THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY LIBERTINE IN FRANCE AND ENGLAND: A STUDY IN CONTRASTS

by

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INTRODUCTION

Libertines of the seventeenth century vigorously disputed the conventional beliefs and systems of knowledge generally accepted in their time. Offspring of a time of transition in politics, religion and scientific knowledge, their individualism was formed and influenced by many factors in this age of shifting values. They were affected by the decline of Papal authority and the growth of national self-consciousness; by Protestant interpretations of the Scriptures, and the increasing complexity and disparateness of religious dogma. The impact of humanism on them was considerable; they were interested in the revival of philosophies opposed to Aristotle, and perhaps most important, in new developments in science, which increasingly sanctioned the questioning of previously accepted authority.

In spite of their bad reputation they are not a group which can be neatly distinguished by the nature of their beliefs. There is no one particular way in which they influence literature, nor one consistent attitude which they can be said to have adopted towards science and philosophical enquiry. There is, in fact, no reliable criterion by which they can be clearly divided from the multitude of figures who thought along similar lines or had similar aims, but who definitely cannot be described as "libertine". And yet libertines did exist and there is no other word to describe them; a "rake", an "egoist honnête homme" or a "diabolical exponent of scientific incredulity of Christian superstitions" do not quite mean the same thing although they each describe an aspect of the libertine character.

Libertine attitudes were based on, and grew out of Renaissance and late medieval ideas: to use a metaphor, the libertine heads that appear in the seventeenth century are firmly attached to bodies of humanists, Pyrrhonists, neo-Platonists, Copernican astronomers, Epicureans, Averröistic Aristotelians, religious moderates, or Protestant doctrinaires. Today some of them are difficult to recognise as libertines because their ideas seem no more audacious than those of many other seventeenth century thinkers. To their contemporaries the libertines seemed to possess a clearer identity: they enjoyed notoriety, first because of the opposition of the Church to them, and secondly because some of their characteristic traits became fashionable. They became an advertisement of a way of thinking and behaving that pervaded, in less obvious ways, a large proportion of non-libertine society.

Those who were labelled libertines, either by their contemporaries, enemies or friends, or were self-styled adepts of libertinage, fall into three broad groups. There are the licentious rakes, who were opposed to conventional morality and to the authority of the Church. They engaged in orgies of drunkenness and promiscuity, in street fights and in imaginative sacrileges. They exist in all ages, but their numbers in France increased after the Civil Wars as they did in England after the Restoration. The reasons for their appearance were various: besides the obvious one of social disorganization after internal strife, one may cite in France foreign influences at court, and weakening of religious discipline. In England one of the main causes for their emergence was probably a deliberate reaction to the restrictions of previous religious fanaticism. Since a study of these libertines would belong more properly to sociology, they will not be dealt with in greater

detail, although today when the libertine is mentioned it is chiefly of these we think.

More pertinent to the purpose of this study are the French learned libertins[1] such as Gassendi, Gui Patin, Gabriel Naudé and La Mothe le Vayer. These scholarly men formed an intellectual élite, socially lower than the licentious aristocrats described above. Their group comprised doctors (ubi tres medici, duo athei was a common saying), lawyers, and often ecclesiastics, perhaps working in the capacity of librarians or tutors in a rich household. These intellectuals met frequently to discuss advances in science and to compare diverse philosophies, religious creeds, and customs, and were linked by correspondence with men all over Europe engaged in similar pursuits, forming an important part of the great web of humanist erudition. It is hardly surprising that their lively exchange of views led them to question problems and inaccuracies inherent in Christian orthodoxy. The form of their scepticism, and the effect of their new theories naturally differed in different countries, according to the political and religious climate which prevailed. In France they were in part made libertins by their environment, and their heterodox activity lay not so much in outright flaunting of unconventional attitudes or of atheism (most of them were in too much intellectual uncertainty to do this) as in a constant, wary ridiculing of superstitions, which was obviously resented by the cautious guardians of orthodoxy. Their English counterparts cannot possibly be called libertines, and in fact were predominantly pious scientists, such as Harvey or Boyle, concerned to reconcile basic

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[1]This word will be spelt "libertin" when writing specifically of the French libertins, and "libertine" when describing their English counterparts, throughout.

Christianity with new scientific knowledge.

The achievement of the French libertins in formulating a new system of ideas to take the place of those in which they perceived error was slight. They were more the arrière garde of the Renaissance humanists than the avant garde of the new empirical age — but their influence on the third group of libertins to be considered was enormous.

This category contains those who were the disseminators of the most startling libertine ideas, and who without complete intellectual dedication were responsible for their spread as a fashion, and for their influence on literature. In France they include, in the early part of the century, writers such as Théophile de Viau, infected by libertine ideas from Italy; and exponents of a less audacious but more insidiously harmful libertinage based on the Pyrrhonism of Montaigne and Charron. Later, libertin honnête hommes such as St. Évremond and the Chevalier de Méré, popularised Gassendi's Epicureanism in the salons, for in spite of their semblance of elegant conformity these well mannered arbiters of sophistication were far from conventional in their views, and the social gatherings they frequented were often hotbeds of religious unorthodoxy.

In England also the ideas professed by the French libertins were current, but their adoption did not constitute a quarrel with authority because of the higher degree of religious toleration in England. Although one might consider as "unorthodox" such writers as Lord Herbert of Cherbury, or Sir Thomas Browne, whose beliefs were sometimes akin to those of the French libertins, they cannot be forced into the libertine fold merely on grounds of their similarities. Subversives in England would have had to be much more extreme in their views and especially in their public behaviour to warrant the term "libertine."

The true English libertines are found in the second half of the century, mainly among the Restoration wits, and the "younger sort of ingenious men" who had a superficial knowledge of Montaigne, Gassendi, or Hobbes and made use of fashionable doubt simply to licence their own irregular behaviour.

The aim of this thesis is first, to discuss the main libertine ideas; secondly to compare libertines of the last two categories noted, and to suggest reasons for the very marked contrast between English and French libertinage in the seventeenth century.

PART I

LIBERTINAGE IN FRANCE

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Chapter I

The Background of Ideas

The Middle Ages had fortified Christian doctrine with the protective barrier of Thomistic Aristotelianism, which was very satisfactory and complete so long as it remained unchallenged. However, its alleged all-inclusiveness was never absolute, and rival opinions were put forward from the time of its initial victory over Platonism in the twelfth century by Averroës, Duns Scotus, Bernard of Chartres and William of Occam among others. With the Renaissance, attacks intensified. Neo-Platonism caught hold of the imagination, Erasmus and the humanists attempted to separate doctrine from metaphysics, Pomponazzi contradicted some basic Thomistic assumptions from the standpoint of purer Aristotelianism, and Protestantism defied the system altogether.

These attacks penetrated the protective barrier, but libertinage attacked, or was thought by the Church to attack the very core of Christian doctrine. Protestants and Catholics were equally averse to free thinkers — Bruno was burnt by the Catholics; Servetus by the Protestants. At first it was a simple matter for the Church to defend itself and to punish offenders, but by the seventeenth century unorthodoxy had become more difficult to separate from what, after the impact of new discoveries, it was becoming permissible to believe. Also the libertins themselves became less outspoken, and learnt through exigency to disguise their doubts with the cloak of fideism.

Calvin was one of the first to use the term "libertin", in describing a sect which defied Protestant discipline in Geneva.[1]

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[1]The word seems to have been used first in 1544 in connection with Jacques Gruet, at Berne. Its first appearance in a dictionary was in Philibert Monet's Invantaire des deus langues françoise et latine (1635).

The ideas of the first thinkers to be formally abused as "libertin", were not new. Their exponents were essentially pantheists who defined God as a spirit which pervades all matter. They thought that the soul dies with the body and is reabsorbed into the God-permeated matter that comprises the universe, that there is no heaven and no hell, and that sin is relative since there is no authority to determine it. These libertins considered organised religion a mere means to gain and hold political power, and their weapons against it were ridicule and insult, which gave their protagonists ample excuse to execute the more foolhardy of them.

Italian heterodoxy.

The small band of Genevan libertines described above seem to have held, in an extreme and fanatical way, ideas that were current in Italy in the sixteenth century among the opponents of scholasticism. The Paduans, Cremonini (1550-1631) and Pomponazzi (1466-1525) both narrowly escaped the Inquisition for propounding unorthodox views about the nature of God and the Universe. Cremonini, although not a pantheist, transcendentalised God to such an extent that he deprived Him of individuality. He thought both that events are predetermined, which denies divine intervention, and that matter is incorruptible, which dispenses with the necessity for a creation of the world by God in time, and makes immortality of the soul difficult to imagine. Pomponazzi questioned the survival of the soul after death, and in a typically humanist fashion laid stress on ethics for their own sake without the necessity of celestial reward.

Cremonini and Pomponazzi adopted some of their ideas from Averroism, notably the theory of the double standard: that is that the rational reconcilement of philosophy and theology is possible, and

that if there seems to be a contradiction it is an error in human judgement, (a point of view which constituted a safe manner of disclaiming responsibility for unconventional speculation).

Another divergent metaphysician was Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) who acknowledged the influence of Raymond Lull and Nicholas da Cusa. Bruno was burnt at Florence in 1600 after refusing to retract his anti-scholastic opinions. For him God was a "monad of monads", a single substance which moves in all things, and he thought that there might be many worlds, each inhabited. About the same time Campanella (1568-1634) was also inclining towards pantheism, especially in his poetry.

In France Geoffroi Vallée[2] was martyred in 1574 for holding ideas very like those of the Paduans, but it was Cardano and Vanini, popularisers of the most suspect of Paduan doctrines, who had a more significant influence on French libertinage. Cardano (1501-1576) a physician and a most bizarre character, was remarkable for his division of the world into space, matter and intelligence. He wisely did not go into the question of whether there was a personal God or not. Vanini (b. 1585) was burnt at Toulouse in 1619 for his promulgation of views against the sanctioned Thomist position,[3] which is that reason and order in the universe move towards the fulfilling of God's purpose. Vanini's God was the depersonalised one of Nature: destiny was quite arbitrary and irrational, the soul was neither immaterial nor immortal, matter was

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[2]Geoffroi Vallée's La Beatitude des Chrestiens ou la Fléo de la Foi (1573) is modernised in Mélanges, ed. Frédéric Lachèvre (Paris, 1920), forming volume VII of Le Libertinage au XVII[e] Siècle. This was a defence of human reason and an attack on organised religion, which he saw as politically inspired.

[3]Vanini's conversation and his flamboyant tricks, such as dressing a donkey as a priest or selling rosaries hung with obscene medals, must have helped in the broadcasting of libertinage. His writings are Amphitheatrum Aeternae Providentiae (1615), in which in the disguise of a defender of orthodoxy he manages to air the opposite views; and De Admirandis Naturae Arcanis (1616), where he uses the same oblique method in the more vivid form of a dialogue.

incorruptible and men could have no intellectual certainty of anything. Jean Fontanier in 1621 suffered the same death for somewhat the same reasons.[4]

Most of these on the whole atypical thinkers were not outright atheists. They did tend to reduce God to an elemental force, however, and the question of the immortality of the soul became almost one of physics. They were interested in the nature of space, time and matter, not questions of doctrine and authority, in regard to which they assumed the humanist attitude and opted for simplicity and semi-indifference. As serious metaphysicians, it is inconceivable that they would resist the attraction of testing fresh hypotheses even if they apparently conflicted with established theology. Since metaphysics and science were very closely linked together (they had actually been forced into connection by the Church) all fresh material in one domain reflected on the other. With every advance in science Aristotelianism was bound to suffer.

The advanced ideas of the Paduans were an immensely influential factor in French libertinage. The Italians' compulsive search for truth, their practical attitude to religion and their hatred of the power of the Church are all typical of the French libertins. Their influence pervaded all spheres: Père Marin Mersenne (1588-1648) calculated that there were 60,000 atheists in Paris alone.[5] "Athée" was frequently used in polemics as a term of abuse against all free thinkers whether they basically believed in God or not. However, it was naturally the gaudiest and most overtly rebellious of their number that the Church in France chose to attack. French libertinage

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[4]Jean Fontanier's Le Trésor Inestimable (1621) also appears in Mélanges, ed. Lachèvre.

[5]Marin Mersenne, Quaestiones celeberrimae in Genesim (Paris, 1623), col. 671.

assumes identity partially through these attacks, because the Church was faced with the problem of defining its enemies before it could make the attempt to demolish them.

A fertile source of information for the beliefs held by the French libertins and for who influenced them is Père Garasse's Doctrine Curieuse des Beaux Esprits ou prétendus tels, which appeared in 1623 with the ostensible purpose of discrediting the libertin poet Théophile de Viau. This is a long and very angry book, full of definitions which helped the libertins to recognise themselves and gave others a guide to emulate them (it was one of the books Queen Christina of Sweden demanded to be sent to her in her libertin phase). Its content is so entertainingly scurrilous and its torrents of invective so unrestrained that it had an adverse effect, and acted as an advertisement for libertinage. Certainly more sober churchmen, such as Mersenne, disapproved of it. Garasse found Pomponazzi, Cardano and "le pauvre papillon" Vanini chiefly responsible for French heterodoxy. But he did not consider the Italians alone to blame: other stimuli were the "libertinage moral des Epicuriens", indifference, which he called the "mécréance Flottante des Pyrrhoniens", and abusive doubt, termed "l'indifference grossiere des Diogenistes."[6] Théophile aroused Garasse's fury because of his Epicureanism, and he thought that the Pyrrhonism of Montaigne and Charron had done more damage to the Church than all Italian heterodoxy.

Epicureanism

Although the libertins made various attacks on Aristotelianism,

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[6]Quoted by René Pintard, Le Libertinage Érudit dans la Première Moitié du XVII[e] Siècle (Paris, 1943), I, 29.

they did not give up its basic premise that man is the centre of the universe. It was not simply from fear of the edict which "interdit à toutes personnes à peine de la vie, tenir ny enseigner aucunes maximes contre les anciens Autheurs et approuvez"[7] that there was no fundamental divergence from the earlier philosophic structures, but because the libertins actually had not yet formulated a different system of values to think from. Their tendency was rather to turn back into the past and substitute for Aristotelianism other philosophies more in tune with modern ideas.

One of the older philosophies in which there was a tremendous increase of interest at the time was Epicureanism, because it stressed enjoyment of the things of this life, and an attachment to reality. It endorsed the notion that the passions are not reprehensible, and had already attracted Renaissance humanists, such as de Valla, because its ethics were consistent with the high esteem in which the humanists held the pagan virtues of tranquillity and common-sense. Epicureanism was in fact naturally related to the humanism of the Renaissance, exemplified by the writings of Erasmus and Cornelius Agrippa, which tended to concentrate on the efficient organisation of life, rather than on its ultimate meaning.

The chief tenets of Epicurean ethics are that man's unique aim is sensual pleasure, which can, however, only be attained through virtue, and that the conserving of happiness should be man's principal activity and is his continual problem. Garasse, of course, chose to emphasise one side of Epicurean teaching only, and stigmatised the

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[7]The substance of a stern reminder by Parlement to one Jean Bilaud, after his attempt to hold discussions on fourteen theses against Aristotelianism. Quoted by R. Pintard, I, 29.

libertines as sensualists: " . . . nos beaux Esprits prétendus, qui ayment mieux la cuisine bien garnie, que la Bibliothèque bien meublée."[8] But it was not only rakes and gluttons who were drawn to Epicureanism. Its teachings attracted interest also in the field of philosophy and science, and that on two counts: first because Epicurean sensationalism reopened the old question of whether reality can be known at all, and if so how much of it; and secondly Epicurean atomism interested scientists because of its affinity to contemporary materialism.[9]

The earlier libertins Théophile, Charles Sorel, St. Amant and Des Barreaux, although they gained a reputation for dissoluteness and self-indulgence, were aware also of the serious, moral side of Epicureanism — the search after virtue and tranquillity. Their enjoyment of life through the senses was often darkened by the feeling that the world is governed by blind Fortune, and that the ideal state of ataraxia is constantly threatened by the sheer strain of trying to maintain it against capricious chance.

Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655), member of a circle of learned libertins, set himself the task of preparing a life and an edition of the works of Epicurus, and after numerous prudent withdrawals De Vita Epicuri was finally published in 1647 by Samuel Sorbière, while the Syntagma Philosophiae Epicureae appeared two years later.

There are obviously tenets in Epicureanism that are in direct conflict with those of the Church, and it was inconsistent — and could

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[8]François Garasse, La Doctrine Curieuse des Beaux Esprits de ce temps ou prétendus tels (Paris, 1624), p. 90. This was the traditional objection to Epicureanism, and goes back to the Middle Ages. Chaucer described the Franklin as "Epicurus' owne sonne", and still, in 1623, Charles Cockeram's English Dictionarie defines "Epicurisme" simply as "Gluttonie".

[9]Lucretius' didactic poem De Natura Rerum had helped to make known the atomic theory of Democritus and Epicurus.

have been dangerous — for a priest of genuine piety, such as Gassendi undoubtedly was, to promulgate them. But Gassendi was an adept at dividing the intellectual consequences of science and philosophy from religion. He defended his championship of Epicureanism by specifying that he undertook his work on the philosophy as a savant with a legitimate interest in pagan learning. He was in no sense a supporter of anti-Christian tenets, but stressed the Epicurean idea compatible with Christianity, that all men desire happiness and that happiness is attainable through virtue.

Gassendi's interest in and promotion of Epicureanism was the result of a sincere attempt to keep the flamingo of divergent and contradictory issues of theology and science under control. He tried to take into account the claims of both and to reconcile them within a frame which, for the moment, seemed most accommodating.[10]

Gassendi's treatises on Epicureanism had an immense effect on libertinage. In England he was well respected in learned circles, and both Hobbes and the Royal Society were interested in aspects of his teaching.[11] In France the results of his research were seriously discussed at the dinner table of the libertin Luillier, at the scientific sessions of Habert de Montmar, and aroused widespread interest wherever Gassendi lectured. Although scientists showed lively interest in it, libertins without such specialised interests remained aloof, and the more devious the thinker the more sceptical he was likely to be.

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[10] See below, pp. 35-37

[11] In England a serious discussion of Epicureanism appeared in 1656 in Sir Thomas Stanley's History of Philosophy.

La Mothe Le Vayer and Gui Patin were too Pyrrhonist, and Gabriel Naudé too mistrustful of newly formulated dogma to commit themselves to it. In circles with less pretension to erudition, however, Epicureanism was rife. In fact, the further the disseminators were from being men of probity and caution the more enthusiastic they were about it. In the relatively restrained society of the Chevalier de Méré, or of St. Évremond, where politeness, etiquette, gallantry and wit counted highly, the philosophy was adopted as a moral code, but saved by the urbanity of this particular social group from outright friction with Christian morality. However, in the salon of Ninon de l'Enclos (1620-1705), "le libertinage, l'épicurisme, l'impiété, atteignaient un plus haut degré d'insolence que l'on puisse imaginer."[12]

Pyrrhonism

Almost universal among the libertins was scepticism of one type or another. In this extremely complex century perhaps the outstanding conflict of ideas was between empiricism – the inclination towards explaining the universe by mechanical means – and scepticism. Old certainties were decaying and gradually becoming less reliable, but there was an equal distrust of new premises. The problem was resolved in various ways. In England the Royal Society settled for an attitude of limited scepticism: a certain amount could be known, but the more one knew the more one realised the impossibility of complete knowledge. To Hobbes empiricism seemed as vain as scholasticism – his solution was one of pragmatic utility. Gassendi and Naudé rested the whole

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[12]Tallemant des Réaux, Remarques Journalières et véritables de ce qui s'est passé dans Paris et ailleurs ès années 1648-57, quoted in F.-T. Perrens, Les Libertins en France en XVII[e] Siecle (Paris, 1896), p.186.

question of knowledge on intuition, as did in a different way the Cambridge Platonists. The solution of Temple, and in a more mannered way of St. Évremond was still similar to Montaigne's: that truth was very difficult to discover but that nevertheless an attempt should be made and a constant, critical (but not pedantic) view of the world maintained. For Montaigne, a legitimate field of enquiry was one's own nature, and for St. Évremond moral philosophy, which taught one how to live both naturally and with grace.

