

---

# Libertinism and the Blurring of Private–Public

*Gol Man Gurung, Ph.D\**

---

*Article History:* Received 7 Dec. 2022; Reviewed 8 Jan. 2023; Revised 13 March 2023; Accepted 18 June 2023.

---

## **Abstract**

*The distinction between private and public has been existed in debates not only between liberals and communitarians regarding the commercial or common interest on economic issues, but also among members of the same family, community, class, circle, group, institution or party, and is made sharper more in essence by social norms and ethics relating the private as aberrant, and could thus, be injurious to the mass. Such a dichotomy made between the private as purely personal instinct-driven and the public as larger and society-driven mystifies the most common libertine character that exists more implicitly among all individuals, which the libertine literature attempts to expose by bringing into practice the private pleasure to the public via, among many other genres, plays and theatric performances. This paper attempts to show how the libertine plays have been successful in challenging the-then emerging bourgeoisie sexual-morality by blurring the public and private acts, thereby expanding the possible sexual roles and identities available to late seventeenth century men and women.*

**Keywords:** *libertine ethos, morality, private-public, restoration plays, sexuality.*

---

## **Introduction**

Intense debate for long has consistently been ongoing among people belonged to private and public camps of platforms not only of political or ideological nature, but also, among others, of social and intellectual. It is also that the social norms, code of conducts, ethics, laws or morals are made by expecting simply that the people compromise their private pleasure with the public rules, and on that basis, they can easily be governed. However, people have the common character of seeking freedom, which, if ruled out, may blast both in multiple forms and contents such as cuckolding, debauchery, seduction, lechery, etc., and pose threat to the existing morality and order. One of the major manifestations of such freedom-seeking activities – also referred to as libertine movement – is the public performance of private pleasure in the theatre, and the blurring of private and the public.

Libertinism is an extreme form of hedonism emerged in the sixteenth century Europe. The history of libertinism has association with a French theologian named John Calvin, who coined the word libertine originally to label the opponents of his policies in Geneva with negative stereotypes. Calvin was of the view that the people should be highly disciplined and follow the norms and principles of the Church. But his opponents were in search of more freedom and targeted to supplant Calvinist principles. "It can be argued that society creates its rebels, and that limited toleration and eventual punishment of dissenters from the established order of family, church and state serve as effective instruments of social control" (Chernaik, 1995). However, libertinism

---

\* Associate Professor, Department of English, Saraswati Multiple Campus, TU, Nepal

came more to associate with sexual freedom, and sexual libertinism became the true form of libertinism, where the tensions inherent in the ideology of individual liberty was applied to the conduct of sexual relations inside and outside marriage.

The emergence of libertinism was a fashionable and pervasive mode of thought whose freedom was related to religion, politics, and society as well as to sexual life (Foxon, 1965). Libertinism embodies physical pleasure, which can particularly be experienced through the senses. Thus, any libertine person rejects given social norms and morals regarding sex. Libertines define moral principles as restraints, which curtail individual freedom to sex and physical pleasure. They reject established norms and behaviors of a larger society, which fall under the regime of the public, and are made in the name of systematic management of sexual life. It is said that human activities are determined by desires to pursue pleasure and avoid pain, and this desire because it is unnecessarily curbed in the name of morality, should be freed. Libertine playwrights were the public performers of private pursuits and that they come out as both sexual adventurers and as radical questioners of social, political, and moral values of the Puritanism through their dramatic performances.

Libertinism was better practiced in the Restoration drama, which spans the phase from the 1660s to the end of the seventeenth century, and the heydays of the erstwhile aristocrats-turned-libertines were the period that began with the return of Charles II. As these aristocrats were facing pressures from the neo merchant elites, they asserted themselves with their aggressive libertinism so that even the morally straight citizens could turn to be Peeping Toms. They had a firm belief that the pleasure-seeking is the common character than a unique habit of a person. Therefore, there is no private or the public in the real, but only the practice of mystifying something as private or the public. It simultaneously produced the conflicting attitudes toward such ethical problems as the individual versus society, freedom versus restraint, self-interest versus obligation, and – in a special but not less crucial sense which we shall explore – the question of "pleasure" versus "virtue" (Underwood, 1957). This paper brings four key libertine plays into discussion and concludes how the libertine playwrights performed the private pursuits in the public and were successful in blurring the private and the public.

