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Glamorizing the Progress of a Notorious Rake

By CHARLES McGRATH

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The Restoration, the textbooks tell us, was the era when England became a kind of public theater. The playhouses reopened, to great acclaim, and gentlemen began wearing costumes on the street - foppish coats and pantaloons and long Frenchified wigs. Even politics became a kind of stage play, with the king and Parliament enacting elaborately contrived roles in a lengthy melodrama about power and succession.

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Weinstein Company

The dark glam of a self-destructive rocker: Johnny Depp as the 17th-century writer John Wilmot, aka the second earl of Rochester, in Laurence Dunmore's film "The Libertine."

The degree of spectacle and role playing at court in particular was wittily suggested in Michael Hoffman's 1995 movie "["Restoration,"](#) a campy costume epic featuring Robert Downey Jr. as a down-at-the-heels physician who becomes veterinarian to the royal dogs. Laurence Dunmore's new movie, "["The Libertine,"](#) which opened on Friday in New York and Los Angeles, evokes a very different Restoration.

This one is an age of anxiety, in which having survived fire and plague, Londoners regarded the newly arrived Charles II, dandified and nearly penniless, with a good deal

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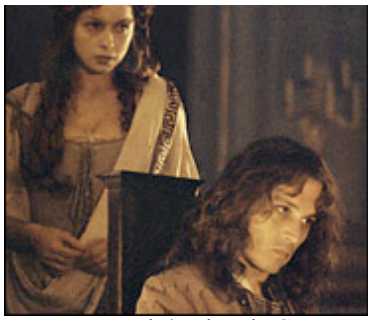
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Peter Mountain/Weinstein Company
Shades of Pygmalion? Samantha
Morton as an actress and Johnny
Depp as John Wilmot in "The
Libertine."

of wariness and uncertainty.
The movie never refers to
him explicitly, but almost
every scene is a reminder
that a best-selling author of
the period was Thomas
Hobbes, who wrote that life's
natural course is "nasty,
brutish and short."

"The Libertine" focuses
instead on another writer,
John Wilmot, second earl of
Rochester (1647-80), a

notorious rake who self-destructed with terrifying velocity.
He inherited his title at 10, went to Oxford at 12 and
graduated at 14. When he was 18 he was imprisoned for
abducting a wealthy heiress (whom he later married); he
subsequently became a war hero and an on-again, off-again
favorite at court, where he was renowned for his wit and
his debauchery and for drunkenly smashing the king's
sundial; and at 33 he was dead, of syphilis and alcoholism.
Samuel Johnson wrote of him: "In a course of drunken
gaiety and gross sensuality, with intervals of study perhaps
yet more criminal, 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."

In the movie, [Johnny Depp](#) plays Wilmot as a kind of
fallen archangel, a prince of arrogance and self-loathing,
and we watch him rot before our eyes, as he gradually
becomes crippled and incontinent; his teeth decay and his
skin erupts in lesions; and finally his nose falls off. By the
end he's like a figure who has lurched in from a horror
movie.

On his deathbed, Wilmot was attended by a parson named
Gilbert Burnet, who was a sort of celebrity chaplain - the
Billy Graham of the 17th century. He claimed that, thanks
in part to his ministry, Wilmot repented and converted, and
Burnet later wrote a book about those last days, which for a
while turned Wilmot into a frequent sermon topic and a
poster child for prayer, penance and divine forgiveness. Not
all of Wilmot's friends believed the conversion, however;
they thought he had lost his mind or else that his Puritan
mother was trying to put a final, positive spin on his

reputation.

Wisely, the movie hedges a bit. The screenplay, which is by Stephen Jeffreys and based on his own 1994 play about Wilmot, has him repent, but doesn't make a grand, redemptive gesture out of it. We're left at the end not with an ennobled or purified Wilmot but a macabre and ruined one, with a piece of gauze where his nose should be.

Wilmot's real claim on our attention is his poetry: he was at his best a kind of secular John Donne and an even more scathing and scabrous Jonathan Swift. But except for scholars, few people have read much of his verse, because until fairly recently it was considered far too dirty to be reprinted in the anthologies. His favorite theme was sex, which both fascinated and disgusted him, and he wrote about it with, even by today's standards, uncommon explicitness and attention to bodily fluids. The first modern edition of his work, published in England in 1926, had to be limited to just a thousand or so copies to escape prosecution. A few years later, in the early 30's, [Graham Greene](#), who not surprisingly felt a great affinity for Wilmot, wrote an excellent biography of him, "Lord Rochester's Monkey," but in part because publishers were squeamish, it didn't come out until 40 years later.

The movie is for the most part remarkably faithful to the facts of Wilmot's life, and even includes, in glancing fashion, a couple of episodes that may baffle viewers who don't know the whole story: a murkily lighted brawl in which one of Wilmot's friends is killed, and a mysterious interlude in which he disguised himself as an Italian quack and medicine-show performer.

About the poetry, it does the best it can. Mr. Depp recites some snatches of Wilmot's verse in a way that suggests both its metrical mastery and colloquial energy. There is also a set piece in which Wilmot stages two of his most scurrilous efforts, a lampoon called "Signior Dildo" and a play about Sodom, in an attempt to embarrass and scandalize the king. That we are spared having to watch him sit down with quill and ink and slave over the parchment makes good historical as well as dramatic sense: Wilmot prided himself on being a gentleman, not a hack who wrote for money, and the myth, at least, was that gentlemen never had to work at their writing.

The movie devotes far more attention to another artistic

pursuit of Wilmot's: his undertaking, on a bet, to transform an actress named Elizabeth Barry, thought to be hopelessly unattractive and untalented, into the great stage presence of her day. The Pygmalion aspect of this story may be apocryphal; the main source for it is an 18th-century bookseller named Edmund Curll, who was famously inventive about the facts. Despite her unpromising appearance, Barry (played in the movie by [Samantha Morton](#)) did become a great actress, however, and she did have an affair with Wilmot and gave birth to his child. She was famous, moreover, for her unfeelingness (offstage) and her flintiness with money (she died quite well off), both of which help explain why in the movie she glows under Wilmot's instruction but is mostly cool to his entreaties. That he truly cared for her is not much in doubt; his letters to Barry are more ardent, if less guilt-stricken, than those to his long-suffering wife.

Was this mostly one-sided affair the great loss of his life? Again, "The Libertine" hedges a little, and again that seems right. By the time he met Barry, Wilmot was probably too far gone; nothing could distract him for very long from the black hole of his own psyche. Some of his biographers have suggested that there was something principled about Wilmot's libertinism - that in an age of hypocrisy and false piety, he was heroic in his unbelief and his scorn for convention. In the movie's portrayal, which includes elements of Jim Morrison and Iggy Pop (for whom Mr. Depp used to open), he's more nearly a rock star ahead of his time, whose dark glamour comes from burning himself out.

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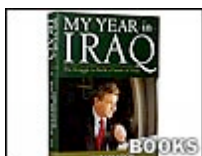
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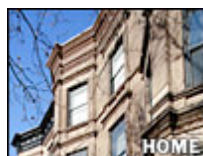
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