As a philosophy Pyrrhonism almost negates itself, for it emphasises the futility of all philosophising. Since the senses are defective, and all knowledge relative, no universals of any kind can be established, metaphysics and science are vain, and ratiocination time wasted. Pyrrhonism did, however, conduce to a code for living. In an age in which new, untried and often startling ideas suddenly appeared it taught that the wise man should balance every proposition with its opposite and thus arrive at a state of complete detachment (similar to the ataraxia the moral teaching of Epicurus described). Its proponents agreedthat because nothing is worth the pain of disputing, the most sensible course is to accept convention, and to follow the dictates of the majority.

Pyrrhonism showed a defensive, conservative cast of thought, and produced a much less aggressive form of egotism than Epicureanism. The conformity, self-control, avoidance of harsh excesses in religion, and prudent appreciation of material pleasures advocated by scepticism appealed both to the sober, learned libertin and the sophisticated honnête homme, and proved to be distinctly more compatible than Epicureanism with their residual Christianity. The two philosophic systems in spite of their dissimilarities are not mutually contradictory, and

could in fact both be followed by the same person, with stress on one or other aspect according to mood: adherence to a set of dogmas is not as necessary in philosophy as in religion.

Plainly, Pyrrhonism undermined religion in a much more subtle and dangerous way than Epicureanism, but here again it was not so much the prudent intellectuals who caused the trouble as the esprits forts; not those who confessed themselves sincerely puzzled by the problem of certainty, but irascible spirits with the urge to attack Christian orthodoxy with whatever convenient weapons presented themselves. Montaigne was certainly not an atheist, although his type of Christianity, polished by classical learning, laid far more stress on being a gentleman than a saint. Neither was Charron outstandingly radical, but the dangers of his fideistic capitulations — "la vérité n'est pas un acquiert, ny chose qui ce laisse prendre et manier, et encore moins posséder à l'esprit humain. Elle loge dedans le sein de Dieu,"[13] or again, "la doute faict plus de service à la pieté, religion et l'operation divine que tout autre qui soit"[14] — were clearly seen by the Church. For once the idea had caught on that there was a fresh field where disbelief was licensed, or could at least masquerade as the religious sentiment of credo quia impossibile est, all the unorthodox were ready to exploit it. The notion that "ces sagesses ne sont que folie devant Dieu", although it sometimes indicated a genuine dichotomy between intelligence and piety, more often showed a profound scepticism about religion itself, under guise of humility. La Mothe le Vayer, for instance, constantly used a bland and hypocritical fideism, and in the heat of

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[13]Pierre Charron, Traité de la Sagesse (Paris, 1646), I, 126.

[14]Ibid., II, 53.

enthusiasm to make another point against credulity and superstition at times went so far as to call the existence of God in doubt. Also, Pomponazzi's double standard, "I believe as a Christian what I cannot believe as a philosopher" was commonly used by wits and unbelievers.

The Libertin and Nature

An account of the salient ideas of French libertinage must include some discussion of the libertins' notorious idea of Nature and living according to Nature. Critical onslaughts on libertin naturalism were common from Garasse to Dassoucy. In 1623 Garasse accused Théophile de Viau and his companion beaux esprits of an attempt to sanctify vice because, having first devalued God to the level of Nature, they then openly indulged in a "following of Nature" which was nothing but vicious self-indulgence.[15] Dassoucy wrote in 1672 of Armand Chapelle: "Celui-cy ne reconnaissoit rien au-dessus de la Nature, attribuoit tout au hazard," for "Il avoit succé l'erreur avec le lait auprès d'un grand philosophe, Athée parfait et accomply,"[16] referring to Gassendi.

The notion of "following Nature" was common to all philosophies current at the time, including scholasticism, and was of course interpreted by each according to its particular bias. Because the libertins were by definition extremists, their views, whatever philosophy they affected, tended to be unconventional. Among the libertins there were as many different ways of regarding Nature as there were types of libertinage.

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15 Garasse (Doctrine Curieuse, liv.VI, p.675) discusses this under the heading "Il ny a point d'autre divinité ny puissance souveraine au monde que la nature, laquelle il faut contenter en toutes choses sans rien refuser à nostre corps ou à nos sens de ce qu'ils desirent de nous en l'exercice de leurs puissances et facultez naturelles."

16 Les Pensées de M. Dassoucy dans le St. Office de Rome (1672). Quoted in Les Oeuvres Libertines de Cyrano de Bergerac, ed. F. Lachèvre (Paris, 1921), I, xcvi.

The three main ones were the humanist version, not at first sight greatly different from the scholastic definition, which assumed Nature to be fundamentally good, and that living in accordance with Nature meant the government of life by reason in pursuit of virtue; the opinion of those who were influenced by the pantheism of Bruno and Campanella; and that of naturalists in the manner of Machiavelli, who regarded reason as an instrument to control a basically corrupt Nature.

Like Aristotelianism the philosophies revived by the humanists, and which the libertins found so attractive, equated Nature and reason, and explained "following Nature" as following the virtuous norm. But in addition they stressed the unique importance of man's role in the universe, and his capacity for development. It was man's duty to direct his energies towards self-knowledge and conscious management of his individual genius. To the humanist, therefore, "follow Nature" meant finding after rational evaluation the norm most compatible with one's own character. Virtue was as necessary and as absolute as in scholasticism, but the humanists emphasized personal effort and intelligence rather than simple obedience. It is this individualistic aspect which appealed to the libertins, and which was at the root of their admiration of Montaigne.

But although the libertins' conception of "following Nature" is superficially similar to Montaigne's there is a significant difference in spirit, caused in a large measure by contemporary strivings to find a philosophy which did not only supply a rule of conduct, but also fitted with phenomena newly discovered as the result of scientific observations. Thus the libertins were in particular attracted to Epicurean atomism, which had been glossed over by the humanists, and it is not surprising that their "following Nature", even though hidden

behind the façade of an unimpeachable classical morality, or behind the nonchalance of honnêteté, was suspect. The good faith of the erudite libertins' reconciliation of Epicureanism with Christianity was doubtful, while the philosophy of the libertin honnête homme was even better known to be empirical and materialist. Epicureans such as the Chevalier de Méré, for example, although nominally Christian, believed in nothing beyond Nature, and meant by following Nature the careful selecting and refining of pleasure for purely egotistical reasons. Cyrano de Bergerac wavered between two ideas of Nature; at times, influenced by the Epicureanism of Gassendi, he inclined to a mechanistic view of the universe, but alternatively he tended to follow the animistic ideas of Bruno and Campanella, which had been held about twenty years earlier by, among others, Vanini, Charles Sorel and Théophile de Viau. These writers believed that Nature was not corrupt but holy because it was of the same substance as God, who was "la féconde âme du monde." This identification of God with created things was a heresy the Church was deeply concerned to eradicate, and which it fought by strong-arm methods and through propaganda. The method of attack used by propagandists like Père Garasse was to attack as loathsome, debauched, immoral and exclusively sensual the way in which the libertins, supposedly as a direct result of their irreligious view of the universe, "followed Nature." Garasse attacked Théophile ferociously on the grounds that his atheistic theory of Nature led him to advocate unlicensed sensuality.

The third view of Nature current among the libertins differs radically from the previous two discussed. It is one in which Nature is not considered to be benevolent and purposive, but on the contrary basically corrupt and prone to deterioration, and in which man's nature

is totally amoral. This attitude was not new, and long before Hobbes had been cogently expressed by Machiavelli, who, as a political thinker and a pragmatist, deliberately avoided metaphysics and started from the standpoint of society. Since according to this view it seemed obvious that left to follow their natural bent men would destroy themselves and their community, their liberty must be curtailed and restraints enforced. To Machiavelli the end, that of preserving status quo, justified the means: the governing power was to be guided by utility, not virtue, and in fact the practice of the very opposite of the conventional virtues was often expedient. Strength, cunning, exploitation, hypocrisy might all be employed if necessary.

These ideas were common currency. In distorted form they had inspired the English literary genre of Machiavellian tragedy, and it was natural that some notorious Machiavellian characteristics should be absorbed into the portrayal of the libertin Don Juans in both French and English plays. To a certain extent in France, but more especially in England where this type of naturalism had been given new force by the teachings of Hobbes, the libertins were stimulated intellectually by the Machiavellian ethic of success. There was a tendency to interpret "following Nature" as living on one's wits and exploiting one's environment in the interests of self-gratification, using the excuse that, since man is differentiated from animals only by his cleverness, this is "natural" behaviour.

These are, roughly speaking, the three attitudes to Nature most frequently held by, and attributed to the libertins.

To summarise libertin characteristics noted in this chapter: the libertins' deviations tended to take forms peculiarly irritating to the Church; they had the reputation of opposing the sensuality of

Epicureanism to certainty in religion. Their interpretation of the Renaissance doctrine of "follow Nature" did not meet with orthodox approval, nor did their dubious attitude to immortality and substitution of blind Fate for God. Not all libertins were radical questioners, however — some were simply attracted by the honesty of Epicurean egotism; others wished to shear away all non-essentials from religion, to restore it to its pure form, and limit it to a place separate from that assigned to science.

Libertins, or their equivalents, to be discussed in the following chapters divide conveniently into three types: first, those intellectuals who affected their milieu by lively propagation of inflammable ideas; secondly, those who modelled their behaviour on these sophisticated ideas and so influenced manners, and, thirdly, libertin poets and playwrights.

Chapter II.

Libertin Philosophers, and the Relationship of Libertins and Virtuosi

Montaigne, Pierre Charron, Gui Patin, François la Mothe le Vayer, Gabriel Naudé, Pierre Gassendi, P. Marin Mersenne.

Montaigne (1533-1592) has been called a humanist for whom humanism furnished reasons to remain within the Church.[1] But although his own attitude to religion had not been too reprehensible, his philosophy became immensely popular with the esprits forts. Among libertins and near libertins known to have admired the Essais were Henry IV, Ninon de l'Enclos, Richelieu, St. Évremond, and La Mothe de Vayer. In De la Sagesse Charron elaborated the "theriophily" of the Apologie pour Raimond Sebond; this provocative insistence on the superiority of animals to humans is also imitated in the satire of Cyrano de Bergerac, and the poems of Madame Deshoulières. Vauquelin des Yvesteaux placed the Essais on his list of books recommended for the Dauphin's library, and in his plan for the instruction of the young Louis XIV Gabriel Naudé closely followed Montaigne's pedagogic ideas. Gui Patin hung a portrait of Montaigne in his library, together with those of his other favourite great men.

Some of these admirers of Montaigne, although they went much further than he or Charron in disagreement with and in mockery of the Church, can still be described as late humanists, very similar in attitude to the humanists of the Renaissance. Naudé or le Vayer, for example, revered the intelligence and purity of the ethical teaching of

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[1]Pierre Villey, Montaigne devant la Posterité (Paris, 1935), p. 152.

pagan philosophy in the same way as Erasmus or Justus Lipsius had done. These men, like Montaigne, tended to respect Christianity as a venerable form of natural religion, but paid only polite attention to the fundamental doctrines of the Church, which they found intrinsically harsh and immoderate. They too were inimical to dogmatism, and therefore found Montaigne's critique of a priori reasoning most congenial to their tastes.

Montaigne, though he himself was not a libertin, appealed strongly to those who were, because of the fact that most of the ideas which became characteristic of libertinage do occur in the Essais. Montaigne was not, of course, their unique disseminator, nor the only one to appreciate the translating of Sextus Empiricus or to become interested in comparative religion, but his very personal style and trenchant expression gave the Essais a considerable advantage over any other source in which the same ideas were found.

From the libertin point of view the Apologie pour Raimond Sebond (1580) was of special interest.[2] At the time of writing, the Apologie was not considered particularly unconventional and acquired its bad reputation with Catholic authorities only gradually,—probably because the libertins showed themselves to be so attracted by its content. It was not until some thirty-five years after its publication that the Church became sensitive to the bad influence of its Pyrrhonism on the beaux esprits.[3]

How far Montaigne wrote from sincere Christian piety is a matter of opinion. Although Rome had occasionally disciplined fideistic

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[2]Translated into English by John Florio in 1603.

[3]The Essais were censured in Montaigne's lifetime by the Inquisition for some minor details (see P. Villey, p. 91-93), but were not criticised as "libertin" until Garasse's attack in La Doctrine Curieuse (1623). Later, criticisms grew more frequent: Descartes, the Jansenists of Port Royal, Bossuet and Malebranche all disapproved of Montaigne.

writers, the argument constantly used by Montaigne that faith is more important than reason remained a commonplace of Catholic apologists and evangelists. Neither is the form of an indictment of reason, in which the essay is written, as outrageous as it might seem, for it was not an isolated instance. Both Montaigne and Sanchez, who wrote Quod Nihil Scitur (1581), a work similar in intent to the Apologie, were indebted to Cornelius Agrippa's De Incertitudine et Vanitate Scientiarium (1530). On a less serious level the essay can be innocently interpreted as a gigantic extension of a contemporary literary genre, the Paradoxes, which were absurd propositions (such as "Qu'il vaut mieux estre ignorant que sçavant"[4]) presented so that the author could demonstrate his virtuosity in argument. However, in spite of these mitigating facts, the Apologie is plainly neither a work of conventional piety nor an exercise in perverse intellectual pyrotechnics. It is, in fact, a statement of sceptical principles, which in 1580 had become an integral part of Montaigne's philosophy, and its tone is far more pagan than Christian. Montaigne was well aware that the sceptical dialectic he used might constitute a danger to orthodoxy, and cautioned that this "dernier tour d'escrime icy, il ne le faut employer que comme un extreme remede"[5] against the abstract ratiocination he was concerned to attack.

In this essay reason is thoroughly undermined. Under the cloak of a sermon against vice — a converted pagan would be shocked were he to visit Christian countries and see the extent of the decay of religion —

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[4]See George Boas, The Happy Beast (Baltimore, 1933), p. 11. Boas quotes from the Paradoxes of Ottensio Landi, translated into French in 1553 by Charles Estienne.

[5]Michel Montaigne, Oeuvres Complètes, ed. Jean Plattand (Paris, 1946), 6 vols. Subsequent references will be to this edition. This quotation comes from "Apologie pour Raimond Sebond", vol. III (liv.II, ch. xii), p. 333.

Montaigne speculates on the paradoxical cruelty inherent in religious zeal, and concludes that we are Christians merely because our environment makes us fearful of being otherwise. He thinks we have no cause to pride ourselves on our superiority, and there follows in the Apologie a long section of ironic overstatement concerning the superior intelligence and equipment of beasts. Animals excel us in strength, in reasoning power, and in all the virtues. We are not remarkable for our knowledge, and in fact have an astonishing capacity for errors in logic: "La plus part des occasions des troubles du monde sont Grammairiennes."[6] Having demolished man's claim to precedence as a reasoning creature, and incidentally widened the gap between him and God, Montaigne proceeds to a defence of Pyrrhonism, of calmness, of weighing both sides, and of quiet virtue: "Quiconque imaginera une perpetuelle confession d'ignorance, un jugement sans pente, et sans inclination, à quelque occasion que ce puisse estre, il concoit le Pyrrhonisme."[7] He abhors philosophic dogmatism and presents the dangers of pretensions to close knowledge, and the foolhardiness of experimenting. He remarks of the Copernican-Ptolemaic controversy: "Que prendrons nous de là, sinon qu'il ne nous doit chaloir le quel ce soit des deux?"[8] He then makes a strategic retreat to a fideist position: how dare one degrade God by pretending to know Him, or any of His mysteries, including the substance of the soul? Judgement is fragile, reason is corruptible, and therefore,

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[6]"Apologie pour Raimond Sebond," Oeuvres Complètes, vol.III (liv,II,Ch.xii), p.285.

[7]Ibid., p. 252.

[8]Ibid., p. 352.

Puis que je ne suis pas capable de choisir, je pren le chois d'autruy, et me tien en l'assiette où Dieu m'a mis. Autrement, je ne me scauroy garder de rouler sans cesse. Ainsi me suis-je, par la grace de Dieu, conservé entier, sans agitation et trouble de conscience, aux anciennes creances de nostre religion.'[9]

The sense of relativity Montaigne had gained from his study of Sextus Empiricus was reinforced by his observation of contemporary discoveries. He realised that a greater variety of things might be known than fitted in with the laws of present knowledge, and that monsters, strange customs, exotic mutations had an existence as valid as that of familiar things. This point of view made values far more relative than reason had assumed, for if there is so much to know, and if further novelties are discovered with every search, there is a corresponding increase in uncertainty in forming opinions, which may well be proved wrong by fresh information. Montaigne's conclusion was that the only thing one could know thoroughly was oneself, and that although man is limited to his immediate perceptions and has no certainty of anything outside the range of his senses, within this relatively small compass it is possible to order one's life well.

Montaigne's Epicureanism was of a practical and unexaggerated nature, far removed from vulgar sensuality. He believed that it was as morally right to trust sensual enjoyments as it was to follow reason. In his essay "De l'Experience", in which this aspect of his philosophy emerges most clearly, he wrote that "Nostre grand et glorieux chef-d'oeuvre c'est vivre à propos,"[10] and that in order to make this possible Nature had provided two guides, reason and the

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[9]"Apologie pour Raimond Sebond", Oeuvres Complètes, vol.III (liv.II, ch. xii), p.351.

[10]Ibid., p.244.

senses, "Nature a maternellement observé cela, que les actions qu'elle nous a enjoinctes pour nostre besoing nous fussent aussi voluptueuses, et nous y convie non seulement par la raison, mais aussi par l'appetit; c'est injustice de corrompre ses regles."[11] But the dictates of the passions should be followed only so far as they benefit man, and should be abandoned when undue indulgence in them may harm him: "J'estime pareille injustice prendre à contre coeur les voluptez naturelles que de les prendre trop à coeur . . . Il ne les faut ny suyvre, ny fuir, il les faut recevoir."[12] One should aim at a sensible, relaxed following of the happy mean, and live "au modelle commun et humain avec ordre: mais sans miracle, sans extravagance."[13]

Many libertin Epicureans agreed with Montaigne in deciding that the happiness which was their aim could best be gained through moderation, and that self-knowledge was of supreme importance. Writers as different as Théophile de Viau and St. Évremond were preoccupied with perfecting the technique of happiness, but they were haunted by the feeling that time, accidents and human ills would inevitably tip the scales against them. In Montaigne there is neither this sense of strain nor the resulting pessimism, possibly because he was not by nature a materialist, and as a humanist retained a feeling for order and purpose in the universe.

"Mener l'humaine vie conformément à sa naturelle condition"[14] meant to Montaigne choosing the course of action most appropriate to one's basic personality—"la maistresse forme." Thus one was not

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[11] Oeuvres Complètes, vol. VI (liv.III, ch.xiii), p. 243.

[12] Ibid., p. 241.

[13] Ibid., p. 255.

[14] "De Repentir", Oeuvres Complètes, vol.V (liv.III, ch.ii), p. 35.

forcing oneself to act according to a scheme imposed from outside, but following easily and harmoniously "la pente naturelle". Even death was not the shocking absurdity it was later to become to mechanistically minded Epicureans, but could be accepted as a most personal and meaningful event. In fact Montaigne's superiority to the libertins lies in the fact that he likes and accepts life, as he wrote in his essay on experience: "J'accepte de bon coeur, et recognoissant, ce que nature a faict pour moy, et m'en agrée et m'en loue."[15]

Both Montaigne's Pyrrhonism and his philosophy of nature had considerable effect on the libertins. After the middle of the century there was a decline in the popularity of the Essais, but although their style was criticised for its crudeness and archaisms, and the originality of Montaigne's "peinture de moi" was considered by the Academy to lack discipline and to be too personal to be in good taste, his ideas were by no means discredited. In part because of his horror of pedantry and of dogmatic affirmation, in part because of his independence of mind, love of justice, reason and the golden mean, he was still regarded as an excellent model of honnêteté, especially by the libertin honnête homme.

