
Libertinism during Restoration Era and the Liberation of a Restricted Sexuality

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Abstract

This paper deals basically with defining libertinism as a freedom movement giving attention to the rise of theatre activities during the Restoration Era. In addition to this, the evolution of libertinism from pre-Enlightenment Era to how it was revived by the Court Wits during the regime of King Charles II of England is reviewed. It views that the sexuality was defined in consonance with someone's vested interest of maximizing the pleasure of the self and of controlling others thereby giving rise to the guiding principles, norms, morality, law and policies on it. It reviews half a dozen of books on libertine sexuality with particular reference given to two selected Restoration libertine playwrights William Wycherley and Thomas Shadwell, and shows how bourgeoisie sexual morality came to blast caused by its complete disregard to one's release of private pleasure. It finds that the libertine dramas have helped not only to expose people's sexuality naturally in the public, but also to redefine sexuality in a quite open and unrestrained manner. It finally concludes that the established and seemingly rigid normative standards, which aim to demolish the real human sexuality, are also subject to change.

Keywords: drama, libertinism, morality, sexuality, Restoration.

Introduction

Libertinism is a philosophy that disregards the conventional morality about sex and religious life. A libertine is a person who puts value on physical pleasures that can be experienced through the senses. Libertines are unrestrained by moral restriction; especially, they lead a sexually dissolute life. They are characterized by a lifestyle or pattern of behavior, which is characterized by a lack of restraint regarding sex. Libertine writing came to evolve after the clash of the sexual-moral values of the emerging merchant elites and the traditional aristocrats. The traditional aristocrats were the power-exercising authority, who once challenged by the emerging merchant elites turned to be the more aggressive libertinism. Libertines were the sexual adventurers, who raised radical questions on the social, political, and moral values of society through their dramatic performance. They were the public performers of private pursuits, and thus, brought private affairs to the public. Libertinism's blurring of public and private acts challenged the-then emerging bourgeoisie sexual morality, and expanded the possible sexual roles and identities available to late-seventeenth century men and women.

Libertinism in the Pre-Enlightenment Era

The word libertine was understood particularly before the Enlightenment Era in a disparaged way whereby sex or sexuality should be kept inside the gamut of the self so as to practice it privately. Contrary to this, libertinism from the sixteenth and seventeenth century came to be taken mainly in Italian and French erudite cultural, philosophical movement as a practice that has connection with

reason and nature; a basic criterion of morality, politics, and law. Slightly differently, morality or law would be futile if it disregards the intrinsic relationship between reason and nature. The giving of precedence of sexuality over theology and philosophy was unbelievable, but freethinking in the Restoration Era began as a reaction against the religious propaganda.

Gradually a reasoning was evolved in which not only a word of the Almighty but also the miracles can be explained according to natural laws. Additionally, the function of religion was understood not as to teach the philosophy but to bring the real life to the mass. As the historians traced the mid-seventeenth century heretics, irreligion, anticlerical renters, criticism of Bible, and their suspicion of religion and their skepticism about heaven and hell, the libertine movement began more openly in the preceding decades of Charles II's court.

Libertinism during the Restoration Era

The presence of libertinism was seen well before the Restoration Era, particularly the Renaissance Era, but it was more like 'top-down', because the Renaissance Era was focused on bringing the literature of the upper-class nobility. The remarkable feature of Renaissance was that it helped a lot in the Protentantization process. But, the full-fledge libertinism came into practice during the Restoration Era. King Charles II's ascension to Throne on 29 May, 1660 was the milestone of Restoration Era and the resuming of Stuart Monarchy because King Charles took an initiation to open the banned theatrical performances during the interregnum by the puritanical regime of Oliver Cromwell. Also, Charles and his pupils brought some unique libertine characteristics home from France.

Augmentation of Libertinism in Restoration

Restoration Era was a heyday of libertinism but the libertine performances were also seriously challenged by Puritanism, conventions, and followers of normative moralists. Thus, Restoration libertinism gave rise to new vocabulary of sexuality like scrubber, philanderer, paramour, cunnilingus, phallic sabbath, skimmington, carnelevation, priapism, hooker, shaming ritual, etc. Theophile's ode celebrates the idea that submission to nature is a liberating experience that pertains personal detachment from the worldly anxieties. Likewise, he demystifies the Church's rationalist ethics and compares it with delusion and hypocrisy. He was jubilant in rejecting all other worldly pleasures in favor of the sexual satisfaction to be gained from someone mistress. The Restoration ethos of libertinism was the subversion of traditional notions of family, religion, and government.