## Methodology

This article is prepared with reference to the review of half a dozen of selected scholarly books on libertine literature. While reviewing, emphasis is given more on clearer conceptualization of the term libertinism, its association to individual freedom, the historical evolution of libertinism in Europe with its epicenter in England, France and Switzerland, libertine movement's nexus with Western Regimes, libertine literature's reflection of hypocritical European society, and the theatrical performance of sexual pleasure in the public. Because this paper describes and analyzes libertine literature, it is more descriptive and analytical in essence than its seemingly historical narrative form. The major libertine literature reviewed in this paper include William Wycherley's *The Country-Wife*, George Etherege's *The Man of Mode*, Thomas Shadwell's *The Libertine*, and William Congreve's *The Way of the World*. Conclusion regarding the blurring of private and public caused by the Restoration drama and its performance in the theatre is made on the basis only of the literature-review.

## Discussion and Analysis

With reference to the four selected writings of respective libertine playwrights, notorious for their sexual candor, a review-based discussion and analysis is made on how the debate between the private and public is blurred by the stage comedy of the Restoration literature.

### William Wycherley's *The Country Wife*

*The Country Wife* by William Wycherley describes the sexual deception, a common phenomenon in British society, by foregrounding sexually scandalous people, their practice of cuckoldry, and the hypocritical social norms and values attached to sex and marriage. It has clearly depicted a picture in which social norms and morality regarding sex and marriage, supposedly a private affair, are challenged.

Harry Horner, the hero of the play, was a womanizer, who convinced the doctor to spread a rumor that he was impotent, and therefore, could have easy access to women with whom he could engage easily in sexual activities. Horner used to stay more with women, making laughter with them, and was busy in cuckolding. The women were supposed to be trustworthy for not making illicit sexual relationship with others, but were libertines, and were looking for freedom, flirt, suitor, romance, seduction, debauchery, etc. It also has given a glimpse of the sexualized city, which compared to countryside, is much more a place to cuckolding and wider scope of open sex.

In one scene, Margery replied to Jack Pinchwife regarding his advice for staying away from the cuckolding of Horner as:

“He [Horner] carried me up into the house, next to the / Exchange. / He kiss’d me an hundred times, and told me / fancied he kiss’d my fine sister, meaning me you know, whom / he said he lov’d with all his soul, and bid me sure to tell / her so, and to desire her to be at her window, by eleven of / the clock this morning, and he wou’d walk under it at that / time. / ... Why he put the tip of his tongue between my / lips, and so musl’d me... and I said, I’d bite it. / ...Nay, you need not be so angry with him neither, / for to say truth, he has the sweetest breath I ever knew. /” (Wycherley, 1981)

Besides, the drama has shown the upper-class women's bold belief that they have the freedom of doing their own business and discussion on adultery. They are the people of the fashionable society so that they drink, dance, play cards and show their inclination to it and in their discussion each one presents the view that adultery is a good thing till it goes on in secret and damages no one's honor. The upper-class ladies such as Lady Fidget, Mistress Squamish, and Dainty Fidget were excited to live with sexual promiscuity, and have a favorite companion like Horner, who was full of erotic style and the art of mixing love with intense sexuality. By showing how rationality was overpowered by instinct in *The Country Wife*, William Wycherley made possible the public performance of private pleasure and blurred the private-public.

### Libertinism in *The Man of Mode*

The Restoration libertines talk about the physical and vascular pleasure in life and perform the same in the theatre. In pursuit of private pleasure, which is libertine's only motto, is pervasively portrayed in their writings through filthy words. The libertine language such as hunters, predatory,

whores, monster, etc. further illustrates people's engagement in whoring activities and getting pleasure and gratification from that.