The belittlement of reason was continued by Pierre Charron (1541-1603). He also emphasised the importance of the senses because they are man's only instrument for gaining whatever limited knowledge he has. He thought, however, that if the senses are to be given their true value the knowledge gained through them should not be overestimated. Charron, even more than Montaigne, distrusted man's

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[15]"De l'Experience", Oeuvres Complètes, vol. VI (liv.III, ch. xiii), p. 251.

ability to know anything for certain, and in the exhaustive and consequential Traité de la Sagesse (1601)[16] scepticism moved from the half earnest mood of the Apologie pour Raimond Sebond into serious philosophy. Essentially, the ideas in De la Sagesse are those of Montaigne, elaborated and couched in stronger terms. Charron considers that between man and animal there is only a difference of degree, and that there are very tenuous reasons for believing in the immortality of the soul or in a First Cause. Environment alone dictates religion, which he regards as indeed useful and civilising. However, "tranquillité d'esprit," which is of prime importance to man in his day-to-day existence, should be preserved, and vain attempts to comprehend the mysteries, as well as fanatical zeal and undue sanctity, should be avoided.

Summarized, these views appear dangerously radical, but Charron protected himself well by constantly employing the fideistic defence that, seen with a truly devout sense of proportion, man's attempts at wisdom are foolishly presumptuous. Charron himself was a priest and, though not in favour with the rigidly orthodox, never ran the risk of persecution for heresy. His influence, which was great, gathered force with time, and together with Montaigne's Apologie pour Raimond Sebond his Traité de la Sagesse became required libertin reading.

Another disciple of Montaigne was François la Mothe le Vayer (1588-1692), who, while still young and fashionably debauched, frequented the salon of Montaigne's decorous spiritual daughter Mademoiselle de Gournay. Le Vayer was of a scholarly disposition and

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[16]Translated into English by Samson Lennard in 1606.

found himself attracted to the society of the learned libertins who met regularly at the house of the Dupuy brothers, and included among others Elie Diodati, Gabriel Naudé, François Luillier, Jacques Gaffarel, Gui de la Brosse, and Jean Jacques Bouchard. He was not stimulated into writing until his middle age, when he produced Dialogues d'Orasio Tubero, faits à l'imitation des anciens (1630). These are respectively entitled "De la philosophie sceptique", "Le banquet sceptique", "De la vie privée" and "Des rares et éminentes qualitez des asnes de ce temps", and are the most outspoken of his writings.

Le Vayer has the same comparative and tolerant temper as Montaigne, and employs a comparable wealth of exotic illustrative examples of similarities and contradictions in human customs. But the effect of Montaigne's Apologie pour Raimond Sebond is positively benign in comparison with le Vayer's malicious and treacherous intent, for he writes from the standpoint of one who simply refuses to dogmatise about anything. Even virtue in his view is not universal: "Il n'y a vertu qui ne soit prise pour un vice, ni vice qui ne tienne lieu de vertu ailleurs."[17] He has no high opinion of man and his knowledge: "Toute notre vie n'est, à le bien prendre, qu'une fable, notre cognoissance qu'une asnerie, nos certitudes que des contes."[18] Among his more outrageous statements are that Christianity is founded on anthropomorphism, that atheism has obtained in some of the most peaceful and sane states, and that superstition, so much of which mars the Christian faith, often causes war. He takes scepticism much further than his

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[17]François la Mothe le Vayer, "Des Asnes de ce temps", Cincq Dialogues faits à l'imitation des Anciens par Oratius Tubero (Francfort, 1716), I, 279. See R. Pintard, Les Libertins Érudits, I, 505-39.

[18]"Lettre de l'Autheur", Dialogues, I, 5.

predecessors, and using Pyrrhonism as a destructive rhetorical weapon, occasionally comes close to doubting even whether God exists. But this streak of mordant sincerity is quickly obscured by the constant excuse that scepticism is the perfect introduction to the Christian faith.

Le Vayer had the reputation of being indolent, egotistical, eccentric and sulky; nevertheless he had also his fair share of the virtues appertaining to an honnête homme. Morality for him, as for Montaigne, was separate from religion, and was more commendable. It was moral to cultivate reason, equanimity and justice, to avoid base actions and to make oneself agreeable to others. Le Vayer's conviction that successful living is an art which is difficult to learn and even more difficult to maintain, coloured his outlook with pessimism and resulted in his finally adopting the Stoic attitude to life.

The Dialogues d'Orasio Tubero were the most audacious of his writings. After this he became conciliatory, for he was concerned with furthering his career under Richelieu and courted the position of instructor to the Dauphin.

In De la Vertu des Payens (1642), written ostensibly in defence of the innate apprehension of God, he is more circumspect, and careful not to give offence. The serious virtues of the teachings of Epicurus, Pyrrho, and "le Socrate de Chine" are pointed out, but so also are their other, less respectable ideas for which, according to the Church, they deserve to burn in hell. Le Vayer's line of attack on orthodoxy is oblique, and the reader is left to draw his own conclusions.

La Mothe le Vayer has been maligned by critics and called dull, diffuse and turgid of style. His writing, though certainly devious and laden with classical allusion, is actually no more exasperating

to read than Sir Thomas Browne's in Pseudodoxica Epidemica, and often possesses a comparable charm, as can be judged by his remark on the plurality of worlds: "Les preuves d'Anaxarche en faveur de cette opinion estaient bien puissantes, puisqu'elles firent pleurer Alexandre, qui ne s'estait pas encore rendu maître absolu des trois partis du Monde qu'il connaissait."[19] It is rather difficult to separate Le Vayer's libertin philosophy from his refutations of it, for he was very careful to obscure every extreme statement immediately he made it. However, this was not an unusual procedure, and his contemporaries of the same kidney as himself found no difficulty in disengaging his meaning. Naudé, for instance, places "Les dialogues sceptiques de la Mothe le Vayer" with Seneca, Cicero's De Officiis, Pliny, Montaigne's Essais, and Charron's De la Sagesse in his list of books which teach "la loi de la Nature", "la vraye regle d'une honnête homme" and libertin.[20]

Friends of La Mothe le Vayer who shared his views were Gabriel Naudé, Gui Patin, and Pierre Gassendi. These four frequently met to form a witty and apparently sober group of dissidents.

Gabriel Naudé (1600-1653) is described by his friend Gui Patin as "tres savant, bon, sage, deniasé et guéri de la sottise du siècle."[21] He studied medicine with Gui Patin, under Riolan, but this was far from being his major field of interest. He was a man of immense erudition who made his solid contribution to learning as librarian to

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[19]De la Vertu des Payens (Paris, 1642), p. 84.

[20]Naudaeana et Patiniana (Paris, 1701), p. 54.

[21]Gui Patin, Lettres, ed. J.H. Reveille-Parise (Paris, 1846), II, 571.

Mazarin, for whom he collected thousands of invaluable books and incunabula.

Naudé is most remarkable for his cold passion for reasonable explanation of phenomena ascribed to supernatural causes, and for his unabating war against superstition, credulity in remunerative local saints, and the duping of mankind by the unscrupulous perpetrators of false miracles. He maintains a critical attitude towards problems he is asked to consider, and is invariably alert to possible deceptions. His Apologie pour tous les grand personnages qui ont esté faussement soupconnez de Magie (1625)[22] bears witness to this highly critical spirit of enquiry; and his Considerations politiques sur les coups d'Estat, which appeared anonymously in 1639 is another attack on public gullibility, exposing the political reasons which often lie behind ostensibly religious discipline.

Naudé was a lively debunker of other men's intellectual compromises, but it is difficult to say what positive stand he himself took on questions of importance, for in spite of the fact that he from time to time deals kindly with Cremonini, Averroës, Machiavelli, Cardano, Galileo, Boccaccio, Pomponazzi and Vanini, he too was most prudently circumspect, and as consummate a master of concealment as his friend Gui Patin. His attitudes were complex and often contradictory, for he was simultaneously a confirmed Aristotelian in philosophy (he considered Platonism mere dreaming, and distrusted Epicureanism) and yet was indefatigably suspicious of all dogma. He employed the rational method of enquiry but remained of a fundamentally sceptical temper. Naudé distrusted contemporary science, where spurious and genuine experiments

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[22]Translated into English by J. Davis as The History of Magic, by way of Apology for all the Wise Men who have been Unjustly Reputed Magicians from the Creation to the Present Age (London, 1657).

were often indistinguishable, and was unwilling to accept the truth of recorded fact, for he felt that history is full of deceptions. He was basically pessimistic, like many of the libertins. Like Temple, he did not believe in progress and considered that decline is inevitable, religion being also subject to fatal vicissitudes, and yet in the teeth of this he went on with his positive activities of book collecting and combating popular errors. He was perhaps less of an atheist than La Mothe de Vayer for like Gassendi he rested his philosophy on the innate intuition of the existence of God.

The physician Gui Patin (1602-1672) also delighted in exploding vulgar errors and considered himself completely disabused. In his letters, particularly in those written to his friend Falconnet, he comments on every small scandal and inconsistency which could redound to the discredit of the Church of Rome. As a Gallican, indignant at the contemporary state of corruption in the Church, he was representative of a party in France which wanted very much what the Church of England had achieved, namely, freedom from Papal authority and from the hated Ultramontanes and the Jesuits, a correct emphasis on the liturgy and the central doctrines, and the abolition of new doctrines, of Mariolatry, of saints of insufficient pedigree and of the thriving shrine and medallion commerce.

Like Naudé, Patin was more of a belated Renaissance humanist than an innovator. In medical matters he was reactionary, and refused to accept Harvey's theory of the circulation of the blood (De Motu Cordis, 1628) because it did not accord with the theories of his old teacher Riolan. But his humanist and libertin sympathies are well shown in his description of his library, where:

pardessus la tapisserie se voyaient curieusement les tableaux d'Erasme, des deux Scaliger, père et fils, de Casaubon, Muret, Montaigne, Charron, Grotius, Saumaise, Fernel, de Thou, et notre bon ami M.G. Naudé . . . Il y avait encore trois autres portraits d'excellents hommes, du fin M. de Sales, evêque de Genève, M. l'evêque de Bellay mon bon ami, Justus Lipsius, et enfin de François Rabelais.[23]

Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655) because of his scientific bent, drew closer to what one might assume to be the most significant theatre of heterodoxy. He was much more concerned with scientific questions than were any of the three libertins previously discussed, and he did make a serious effort to come to terms with the problems raised by recent advances in science.

Gassendi was a mathematician, an astronomer, and an empiricist. He was deeply curious about the ultimate value of philosophy, which depends on the extent of knowledge of reality man is able to attain. Galileo's depreciation of man's apprehension of reality, and his division of perception into first and second qualities (which means it is possible to know only a limited amount for certain because man the knower is fallible), had proved disturbing. The gravity of this attack upon reason, though not completely realised at the time it was formulated, nevertheless did add force to the already strong Pyrrhonist current.

Gassendi, however, declared that his humour was "aulcunement Pyrrhonienne." He was therefore left with two alternatives: he could, like Descartes, place his faith in pure mathematics, and so veer to metaphysics; or, guided by applied mathematics, that is the demonstration of facts first suspected hypothetically, he could arrive at empiricism. Perhaps because of his interest in astronomy he chose

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[23]Lettres de Gui Patin, II, 571.

the second course. He accepted that the truth of mathematical knowledge is undemonstrable, but unlike his predecessor Bruno, he did not despair of the possibility of knowing. Gassendi realised that from the starting point of a hypothesis a line of investigation may be followed which can fruitfully lead to new information, and this, if it tallies with observed fact, is probably true. Like Cremonini, Pomponazzi and Galileo he believed in probability, if not in certainty.

What appealed to Gassendi about Epicureanism[24] was that it appeared to contain a high proportion of beliefs that were clear, demonstrable, sensible and therefore probably true. Epicureanism stated that through sensation one could be sure of the nature of things outside oneself, and although he limited such certainty to perception of first qualities only, Gassendi substantially agreed. In line also with his penchant for probability was the Epicurean idea that one arrived at knowledge by reasoning from things perceptible to things imperceptible. Epicurean ethics, which taught that the only universal is the pursuit of pleasure and the only innate idea the will for happiness, also appeared to Gassendi to be fundamentally justified. In addition, Epicurean atomism revealed to the physicist a fertile, fascinating source of fresh probabilities.

Gassendi did not attempt to reconcile the question of religious proofs with his materialistic, empirical philosophy, for he thought that the truth of Christianity could no more be established on materialistic grounds than by Aristotelian proofs, because one's apprehension of the faith is supernatural and depends essentially on intuition.

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[24]Gassendi's chief writings on Epicureanism were: Animadversiones in X librum Diog. Laert. (1646), De Vita et Moribus Epicuri (1647), and Syntagma Philosophiae Epicuri (1649).

Although Gassendi's Epicureanism effected no radical change in his attitude towards the Christian faith, his championship of Epicurean physics and of the empirical method of enquiry had an enormous influence, both on the continent and in England, and provided a powerful stimulus to atheistic materialism.

Père Mersenne (1588-1648) is an example of the combination of churchman and scientist. Mersenne was a liberal Catholic, and although it was rumoured "Qu'il ne croyoit pas toute sa Religion, jusques au Baptesmes des cloches,"[25] no suspicion of subversive beliefs was attached to his name, and he was in fact known to be an enemy of atheistic libertinism.[26] An extremely erudite man, he was interested in contemporary advances in all fields and devoted much of his time to publicising new philosophic and scientific conjectures, some of which were likely to undermine basic theological assumptions. Before scientific journals existed to facilitate the communication of research, Mersenne engaged in a continual correspondence with European scientists of repute, with the object of keeping them informed of each other's work. Under his influence the Place des Minimes became a market for the interchange of doctrines currently in fashion, for there the work of Pascal and Descartes, the experiments of Harvey, Galileo's discoveries and Gassendi's empiricism were freely discussed. Mersenne knew and admired the De Veritate of the deist Lord Herbert of Cherbury; and it was he who received Hobbes' work with enthusiasm and encouraged the author on his

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[25]Andre Pineau's MS letter at Leiden University, quoted by Harcourt Brown in Scientific Organisations in the Seventeenth Century (Baltimore, 1934), p. 38.

[26]His Impiété des Déistes, Athées et Libertins de ce temps (1624) is a most rational approach to the problem of atheism. See J.-Roger Charbonnel, La Pensée Italienne au XVI[e] Siècle et le Courant Libertin (Paris, 1919), pp. 43-48.

visit to Paris. But although deeply involved in the broadcasting of radical ideas Mersenne, like Gassendi, refused to submit Christianity to the exigencies of scientific proof.

Only a part of these seeming inconsistencies in the thought of erudite libertins can be attributed to their dissembling of orthodoxy. Mersenne and Gassendi genuinely believed that it was useful and sensible to separate science from theology. In their opinion experimentally proved knowledge should be accepted if it does not harm the Church, and they agreed that there was usually no reason why it should do so. Most of the trouble, they thought, came from lack of tact on the part of the scientists, and from an undue hastiness to wage war over points which could be made perfectly compatible with theology. Mersenne criticised the extremism and lack of discretion of those scientists who were censored by the authorities and forced to retract a truth because they had expressed it crudely or published at an inauspicious moment. He adopted the position that since the essential truth of the Church, revealed by God, is quite invincible and incorruptible, there is no danger in correcting superficial errors accumulated through the centuries.

Members of the intellectual circles were generally unwilling to destroy the learning of the past and to assume from relatively new and untried suppositions that the reasoning, the beliefs, and the theology of previous ages were wrong. They were Pyrrhonist not only as a matter of policy but fundamentally — for to be dogmatic at all was counter to their speculative, sceptical cast of thought.

Although the learned libertins had no new convictions from which to make a sweeping attack on religion, their oblique attacks were in the end just as devastating. They devoted themselves to unmasking

bogus saints, and to exposing false miracles and religious frauds. It was common to make one of the objects of travel to visit famous shrines, in order to subject them to critical analysis. J.J. Bouchard, a churchman of very liberal views, spent some time inspecting miracles in Italy and ironically reporting natural causes for them. Gui Patin was equally fascinated by this pursuit, as was Jean Launay, the "dénicheur des saints." The libertins were without exception suspicious of the validity of prophecies and revelations, ghosts, devils, witches and possessions, and evinced a scientific curiosity in investigating the natural causes for them.

This attitude of debunking was extended to over-credulity in science, and quite reasonably so, for some of the new experiments which were being attempted and curious instruments which were demonstrated, would have provoked the most enthusiastic to doubt. In this fever of scientific discoveries it was rare to find one that proved of lasting significance.

Within the French scientific movement the libertin role is a curious one. Erudite libertins, together with liberal Catholics, Huguenots and the occasional heretic were accepted without question into the ranks of the virtuosi, for in a group ridiculed by the court, suspected by the vulgar and virtually isolated in society, religion was not of great importance. They agreed tacitly to differ on matters of faith, and for the sake of their common interests to keep up at least the appearance of conformity. Inquisitive, dissident and ironic, the libertin temper would seem to be most compatible with the emerging spirit of Enlightenment, and yet their positive contribution was not outstanding. The most significant advance in science proved in the end to stem from Cartesian rationalism, but the predominantly Pyrrhonist

libertins distrusted rationalism. Their attitude had not, in fact, altered very much from Montaigne's at the beginning of the century, in that they were fascinated by the diversity and contradictions of new knowledge but unwilling to impose any dogmatic interpretation on it. Their main interest lay in collecting and comparing rather than in interpreting. For instance, orientalists, such as Gilbert Gaulmin and Jacques Gaffarel, returned from the East with oriental lore and antiquities to be discussed; Peiresc was famous for his importation of rarities, fossils and strange plants and animals; the naturalist Gui de la Brosse created the Jardin des Plantes; Peiresc and Elie Diodati were responsible for the telescopes and other new scientific instruments displayed at scientific meetings. At the Academies frequented by the libertins, notably the Cabinet of the Frères Dupuy at the Hôtel de Thou, and the Academy of Habert de Montmar, subjects as diverse as astronomy, the geography of the New World, and biblical exegesis were debated, but interest in chemistry, or in anatomical dissection was less, and of course the theories of Gassendi were far more popular than those of Descartes.

To summarise the attitude of the learned libertins: they were unwilling to undertake a radical revision of ideas with regard to theology and philosophy because of the dubious state of contemporary science; they remained fairly sincere if "enlightened" in religion, but they were scornful of redundancies and superstitions, and this attitude did have the effect of subtly undermining belief. They made no attempt to reconcile their enthusiasm for new discoveries with the immutability of religious doctrine, but preferred to pursue a course of well-mannered dissimulation, and, because the emphasis in their group was more on erudite enquiry into facts than on metaphysics,

they were able to ignore inconsistencies. Finally, they remained sceptics when the bias of the times was unmistakably towards rationalism.

Chapter III

The Libertin as "Arbiter Elegantiae".

The Chevalier de Méré, St. Évremond.

Although the erudite libertins discussed in the previous chapter were unassertive, and ostensibly conformist, they were nevertheless responsible for the spread of some extremely inflammable aspects of libertinage. A wide circle of esprits forts less intellectual, but far more thoroughgoing in their atheism, and in their willingness to explore the philosophic consequences of libertin beliefs, or lack of beliefs, were influenced by the insidious scepticism of the learned libertins, whom they particularly admired for their mild but persistent mockery of the Church. They comprised followers of Gassendi such as Cyrano de Bergerac, the younger le Vayer, Bernier, Chapelle and perhaps even Molière.[1] Related to these was a group of civilised libertins, who combined libertin ideas and honnête precepts to devise a highly specialised code of behaviour. These honnête libertins are the subject of this chapter.