Court Wits and Women Sexuality

Unequal gender roles were prevalent in England whereby girls and women could not come to play the theatre role previously. But after King Charles returned back from France, he became more open to libertinism, introduced gender equality, and allowed girls and women to join theatre. The theatre license granted by Charles II was the first type in England to permit women to play female roles on stage. Female roles before that were played by boys. The Restoration Court was more like hedonistic, which celebrated the libertine literature to its fullest. The libertine's pursuit of pleasure created an irresolvable rigmarole in the history of England and the traditional gender roles played before the

Restoration Era by men especially the constables, husbands, fathers, brothers, employers, ministers and the king were brought under question.

Libertines as Performers

Libertines assumed all authority as illegitimate whereby institutions like the state, church, and family were equally parasitic on man's fear of freedom. With favor granted by the King Charles II, the upper-class youths in particular adopted their libertine philosophy against the Puritan morality. It seems that the libertines had fully internalized the philosophy of sexuality, which Michel Foucault analyze as "the pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light" (1978 p.) which would illuminate the importance of power and sexuality. Turner (2002) focuses on the European evolution of pornography and its association with women's prolonged attempts to achieve both literary and social power. By examining a wide-range of pornopolitical texts and practices, he demonstrates how pornographic discourse provides an important register of the marginalized political and sexual attitudes and practices (p.22). It can firmly believes that the pornography destabilizes the protected sexual categories and hierarchies.

Restoration Rakes

The real revolutionary era began after the court wits performed the libertine drama to achieve the monarchical favor so that by their enactment, they made the king and other spectators laugh together. It indeed was an effective social and political capital or tool to neutralize their political enemies. In actual speaking, the libertine performance was a political agenda of a kind of social liberation whereby common people as spectators could comfortably join with the King. The Restoration libertines were highly successful to fashion an identity that transcended the mere entertainment value of their lived acts and theatrical plays. As Shadwell (1927) believes, libertinism was a "prominent and pervasive phenomenon" of the seventeenth century; it could hardly be a "philosophic system"; and at best, we can call it a "way of life" (p.23) which should be seen through the observable phenomenon.

Libertine Liberation in Restoration Drama

William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* and *The Plain Dealer* are two restoration drama that expose the controversial sexual explicitness of that time. The publicity of sexual matters to the urban women as shown in *The Plain Dealer* had the vested interest for the libertines to come out as victorious in their political and sexual scam. The upper-class women held the belief that they had freedom of doing their own business and discuss on adultery. They thought themselves as fashion-icons so that they could drink, dance, play cards and show their inclination to it. They believed that adultery was a good thing till it was practiced in secret and damaged no one's honor. There was libertine ethos in every human being, but due to the religious and social restraints only the upper-class women enjoyed the libertine rights. The lower-class women were called as whores because the political, religious, and social systems were meant to control the crowd.

In *The Country Wife* a scene is described where the upper-class ladies were seen frustrated from their husbands because of their complete ignorance from husbands, who used to think only of their business

and worked for it. The wives were never satisfied sexually from their busy husbands, and used to gratify their sexual desire from others. Lady Fidget, Dainty Fidget, and Mistress Squamish used to sing and dance at their best to appease Horner with whom they reached to the peak of the pleasure. The rise of a gallant Horner, the most favorite person to these upper-class women was a kind of failure in the attitude and the behavior of their impotent husbands because from Horner the upper-class women got luxury, companionship, and entertainment. The wives kept in mind that the gallant could please them as frolic, as gamesome, as wild as the Horner. Libertinism seen in Wycherley's drama could be described as "Whether in the form of a subtle confession in confidence or an authoritarian interrogation, sex – be it refined or rustic- had to be put into words" (Foucault, 1978 p. 32). Horner could be remembered as the best libertine authority which rebelled against the existing authority of different forms. Infidelity as portrayed in the drama was the picture that had clearly reflected how sexuality used to be spilled nudely as a result of consistent encroachment from the institutions of marriage.

Wycherley conveys a meaning that the culture has repressed the sexuality in the name of marriage, honor, religion, law, etc., due to which many people were suffering and some handful are enjoying as they are resourceful. Wycherley's *The Plain Dealer* was the quest for the honest man in the contemporary society. At the time the libertine dramas were performed, the-then Britain was on its course of increased urbanization, and London was the largest city in Europe. London was the major city that enabled modernization from the public performance of libertine dramas. To round off, *The Plain Dealer* demonstrated the evolution of morality and Wycherley's convictions about the attitudes of the people in the capitalist society. Hence, the libertine character possessed in Wycherley's works the qualities of an affluent, insatiable sexual appetite, and the sexual rebellion against institutional authorities.

The Restoration libertines were the descendants of the Lucretian school of thought, who used to talk about the physical and vascular pleasure in life. The libertines' main pursuance was the sexual pleasure that they could obtain by liberating sex from social bondage or marriage. Some of the renowned libertine playwrights of the Restoration Era were George Etherege, John Wilmot, George Buckingham, Charles Sidley, William Wycherley, and Shadwell. During the Era, the libertines mainly valorized the private pleasure over public duty. As Jeremy W. Webster (2005) writes, "One of the major challenges to these playwrights' depictions of the libertines was some people's perception that the libertines in Charles II's court were not only morally bankrupt but were also actively bringing about the demise of social order" (2005 p. 105). Such performances disengaged Charles to from these wits for his public prestige but it was said that he still privately indulged himself in wine and mistresses in the company of these wits.