George Etherege's *The Man of Mode* illustrates the man-about-town and the notorious womanizer Dorimant, who was in affairs with numerous women, and used to lie about his whereabouts. Once Dorimant is informed of the arrival of a beautiful heiress Harriet in London, he was keen to break off his relationship with Mrs Loveit, being already involved in relationship with younger friend Belinda. At the same time, Young Bellair's devotion to Emilia as the best companion is ridiculed. The fop Dorimant's engagement in activities with women only in pursuit of fulfillment of pleasure and no more commitment to anyone on the one hand, and his attempt of disengagement with previous mistresses in search of new mistresses shows the perfect libertine character.

The play is all about the sexualization of urban geography. Fashion-monger Dorimant's aristocrat status and his effort for reconciling sexuality, love, marriage, and money for private pleasure have glorified sex during the Restoration time as appetite which is fundamental to our organism and its denial or ignorance to it is the rejection of the true values of life. The protagonist Dorimant is the representative Restoration rake hero whereas his sexual adventure is the central issue of this play. Dorimant uses the libertine performance to fulfill his mission of libertine wishes but for Harriet the performance is as means of both attracting and entrapping men and hiding her true thoughts. The rake believes on the philosophy that life is just one big stage and the performance leads the life forward. Including Dorimant, Fopling also holds the idea that constancy on marriage is an idle conservative theme that binds the people from going forward and the play pleads the ideology of secular modernity which can provide freedom from prevalent social restraints. A Machiavellian nature of sexual greed of Dorimant and his conflicting relationship with Mrs. Loveit is revealed in the following dialogue as:

Mrs. Loveit: Is this the constancy you vowed?

Dorimant: Constancy at my years? 'Tis not a virtue in season: you might as well expect the fruit the Autumn ripens; the spring.

Mrs. Loveit: Monstrous principle!

Dorimant: Youth has a long journey to go, madam. Should I have set up my rest at the first inn I lodged at, I should never have arrived at the happiness I now enjoy. (Etherege, 1989)

The libertine characters' play with their sense of inclination which is about lust and sexual varieties against the society's attempts of subordinating the individual to the group and its effort to restrict each man to one woman and each woman to one man but the protean nature of passionate love is trying to escape from the then moral religious boundary. Dorimant's libertine ethos thus continues to revolt against the sexual license of the sociopolitical culture of the post-puritanical regime. The libertine activities like whoring, gambling, drinking, dining and play-going were very expensive and to meet their usual costs they had to look out for extra resources so that, one of the reliable sources was the property which they could get from the marriages of upper class and rich women. Dorimant's vested interest was to seduce Harriet Woodvilland obtain her riches so that he could fulfill his libertine wishes because without money he could not pursue his private pleasure with so many other women. The frequency of sexual relationship once crosses its traditional limit between one man and a woman it ceases to remain as a private affair, but

becomes a public issue. Besides, the readiness of a man to multiple women or of a woman to several men to engage in sexual candor, often blurring the identity of married or unmarried status helps ultimately to blur the discourse on the private and the public.

### **Radical Performance in The Libertine**

The Libertine is perhaps the most radical among the Restoration libertine plays written by Thomas Shadwell that surpasses the total tradition of freethinking of Lucretius, Epicurus, Hobbes, and Rochester. Don John, the lead character, dominates the entire play and his domination seems to be highly terrific for ordinary human being because the whole play is full of rape, murder, fighting, sacrilege, seduction, and pillage. Social rules and regulations along with law and religion are shown as if they create only the idle fear of future misery, and the only fulfillment of such natural appetites can overcome the so-called conscience by providing natural pleasure. How much the libertines enjoy the private pleasure of nature in a great many ways and their pursuance of the liberty of nature goes uninterrupted is spoken by Don John's like:

"A senseless fear, would make us contradict  
The only certain Guide, Infallible Nature;  
And at the call of Melancholly Fools,  
(Who stile all actions which they like not, Sins)  
To silence all our Natural appetites." (Shadwell, 1927).