The impulse towards civilised living, which came as a reaction to the coarseness and chaos of society after the civil wars, grew stronger throughout the seventeenth century. As time went on there were, of course, changes in the interpretation of honnêteté, dictated by class considerations or by vicissitudes in fashion. It is not easy to generalise, but perhaps it can be tentatively laid down that the

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[1] See below, p. 73.

aristocrats of the salons were inclined to be more interested in extra-refinement of manners, in style and in wit, whereas the bourgeoisie in addition to etiquette stressed morality, both Christian and classical.[2] The homme du monde was frequently licentious, but renowned for his wit and galanterie. The homme de bien, a man of solid virtue, was of a slightly lower class and of a more serious nature. He was influenced by an ideal of honnêteté which goes back to the Italian Renaissance, being neo-platonic and humanist inspired (it was based on Castiglione's Courtier), and which optimistically upheld man's perfectibility in virtue as well as in social behaviour. The homme de bien opposed reason to the senses, revered chastity, and had high regard for education. His views continued to be held throughout the century, parallel with the more worldly and pagan ones of an honnête homme such as, for example, St. Évremond, and changed only in that emphasis was shifted to Christian devotion when humanism had become outmoded.

The term honnête homme is not quite synonymous with any of the previously mentioned models of honnêteté. Ideally the honnête homme should be a supremely civilised man, whose gentility is apparent not only in superficials such as wit and graceful adherence to etiquette but in the development of his whole personality. He should have sufficient learning and should be physically as well as mentally accomplished. He was to show the refinement, through education, of natural man. However, his most important quality was a respect for reason and moderation, and if he possessed this his lack of polish or

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[2]See Maurice Magendie, La Politesse Mondaine et les Théories de l'Honnêteté en France au XVII[e] Siècle (Paris, 1925), I, 467-75.

galanterie did not prevent him from being called honnête homme. For instance Montaigne, who had not been renowned either for wit or social graces, and whose table manners were bad, was still one of the century's models of honnêteté because he had disliked pedantry and dogmatism and had defended justice, reasonableness, and mental independence. Honnêteté could exist despite disadvantages of birth, profession or nationality; and religious principles were certainly not essential, for it was remarked that "la première qualité d'un honnête homme est la méprise de la religion."[3]

The learned libertins, because they were men of probity, intelligence and independence could be described as honnêtes hommes. The main difference, in fact, between them and a sophisticated honnête homme such as the Chevalier de Méré is not one of ideas but of motivation, and therefore of behaviour. The mondain libertins were equally nonchalant in their attitude to the Church, sympathetic to Montaigne's philosophy and imbued with fashionable scepticism. They also were alive to the implications of new advances in science. Unlike the erudite libertins, however, they were not whole-heartedly absorbed in pursuit of knowledge because they refused to be committed to anything which did not directly concern their own happiness. What gives this group its special character is that they adopted one particular facet of libertin thought, namely Epicureanism, on which they based their code of behaviour. Stimulated by Gassendi's analysis of Epicureanism the mondain libertins gave the code of honnêteté new point and consistency. Whereas many exponents of the art of civilised living

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[3]Nicolas Bardin, Le Lycée (Paris, 1632), I, 93. Bardin devotes all his energy to establishing that this was not the case.

aimed to make the best of the gifts God had given them in the service of their fellow men, the libertins of the school of St. Évremond, Ninon de l'Enclos, M. de Coulanges, de Bussy, La Rochefoucauld and the Chevalier de Méré were self-confessed materialists who acted solely in their own interests.

One of the most influential of these civilised libertins was Antoine de Gombaud, Chevalier de Méré (1610-1684), who came to occupy the position in French society of a "professeur de bienséances". The Chevalier was well equipped with the physical and mental qualities necessary for an honnête homme. He is said to have been handsome, elegant and witty; he fenced, rode and danced well; he was cited for courage in battle, and as he was a Knight of Malta his social position was thoroughly acceptable. He had benefited from a humanistic education, and himself had some reputation as a pedagogue, was an excellent linguist and enough of a mathematician to compete in argument with Pascal. Méré was not ambitious for personal advancement: neither was he an intellectual. He was predominantly interested in the subtleties of being a gentleman, and devoted himself to teaching the art of polite manners. His taste in society was eclectic, ranging from the Hôtel de Rambouillet and the salons of Mme. de Longueville and Mme. de Sable, to gatherings presided over by Marion de l'Orme or Ninon de l'Enclos. He mixed with the ultra-conventional and with near libertins like La Rochefoucauld or St. Évremond. His writing, mainly concerned with points of honnêteté, was undertaken rather late in life and published only after 1668.[4]

The Chevalier was outwardly conformist but his attitude to religion was known to be cynical, and as he died in the middle of a game

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[4]His most important works are: Les Conversations avec le Maréchal de Clérembaut (1668), Discours des Agréments, de l'Esprit, de la Conversation (1677), Lettres (1682).

of picquet it is probable that he escaped final absolution. As regards morality, he considered it subservient to the demands of the honnête code of behaviour. For example, he approved of discreet adultery, on the grounds that six years of marital fidelity was all that could be expected or thought civilised. He himself remained a bachelor in accordance with the statutes of his Order, but did engage in various well-bred liaisons, including one with the distinguished libertine Ninon de l'Enclos.

Méré's honnêteté was an inescapable consequence of his extremely lucid and coherent Epicureanism. Materialist and empiricist, he was convinced that the actions of an intelligent man should be dictated by how best he could attain the summum bonum, pleasure. It was possible, he thought, to perfect a technique of happiness, the mastery of which should be attempted early and not left until old age diminished its advantages. Since "tout ce qu'il y a de plus honnête et de plus raisonable dans la nature est ce qui contribue à notre bonheur"[5] a sensible man would devote his energy to discovering what was honnête and adapting it for his own pleasure. Méré described those who were uniquely interested in etiquette and social distractions as being possessed of "fausse honnêteté." There was much more to the training of a genuine honnête homme: "suivant moi," he wrote, "l'honnêteté (à vrai dire) c'est la quintessence de toutes les vertues."[6] The prime quality of the honnête homme was reasonableness; he should be free from prejudices and superstition, not duped by appearances, and able to discern true merit, for "la vraie bienséance ne dépend point de la fortune: elle vient du coeur et de l'esprit."[7]

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[5]Chevalier de Méré, Oeuvres Complètes (Amsterdam, 1692), II, 367.

[6]Le Chevalier de Méré . . . un choix de lettres et de pensées, ed. Edmond Chamaillard (Niort, 1921), p. 139.

[7]Ibid., p. 132.

Reason inevitably indicates moderation, and most important in Mere's conception of the honnête homme was the happy mean: "le plus difficile secret pour être honnête homme dépend de trouver le tempérament le plus juste en toutes ses actions."[8] All excess whether in debauchery, in love, or in religion should be avoided because in the last analysis it yields more pain than pleasure.

The mainspring of Méré's design for a happy life was obviously egotism, which applied even in ethics. He thought one should certainly love one's neighbour, but not to an extent that doing so interfered with one's own piece of mind. In his opinion it is wise to follow a moral code simply because nonconformity proves uncomfortable, and even if sometimes less materially successful than vice, a virtuous course is less nerve-wracking for an honnête homme intent on his own comfort and pleasure. He allowed religion as a means to happiness, yet himself approved the classical virtues more warmly than the Christian ones.

Méré devoted much attention to the mechanics of honnêteté, to "l'art de plaire". "L'honnête homme" he wrote, "a but d'apporter la joie partout. Il faut donc exceller en tout ce que regarde les bienséances de la vie."[9] One should rather sacrifice originality and avoid all over-individualistic traits than risk disturbing the smooth surface of social intercourse. Even wit should not be too bizarre or mordant, and as the general aim was quiet elegance, foppery in dress should be avoided, as well as affectation in speech and writing.

The Chevalier de Méré was an Epicurean in intention, a sceptic in outlook and a rationalist in practice. However, there are flaws in his

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[8] Oeuvres Complètes, II, 358.

[9] Choix de lettres et de pensées, p. 140.

system, one of which is boredom. Méré sometimes felt the tyranny of reason, and realised that a state of complete imperturbability is little better than death, leading as it does to a feeling of satiation and self-disgust. There is also the problem of duplicity. In the interests of equable social relations the honnête homme must subdue his real feelings and, although he is completely disabused and judges people and situations as they are, he must never be uncivil. But is hypocrisy honnête, and would Socrates, the Chevalier's "héros d'esprit", have approved of such dissembling?

Highly civilised as it was, libertinage existed against a darker background. If Méré devoted his energy to steering the most agreeable course, and sought out diversions that afforded him pleasure, it was because he realised that life on the whole is harsh and brutal. While he balanced delicately on his tightrope of honnêteté he was fully aware that one false step would bring disaster, and, even if his fortunes did not turn, pain and death would bring him to the ground. So in common with many libertins, Méré counterbalanced his Epicureanism with Stoicism. Since misery is inevitable it should be met with as noble a courage as possible, and this is all the more reason to exploit fleeting pleasures to the full: "Si vous êtes toujours aussi sensible à ces coups de la fortune, que vous serviront tant d'avantages que vous avez pour vivre agréablement"[10] he wrote to Mme. Lesdiguières, reproaching her for excessive mourning.

A final criticism of Méré is that in spite of his contention that the most reasonable and pleasant way of life is a virtuous one, the

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[10] Oeuvres Complètes, II, 314.

actual result of his self-interest was an indisputable coldness, and a remoteness from passion and compassion vaguely displeasing. Carried to its logical conclusion Méré's type of honnêteté supposes that the only permissible extreme is the extreme of bland mediocrity.

Another famous honnête homme who based his conception of honnêteté on Epicureanism was Charles Marguetel de Saint Denis, Seigneur de St. Évremond (1616-1703). Like the Chevalier de Méré St. Évremond entered a career of arms; he moved in similar social circles and also enjoyed a liaison with Ninon de l'Enclos. His wit, finesse and passion for social pleasures were equal to the Chevalier's, but he was perhaps a more sympathetic and flexible character, for he was a tolerant man and had, especially in his later years, the very human faults of untidiness and indolence. Rather unfairly exiled in 1661, he had opportunity to put his philosophy to the test in Holland and England, where he was deprived of the select French society most congenial to him, and found himself often short of money. At the Court of Charles II he cut a somewhat staid figure, for his urbane and leisurely Epicureanism was a marked contrast to the extremism of the wits. He was, however, admired for his polish and literary judgement, and his advice sought in matters of taste.

St. Évremond described himself as a "Philosopher", one of those who "make their Reason the foundation of their Happiness"[11] in accordance with which his attitude towards religion and politics was strictly impartial, and his intellectual libertinage discreet and unemphatic. His sympathies in the famous controversy were with the Moderns, but

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[11]St. Évremond, Letters, ed. John Hayward (London, 1930), p. lviii. Subsequent references will be to this edition.

he disliked the atmosphere of the Royal Society, and although he was interested to converse with Gassendi and to meet in England Hobbes, Sir Kenelm Digby, Vossius, Spinoza and Heinsius, he cannot be described as erudite, nor did he want to be thought so. "There are no Sciences, in my opinion, that particularly deserve the care of a Gentleman," he wrote, but "Morality, Politicks, and Polite Learning".[12] His own writing might come under the heading of "Polite Learning", the accomplishment of an honnête homme, and in the spirit of an educated amateur he produced essays, an occasional play, and letters which he was pleased to have published for the entertainment of posterity.[13]

St. Évremond's Epicureanism did not owe very much to Gassendi[14] or to his apologists, for he was not interested in the christianisation of a pagan philosophy, and refused to believe that Epicurus had advocated an austerity "more severe than the Virtue of the Stoicks."[15] The type of Epicureanism St. Évremond favoured was more akin to Montaigne's, being based essentially on common-sense and moderation.

Indisputably the summum bonum is happiness, but it is extremely difficult to attain and practically impossible to maintain:

> "Glory, Reputation, Riches, Amours, and well manag'd Pleasures, are a mighty relief against the rigours of Nature, and the miseries of Life. And, indeed, the principal end for which Wisdom was given to us, was to direct us in the enjoyment of Pleasures: but for all the excellence of that Virtue, we shall find it stands us in small stead, when we are either rack'd with Pain, or alarm'd with the approaches of Death."[16]

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[12] Letters, p. 35.

[13] His letters were edited in 1705 by Des Maizeaux, and first appeared in English in 1713, translated by Sylvestre and Des Maizeaux.

[14] This is not to say that his interest was not stimulated by Gassendi's popularisation of the teachings of Epicurus; however, St. Évremond did not regard the philosophy in the same light as Gassendi; he formed his own conclusions.

[15] Letters, p. 275.

[16] Ibid., p. 14.

One must be constantly alert to evade the endless miseries which attack imperfect human beings and to cheat melancholy, pain and boredom. St. Évremond advised social distractions as the best way of doing this, for solitude and contemplation only makes man more aware of the wretchedness of his condition. The company of friends, the pleasures of the intellect, wine and love should be moderately indulged in.

Although he considered that "We can never bestow too much address on the Management of our Pleasures"[17] St. Évremond did not underestimate the value of spontaneity. He thought it possible for an honnête homme to develop a flair for pleasure, half intuition and half wisdom, which told him when to act and when to stop:

> An imperfect enjoyment is attended with Regret; a surfeit of pleasure with Disgust. There's a certain nick of time, a certain medium to be observ'd, with which few people are acquainted. We must enjoy the present Pleasures, without impairing the future. [18]

Because happiness depends on moderation, the too frivolous or too sober would miss it altogether, but there are no set rules for attaining it. It varies with the individual and is different for the "Sensualist", the "Voluptuary" or the "Nice." It depends also on mood, age and on surrounding conditions. St. Évremond thought the honnête homme must be adaptable. When he is "in a condition to taste Pleasure," he wrote, "I'm of opinion that health shows itself by something more lively than a bare Indolence,"[19] but in old age he can enjoy "the nice sense of a pure Joy, which proceeds from a repose of conscience, and a serenity of mind."[20]

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[17] Letters, p. 16.

[18] Ibid., p. 17.

[19] Ibid., p. 279.

[20] Ibid., p. 19.

Like La Rochefoucauld, St. Évremond regarded it as a virtue to be "peu sensible à la pitié."[21] It was indeed bad taste and inhuman to be totally insusceptible to the misfortunes of one's friends, but "our grief ought to be rare, and soon laid aside; whereas joy ought to be frequently and artfully entertain'd."[22] In his opinion it is wiser to take another lover than be so afflicted over the death of the old one as to consider entering a convent.[23] There are troubles which cannot be averted -- no amount of stoicism detracts from the ignominy of pain and death, but "a little reason will make us relish the good things as deliciously as possible, and instruct us to bear the bad with all the patience we can."[24]

These are the views of a very civilised and unvehement libertin, but a libertin nevertheless, and although they caused little comment in the riotous English society of the time, they provoked criticism in France from such diverse churchmen as Bourdaloue, Nicole and Bossuet.

It goes almost without saying that St. Évremond held the fashionably licentious attitude to morality ("nothing is so injurious to the reputation of a Beauty, as Constancy"[25]) although his own behaviour was infinitely more refined than that of the Restoration Wits. Like La Rochefoucauld he enjoyed the company of women because they had often a finer wit and excelled in the art of conversation. For him friendship was almost indistinguishable from love. He wrote

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[21]La Rochefoucauld, Oeuvres, ed. M.D.L. Gilbert and V. Gourdault (Paris, 1868), I, 9.

[22]Letters of St. Évremond, p. 16.

[23]Ibid., pp. 245-58.

[24]Ibid., p. 280.

[25]Ibid., p. 21.

that "if I pass from Friendship to Love without difficulty; I am able to return from Love to Friendship, with as little violence,"[26] but even such views as this had a worldly and egoistical basis, and it was for this reason that the moralist could quarrel with them.

The attitude of St. Évremond to religion was polite yet materialistic. Ostensibly a Catholic, following pious conventions in some of his letters, he was impartial to religious beliefs and fundamentally a sceptic. He admitted that belief in the immortality of the soul would conduce to a tranquil state of mind, but was temperamentally incapable of believing it, and died refusing the ministrations of a priest.

It is in this materialism and egotism that the libertin honnête homme like St. Évremond or the Chevalier de Méré differed from the homme de bien. The interests of the homme de bien centred not on himself but on the community. He believed that values such as honour, compassion and fidelity are absolutes and not relative, and he based this conviction firmly on Christian doctrine. The honnête homme, however, had no such touching faith as this. He knew well that man is imperfect and had no illusions concerning the mechanical nature of the passions, which he considered the sole originators of virtuous acts and feelings. True to sensationalism, he accepted no exterior absolutes. If it suited his ends he might even indulge in polite vice, for as La Rochefoucauld remarked, "Nous plaisons plus souvent dans le commerce de la vie par nos défauts que par nos bonnes qualités."[27]

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[26] Letters, p. 12.

[27] La Rochefoucauld, Oeuvres, I, 170.

It is true that the best _honnêtes hommes_ in France did not stand out as blatant libertins; they were in no danger from authority on account of their private opinions because their teeth were already drawn by the code of _honnêteté_ they followed. They were not interested in undermining public credulity, nor did they indulge in destructive mockery of conventional notions, for the simple reason that this might have injured the self they were concerned to protect. And yet in spite of their affable exterior there is no doubt that they were libertins, for as they themselves were eager to point out, the social amiability they practiced was in fact the fruit of a cold, calculating, agnostic egotism.

Chapter IV

Libertin Literature

Théophile de Viau, Charles Sorel, Cyrano de Bergerac.
Claude-Rose de Rosimond, Molière.

In considering libertin literature a distinction must be made between writers who merely exploited the popular, flamboyant idea of the libertin because it provided excellent literary material, and those who were conspicuously heterodox and concerned with presenting a fairly coherent and serious statement of their philosophy. In the first category Rosimond and Molière are the most remarkable from the literary point of view.

The choice of representatives from the second category presents more of a problem, for the field of libertin imaginative literature is very wide indeed. It extends from the group of poets writing in the 1620's — St. Amant, Théophile de Viau, Jacques Vallée des Barreaux, Tristan l'Hermite — who had their own literary programme, still preferring the style of Ronsard — to poets of the last quarter of the century preoccupied with "nature" and "le néant", such as St. Pavin, Jean Hesnaut and Mme. Deshoulières. It covers classical and metaphysical poets who were not so explicitly libertin, such as Malherbe or the habitués of the Hôtel de Rambouillet, Voiture and Costar, as well as patently libertin poets, collected in Lachèvre's Le Libertinage au Dix-Septième Siècle. Among prose writers La Rochefoucauld must be noted, and Maucroix. La Fontaine and Fontenelle might also qualify for inclusion. Confronted with such a proliferation of libertin writers it is necessary to be extremely selective. Théophile de Viau appears

an obvious choice on account of the notoriety he gained as a result of his trial: there is a link between Théophile and Charles Sorel because of the strong probability of Sorel's Francion being an idealised depiction of the libertin poet; whereas Cyrano de Bergerac, a writer most articulate with regard to libertin philosophy, would seem to follow naturally on grounds of his affinities with Sorel both in ideas and in style.

Théophile de Viau (1590-1620) is important not only because he was a good poet whose unconventional ideas were lucidly expressed in his poetry, but because his trial in 1624, in which all the various aspects of libertin heterodoxy were debated, constituted a decisive defeat for libertinage, after which free expression of such ideas was no longer possible.

