (the French word for *swinger*). Hence, the word *libertinism* became—incorrectly—synonymous with “libertinage.” In some newspaper articles on the 2012 Republican presidential primaries, Ron Paul was even incorrectly described as a “libertine,” while the journalist of course meant “libertarian,” a political position commonly associated with a conservative perspective on economy and property rights and an emphasis on individual freedom in social and ethical matters.

From a historical perspective, this all-too-easy association of the word *libertinism* with a joyous sexual life and an explicit pornographic imagination is problematic, as many studies have shown (for an extensive bibliography on this issue, see Jean-Pierre Cavaillé’s *Les Dossiers du Grihl*). These same studies have shown that we should not imagine the libertine posture was confined to the eighteenth-century universe of the Marquis de Sade and his contemporaries. Rather, it is a practice or a position—both intellectual and physical—aimed at the liberation of the individual mind. It is an attitude that one could describe as profoundly modern, an attitude in which the individual living in the ever-shifting early modern world—a world that one could describe as fundamentally “baroque”—shapes himself (*libertinism* generally being a male privilege) and his surrounding world by living his life as an experiment. *Libertinism*, as Cavaillé rightly points out in his illuminating article “La polémique anti-libertine et anti-libertaire contemporaine: catholiques, libéraux, libertariens,” is all about freedom, the use, or rather the abuse (as the word *libertinism* had a fundamental negative connotation), of your individual freedom:

On a d’abord taxé de libertinage ou de libertinisme l’exercice de libertés indues, jugées négatives, excessives, délétères, en tous les domaines, religieux et moral d’abord, mais aussi politiques et en fait dans toutes les relations sociales qui requièrent l’obéissance et la soumission aux normes.

The words *libertinage* or *libertinism* were first used to describe the execution of inappropriate freedoms that were considered negative, excessive, dangerous, in all domains, religious and moral in the first place, but also

political, in fact in all social relations that demanded obedience or submission to norms.

Only from the eighteenth century on, the category of libertinism saw itself reduced to the transgression of sexual norms, to “une forme particulière de transgression, limitée à la sexualité et limitée aussi dans la sexualité” (“a particular form of transgression, limited to sexuality and also limited *in* sexuality”; Cavaillé, “La polémique”). Indeed, the fundamentally subversive urge of libertinism, i.e. the desire to defy dominant social, moral, political, religious, or sexual norms, has been gradually narrowed down to the perfectly codified and normative games of libertinage that DSK was looking for in *Le club des Chandelles*: “Ainsi le mot n’est-il quasiment plus utilisé pour désigner des pratiques réellement transgressives, mais l’évocation de celles-ci dans le cadre de pratiques et de discours parfaitement codifiés et neutralisés.” (“[i]n that sense, the word now almost never refers to real transgressive practices, as it evokes practices and discourses that are now perfectly codified and hence neutralized”; Cavaillé, “La polémique”). Libertinism has thus lost its inherently experimental nature, its performative urgency that made individuals believe that they could rethink their world and their position as individuals within that world. Today, libertines look very much the same on Google Images, wearing cheap leather clothing or fishnet stockings, awkwardly smiling (grinning in most cases) at the flash of their partner’s camera.

The Libertine Attitude of Rochester

Essays in this special issue of the *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*¹ take us back to the seventeenth century (and in one case to the eighteenth century), particularly to the Restoration court of Charles II; the issue’s theme takes the idea of libertinism as an experimental attitude as its starting point. This issue brings together a number of articles that approach early modern libertinism as a full-fledged intellectual attitude, refusing to reduce the word *libertine* to the all-too-easy association with pornographic extravaganza.

John Wilmot (1647–80), second Earl of Rochester was an early modern libertine who chose to defy the existing normative system of his times.² Rochester lived his life as if it were an experiment, driven by a new, early modern desire to discover the unknown, to cross the boundaries of official knowledge and taste. After a long and (mock-) heroic struggle, Rochester died

26 July 1689 at the age of thirty-three, ending the wild (and thus exemplary) life of the libertine he was. The reason for his death is more than clear: alcohol abuse and syphilis. On his death-bed, in the presence of Bishop Gilbert Burnet, Rochester apparently staged his last *coup de théâtre*: he dramatically pleaded guilty, expressing his remorse over his sinful life and officially dying as a Catholic in good standing. Rochester died as a martyr, but also as a victim; he was a victim of his own sins, but also a victim in the name of sin, or, as Kirk Combe describes it in the subtitle of his book on Rochester, as “a martyr for sin.” He lived his life to the fullest, in the name of all sinners preceding and following him. Or did he die, as Robert Parsons would like us to believe in his “A sermon preached at the funeral of the Right Honourable John Earl of Rochester,” as the ultimate sinner being granted pardon by the Lord himself?