The libertines are the prodigal sons of Hobbes Leviathan because they follow the philosophy "right of nature" that men must let their self-interest guide and use it as a means to protect them from the potential harm. Since libertines believe on the natural pleasure that is possible from seduction and riots, they do involve in violent activities as well. Not only Don Lopez cut his own Elder Brother's throat to obtain a good estate from him and to waste it on whoring and drinking, but also Don Antonio impregnated his two sisters to please his appetite. It is also said that Don John had also killed his own father for the sake of his pleasure because his father had a design to debar him of his pleasures.

The libertine trio namely Don John, Don Lopez and Don Antonio proclaim that they live the life of sense and their sole target is to please their sense. Don John had already married six women in a month and promised to fifteen more for marriage. All the trio were committed to do collective rape to the women against their resistance. They did not care for whether the women were ugly or beauty, but they were thinking only of committing debauchery and rape. Don John's order to bring any first woman that his valet Giacomo meets in the street was just to quench his sexual thirst, which according to libertinism, is more powerful than rationality.

Throughout the play, Thomas Shadwell's libertine hero Don John remains unchanged in his sexual psychology and never surrenders to the artificial social forces. It showed the dismissal of libertine's idea of what society and morality is, and what about the afterlife. Don Juan has been foregrounded as a rake, a perfect hunter, who pursues women not for love or marriage but only for sex. The astonishing exposure of Don John's libertine character is superb in the sense that he is in the way of destroying all societal restraints rather than subverting and changing it. Don John and his subordinate colleagues use women only for sexual gratification. And, women's love to Dons was also given least importance. The dominant status and influence of cuckolders and

debauchers as performed in libertine dramas have glorified the libertine ethos making it more public.

## Loose Morals in The Way of the World

William Congreve's play *The Way of the World* explores human beings' willingness to get what they want through whatever means. It revolves around marriage and infidelity, an unquenched thirst of all human beings, who by any means attempt to quench the sexual thirst. The play's portrayal of the women characters such as the types of young predatory widows and older ladies, who try to be attractive to sexually impress the young men. The libertine way is depicted as if it is the only way of the world. Even the 'good-natured' gentlemen serve as a means of deceitfully encouraging virtuous women to engage in pleasure-seeking sexual activities, and other women to continue infidelity even after marriage. Millamant was making a condition of marriage to her lover Mirabell by saying:

"Milla: It may be in things of common application, but never sure in love. Oh, I hate a lover that can dare to think he draws a moment's air, independent on the bounty of his mistress. There is not so impudent a thing in nature, as the saucy look of an assured man, confident of success. The pedantic arrogance of a very husband has not so pragmatical an air Ah! I will never marry, unless I am first made sure of my will and pleasure." (Congreve, 2006)

Since a libertine rejects all moral boundaries and lives free of any constraint, the life of a libertine becomes profligate and dissolute. All the libertines have disinterest in ethics and social mores and as a result they are sexually promiscuous and bigamy despite of monogamy. The growth of Dildo and Murkin business during that time substantiated by bringing the private pleasure to the public domain that the love's only theatre is the bed. Millamant loves liberty more than marriage and she seldom compromises her freedom in the name of marriage. In another instance, Millamant tries to persuade her suitor Mirabell not to disclose their relationship to the public as spouses, and the conversation goes on like:

Milla: Ah! Idle creature, get up when you will. And, d' ye hear, I won't be called names after I 'm married; positively I won't be called names.

Mira: Names!

Milla: Aye, as wife, spouse, my dear, joy, jewel, love; sweet-heart, and the rest of that nauseous cant, in which men and their wives are so fulsomely familiar I shall never bear that—Good Mirabell, don't let us be familiar or fond, nor kiss before folks, like my Lady Fadler and Sir Francis: no go to Hyde Park, together the first Sunday in a new chariot, to provoke eyes and whispers; and then, never be seen there together again: as if we were proud to one another the first week, and ashamed of one another ever after. Let us never visit together, nor go to a play together but let us be very strange and well bred; Let us be as strange as if we had been married a great while; and as well-bred as if we were not married at all. (Congreve, 2006)

The intensity of sexual desire not only of Millamant but also of Lady Wishfort and her maid Foible that can be fulfilled by Sir Roland was expressed interestingly. Lady Wishfort's effort to

beautify her body so that the Restoration rakes find her sweeter and tastier. Lady Wishfort's impatient ordering of more make-up kits to be used during dressing in a dialogue with her maid Peg, who was working in absence of another maid Foible, expecting that Sir Roland will be excited to accept her as his mistress and engages in sexually indulgent activity to fulfill her weird sexual desire is expressed in words below as:

Lady: Merciful, no news of Foible yet?