Lachèvre's classic definition of a libertin fits Théophile very well: "Un libertin est un homme aimant le plaisir, tous les plaisirs, sacrifiant à la bonne chère, le plus souvent de mauvaises moeurs, raillant la religion, niant l'immortalité de l'âme et dégagé des erreurs populaires."[1] However, though Théophile's detractors paid at least as much attention to the licentiousness of his manners as to his philosophical aberrations, he was by no means a mere rake and scribbler of obscene light verse. He in fact possessed the qualities of a serious and civilised man. His education had been Protestant and liberal; he had travelled in Holland, where he became interested in religious questions and studied under Heinsius, and although he had no pretensions to erudition he was respected by his friends among the nobility and even among the clergy, for his wit and the acuity of his intelligence.

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[1] Le Libertinage devant le Parlement de Paris. Le Procès du Poète Théophile de Viau, éd. F. Lachèvre (Paris, 1909), I, xiii.

His reputation as a poet was high, and he was favoured at court to the extent of receiving a pension. His personality is revealed in the following statement (substantiated by his friends) about himself: "Ce qui m'acquiert des amis et des envieux ce n'est que la facilité de mes moeurs, une fidelité incorruptible et une profession ouverte que je fais d'aimer parfaitement ceux qui sont sans fraude et sans lascheté."[2]

As a poet he was anti-humanist, anti-classical, anti-imitation, and one of the last to write with naturalness and originality before classical rationalism petrified lyric verse. Consequently, much of his true thought is found in his poetry, where there are hints of impiety, attacks on providence, indications that he shared Vanini's conception of man, and that he cultivated Epicureanism.

Théophile derived his idea of the nature of the universe from Giordano Bruno, and defined reality as the all pervasive God of Nature, the "féconde âme du monde." Matter, mind and soul are, according to this theory, all the same substance, and are all permeated with a divine essence from which emerge the various life forms, each containing a part of this essence. The elemental God of Nature is essentially a creative spirit, completely impersonal and therefore unconcerned with human individuality. The elements, not an anthropomorphic Christian God, created man. Destiny is pre-determined, and after death the temporally individual souls of men are reabsorbed into the non-being from which they emerged.

Théophile did not consider this an overly depressing view of reality. He was, on the contrary, contemptuous of other religious systems which depend on a personal God, for they appeared to him petty

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[2]Théophile de Viau, Oeuvres Complètes, ed. M. Alleaume (Paris, 1855), II, 288.

when contrasted with the awe-inspiring fruitfulness of Bruno's deified Nature.

Indications of these ideas and of others equally heterodox gleaned from Pomponazzi, Campanello and Vanini occur in Théophile's poems written between 1618 and 1623. These poems, which include various odes, sonnets, "Elegie à une Dame," and two "Satyres," are serious, discursive, and without being provocative or truculent do reveal the poet's libertin philosophy. His view of the divinity of nature and of the limitations of the Christian God are clear:

> Celuy qui dans les coeurs met le mal ou le bien
> Laisse faire au destin sans se mesler de rien:
> Non pas que ce grand Dieu qui donne l'ame au monde
> Ne trouve à son plaisir la nature feconde,
> Et que son influence encore à plaines mains
> Ne verse ses faveurs dans les esprits humains:[3]

It is also evident that Théophile's awe for the whole of Nature did not extend to its parts, and that like Vanini, he entertained a low opinion of the nature of mankind. Regarded in the harsh light of realism, man is certainly not made in the image of God, nor is his state particularly happy -- animals are better provided by Nature:

> Voy la condition de ta sale naissance,
> Que, tiré tout sanglant de ton premier sejour,
> Tu vois en gemissant la lumiere du jour;
> Ta bouche n'est qu'aux cris et à la faim ouverte,
> Ta pauvre chair naissante est toute descouverte,
> Ton esprit ignorant encor ne forme rien
> Et moins qu'un sens brutal sçait le mal et le bien.[4]

He is battered by a destiny "sourde et indifférente"; there is nothing of which he can be truly certain; virtue and effort are not rewarded,

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[3] Oeuvres Poétiques, ed. L. R. Lefèvre (Paris, 1926), p.72.

[4] Ibid., p. 79.

and everything is subject to the laws of chance:

> Que le sort a des loix qu'on ne sçauroit forcer;
> Que son compas est droict, qu'on ne le peut fausser.
> Nous venons tous du ciel pour posseder la terre;
> La faveur s'ouvre aux uns, aux autres se resserre:
> Une necessité, que le Ciel establit,
> Deshonore les uns, les autres anoblit.[5]

Théophile's conclusions on how to govern one's life resulted from the blend of Stoicism, Pyrrhonism, and Epicureanism in his thought. He had two constructive suggestions: first that one should submit stoically without complaint to the adversities of fate, not expecting stability or rationality in the movement of events; and secondly that one should "follow Nature," by trusting the pleasures of the senses and cultivating what is individual in oneself. This is substantially the same advice as that given by Montaigne; however, the kind of pleasure advocated by Théophile when he wrote:

> J'approuve qu'un chacun suive en tout la nature:
> Son Empire est plaisant et sa loy n'est pas dure;
> Ne suivant que son train jusqu'au dernier moment.
> Mesmes dans les malheurs on passe heureusement.
> Jamais mon jugement ne trouvera blasmable
> Celuy-là qui s'attache à ce qu'il trouve aymable,[6]

probably differed from Montaigne's ideal, for Théophile was neither a humanist nor given to solitary contemplation.

A corresponding resemblance to Montaigne as well as difference from him is evident in Théophile's views on happiness. Like Montaigne he believed a technique of living is necessary, which involves knowledge of one's potential, and tenacity of purpose:

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[5] Oeuvres Poétiques, ed. Lefèvre, p. 85.

[6] Ibid., p. 81.

Nostre nature est assez belle
Si nous sçavons jouir de nous.
Rien que nous-mesme ne nous blesse,
Nostre mal, c'est nostre foiblesse.
Le sot glisse sur les plaisirs
Mais le sage y demeure ferme.[7]

But one feels that by self-knowledge he referred less to the development of moral properties of mind than to the wise man's capacity for astute summing up of a situation so that he may take appropriate action to exploit it.

A relatively small proportion of Théophile's verse, however, is concerned with serious libertin philosophy: much more is written in a light-hearted, very unphilosophic vein, combining effrontery and lyrical freshness. His "professional" poetry is never obscene but his conceits do occasionally flirt with sacrilege:

De la mort de son fils Dieu contre moy se venge
Depuis que ma Philis se fasche de me voir,[8]

or when, governed by impertinent common sense, he counsels Liancourt to cease mourning his father's death, for:

Un homme de bon sens se mocque des malheurs;
Il plaint esgallement sa servante et sa fille.
Job ne versa jamais une goutte de pleurs
Pour toute sa famille"[9]

The "vers impies, meschantz et habominables"[10] on account of which Théophile was brought to trial in 1624 included parts of his serious heretical poems, some of his audacious love lyrics, and a great deal of witty and obscene trivia which he did not write. But the fact that Théophile had not actually contributed to Le Parnasse des Poètes Satiriques (1622) was not particularly important, for the Church was

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[7]Oeuvres Poétiques, ed. Lefèvre, p. 216.

[8]Le Procès du Poète Théophile de Viau, ed. Lachèvre, II, 315.

[9]Ibid., 345.

[10]Ibid., I, 446.

determined to make an example of one of the most influential of the libertins, even if it entailed resorting to unjust accusations and using false witnesses. In the opinion of Garasse: "le plus abandonné de tous est le principal autheur du Parnasse Satirique qui s'en prend aux destins et à la Nature avec des paroles infames et avec des imprécations de Sodomite, comme si Dieu estoit jaloux et envieux de ses impudicités."[11] Throughout the trial he and Théophile's other prosecutors, Guérin, Mathieu Molé and the P. Voisin attacked the poet on grounds of being a drunkard, sodomite, blasphemer and sensualist. He was accused of disrespect for the Virgin, the saints and the angels, of disbelieving in hell and the immortality of the soul, and most important, of denying divine intervention in human destiny and "en effet tenyr la natture pour Dieu et sc'y habandonner de tout."[12] Théophile replied by refusing to acknowledge the authorship of anything that could compromise him, whether he had actually written it or not. He stressed his conversion to Catholicism[13] and his faithful observance of religious routines, and in fact reneged his libertinism.

The result of the trial was a victory for the Church. Théophile was "convaincu de crime de lèze-majesté divine,"[14] and ordered to be burnt in effigy. He escaped through the efforts of the Gallicans,[15] but the result of the trial and his recantation constituted a signal defeat for libertinage.

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[11]Garasse, Doctrine Curieuse, p. 785.

[12]Le Procés du Poète Théophile de Viau, ed. Lachèvre, I, 378.

[13]Probably quite genuine; he is said to have been converted through his Pyrrhonism.

[14]Oeuvres Poétiques, ed. Lefèvre, p. xiii.

[15]The persecution of Théophile was instigated by the Jesuits, who were highly inimical to the Gallican faction.

It is of interest to consider briefly Charles Sorel's idealised picture of the libertin in the Histoire Comique de Francion (1632)[16] because Francion is reputed to be a portrait of Théophile, and therefore throws some light on Théophile's own ideas.

Francion is essentially a satire written in the form of a picaresque novel. Reacting against the false grandeur and oversensitivity of the précieux romans, Sorel gives an account of the adventures of a very down to earth, if noble, rascal. Because of the scope this genre of novel afforded for comment on a diversity of situations and settings, Sorel was able to attack nobility and nouveaux riches, précieuses and pedants as well as the plethora of inferior writers. He included also thinly disguised caricatures of contemporary figures, such as Hortensius the pedant, who is in part modelled on François la Mothe le Vayer, and castigated individual vices of fools and fops alike.

However, there is a more serious meaning to the Francion. It is probable (although not altogether certain, for Sorel necessarily disguised his aim very well from the uninitiated), that he counterbalanced his critical view of society with a positive description of ideal, libertin principles and way of life.[17] It seems likely that Sorel disclaimed authorship of the Francion[18] not only because his caricatures would have made him enemies but also because of its dangerously libertin ideas.

Francion is certainly not portrayed as possessing the Christian

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[16]Second edition. The first edition (1623) contained only the first seven books.

[17]See Antoine Adam, Théophile de Viau et la Libre Pensée Francaise en 1620 (Paris, 1935), pp. 297-331.

[18]In his "Avis aux Lecteurs" Sorel persisted in attributing authorship to du Parc. See Histoire Comique de Francion, ed. Émile Colombey (Paris, 1858), p. 13. Subsequent references will be to this edition.

virtues. He is promiscuous and dissolute, and his escapades are the most lawless libertinage. The virtue he proposes is of a different kind — its definition occurs in the inscription over his friend Raymond's doorway: "Que personne ne prenne la hardiesse d'entrer ici, s'il n'a l'âme véritablement généreuse, s'il ne renonce aux opinions vulgaires, et s'il n'aime les plaisirs d'amour."[19] L'âme généreuse implies the possession of intelligence and open-mindedness, courage in adversity, loyalty, inflexibility of purpose and nobility of character. In Book VI Francion becomes the head of a group of "personnes toutes braves et enemies de la sottise et de l'ignorance," who called themselves "les généreux."[20] It was their aim to combat vice by force as well as by verbal criticism: they accepted into their company anyone of merit, irrespective of birth or money, and followed reason and nature, believing that "la raison naturelle" would reign when they had defeated the deep-rooted errors of the brutal and ignorant, "les âmes viles de tant de faquins qui sont dans Paris."[21]

"Les généreux" were to be completely free of common delusions and patently incorrect views of the nature of things, and free also of the social vices. The errors they were to be emancipated from were presumably those inherent in scholasticism, and judging from Sorel's hints on the nature of the soul in Francion's dream,[22] their own philosophy would be Averroistic and Vaninian. Their religion of

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[19]Francion, VIII, 306.

[20]Ibid., VI, 221.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid., III, 101.

nature, and the idea that the individual soul is a divine particle of the universal soul, was apparently taken so seriously as to make any lapse into orthodoxy a sacrilege to libertinage. The libertin elite who held such a view of nature considered their awareness of the correct philosophy was an indication that they possessed particles of the best quality soul material available. How this esoteric group conducted themselves, in proselytising and in belligerent street scüffles, is quite revealing because it throws light on Garasse's extraordinary ferocity against Théophile, and makes it clear that Théophile's philosophy was more dangerous than a simple Epicureanism, comparable to Montaigne's.

The third point of Raymond's inscription is "les plaisirs d'amour." The libertin must make a discerning choice but must be careful to guard his freedom to change, since the limitation of desire is an ungenerous act. Francion's and the libertins' purpose in life was to guard the purity of this ideal freedom of experience, and to make ceaseless war on the vices of the crude, ignorant and mean majority. It is on behalf of such positive principles that Francion became a "fléau des vicieux," and that "les généreux" visited "les meilleures maisons de la ville, où nos combattions toujours pour notre nouvelle vertu."[23]

A study of the Francion seems to point to the fact that Garasse's implacable enmity to Théophile was caused by something more than the poet's licentious manners and reckless attacks on Catholic doctrine. He and the other defenders of orthodoxy were deeply disturbed by the insidious mystique of Sorel's and Théophile's type of libertinage.

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[23]Francion, VI, 223.

The source of Savinien de Cyrano Bergerac's L'Autre Monde, ou les Estats et Empires de la Lune et du Soleil (1648-50)[24] is found in a remark of Charles Sorel's pedant Hortensius:

> Vous savez . . . que quelques sages ont tenus qu'il y avait plusieurs mondes; les uns en mettant dedans les planètes, les autres dans les étoiles fixes, et moi, je crois qu'il y en a dans la lune . . . je veux décrire des choses qui soient arrivées dans la lune; je dépeindray les villes qui y sont et les moeurs de leurs inhabitants . . .[25]

L'Autre Monde, published posthumously and even then expurgated, is fantasy made a vehicle for extreme ideas derived from many sources, all of them unorthodox: Montaigne, Cardano, Campanella, Tristan l'Hermite, Agrippa, the Rosicrucians, Labrosse the witch, and the Cartesian Rohault. The work is a critical assault on the Christian world picture, and contains in addition numerous minor, sporadic attacks on government and social conventions. In presenting an alternative view of the nature of the universe and of man's value and place in it Cyrano hesitates, torn between his admiration for the universe of rational scientific mechanists like Galileo, and Bruno's animistic one. The Estats et Empires de la Lune contains a strong defence of Copernicus' theory. Dyrcona (the name is a rough anagram of Cyrano), decides to go to the moon in order to see if Copernicus is right. In his first attempt he does not reach his destination, but makes a forced landing in Quebec, which proves equally well that the earth has revolved.

In a discussion with the Governor of Quebec the religious

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[24]Translated into English in 1659 by T. Serf, as Senarchia, or the Government of the World in the Moon, and "newly Englished" in 1687 by A. Lowell as The Comical History of the States and Empires of the World, of the Moon and Sun.

[25]Francion, XI, 435.

objections to the theory are considered, Dyrcona maintaining that it is actually the sin of pride which has caused men to err in assuming the earth to be the centre of the universe. The sun, "un dieu vivant," lights the whole of nature, not man alone. The absurdity of orthodox theories of the universe is further emphasised when Dyrcona finally reaches the moon. Here, in his trial by the priests of the moon, which is an exact parody of Galileo's trial by the Inquisition even to the recantation, he is charged with holding that the earth is a world and not a moon.

In Estats et Empires du Soleil Cyrano seems to decide for the animist philosopher Bruno, and following him and Campanella, describes matter as substantially soul. Individual souls are luminous, fiery atoms coming from and returning to the sun: death means only that the distinct souls enter again into the substance of other living beings — with the exception of philosophers' souls, which are given a respite of 8,000 years from nonentity. Cyrano insists that there is no essential difference between men and other living things — the whole universe is like a vast living being, "un grand animal," composed of a substance which is eternal and material.

It seems extraordinary that an enlightened and intelligent libertin, familiar with the scientific method of reasoning of Gassendi, Galileo, Descartes and Rohault, should opt for mysticism. Cyrano, however, like Pascal, held that science had revealed a more complex and mysterious reality, making it plainer than ever that only part could be empirically understood by man.

Cyrano thinks there is little to be said for humanity. In Estats et Empires du Soleil Dyrcona undergoes a trial by birds for

the crime of being a man, and narrowly escapes a horrible death penalty. The opinion of his accusers is that man is ugly, featherless, cruel and stupid. His predilection for slavery is despicable — all men are the slaves of other men and yet have such an appetite for subjugation that they also find it necessary to invent gods. Most despicable of all is man's refusal to be free, his eagerness to bind himself with the most imbecile customs, and make himself the dupe of lies spooned to him by his priests and kings, whose only concern is to exploit his gullibility. Improvement must start with a willingness to analyse existing knowledge and test its truth. Everything that appertains to man, his laws, customs and philosophy must be re-examined. A pattern for this is given in the behaviour of the young libertin at the end of Les Estats et Empires de la Lune: "Il fault prouver auparavent qu'il y ait un Dieu, car moi je vous le nie tout à plat"[26] he says, and proceeds to exercise his intelligence on the question. If God loves mankind He would want its salvation enough to make the fact of His existence less ambiguous. Since it is impossible to imagine a God "sot ou malicieux," playing a rather savage hide-and-seek with man, He must be non-existent. That nothing particularly bad can happen after such an exercise of intellectual liberty[27] is indicated by Cyrano's sudden

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[26]Cyrano de Bergerac, Oeuvres Libertines, ed. F. Lachèvre (Paris, 1921), I, 95.

[27]See also the speech of the confirmed libertin Séjanus in La Mort d'Agrippine (Act II, sc.iv):

> Séjanus: Ces Dieux que l'homme a faicts, et qui n'ont point faict l'homme . . .
>
> Terentius: Mais s'il n'en estoit point! Cette Machine ronde . . .
>
> Séjanus: Ouy, mais s'il en estoit, serois-je encor au monde?

Oeuvres Libertines, II, 120.

lapse into fantasy when he makes an incredible devil pick up the libertin and drop him neatly into hell. Such ironic comments are far from invalidating the lesson Cyrano tries to teach throughout L'Autre Monde, which is that man should be guided only by the principles of liberty and unbiased wisdom, expressed in the greetings current in the moon Utopia: "Songés à librement vivre" and "Ayme-moi, Sage, puisque je t'ayme."[28]

A much less ingratiating depiction of the libertin is found in the rash of plays which appeared from 1659-69 on the subject of Don Juan and his unpleasant end. The subject was popular because it was sensational, and practically every theatre had its own version.[29] Don Juan's escapades provided wonderful comedy material, and developments intrinsic to the plot allowed for the use of complicated machines and theatrical effects.

The most complete portrait of a libertin in these plays, and also the most serious indictment of libertinage, is found in Rosimond's tragi-comedy Le Nouveau Festin de Pierre ou l'Athée Foudroyé (1669).

The play is almost a catalogue of notorious libertin vices. Don Juan's first sins to be revealed are promiscuity and murder. He will despatch without regret anyone who interferes with the enjoyment

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[28]"Les Estats et Empires de la Lune," Oeuvres Libertines, I, 83.

[29]The principal French versions were: Villiers' Festin de Pierre (1659), Dorimond's Festin de Pierre ou le Fils Criminel (1661), Molière's Don Juan ou le Festin de Pierre (1665) and Rosimond's Nouveau Festin de Pierre ou l'Athée Foudroyé.
Molière was the first to make Don Juan an atheist.

of his pleasures, including his father,[30] whom he kills because "Son humeur étoit par trop sévère."[31]

Don Juan's defence of his actions is to deny the validity of any absolute moral code - he is guided only by the dictates of his senses:

> J'obéis à mes sens, il est vray; mais quel crime?
> La nature m'en fait une nécessité,
> Et nostre corps n'agit que par sa volonté;
> C'est par les appétits qu'inspirent ses caprices,
> Qu'on court différemment aux vertus commes aux vices.
> (I.ii.328)

He is a follower of nature, which is evil in the Machiavellian sense:

> Songez que la nature est tout ce qui nous mène,
> Que, malgré la raison, son pouvoir nous entraine,
> Que le crime n'est pas si grand qu'on nous le fait,
> Que tous ces chastimens dont vous preschez l'effet,
> Ne sont bons à prosner qu'à des âmes timides,
> Que l'on ne doit souffrir rien que ses sens pour guides,
> Qu'ils les faut assouvir jusq'aux moindres désirs,
> Et n'avoir point d'égard qu'à ses propres plaisirs.
> (III.iv.351)

The next libertin trait he evinces is a rational defence of atheism. As far as he knows the gods do not exert themselves to punish the vices of men, because there are no gods -- they are the fabrications of interested authorities:

> Pour voir ce qu'ils sont il ne faut que des yeux.
> L'adroite politique en masqua le caprice,
> La foiblesse de l'homme appuya l'artifice,
> Et sa timidité s'en faisant un devoir,
> Sans aucune raison forgea ce grand pouvoir.
> (III.iv.351).