Rochester’s texts (Wilmot) grant us an insight into an extremely troubled mind in which the boundless will to live tries to obscure a deep fear of life itself. His work is a long and loud scream, an attempt to face the doubts caused by the void that we call “modernity,” a scream that is far removed from the codified pleasures of present-day “libertinage.” Moreover, his poems do not constitute an *œuvre* as we tend to call it today. There is no clear unity to be discovered in the writing, nor is there a grand poetical system to be laid out. Rochester did not consider himself a writer in the true sense of the word; he saw himself, rather, as a dilettante, an amateur, happily lacking the artistic *sérieux* of colleagues like John Dryden. Moreover, his life and his literary work are completely intertwined. His writings question his life and sometimes even contradict it. Together they constitute a performative collection of acts, a series of discursive actions often aimed at what one could describe as “self-fashioning.” So there is no coherent body of writings, there is only “the collection of works that we call Rochester” (Burns 3). Rochester’s work is a living laboratory, an instrument in the long and extensive experiment that he, as a radical empiricist and a true libertine, considered his life to be.

The life and work of this sinner function as a sort of magnifying glass for this special issue as it investigates the interconnection (or friction) between libertinism as a critical attitude on the one hand and early modern baroque identity on the other hand. Wilmot’s work intensively confronts us with the question of baroque corporeality, with the idea of a theatrical body in which the distinction between reality and mystification is willingly blurred. With Rochester, we confront the complexity and the disturbing elusiveness of the early modern world of the baroque, a world in which the spectacular, the theatrical,

and the sensuous prevail, a world in which the distinction between reality and fiction, between life and art, disintegrates. Baroque theatricality and the libertine *esprit* of experimentation (both intellectual and physical) are fundamentally intertwined: both are attempts to understand and confront a world in permanent transition.

Even more: for the libertines at Charles's court, the omnisexual Rochester included, politics was a libertine and sometimes pornographic *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as Jeremy Webster has convincingly illustrated in *Performing Libertinism*. And the other way around: for the libertines, pornography is all about politics. Sex is about politics and vice versa, as Rochester brilliantly illustrates in his closet drama *Sodom or the quintessence of debauchery*. In this work attributed to Wilmot and posthumously published in 1684, Bolloxian, king of Sodom, prescribes sodomy as the sole acceptable sexual practice. This simple and straightforward pornographic joke serves as the starting point of a burlesque and satirical parable in which Rochester reveals the libidinous nature state reigning at the court of Charles II while at the same time radically and unequivocally appealing to the reader's imagination. *Sodom* is only one of many early modern examples in which intellectual criticism and free-thinking go hand in hand with an erotic and sometimes pornographically grotesque universe in which, through its baroque extravaganza, the distinction between the real and the fictional, between the private and the public, disintegrates. In *Sodom*, the libertine body becomes a subversive tool for political satire, willingly breaking down all fixed frames of reference and trying to embody the baroque instability of the world, a world in which the performative body functions as a central point of reference, a body that is at the same time burlesque, pornographic, satirical, and political.

Baroque and Libertinism

Traditionally the idea of baroque is associated with a particular period in art history featuring specific stylistic characteristics such as an outspoken preference for irregularity, movement, and perspective, but also kitschy extravaganza, etc. One could think of baroque church architecture, the paintings of Rubens, or the music of Monteverdi. However, rather than referring to a clearly identifiable set of stylistic features, baroque should be thought of as an *experience*, a liminal experience during which the limits of reality itself are questioned and playfully deconstructed. The baroque immerses

its user (spectator, listener, reader) in a world different from our everyday world, as if that person jumped into a pool, reducing the outside world to a remote, shimmering reality. At the same time, the baroque consciously plays with the very same rules that make this immersive experience possible. In other words, baroque is all but the absence of rules. The baroque plays with and investigates the rules of representation. And playing means showing. Think of the baroque predilection for the *trompe-l'oeil*, for consciously artificial techniques that try to evoke an effect of realism. Baroque is a “borderline” experience investigating the very limits of reality itself (Vanhaesebrouck). Therefore baroque could be described as a fundamentally confusing experience: rather than showing reality as such, baroque questions the very idea of reality, by staging another reality or by showing the way in which reality is constructed. This confusion, this game with ideas and identities, is what constitutes the very heart of Rochester’s life and work, as Combe eloquently shows in his contribution to this special issue when analyzing the (self-) enactment of Rochester’s satire *Alexander Bendo’s Brochure*.