Sex as Natural and Rational

All the male and female by nature are given priority to their sexual instincts. But an individual has to undergo the rules of the society, within the restraints, and the power of a community for the civilized sexuality. However, libertarian rakes manipulate the society and refuse to accept the social restraints

imposed upon as a rule such as, one man to one woman, and one woman to one man, in order to fulfill their sexual desire. Thus, the libertine ethos continued 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 costly 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.

Restoration metaphor of sex was an appetite, which was fundamental to our organism and its denial or ignorance was the rejection of the true values of life. Thus, libertine drama revealed that luxurious dreams like entertainment, lodge, servant, money, dress, stalls, furniture and decorations could be fulfilled from marriages to rich landed women, and heavy dowry. Dorimant, as an aristocrat man, tried to maintain the libertine status by reconciling love, marriage, and money for private pleasure.

Shadwell's *The Libertine* was one of the leading Restoration comedies of radical libertine performance. It was the most radical because it exceeded the whole tradition of freethinking of Lucretius, Epicurus, Hobbes, and Rochester. Shadwell (1927) portrayed the libertine protagonist as a rake who had easily disregarded social morality with regard to sexual intercourse because the commitment to sexual morality was against the nature as well as reason. Libertines believed that the pursuit of natural pleasure was available from seduction and riots. The social rules and regulations along with law and religion create idle fear of future misery but only the fulfillment of such natural appetites can overcome the so-called conscience and provide natural pleasure. Regarding the importance of reason, libertinism follows the idea that:

My business is my pleasure, that end I will always compass, without scrupling the means; there is no right or wrong, but what conduces to, or hinders pleasure. But, you tedious insipid Rascal, if I hear more of your Morality, I will Carbonado you. (p. 124-127).

The libertines were the prodigal sons of Hobbes *Leviathan* because they followed the thesis "right of nature". They believed that men must let their self-interest guide them and use it as a means to protect them from the potential harm. They even used to suggest every man not to pretend by controlling the passion but to obey their constitutions of sense and nature. A man was supposed not to be regulated by hypocrisy but by passion so that he could not have to be confined to a woman and have repeated sex with her. Confined to have sex with a single woman was to be prisoned and live unhappy forever.

As the chorus sing:

How happy, how happy are they?

But the silly fond Animal, Man,

Makes Laws against himself, which his Appetites sway;

Poor Fools, how unhappy are they? (p. 279-282)

Chorus has firmly depicted man as an animal because man has made so many rules provided that human will be liberated but contrary to the expectation man is ruled and oppressed by the man-

made laws. Hence, human being is the most unhappy being for being compromised to express sexual freedom. However, there are heroes, who break the rules and challenge rigid sexual moralities. Libertine drama shows how a man or woman can live happily only after mating freely with many partners in a frequent way.

To round off, Shadwell's *Libertine* was a totally different genre in presenting the libertine ideology because the libertine hero Don John was unchanged in his sexual psychology and never surrendered to the artificial social forces. In real, the libertines seldom care about what society, religion and afterlife are. The libertines through their drama and playwright explored why sexual freedom was necessary to rescue both man and woman from the control of power and politics.

Female Sexual Psyche in *The Way of the World*

Congreve portrays the young predatory widows and older ladies, who tried to be sexually attractive and impress the young men. His libertine drama ridicules the institution of marriage and fully exposes the Restoration as a period of loose morals. Congreve advises that the traditional concept of marriage should be overhauled and changed in terms of sexuality. Similarly, the lack of sex faced by single women was another important issue of the Restoration society. Sex role is the social role which should be fulfilled by men and women by virtue of society. But unequal sexes roles have the potential of harming the established roles.

Conclusion

The Restoration libertine philosophy was made by a group of literary and political figures aiming to satisfy their pleasure-seeking wildness. The circle's expression of libertine dream was to expose the sexual inadequacies felt by both the men and women, and resist the constraints made by the then prevailing social morality. Libertinism seeks for achieving total sexual freedom from social rules, conventions, and physical limitations, which libertine scholars advocate. Libertine writing however is a complex engagement with sociopolitical and cultural laws and institutions, explore the inadequacies of ethical standards, and pose at the same time a significant challenge to existing laws and institutions. The libertines were inherent in restoring the court wits and in their play performances, their court lives and plays. The restoration of a banned theatre immediately after King Charles II's ascending to throne and giving it the patent rights so as to legalize the entrance of female actresses to play wifely roles in the theatre indicates that sexuality revolves around the power-knowledge game in society, and is subject to change.

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