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[30]Disrespect for parents was a common libertin trait, probably because the over-severity of parents in the seventeenth century was open to criticism. See Cyrano de Bergerac's brutal satire on parental authority and filial respect in "Les Estats et Empires de la Lune," Oeuvres Libertines, I, 377. Théophile also was accused of undermining filial duty, see Le Procès de Théophile de Viau, ed. Lachèvre, I, 377.

[31]Rosimond, Le Nouveau Festin de Pierre ou l'Athée Foudroyé (1669), I,ii, in Les Contemporains de Molière, ed. V. Fournel (Paris, 1875), p.327.

Don Juan is also a hypocrite of the first water. The actual belief of libertins such as Théophile, Sorel and Cyrano de Bergerac that a certain masking of libertin principles was unavoidable both for their own safety and because the mass would have misunderstood the purity of their ideals, is here given a much more vicious turn. Don Juan describes the widespread hypocrisy of society:

> . . . en ce siècle où nous sommes,
> Pour vivre il faut. scavoir l'art d'éblouir les hommes,
> Et sur un beau prétexte acquerir du crédit,
> Paroistre plus qu'on n'est, faire plus qu'on ne dit,
> Couvrir ses actions d'une belle apparance,
> Se masquer de vertu pour perdre l'innocence,
> Estre bon dans les yeux et méchant dans le coeur,
> Professer l'infamie et deffendre l'honneur . . .
> C'est ainsy qu'aujourd'huy se gouverne le monde.
> (I. v. 333).

But far from censuring it he is content to go along with it, because he can turn duplicity to account and by dissembling virtue accomplish his infamous ends better.

The only virtue the libertins were credited with was that of courage, which was, of course, misguided, for one should fear the gods. Don Juan is shown as rashly courageous, and when the reality of the supernatural is established beyond a doubt and can no longer be explained by natural causes, far from recanting he shamelessly boasts that he loves vice, not only for the pleasure it procures but for its own sake:

> Les forfaits les plus noirs ont des charmes pour moy;
> Et, loin que tes advis me donnent l'effroy,
> Je prétens dès demain, dans l'ardeur qui m'anime
> Entasser mort sur mort, et crime sur le crime.
> (V. vii. 376).

In contrast to Rosimond's moralistic melodrama Molière's earlier Don Juan ou le Festin de Pierre (1665) offers a not unsympathetic picture of a libertin. The play is not, of course,

a defence of libertinage, and if it contains no strong censure of Don Juan's extremes, it is not because Molière secretly favoured them but because of the type of play it is. Don Juan was not conceived as a classical comedy with the didactic aim of correcting vice through judicious ridicule. It is a simple farce relying on action. In view of this it is useless to look for an expression of Molière's own judgement which, in his more classical comedies, emerges as the sensible norm which throws into relief surrounding exaggerations. Even Sganarelle, the nearest representative of the right-minded man's views on libertin behaviour, is not a serious critic, not because he is a servant — elsewhere Molière's servants do show up their masters' foolishness by their own common-sense — but because he is the undignified coward of slapstick comedy.

Don Juan can perhaps best be interpreted as Molière's mockery of the fashionable rake's fantasy picture of himself. He has all the popular marks of a libertin. He is, according to Sganarelle:

> le plus grand scélérat que la terre ait jamais porté, un enragé, un chien, un diable, un Turc, un hérétique qui ne croit ni Ciel, ni Enfer, ni loup-garou, qui passe cette vie en véritable bête brute, un porceau d'Epicure, un vrai Sardanaple, qui ferme l'oreille à toutes les remontrances qu'on lui peut faire, et traite de billevesées tout ce que nous croyons.[32]

But he has also the various excellent qualities the beaux esprits liked to think they possessed, such as wit, courage, proficiency and honour in arms, good appearance and high birth.

Don Juan commits most of his iniquities for their amusement value, using the commonplace libertin excuse that he is merely

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[32]Molière, Don Juan ou le Festin de Pierre (1665), Act I, sc.i, Théâtre de Molière (Paris, 1930), IV, 13. Subsequent page references will be to this edition.

following his natural bent: "J'ai une pente naturelle à me laisser aller à tout ce qui m'attire." (III, v, 75) His admitted aim is variety: "la constance n'est bonne que pour des ridicules," (I, ii, 16) and his life is devoted to pursuing the pleasures of the moment: "N'allons point songer au mal qui nous peut arriver, et songeons seulement à ce qui peut donner de plaisir." (I. ii, 16) The Don's preferred activities of womanising (Sganarelle calls him "un épouseur du genre humain" (II, iv, 54)) and diverting escapades, are venial. Even the murder of the Commander, killed in a scuffle when he interrupted one of Don Juan's amours, is not presented as too heinous a crime. Similar incidents must have been common enough among the real beaux esprits, even after the edict against duelling.

However, Molière's mockery of the beaux esprits does turn to indignation near the end of the play when the vice of hypocrisy is in question. Don Juan advocates duplicity, "un vice à la mode." (V, i, 105) He decides that "la profession d'hypocrite a des merveilleuses avantages. C'est un art de qui l'imposture est toujours respectée." (V, i, 105) In future he will take care to conceal his predatoriness and so become a serious menace: "C'est ainsi qu'il faut profiter des faiblesses des hommes." (V, 1, 106) But Sganarelle exclaims, with the agreement of Molière and the audience: "Voilà le comble des abominations."

It is interesting to note Molière's reaction to this question of hypocrisy. Don Juan's other attitudes and exploits are presented in a spirit of good-nature mockery, but hypocrisy, on which the libertins frequently prided themselves, does not escape moral criticism so easily. To Molière dissimulating for blatantly immoral purposes,

however elegantly, was never honnête. He hated hypocrisy, as is plain from his portrayal of Tartuffe. However, a certain amount of dissembling is essential to the art of honnêteté, and the sophisticated honnête homme, a practical, self-confessed egotist, is bound to be insincere whenever it suits his own interests. Logically it would seem that he would have no criterion for his actions except his own pleasure, and that since conformity is less stressful than rebellion his standards would therefore be entirely those of society. It is worth considering Molière's attitude to the problem, particularly since it was so very different to that of contemporary English playwrights who seized on the same paradox of honnêteté and morality.

First, Molière does not accept the fashionable honnête libertin's rather cold-blooded criterion of utility. He does reserve the right to make a moral judgment. That is, his standard of honnêteté does, in the tradition of Montaigne, include a certain measure of honour, and altruism.

Molière was probably aware of all the nuances of opinion among the libertins — he is known to have frequented the salon of Ninon de l'Enclos and to have visited Luillier, where he would meet Gassendi, Bernier, the Abbé le Vayer, Chapelle and Cyrano de Bergerac —[33] but he felt himself as free to satirise faults of the libertins as he did other social aberrations which caught his attention. In Don Juan he ridiculed the libertin rakes whose philosophy of life was too extravagant and impractical; in Le Misanthrope the mockery is more

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[33]Gui Patin remarks of an acquaintance, d'Henault: " . . . il voit souvent deux hommes qui ne sont pas plus chargez d'Articles de Foy que lui, ce sont Chapelle et Molière ce dernier est un Comedien d'importance." Naudaeana et Patiniana (Paris, 1701), p. 113.

personal -- Alceste with his uncouth contempt for social disciplines is reputed to be, in part at least, a portrait of François la Mothe le Vayer, an intellectual libertin of high moral integrity who paid slight attention to the bienséances, while the salon of Célimène bears some resemblance to that of Ninon de l'Enclos.

In one sense Alceste is admirably honnête. He insists on complete honesty and is actually quite right in his contention that one should discriminate between men, and refuse to be sycophantic to folly or vice. But although he embodies some of the right ideas of a Montaignian honnête homme, he puts them into practice in the wrong way. His extreme moral rigidity is not acceptable in polite society, and in spite of his qualities, he fails the test of honnêteté because he is, as Célimène says, "sans mentir, un grand extravagant." He destroys his own peace of mind, he is not always able to discriminate the value of people, is jealous, an extremist when in love, and a victim of irrational emotions:

> Je ne suis plus à moi, je suis tout à la rage:
> Percé du coup mortel dont vous m'assassinez,
> Mes sens par la raison ne sont plus gouvernes,
> Je cède au mouvements d'une juste colère,
> Et je ne réponds pas de ce que je puis faire.[34]

With such a confession he forfeits all claim to the polished and witty honnêteté Moliere favoured.

The truly honnête characters Molière opposes to Alceste's violence, and Célimène's coquetry are Philinte and Eliante. Alceste deplores Philinte's "l'art de feindre" and accuses him of permitting vice and folly to go unchallenged: "Quoi! vil complaisant, vous

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[34] Le Misanthrope (1664), IV.iii.242.

louez des sottises," (I, ii, 192) he says to him. But the actions of Philinte prove that integrity and honnête conformity are not incompatible. Philinte does not, for example, condone the dishonnête behaviour of Célimène, and he does tolerate Alceste because he is loyal to his friends. Philinte's criticisms are sensible and fully justified. He objects to Alceste's brand of honesty because it shows bad manners, and is unnecessarily wounding. In his eyes Alceste commits the double fault of injuring himself by attempting to change a world which will not change, and of making himself ridiculous in the view of society. "La parfaite raison fuit tout extremité" (I, i, 183) he says, and to try over-zealously to set things right is a fault of judgement, for "Il faut fléchir au temps sans obstination." (I, i, 183). Philinte is fully aware of the imperfections around him, but he is a realist and does not allow what he cannot ameliorate to disturb his equilibrium. He replies to Alceste:

> Oui, je vois ces défauts dont votre âme murmure,
> Comme vices unis à l'humaine nature;
> Et mon esprit enfin n'est pas plus offensé
> De voir un homme fourbe, injuste, intéressé,
> Que de voir des vautours affamés de carnage,
> Des singes malfaisants, et des loups pleins de rage.
> (I, i, 183)

Philinte, in short, like the Chevalier de Méré is able to compromise and so remain within society, while Alceste, judged by Méré's code of honnêteté, becomes a neurotic anomaly and eventually ends in black misanthropy. However, Molière is not unaware of the dangers inherent in this code. If Philinte illustrates the good side of honnêteté, Célimène represents its less attractive aspect. Célimène is perhaps an honnête femme of the type La Rochefoucauld

liked to associate with. She is past master of the bienséances, her conversation is excellent, comprising both wit and tact. But her unique attention to her own pleasure leads her into actions that, according to Molière's moral criterion, are not honnête. Her wit can turn into malice, her civil lies are not sociable but merely dishonest, and her coquetry warrants the charge of coldness and superficiality.

It is unsafe to express an opinion as to whether Molière regarded himself as a libertin or not, for there is too little evidence to support either contention. What is undeniable is that he prefers Nature to religion in his great comedies, and that these do embody the moral attitude characteristic of Montaigne, Charron and intellectual libertins such as Naudé, in that they emphasise moderation, common-sense, healthy joy in life, and tolerance.

PART II

LIBERTINAGE IN ENGLAND

PART II - LIBERTINAGE IN ENGLAND

INTRODUCTION

Libertinage in France first appeared as a force to be reckoned with in the early years of the seventeenth century. It arose at a time when the political and religious atmosphere was relatively free -- in fact contemporary English advocates of religious toleration cited France as their ideal. But this enviable laxness was short-lived. The indifference to religion, and the social and political disorganisation in France which had made it possible soon gave way to absolutism, so that by 1630 not only were the libertins brought to order, but the attitude of the authorities to all departures from orthodox Catholicism became increasingly intolerant. Throughout the rest of the century libertinage was forced to become circumspect, and ideas which caused no alarm in England were in France interpreted as thoroughly subversive.

The libertinage of the followers of Vanini started as opposition to scholasticism and ended as an attack on Christianity itself. They sought alternatives to Aristotelianism in Epicureanism and Pyrrhonism, and Italian heterodox philosophy caught their interest. "Les beaux esprits mécreants" criticised corruption in the Church; they despised its rites and doctrines, and continually attacked anything which savoured of the supernatural. They were known to be "followers of nature" who would have preferred a society where a generous indulgence in sensual pleasure would be admissible.

The same trends of thought, resulting from the general ferment of ideas of the Renaissance, also appeared in England, as is evidenced by the concern of Burton, who in 1618 wrote against

> our great Philosophers and Deists, who, . . . attribute all to natural causes, . . . a peevish Generation of men, that misled by Philosophy,

though for fear of Magistrates, saith Vaninus, they durst not publickly profess it.[1]

At the turn of the century a select coterie known as the "School of Night" professed attitudes very similar to those of the French libertins. The interests of this group were wide, including philosophy, politics, astronomy, geography, and chemistry. What helped to give its members a reputation for atheism was their fascination with alchemy and the occult sciences. Whether they were patently atheist like Marlow and Chapman; deist, as Harriot was believed to be; or ostensibly Christian like Ralegh is immaterial. More important is the fact that they were not dogmatists, and were able to discuss the politics of Machiavelli, the Cabbala, Pyrrhonism, and Stoicism in an atmosphere of full intellectual freedom.[2]

It is clear from the literature of the time that both the harsh materialism of Machiavelli, and a naturalistic primitivism were also current in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. In comparison to France, however, the libertine trend in England was relatively weak, and its manifestations rare and without any great impact until the Restoration.

There are many reasons for the comparative unimportance of libertinage of the French type in England, but perhaps the three main ones are the nature of religious authority in England, the fact that for the whole of the first half of the century questioning energy was in England almost entirely taken up by live interest in, not opposition to religious issues, and, most important when one looks for the equivalents of the libertins érudits, the fact that the English

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[1]Robert Burton, The Anatomy of Melancholy (London, 1923), III, 440.

[2]See M. C. Bradbrook, The School of Night (Cambridge, 1936), for a full discussion of this group.

liberal tendency was towards science rather than philosophy, and empiricism had been successfully cleared of the imputation of sacrilege by Bacon.

In England religious discipline was, of course, very much looser. There was no authoritarian Catholic Church to enforce uniformity of religious outlook, and the English Protestant Church, until the balance was upset by bad statesmanship in the early years of the seventeenth century, had an extremely good record as regards toleration. Elizabeth and her ministers had been willing to make concessions for the sake of peace, and if an appearance of conformity was kept up, private discrepancies in belief were not enquired into. The laws against Catholic recusants were not stringently enforced, and persecution was kept to a minimum. Only the odd Socinian, Anabaptist, or Jesuit convicted of treason were executed. In this environment a group such as Ralegh's "School of Night" could exist undisturbed because it did not constitute a political menace. When later on fanatical intolerance did develop, authoritarianism was impossible because among the numerous outspoken, warring factions there was no one party-line to which uniformity could be enforced. This state of affairs produced a curious contradiction: although none of the various sects desired freedom of conscience and toleration of mutual differences, and all, heatedly engaged in pointing out the others' fallacy, advocated persecution for heresy, there was in fact considerable freedom of opinion.

English intellectuals were in any case not particularly interested in the heterodox philosophical concepts which so fascinated the French libertins. Absorbed as they were in intense argument about doctrinal

differences, most of their intellectual energy was channelled into religious affairs. In such an atmosphere the publication of Nathanael Carpenter's attack on Aristotelianism in Philosophia Libera (1621) caused very little stir. The primitivism and idealism of Théophile and Sorel found religious expression in England in the almost mystical sects of the Diggers and the Levellers; whereas the liberal, sceptical temper of such learned libertins as Gui Patin was paralleled by the spirit of rational enquiry of Hales or Chillingworth who, though much against acrimonious sectarianism, were genuinely pious men.

Perhaps the most marked difference between English and French libertinage is the complete absence in England of the learned libertin. English scholars and scientists had no reason to feel themselves rebels, for Bacon had thoroughly vindicated the study of natural philosophy. In his attack on scholasticism Bacon had managed to turn the tables on those who charged that science savoured of black magic by the counter-charge that the presumptuous a priori reasoning of scholasticism had far more cause to be labelled forbidden knowledge. Roughly speaking, Bacon's position was that it was folly to attempt an understanding of First Causes, but that a knowledge of Second Causes was both possible and practical, and was moreover a very reasonable Christian pursuit. In fact his main defence of natural philosophy was that God is served far better by an active appreciation of his creation, gained through study of minutiae, than by either the presumption of the schoolmen or by pious ignorance.

In England this tendency to regard religious and rational enquiry as compatible, and indeed inseparable, took firm root, and explains why

later it was possible for the virtuosi to remain sincerely pious men. They did not, like Mersenne, compartmentalise religion and science in order to avoid the dangers to orthodoxy that a scientific revaluation of doctrine might bring. On the contrary, the Royal Society thought man's reason should be used in the service of God, and that every new scientific discovery was further proof of His greatness and versatility.

It was not until after the Civil War, when the religious ferment had settled, and cold rationalism began to take its place, that libertinism emerged as a current of opinion of major significance. It was in part a reaction against the rigid joylessness of the Commonwealth, for gay indifference to religion and thoroughgoing debauchery could be construed as signs of loyalty to the new regime. On a different level it manifested itself as a harsh opportunism, resulting from the generally cynical mood of after-war disillusionment. The Wits were receptive both to ideas which had been current for a long time, but which had not until then had a positive impact on the public imagination, and to new anti-orthodox attitudes. It was, for instance, no longer considered necessary to refute the sort of pragmatism recommended by Machiavelli. Among the ideas newly in vogue among the Wits the naturalistic sensationalism of Hobbes occupied a major place.

There were, of course, great differences of emphasis between English and French libertinage, which will be further examined after a discussion of the liberal and libertine trend of thought in England.

Chapter I

Sceptical, Epicurean and Naturalistic currents in England.

Scepticism.

The English adherents of Pyrrhonism were generally not libertines. In France the sceptical attitude was automatically suspect because it constituted a threat to the authority of the Catholic Church, and those who were attracted to it were, more often than not, libertins sheltering behind the mask of fideism. In Protestant England, however, where scepticism was rarely seen as an intellectual force undermining religion, it tended to take quite a different form.

At the turn of the century sceptical doctrines gleaned from Cicero and Seneca had wide currency in England, possibly because they accorded with the mistrust and melancholy which underlay Elizabethan self-confidence and optimism. Montaigne's Essays had been translated by Florio in 1595[1] but the Pyrrhonism of the Apologie for Raymond Sebond seems to have had, at that time, small impact in England. Fulke Greville, whose advice in On Human Understanding (1603) was

> That we do not overbuild our states
> In searching secrets of the Deity,
> Obscurities of Nature, casualtie of Fates:
> But measure find our own Humanity;[2]

probably derived his scepticism from the De Doctrine Ignorantia (1440) of Nicolas da Cusa, and from Cornelius Agrippa's De Incertitudine et

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[1]First published in 1603.

[2]Fulke Greville, Poems and Dramas, ed. Geoffrey Bullough (London, 1938), p. 190.