Peg: No, madam.

Lady: I have no more patience—if I have not fretted myself till I am pale again, there's no veracity in me. Fetch me the red—the red, do you hear, sweet-heart? An arrant ash colour, as I'm a person. Look you how this wench stirs! Why dost thou not fetch me a little red? Didst thou not hear me, mopus?

Peg: The red ratafia does your ladyship mean, or the cherry-brandy?

Lady: Ratafia, fool. No, fool. Not the ratafia, fool. Grant me patience! I mean the Spanish paper, idiot, complexion, darling. Paint, paint, paint! Dost thou understand that, changeling, dangling thy hand like bobbins before thee? Why dost thou not stir, puppet? Thou wooden thing upon wires. (Congreve, 2006).

Being engaged with the dialogue as encapsulated by the libertine writers in their plays, and the practice of such libertine ethos in public places such as theatres, the debate on sexuality by relegating it either only to a private erroneous act with reference to the standardized social norms or solely to the public with reference to the principle of physical pleasure seems to be less relevant.

## Conclusion

Standardized norms of society made by the rulers intend to curb the opponent and the same is applied by the Reformer John Calvin during the sixteenth century. Philosophy of Calvin – also known as Calvinist philosophy – was full of moral rules by which people in general and the Genevans in particular would be prohibited from involving in immoral activities. Not only the Genevans, but also the Englishmen were exhausted of practicing Puritan and Calvinist philosophy, they were high in demand of freedom than norms. Later libertine ethos diffused across Europe after the Restoration of Libertine Theatre by Charles II in England. Also, Restoration was the era, which had almost a parallel journey with capitalism. The bourgeoisie morality emerged from the capitalist regime regarding sexuality in a way that the real pleasure is the pleasure gained from the material sources such as from more income and wealth than physical pleasure, and the rules are made accordingly by relegating sexuality to the private camp. However, the lust for sex of people irrespective of their identity as rich or poor, men or women, married or single, widow or virgin, under- or over-age, and their involvement in the only pleasure-seeking sexual activities likeseduction, lechery, cuckolding or debouching as shown in the Restoration plays ridicules the bourgeoisie morality, which supposed sex as an act to be dealt privately, falsified the social norms of sexuality in terms of whether its practice should be private or public thereby obscuring those rigid demarcations. The performance of libertine plays inscribed by the Restoration playwrights challenged the old narrative of sex, which was supposed to take

place with a single partner in a bedroom, a completely private place, by taking it to the theatre, the broad-based and all-inclusive marketplace.

## References

- Chernaik, W. (1995). *Sexual freedom in restoration literature*. Cambridge University Press.
- Congreve, W. (2006). *The way of the world and other plays*. Ed. Eric S Rump. Penguin.
- Etherege, G. (1989). *The man of mode*. Ed. John Barnard. A & C Black Publishers Limited.
- Foxon, D. (1965). *Libertine literature in England 1660-1745*. University Books.
- Gurung, G. (2018). *Restoration libertines on the stage: sexuality, politics and performance*. An unpublished PhD dissertation in English, Tribhuvan University.
- Shadwell, T. (1927). *The complete works of Thomas Shadwell*. Ed. Montague Summers. Benjamin Blom.
- Underwood, D. (1957). *Etherege and the seventeenth-century comedy of manners*. Oxford University Press.
- Wycherley, W. (1981). *The country wife and other plays*. Ed. Peter Dixon. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Oxford University Press.