Embodiment is a central category within libertine thought. The confrontation with one’s own body generates freedom but also fear as it confronts man (Rochester included) with his own finiteness, transience, and thus relativity. Rochester invested his own body, mind, and life in his investigation of his own mortality, up to its ultimate consequences. For this reason, his *oeuvre* can be described as *baroque*, not because it is sumptuous or devoid of rules, but because it radically takes this idea of transitoriness as its starting point. Rochester refuses to withdraw into the all-too-simple solutions of false reason. In other words, his work could be described as itself a multifaceted baroque body, that body being burlesque, satirical, pornographic, and political at the same time.

Outline

This special issue of the *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* focuses on the seventeenth-century libertine (sub)culture that seeks to combine the critique of everything public and political with a visual regime that lavishly indulges in the sensuous experience of baroque theatricality. As these essays demonstrate, libertinism is both a means of intellectual (self-) criticism and an utterly performative practice; it is both political reflection and willful transgression. It is a locus of self-fashioning on a sexual level (experimentation with possible sexual roles and identities) and on a political level (as Webster explains

in *Performing Libertinism*, the debate itself is an integral part of the available political discourse), as much as it is playful make-believe, joyfully investigating the limits of representation itself. Within this complex dynamic of seemingly conflicting interests the physical body takes up a central role.

This understanding of the libertine body is at the heart of this special issue, addressing and questioning the culture of libertinism in terms of baroque performativity in which notions such as immersion and transgression are key points of investigation. How does libertine discourse produce the effects it names (and shows)? This issue also seeks to investigate the role and the place of the baroque body in all of its performative aspects. The work of Rochester takes up a central position, notably in Combe's article and to a lesser extent in Webster's and Klaas Tindemans's. In its entirety, this issue works to enlarge the scope of the concerns raised in this introduction by featuring work on early modern libertine practices in Venice (Paolo Fasoli) and Holland (Inger Lee-mans). Finally, all of the authors have paid considerable attention to the terminological framework of libertinism. The articles by Cavaillé and Tim Wauters in particular insist on the importance of clear and historically informed definitions, the latter taking the case of Isaac Vossius as its point of reference.

In his article "Polemic usage of the terms 'libertine,' 'libertinism' in Great Britain, sixteenth and seventeenth century," Cavaillé presents a thorough investigation of the terminological confusion surrounding the category of libertinism. The traditional division used in mainstream historiography (spiritual libertinism in the sixteenth century, erudite libertinism in the seventeenth century, and sexual libertinism in the eighteenth century) is fundamentally problematic, as the sources show that no such diachrony existed. Moreover, these very same sources reveal that the notion of erudite libertinism is a historical construction *post factum*, not used in contemporary sources. One should not forget, as Cavaillé insists, that even the general category of "libertine" is originally a negative term referring to those who were not considered to be real philosophers. His essay shows that not only in France but also in England, godlessness was a central feature of libertinism, "libertine" being in that context an insulting category applied by Protestants for various rhetorical ends. Sometimes the word addressed those who advocated diverging religious ideas; on other occasions it referred to epicurean libertinism, a line of thought that was easily associated with atheism. Relying on different historical sources, Cavaillé describes how the category of "libertine" enabled Protestants even to invent non-existing sects, but he also shows us that libertinism in England covered a

wide range of dissident religious movements rather than being confined to an “irreligious libertinism” that we tend to associate with erudite libertinism.

The notion of erudite libertinism is featured in Wauters’s contribution, “*Libertinage érudit*’ and Isaac Vossius (1618–1689): A Case Study.” Wauters highlights the character of Vossius, one of the leading intellectuals in early modern Europe. Vossius was part of a broad scholarly circle including Naudé, Gassendi, and many others, and he resided for more than a decade at the court of Christina of Sweden where he acted as her teacher and head librarian. In 1670 he moved to England, where he was appointed canon of the Windsor chapel, even surprising King Charles II, who was not easily impressed as far as libertine matters were concerned. Taking Vossius as his main point of reference, Wauters makes a clear distinction between libertines and libertarians, the former enjoying lavish sexual conduct, the latter being anti-dogmatic free-thinkers. As with Cavaillé, Wauters insists that the meaning of these words must be interpreted through more sophisticated understandings of the person or people using them.

While Cavaillé and Wauters mainly focus on the problem of libertinism as a constantly shifting semantic category, Combe’s essay, “Making Monkeys of Important Men: Performance Satire and Rochester’s *Alexander Bendo’s Brochure*,” focuses on one specific prose work by Rochester in which he takes the persona of Dr. Alexander Bendo, an Italian mountebank. Rochester played the part himself for several weeks, and Combe examines the live enactment of this text, aptly describing it as a true “performance satire” (56) in which Rochester combines “political and social critique with the sensuous experience of baroque theatricality.” *Alexander Bendo’s Brochure* not only testifies to the libertine predilection for disguise and cross-dressing, it is also a vehement political satire in which the mountebank is self-evidently confused with Charles II as they share the very same *modus operandi*, i.e., deceit and make-believe, portraying early modern politics as a game of rooks and dupes. With his performance satire Rochester reveals the truth of reality to be an illusion, a fundamentally unstable and hence baroque frame of reference. In his performance he is thus “not only anticipating postmodern doubt, but also enacting it.”