Vanitate Scientiarum (1527), while Ralegh went directly to the first three books of Sextus Empiricus' Hypotyposes for the material for his Sceptick. In the Sceptick Ralegh illustrates the unreliability of human knowledge, but does not proceed to moral philosophy or to commend the state of ataraxia. The sceptic, he explains, "doth neither affirm, neither deny any position; but doubteth of it, and opposeth his reasons against that which is affirmed or denied to justify his not consenting."[3] Ralegh stresses the deceptiveness of the senses, stating that we have no proof that the object is in reality what we see, since "it is very probable that fishes, men, lions, and dogs, whose eyes so much differ, do not conceive the same object after the same manner."[4] It is equally impossible to arbitrate on intellectual certainty, for "Platonists will believe Plato, but the Epicures Epicurus, the Pythagoreans Pythagoras and other philosophers the masters of their own sects, so that it is doubtful to which of all these we shall give credit."[5]

From the early years of the seventeenth century scepticism in England shows two trends, both different from the type of Pyrrhonism which prevailed in France. For writers as radically sceptical as Donne the new learning caused such doubt and confusion that they refused to accord it any value, and directed all their energies to their own personal approach to God. From this attitude stems much of the fervent religious poetry and prose of the century, which although its rationale is the same, is strikingly different from the

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[3]Sir Walter Ralegh, Works, ed. Oldys and Birch (Oxford, 1829), VIII, 548.

[4]Ibid., p. 549.

[5]Ibid., p. 554.

tepid fideism characteristic of the French libertins. The other important trend was towards the setting up of a double standard of knowledge. Whereas the mysteries of religion were beyond man's comprehension and it was folly to attempt to comprehend them, an understanding of man's own nature, of such subjects as law, politics, or medicine (which had utilitarian value) and of natural phenomena was both possible and commendable. For continental Catholics a philosophy which postulated a separation between faith and reason was suspect, for Catholic dogma is essentially rationalistic, and the view of the Church of Rome, firmly Aristotelian, was that imponderables can be explained. In Protestant England, however, a limited type of scepticism was possible and indeed immensely popular with those whose interests lay in natural philosophy, and was used by them as a weapon of attack on Scholasticism, which they saw as a menace to the new and relatively weak empirical science. This kind of scepticism was adopted by a group of philosophers and religious writers as well as by the virtuosi. While Bacon used sceptical tactics to attack Scholasticism, Lord Herbert of Cherbury could employ them to attack a dogmatism equally stultifying and unpleasant — that of the Protestant sects.

From the beginning of the century sectarian dissension had become increasingly embittered and problems of religion were second to none in importance. Protestants had substituted the authority of the Scriptures for Papal infallibility, but found themselves unable to determine which of the many Protestant sects could be said to interpret Scripture correctly. The question in England was, therefore, not so much whether science had made doctrine untenable, but which set of beliefs was the right one to follow, and what constituted

heresy. Calvinists and Arminians alike were absorbed in intense discussion of doctrinal differences so wide that it seemed impossible to reach any agreement. In view of this, it appeared to a minority of clear-headed, dispassionate thinkers that more tolerance and less intellectual arrogance were required.

The De Veritate of Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1583-1648), which appeared in 1624, is a systematic analysis of what can be known, and of how the processes by which it is known function. The work was undertaken because Herbert saw that "the multitude of sects, divisions, sub-divisions, and cross-divisions in the schools hopelessly distract the wits of the learned and the conscience of the unlettered,"[6] and felt there was a pressing need for an authority based on facts.

In a sense De Veritate was a reply to Montaigne's Apologie pour Raimond Sebond, for Herbert was distinctly opposed to radical scepticism, or fideism:

> a strange and unprecedented philosophy . . . which superseded reason altogether and sought to establish its doctrines upon the basis of implicit faith; inclining, indeed, thereby to that school which taught that it was impossible to know anything. But such a doctrine is unacceptable to our reason, and severs our mental powers in two.[7]

Herbert's own views were midway between scepticism and rationalism. Truth does exist, he asserted "against imbeciles and sceptics,"[8] but it is variable, diverse, difficult to discover, and deceptive.

Herbert's contention that beliefs essential for salvation are in fact rationally compelling shows the same mixture of prudent

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[6]Lord Herbert of Cherbury, De Veritate, ed. Meyrick H. Carré (Bristol, 1937), p. 75.

[7]Ibid., p. 76.

[8]Ibid., p. 83.

scepticism and rationalism. Herbert emphasised individual freedom of judgement, but did not think religious truth is relative. The validity of a religion can be tested by submitting it to five "Common Notions," conditions which are universally accepted. These are: that God exists, that He should be worshipped, and worshipped in a virtuous manner; that sins must be repented; and that death brings final punishment or reward.

The reaction in England to De Veritate and to De Religione Laici (1645) at the time of their publication was tepid, although later Charles Blount, the author of Anima Mundi (1679), and other English deists were stimulated by Herbert's ideas. His works did not give rise to much discussion, because the dominant trend was rather towards Baconian natural philosophy than to Herbert's type of idealistic philosophy. His deism was criticised by some of the clergy, but was in general considered fairly innocuous since it was too intellectual to present a political threat.

On the Continent Herbert's work aroused considerable interest, and was read and criticised by Gassendi, Mersenne and Descartes.[9]

About twenty years later a group of learned and reasonable men of the same turn of mind as Herbert began to meet in the house of Lord Falkland at Great Tew, "not so much for repose, as study: and to examyne and refyne those grosser propositions, which laziness and consent made currant in vulgar conversation."[10]

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[9]Mersenne sent De Veritate to Descartes in 1639. Correspondence between the two concerning Herbert's philosophy is found in René Descartes, Oeuvres, ed. C. Adam and P. Tannery (Paris, 1898), II, 596-97. Gassendi states his views in "Ad Librum d. Edoardi Herberti Angli, De Veritate, Epistola," Opera Omnia (Lyon, 1658), III, 411-19.

[10]Edward, Earl of Clarendon, History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England (1647). This quotation is from Clarendon's "Character" of Lord Falkland, in Characters from the Histories and Memoirs of the Seventeenth Century, ed. D. Nichol Smith (Oxford, 1936), p. 88. Subsequent references will be to this anthology.

Lucius Cary, Viscount Falkland (1610-1643) was typical of the English rational sceptics who were very far removed from their French libertin equivalents, such as Patin or Naudé, but equally far from the dogmatic intolerance of their English contemporaries. Opposed to fanaticism but in no sense a libertine, Falkland was a victim of anxiety in the age of shifting values in which he lived, and unsure of the ultimate authority to appeal to. He was aware that intellect is fallible and that there are, moreover, physical limitations to knowledge. He believed that the core of religious truth, what is necessary for salvation, could be discovered by each individual through rational enquiry, but he felt that with regard to the finer details of points of doctrine the margin of error was so great as to make certainty impossible.

Falkland's accurate analysis of thepolitical situation made him advise caution, and prefer to preserve the status quo rather than risk the violence which would result from an attempt to change it. He was "Enimy to that passyon and uncharitablenesse which he saw produced by difference of opinion in religion,"[12] and hoped that the disparate points of view could be brought into harmony through calm discussion. In 1642, one year before his death, when it was already apparent that passion was going to triumph over moderateness, Falkland rather unwillingly became Secretary of State. In public life his attitude remained equally objective and dispassionate, and the views expressed in Parliament in his speech concerning Episcopacy (1641) were consistent with his privately circulated discourse,

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[12] Characters, D. Nichol Smith, p. 74.

Of the Infallibility of the Church of Rome.

Another temperate and scholarly man who held similar views was John Hales (1584-1650). Hales was initially a Calvinist but came gradually to advocate a form of religion so free and accommodating that his enemies were able to accuse him of Socinianism. In fact

> nothinge troubled him more, then the brawles which were growne from religion, and he therfore exceedingly detested the tyranny of the church of Rome, more for ther imposinge uncharitably upon the consciences of other men, then for ther errors in ther owne opinions, and would often say, that he would renounce the religion of the Church of Englande tomorrow if it oblieged him to believe that any other Christian should be damned.[13]

True to his principles he never attempted to force his ideas on anyone else. Possibly also, being conscious of the defects in human reason he distrusted even his own conclusions. Hales' tolerant ideas, which of their nature did not belong to any particular party, exercised no check on the tide of events. After the ferocity of the Civil War, however, his influence grew, and with the publication of the first edition of Golden Remains in 1657, and later editions in 1673 and 1688, his writings reached a wider audience.

A third man of sceptical and tolerant temper was William Chillingworth (1602-1644). Chillingworth was perhaps the most argumentative and active in defence of his principles of the group at Great Tew, although he too was more a metaphysician than a statesman. Chillingworth was a sceptic by temperament: he loved to read Montaigne and "much delighted in Sextus Empiricus."[14]

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[13] Characters, D. Nichol Smith, p. 74.

[14] John Aubrey, Brief Lives, ed. O.L. Dick (London, 1949), p.64.

According to Clarendon he had "contracted such an irresolution and habit of doubting, that by degrees he grew confident of nothing" and ended with the conviction that "an intire exemption from error was neither inherant in nor necessary to any Church."[15]

The poet Suckling might also be mentioned here. He too was a visitor at Great Tew, and his Account of Religion by Reason (1646) though slight, follows faithfully the latitudinarian ideas of the group.

Falkland, Hales and Chillingworth are remarkable, and original in the age in which they wrote on two counts: first, at a time when religious persecution was fully sanctioned both for the individual's own good and to prevent the spread of infection they argued strongly for the validity of personal judgement. Secondly, although they refused like Herbert to be dogmatic, they made an attempt to discover through reason the essentials of religion.

There is no great discrepancy between the ideas of these English thinkers and their French libertin counterparts. Comparative religion had interested Montaigne as well as Herbert, and had been well discussed by La Mothe le Vayer; French biblical scholars were as learned as Hales or Chillingworth, and libertins like Gui Patin, who were of the Gallican party, had much in common with the English latitudinarians. The really striking difference is that the English thinkers sincerely cared about the fate of religion. Their advice was practical, and although it actually was ignored,

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[15] Characters, D. Nichol Smith, p. 175.

was offered vigorously and constructively. The French sceptics were restricted to caustic, sometimes destructive and so necessarily surreptitious, criticism. Often one feels that the show of piety of these erudite libertins is not altogether sincere. In contrast, the English writers, some of whom occupied important positions in the government, which would have been impossible for men of their frankly liberal persuasion in France, were openly and passionately concerned with the problem of religious tolerance in an age of violence and sharply divided loyalties.

An English sceptic in whose writings there are both similarities and profound dissimilarities to the French erudite libertins was Sir Thomas Browne (1605-1682). Compared to the rational sceptics previously considered, Browne had an intense distrust of reason. He was happy to be conventional in his religious beliefs and liked to follow the "common road". He confessed he had "no Genius to dispute in religion,"[16] and although he was fairly sure he was in the right, preferred to tolerate different opinions rather than oppose them by rational argument. Unlike many of the French libertins, who frequently used the fideist argument to conceal their equivocal attitude to religion, Browne's credo quia impossibile stemmed from genuine piety. In his opinion "there are not impossibilities enough in Religion for an active faith,"[17] and if we "regulate our inclinations by no higher rule than that of our reasons, we are but

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[16]Sir Thomas Browne, Religio Medici, ed. W.A. Greenhill (London, 1950), p. 12.

[17]Ibid., p. 17.

Moralists; Divinity will still call us Heathens."[18] Browne seems to share the sentiments of La Mothe le Vayer when he writes "There are men . . . canonised on earth, that shall never be saints in Heaven . . . who in the eyes of God are not so perfect Martyrs as was that wise Heathen, Socrates,"[19] and in his regret that virtuous pagans should be placed in Hell, "methinks, among those many subdivisions of Hell, there might have been one Limbo left for these."[20] In his research into pagan philosophies and exotic customs he also resembles French writers like Naudé or le Vayer who were following Montaigne, but with the difference that whereas the French stress the dissimilarity of their findings to Christianity and often ironically aim to show the superiority of pagan over Christian customs Browne is happy to discover dimly sketched affinities with Christianity:

> That doctrine of Epicurus, that denied the Providence of God, was no Atheism, but a magnificent and high strained conceit of His Majesty, which he deemed too sublime to mind the trivial Actions of those inferior Creatures. That fatall Necessity of the Stoickes is nothing but the immutable Law of his Will.[21]

Although Browne lived at a time when much attention was accorded rational enquiry and empiricism (his own Pseudodoxica Epidemica was undertaken from scientific motivation), he remained a devout sceptic, and an eccentric Christian humanist, who never, in contrast with some of his French contemporaries, forgot God "as to adore the name of Nature."[22]

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[18] Religio Medici, p. 93.

[19] Ibid., p. 45.

[20] Ibid., p. 84.

[21] Ibid., p. 36.

[22] Ibid., p. 27.

Religio Medici, in spite of its unprogressive character, was extremely popular in England among the Wits: in 1664 it was one of the "three books most esteemed and generally cried up for witt in the world."[23] In France its reception was rather odd. The French rational and clear-cut way of thinking could not accept it as a work of eccentric piety, and interpreted it as either much more, or much less extreme than it actually was. In 1644 a Latin version was published in Paris with a Preface by a Catholic, which stressed Browne's orthodoxy and excused his deviations from the Papist line of thought on grounds that he had had the misfortune to be born English. On the other hand in some quarters Browne acquired the unwarranted reputation of being "un des plus déclarez enemis de toute Religion."[24] Had he been writing in France he might have qualified as a libertin in the tradition of Montaigne and Charron, but even so it is somewhat surprising to find that the libertin Gui Patin entirely misses Browne's genuine piety, and that he should discover in Browne a man like himself, who "cherche maître en fait de Religion et peutêtre n'en trouvera-t-il aucun."[25]

Judging from the writing of Herbert, of the Falkland group, and of Sir Thomas Browne it appears that the influence of scepticism in England was quite strong even before the Restoration. However, English intellectuals who turned to scepticism cannot be called

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[23]Samuel Pepys, Diary, ed. J. Warrington, from Mynor Bright (London, 1953), III, 480.

[24]Marginal note in an edition of Religio Medici in the Bibliothèque Nationale, quoted by Greenhill, Religio Medici, p. ix.

[25]Gui Patin, Naudeana et Patiniana (Paris, 1701), p. 12.

libertines, because unlike those of their French counterparts, the libertins érudits, their ideas did not come into conflict with religious or social authority.

Epicureanism.

In England there was little precise knowledge of Epicureanism until the middle of the seventeenth century, when the influence of Gassendi's scholarly rehabilitation of Epicurus' real doctrines began to be felt. Previously the epicure had been represented simply as a sensualist, like de Valla's Panormita,[26] at the opposite pole to the stoic. A few Elizabethans, Sydney and Greville among them, were acquainted with Bruno's Degli Eroici Furori (1583). Ficino's De Voluptate, which was a fair account of Epicureanism, was known to serious readers, and Lucretius' De Natura Rerum was accessible in continental editions. Popularly, however, until the 1650's an "epicure" meant only an overfed voluptuary, and no-one had put forward the claims of Epicureanism as a serious philosophy fully compatible with Christianity.[27]

Its revival in England started with the publication of Walter Charleton's Epicurus' Morals, Collected Partly out of his own Greeke Text, in Diogenes Laertius', and partly out of the Rhapsodies of Marcus Aurelius, Plutarch, Cicero, and Seneca (1656). Charleton prefaced this work with an "Apology" in which he admitted the atheism

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[26] In De Voluptate (1431).

[27] The epicure's hearty, healthy enjoyment of the good things of life did have a certain charm when compared with the stark pessimism of some Elizabethan Calvinists, and Falstaffian figures in Elizabethan literature put up a sturdy opposition to the restrictions of Puritanism, without, of course, pretending to any form philosophic basis.

of his author but thought that if Epicurus could have had the benefit of modern "illumination" he would certainly have been a Christian.

In the same year the more impartial Sir Thomas Stanley translated parts of Gassendi's De Vita Epicuri and Syntagma Philosophiae for his History of Philosophy. From Epicurus the wave of interest extended to Lucretius, parts of whose De Natura Rerum were rather suspiciously translated by Evelyn in 1656, inimically by Thomas Creech in 1682, and enthusiastically by Dryden in 1685.

Interest in Epicureanism became so lively at the time largely because of the virtuosi. Although many scientists were attracted by Democritic atomism, an interest in "corpuscular philosophy" in 1650 did not necessarily denote a leaning toward atheism. Bacon had been curious about this type of materialism; so were many Puritan scientists.

Neither was a liking for Epicurus' moral philosophy necessarily irreligious. Here there is a marked difference between the English and the French writers. The two main points in Epicurus' moral teaching are that the summum bonum is pleasure, to be gained by self-cultivation and control, and that contentment comes from solitary meditation, when the passions have been subdued. It was the second aspect, the "philosophy of the garden," which appealed to seventeenth century English poets.

A predilection for solitude and the contemplative life, undoubtedly nourished by the stress of political events, need not of course have any specific connection with the philosophy of Epicurus. Marvell's garden poetry, for example, is inspired not by the pagan

philosophers but by Christian mysticism. However, it is interesting to note in passing that while Marvell borrowed certain ideas and images for his garden poetry from the French libertin poets Théophile and St. Amant,[28] who were very Epicurean in outlook,[29] and while Fairfax and Mrs. Phillips translated St. Amant's "La Solitude", none of the cruder aspects of French libertine Epicureanism seeped into English garden poetry.

The French libertin aspiration was more primitivistic; in order to approach again the ideal state of affairs when men lived like gods in innocent sensuality, they recommended retiring from the world, though invariably in the company of a mistress. Most English addicts of Epicurus differed radically in that they excluded sensuality from their country paradise: their retreat is as free from the disturbances of sensual passion as it is from envy, contention, and opportunism in the world. Katherine Phillips, the "matchless Orinda," writes:

> Let some in Courtship take Delight,
> And to th' "Exchange" resort;
> There Revel out a Winters' Night,
> Not making Love, but Sport.
> These never know a noble Flame,
> 'Tis Lust, Scorn, or Design . . .
> But I, resolved from within,
> Confirmed from without,
> In Privacy intend to spin
> My future minutes out.
> And from this Hermitage of mine
> I banish all Wild Toys . . . . [30]

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[28]See M.C. Bradbrooke, "Marvell and the Poetry of Rural Solitude," RES, XVII (1941), 37-46, and R. Wallerstein, Studies in Seventeenth Century Poetic (Wisconsin, 1950), 307-7.

[29]They had adopted as part of their libertin philosophy a type of Epicureanism which stressed "natural" sensuality, in which they were influenced more by Vanini's De Admirandis Naturae Arcanis (1616) than by Montaigne.

[30]Katherine Phillips, Poems on Several Occasions (London, 1710), p. 128.

Cowley also approved of the wisdom of Epicurus' retreat from the world to a garden:

> When Epicurus to the World had taught,
> That Pleasure was the chiefest Good,
> (And was perhaps i'th'right, if rightly understood)
> His Life he to his Doctrine brought,
> And in a Garden's shade that Sovereign Pleasure sought:
> Whoever a true Epicure would be,
> May there find cheap and virtuous Luxurie.[31]

Cowley's Epicureanism is better balanced and more joyful than the spiritual Orinda's. In his whimsical tribute to the grasshopper,

> voluptuous, and Wise with all,
> Epicurean animal[32]

he makes it plain that physical pleasures are not to be despised. The admirable grasshopper drinks, dances and sings, but its pleasures are sinless and well arranged:

> Thou dost innocently joy;
> Nor does thy Luxury destroy,[33]

Later, when country retreat became the vogue, Roscommon, Cotton, and the old Wycherley were warmly in favour of a serene, unstressed retirement from the world.[34] Wycherley, probably reacting against his own early exaggerated claims for sensual indulgence as well as against the universal dishonesty of public life, argued in his poem "For Solitude and Retirement, against the Active and Publick Life," that:

> Alone, remov'd from Grandeur and from Strife,
> And ev'ry Curse that loads a publick Life,
> In Safety, Innocence, and full Repose,
> Man the true Worth of his Creation knows. . .
> To him, with humble Privacy content,
> Life is, in Courts, and gawdy Pride, mis-spent.[35]

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[31]Abraham Cowley, Essays, Plays and Sundry Verses, ed. A.R. Waller (Cambridge, 1906), p. 424.