Webster broadens the scope of this issue’s topic by focusing on the genre of the Restoration comedy. His article, “In and Out of the Bed-chamber: Staging Libertine Desire in Restoration Comedy,” takes the concept of baroque as its direct starting point. In Webster’s analysis of the bed as a site of baroque aestheticism, the concept of baroque is developed as a metaphor for

the instable libertine identities staged in Restoration comedies, its spectators eagerly enjoying the theatrical representation of this willful play with identities. The stage is not only a metaphor for life as such; it also reveals the troubling gendered categories that structure and confuse society. Baroque, then, is far more than an art of extravaganza trying to impress its spectators; it is also an appeal to rethink gendered categories inside and outside the bedroom, the bed functioning as what one could describe as a sexual theater. By means of a close reading of four Restoration plays—George Etherege's *The Comical Revenge* (1664) and *The Man of Mode* (1676), Charles Sedley's *The Mulberry Garden* (1668), and William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675)—Webster analyzes the bed as a site of permanent tension between sexual and social desire. In contrast to these plays that allow the libertine to be witty, charming, and fallacious at the same, Webster points out that Aphra Behn's *The Rover* (1677) insists on the importance of female emotional independence, depicting the libertine rake as a violent aggressor relentlessly seeking sexual gratification at the expense of others.

The contributions of Paolo Fasoli ("Bodily figurae: Sex and Rhetoric in Early Libertine Venice [1642–1652]") and Inger Leemans ("Arousing Discontent: Pornographic Politics in the Dutch Republic 1680–1800") shift the focus from Rochester's Restoration England to the European continent, respectively focusing on Italian libertinism and Dutch pornographic literature. In Fasoli's article two rarely discussed texts take center stage: Fervante Pallavicino's *La retorica della puttane* (1642), in which a young Venetian girl is introduced into the art of whoredom, and Antonio Rocco's *L'Alcibiade fanciullo a scola* (1652), in which a rhetoric professor persuades a young boy, Alcibiades, into the act of sodomy (the young boy of course being on the recipient's side). Fasoli's detailed contextual analysis reveals how both Pallavicino and Rocco willingly intermingle didactic rhetoric with pornography and thus *logos* with *eros*, their texts providing us with a clear insight into the performative impact of sexual rhetoric. Leemans, in turn, presents three different Dutch pornographic theater texts from the second half of the eighteenth century. Not only did these texts aim at "arousing discontent" through the manipulation of the bodies of both the actors and the spectators, they also reveal how here again pornography is used as a subversive strategy for political satire, thus continuing the critical line Rochester developed in *Sodom*.

The final contribution to this special issue, Tindemans's "Nature, Desire, and the Law: On Libertinism and Early Modern Legal Theory," acts as a

conceptual coda, developing a juridical perspective on the problem of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century libertinism, linking it to the Hobbesian notion of the state of nature. Libertines, Tindemans argues, strive for a society in which natural law, i.e., a set of rules resulting from reason rather than being imposed by a central authority (the sovereign), regulates social interactions. Libertinism, as a performative mode, then reveals itself as an expression of “a kind of discomfort about the theatricality of the society [the libertine] depends upon” (141). This notion takes us back to the beginning of the special issue, as Rochester expresses, in his famous “Satire Against Mankind,” his disillusionment with the impossible application of these natural laws. Here again, libertinism, rather than being an extravagant and hedonistic way of life (although it was often joyous and hedonistic), reveals itself as a feeling of profound discomfort with the political and moral world of early modern Europe. As these essays seek to persuade us, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century libertinism demonstrates a persistent unease with the abysmal void that we call modernity.

NOTES

1. Many of the essays included in this special issue (Combe’s, Fasoli’s, Leemans’s, Tindemans’s, and Webster’s) were first presented 16 November 2010 in Brussels at an international symposium, “Libertinism and Baroque Performativity.” Pol Dehert and Karel Vanhaesebrouck organized both the symposium and the preceding seminar in the framework of the artistic and scientific research project “The World of the Monkey: An Archaeology of Baroque Culture,” funded by BOAB, a joint research fund of the Free University Brussels and the Erasmus University College Brussels.

2. See Greene; Johnson; Lamb.

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