[32]Abraham Cowley, Poems, ed. A.R. Waller (Cambridge, 1905), p. 57.

[33]Ibid., p. 57.

[34]The vogue of country retirement owed much also to the influence of Horace.

[35]William Wycherley, Complete Works, ed. Montague Summers (London, 1924) IV, 135.

After the Restoration, although the attitude of some admirers of Epicurus such as Sir William Temple and Evelyn (before he began to have his doubts) continued to be morally orientated, the majority of the Court Wits were not at all attracted by the prospect of virtuous solitude. They in fact committed the common mistake of confusing Epicurean with Cyrenaic dicta, and at the same time took pains to highlight the discreditable side to the philosophy. Far from toning down its essentially egotistical aspect, as an honnête homme like St. Évremond would do, the Wits deliberately accentuated it, interpreting "seeking pleasure" carnally and amorally. Influenced by the gloomy grandeur of Lucretius they underlined the atheistic implications of Epicureanism; and in some of their more serious verses stressed the idea that the gods, if they exist, are remote, and that immortality is most unlikely. In addition the Wits found Democritic materialism scarcely distinguishable from that of Hobbes, whom they had also elaborately misunderstood.

The result of the Wits' adoption of Epicureanism was that by 1685 the philosophy had become the hallmark of a libertine, and was discredited to such an extent that the devout scientist Boyle considered its materialism as virulent as Hobbes'. The wheel had turned full circle and Epicureanism had regained its old renown of advocating nothing but carnal licence.[36]

Naturalism.

Seventeenth century libertines inherited medieval definitions of nature as well as Renaissance conflicts and doubts concerning

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[36]The change in intellectual atmosphere after the Restoration is very clearly shown by the case of Cowley. Cowley valued Epicurus' teaching and admired Hobbes, and found nothing inconsistent with religion in the philosophy of either of them. By the 1680's Boyle, who like Cowley was both a Christian and a supporter of experimental science, found both Epicurus' and Hobbes' teachings insupportable, undoubtedly as a result of the malevolent influence of their protagonists the Wits.

these definitions. "Nature" in medieval terminology could be defined in either of three ways: as the benevolent hierarchical order created and directed by a Supreme Power for man's good, as the physical laws of the universe which can be understood by and to a certain extent controlled by man, and lastly as man's own nature, open to government by reason so that he may follow the path of virtue.[37]

Towards the end of the sixteenth century arguments concerning each of these three definitions of nature became vehement, set in motion by political and economic changes, by scientific advances, and by the more precise influence of Montaigne and Machiavelli. Some of the questions which troubled curious intellects of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century were: first, whether nature was benevolent, simply inanimate, or fundamentally evil. Secondly, if there was indeed a transcendental power, or if nature was wholly explicable by physical laws. Thirdly, whether laws and customs were man-made, as Montaigne had hinted, and if by following them man was perhaps denying his true nature. Fourthly, whether man's nature was essentially evil, as Machiavelli had inferred.

The libertines' opinion usually inclined to the newer, iconoclastic and unconventional side of the argument but, until the Restoration, when materialism had obtained the strong support of Hobbsian philosophy their views when they appear in literature are almost always shown defeated by the more orthodox argument. In order to have a clearer picture it may not be out of place to describe the various libertine ideas of the nature of nature in more detail.

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[37] Natura dea, natura naturans and natura naturata.

That there was towards the end of the sixteenth century current doubt as to whether nature was a benevolent order or simply brute, irrational power is evidenced by Spenser's ambiguous picture of nature in the Mutabilitie Cantos:

> Her head and face was hid that mote to none appeare.
> That, some doe say, was so by skill devized,
> To hide the terror of her uncouth hew, . . .
> For that her face did like a Lion shws, . .
> But others tell that it so beauteous was,
> And round about such beames of splendor threw,
> That it the Sunne a thousand times did pass . . . [38]

The liberals of the Renaissance were becoming less sure that nature was a rational arrangement in some way an expression of the nature of God. Certainly Calvinists inclined heavily to the belief that Creation since the Fall is corrupt, and their horror of worldliness brought them close to the notion that matter is wholly evil.

The medieval conviction that virtue consisted in every component in nature, including man, remaining subservient to the whole and not deviating from its proper place in the pattern suffered setbacks for secular as well as religions reasons. The restless spirit of the Renaissance was against passive obedience and increasingly sceptical of the grounds for authority, and Elizabethans preferred to think of man controlling his environment rather than functioning as a mere cog in a well ordered machine. Self reliance, political acumen, efficiency in the management of affairs became commendable qualities, and the relentlessly sensible man a type to be admired. To "follow nature" could therefore mean to be guided by common sense. When Edmund in King Lear proclaims:

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[38]Edmund Spenser, Poetical Works, ed. J.C. Smith and E. de Selincourt (Oxford, 1912), VII, 5-6.

> Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law
> My services are bound. (I, ii)

the law he refers to is probably the pragmatic law of common-sense. Edmund, an out-and-out pragmatist, disregards astral warnings, and interprets law and custom either as superstition or convenience, rather than parts of a meaningful pattern ordained by God. Some of Edmund's characteristics — his political intelligence, energy, resourcefulness and lack of superstition — are admirable; in another context basically the same attributes make up the character of the perfect king. However, Edmund is shown consistently using his considerable talents not to uphold order but to corrupt it. It is just, therefore, that he should contain the elements of his own destruction, as does Tourneur's D'Amville, another late Machiavellian villain who held the same opinions.

D'Amville, in The Atheist's Tragedy, contends that nature helps those who help themselves,

> For it follows
> That Nature, since herself decay doth hate,
> Should favour those that strengthen their estate.[39]

He too judges entirely pragmatically: there can be no Supreme Power beyond nature because no supernatural intervention has checked his nefarious rise to power. Laws and customs, he believes, can be changed by the enterprising man to suit his own purposes. But that D'Amville is under a delusion is made perfectly plain by the circumstances of his end, when he is shown completely thrown off his course by adversity, and forced to recant his materialism. His conclusion is

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[39]Cyril Tourneur, The Atheist's Tragedy (I, iv) in Plays of Webster and Tourneur, ed. J.A. Symonds (London, 1888), p. 279.

"Nature is a Fool."

Characteristic of the naturalistic villain is his refusal to be dominated by common moral laws. Floodlit in drama from Ford's T'is Pity to Suckling's Aglaura this often takes the form of a defiance of the laws against incest. Tourneur's D'Amville argues:

> These distances affinity observes
> Are articles of bondage cast upon
> Our freedoms by our own objections. (IV, iii, 311)

This view is also reflected in Donne's early libertine poetry:

> How happy were our Syres in ancient times . . .
> Kindreds were not excepted from the bonds
> Which with the Persian still in usage stands.[40]

A preoccupation with incest is the most melodramatic manifestation of a type of naturalism which, assisted by the sober influence of Montaigne, was beginning to assert more hold on the popular imagination. The idea that one should give one's natural appetites free play and refuse to be bound by systems based on reason, which very often ran counter to what is good for the individual was far from new.[41] From Chaucer onwards there had been attacks in literature undermining the assumptions of Courtly Love, and pleas for a more robust appreciation of life's pleasures. Donne's anti-Petrarchan, licentious poetry puts the case for behaviour based on a more realistic view of man's nature most persuasively, and in much the same terms as do French libertin poets of the first quarter of the century. His point of view was more or less that to live according to nature meant to trust

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[40]John Donne, Poems, ed. Sir Herbert Grierson (Oxford, 1933), p. 101.

[41]See Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas, Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity (Baltimore, 1935).

instinct and sensual evidence more than reason, to accept that man's appetites predispose him to change rather than constancy and that women are naturally lascivious, and to refuse to be bound by restrictive man-made law and customs which are perversions of the original primitive norm. Provocatively he put forward the idea that primitive society when all lived according to nature, was a good deal happier than the present servitude to unnatural moral restraints:

> Women were then no sooner asked than won.
> And what they did was honest and well done.
> But since this title honour hath been us'd,
> Our weak credulity hath been abus'd,
> The golden laws of nature are repeal'd,
> Which our first Fathers in such reverence held;
> Our liberty's revers'd, our Charter's gone,
> And we're made servants to opinion . . . [42]

A rather wistful primitivism (the idea that man has fallen from the original perfection of the Golden Age), and the contention that if animals can enjoy themselves freely there is every reason for intelligent man to do so, are commonplaces of this type of naturalism. They are, however, usually stated antagonistically and in the drama at least the naturalistic attitude is invariably corrected. Tourneur's Lividulcia, a woman who boasts of the strength of her appetites, dies, while the "dormice" she reviled live on as reward for chastity. The lust of Suckling's Aglaura is also punished, and in comedy Freevill and Malheureux, characters in Marston's Dutch Courtesan, realise the error of their views and are reconverted to virtue, in spite of the fact that their libertinism had reached

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[42] Donne, Poems, p. 101.

the advanced state where Malheureux could declaim:

> O you happy beasts!
> In whom an inborn heat is not held sin,
> How far transcend you wretched, wretched man,
> Whom national custom, tyrannous respects
> Of slavish order, fetters, lames his power,
> Calling that sin in us which in all things else
> Is Nature's highest virtue.[43]

The primitivistic view of nature, although it is important, is perhaps less dominant in English libertinage than in French. Of Machiavellian naturalism the opposite is true. This type of harsh pragmatism was especially significant in English libertinage.

Machiavelli had declared outright that man's nature was evil. No moral stigma could be attached to gratification of the natural appetites but of necessity they must be controlled if the result were not to be a dangerous universal chaos. Laws were therefore essential but their existence was justified strictly pragmatically and not from any absolute moral standard.

Machiavelli advised his Prince to adopt ruthless and amoral behaviour for the public good, but was far from suggesting that these strictly political principles should be followed by every individual in a sophisticated war against his fellows.

As previously noted, political pragmatism, ruthless in execution but on the whole benevolent in intent, appears in Shakespear's historical plays. But although the Elizabethans realised that there was something to be said for Machiavellianism, and although it was in tune with the times, it did inspire horror, for

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[43]John Marston, The Dutch Courtesan (II, i) in Works, ed. A.H. Bullen (London, 1887), p. 25.

the weight of traditional ethics was not easily contravened. The politic Machiavellian of Elizabethan drama therefore appears as a rebel against order and moral law, a clever, vindictive atheist who lives on his wits and exploits his environment in his own interest. The law of nature he invokes is the law of the animal kingdom, that the strong and cunning naturally win success over the less ferocious and intelligent. He is, however, invariably defeated, and the supremacy of traditional morality affirmed.

As the century wore on the Machiavellian naturalist of drama gradually underwent a change. There are of course numerous sensational villains and Italian poisoners in Jacobean and Caroline Drama, but they were regarded with more derision than fear, and the naturalistic attributes of the type passed over into comedy. In comedy "followers of nature," amoral, egocentric sensualists and epicures merit ridicule, and though allowed to express their views, end discredited. That their aberrations were not felt as tragic but allowed as subjects of comedy is symptomatic of the fact that they were no longer profoundly disturbing. They warrant intellectual discussion, they are criticised for their foolish, anti-social extremism, but their ruthless opportunism is underplayed because it was beginning to be tacitly accepted.

The experiences of the Civil War pointed to the fact that Machiavelli's concept of homo homine lupus was probably correct, and certainly activated Hobbes' political thinking. It began to seem sensible to accept without condemnation that human actions are motivated by acquisitiveness and self-interest and to aim, in the general struggle for advancement to turn others' weaknesses to

one's own advantage. This change of attitude is mirrored in literature. The super-villain compounded entirely of strength and cunning makes a brief appearance in Heroic Drama, and the poetry of the Wits shows that the appeal of an amoral "living according to nature" based on expediency was very strong. It is in Restoration comedy, however, that the evidence for a change of attitude is most marked. Here the machinations of the naturalistic libertine heros are condoned and enjoyed, and they are no longer forced to recant. If they capitulate to marriage, they do not do so because of the superiority of order, stoic virtue, or Christian morality has been proved, however lightly, but because it is to their own advantage.

There are, then, two main attitudes to nature and "following nature" current among the English libertines, both of which are in conflict with the orthodox Aristotelian version of nature as a purposive, benevolently constructed pattern. One view is characterised by an insistence on following the natural appetites and a refusal to accept the authority of moral laws and customs. To "follow nature" is to approximate to the primitive state of affairs when men were as happy and incorrupt as animals. It is this naturalism which is behind the many libertine lyrics in praise of inconstancy by among others Donne, Beaumont, Suckling and Carew, and which is the philosophy of the light-hearted "epicure" in the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher, and Marston. The other concept of nature which pervades seventeenth century libertinism, becoming more significant after the Restoration, is Machiavellian and Hobbsian. In this view the universe is mechanistic and man an animal fundamentally destructive if not actually evil, who cannot be

blamed for his predaciousness. In literature these two anti-traditional ideas of Nature finally meet and blend in the lyrics and comedies of the Restoration Wits, who, as will be seen, deliberately misconstrued Hobbes' theory of appetites, using it as a defence of immorality.

Chapter II

The Royal Society and Hobbes.

On Wits bent on questioning the established order two of the most vital influences in a most disturbing environment of "Enlightenment" were the Royal Society and Thomas Hobbes. The attitudes of both Hobbes and the members of the Royal Society stemmed from a preoccupation with the material problems of the age, and both were fundamentally sceptical. However, though the more intelligent Wits were naturally interested in the results of experiments which they could construe as undermining the assumptions of conventional law, morality and religion, they were not on the whole in awe of the Royal Society. They tended to ridicule the deadly earnestness, the obsession with minutiae, the pomposity and piety of its members, and found their reading of Hobbes very much more stimulating.

The Royal Society was most careful to dissociate itself from Hobbism and to protect itself from the misinterpretation of the libertine Wits. The philosopher Hobbes was far more unorthodox, and also far more sceptical than the scientists of the day, for the avowed aim of the Royal Society was to distrust untested knowledge, but not to preclude the possibility of certainty. The members of the Royal Society attacked scholasticism's "dry Spinosities, lean Notions, and endless Alterations about things of nothing,"[1] but were equally averse to radical scepticism, holding it an evidence of "superstition

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[1]Joseph Glanvil, Scepsis Scientifica, ed. J. Owen (London, 1885), p.lix.

sottishly ignorant in Phancying, that the knowledge of Nature tends to Irreligion."[2] Hooke, writing in 1663, puts the aims of the Society very clearly:

> this Society will not own any hypothesis, system or doctrine of the principles of naturall philosophy, proposed or mentioned by any philosopher ancient or modern, nor the explication of any phenomena whose recourse must be had to originall causes . . . nor dogmatically define, nor fix axioms of scientificall things, but will question and canvass all opinions, adopting nor adhering to none, till by mature debate and clear arguments, chiefly such as are deduced from legitimate experiments, the truth of such experiments be demonstrated invincibly.[3]

Primarily this attitude attempted to define the Society's opposition to scholasticism and pure rationalism, but it also ran the danger of being misinterpreted by the libertines because religious truth, of course, cannot be tested by such methods. Realising this, the scientists were constantly on the alert to protect themselves from charges that their research was injurious to religion, by explaining that they laid only a limited claim to knowledge of reality, and that in their present state of knowledge they did not presume to draw conclusions about the nature of ultimate truth. They made haste to point out that every discovery they made about the nature of the world around them indicated more clearly the richness of creation and made it logically impossible to disbelieve in a beneficent Creator.

Bishop Sprat, a most conventional churchman who believed in a constant Providence and in revealed religious truth, defended the Society's promotion of research on grounds that its results would

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[2] Scepsis Scientifica, p.lvi.

[3] C. R. Weld, History of the Royal Society (London, 1848), p.147. Quoted From Robert Hooke's MSS Papers.

"teach us a Wisdom which springs from the depths of knowledge, to shake off the shadows, and to scatter the mists, which fill the minds of men with a vain consternation."[4] He considered natural science a very proper study for a Christian, since the scientist

> will best understand the infinite distance between himself, and his Creator, when he finds that all things were produc'd by Him; whereas he by all his study, can scarce imitate the least effects, nor hasten, or retard the common course of Nature . . . hence he will be led . . . to direct his praises aright: which no doubt, when they are offered up to Heaven, from the mouth of one, who has well studied what he commends, will be more suitable to the Divine Nature, than the blind applause of the Ignorant.[5]

The scientist, however, must always limit his inquiries to Second Causes, and even in this restricted field the particular rather than the general must be stressed, for truth is only slowly revealed on the accumulation of evidence scrupulously collected from experiments.

The opinions of Robert Boyle (1627-91) were even more conciliatory. He too felt that it was more useful to explain phenomena at hand than to try to understand ultimate truths. He pointed out that the age for more or less accurate generalisation had not yet arrived -- if indeed it ever would. Man's range of knowledge is small, and what he thinks he knows now is so uncertain that later it may well prove wrong: "What pleased me for a while, as fairly comporting with the observations on which such notions were grounded, was soon after disgraced by some further or new experiments."[6]

The religiously oriented Boyle was concerned about the effect scientific scepticism could have if construed wrongly by the libertines.

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[4]Thomas Sprat, History of the Royal Society, 2nd ed., (London, 1702), p. 362.

[5]Ibid., p. 349.

[6]Robert Boyle, Works, ed. Thomas Birch (London, 1672), III, 307.

Light-headed libertines, he feared, were capable of causing considerable damage to the cause of religion, because they did not have the intelligence and depth to see that the most eloquent proofs of religion were precisely those which do come from an area outside man's understanding. He therefore devoted much of his time to combating libertine and agnostic ideas, and to this end founded the Boyle Lectures (in 1691) so that difficulties raised by science could in the future be seriously discussed and reconciled with religion.

The ideas of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) were the chief source of alarm for the pious virtuosi. The Wits, on the other hand, were attracted by the clarity of Hobbes' materialism, for it seemed to them eminently reasonable that Galileo's conception of a mechanical order existing in the universe of matter should be extended to the movements of the mind.

Hobbes shared with Lucretius the view that the entire universe consists of material atoms moving in space:

> The whole mass of all things that are, is corporeal, that is to say, body; and hath the dimensions of magnitude, namely length, breadth, and depth, . . . that which is not body, is no part of the universe: and because the universe is all, that which is no part of it is nothing, and consequently nowhere.[7]

Man is composed of the same qualities as the rest of the universe, and his soul is also material. His mental activity is dependent on his material make-up in precisely the same way as the atomic composition of the universe is responsible for its physical movements. Hobbes thought that consistent mental movements, corresponding to

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[7]Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, ed. M. Oakeshott (Oxford, 1955), p. 440.

the physical movements in the universe, can be distinguished in man's nature. He observed that man is governed by two mental movements -- Appetite and Aversion -- and that the individual's conception of what is good for him makes him act either to further his progress towards the summum bonum, or to avert factors which hinder his advance towards it. The summum bonum is not an absolute (Hobbes never attempted a facile equation of the ultimate good with virtue), but is different for each individual. It can never be attained, and therefore man's mental condition is never static: "To have no desire, is to be dead."[8] What is desired is not freedom from pain, or a state of balance, but "that which is more vehement."[9]

Hobbes defined Will as the ability to make a reasoned choice of the best of two alternatives, but at the same time he insisted that Will is not free because, in choosing, man is governed by his natural appetites, which are brutally egotistical and can all be reduced to the desire for power. Power, however, cannot be gained without superiority over others, and the result of an attempt to gain such superiority is war. It is then that the reality of death as an annihilation becomes evident and forces men to take measures to restrain their brute natures in order to preserve their lives. Driven by fear they contract to accept some authority which will rule and protect them from self-destruction; yet even this contract which they seem to make of their own volition, is determined, because it is a consequence of their own nature which leads them inevitably to make it.

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[8] Leviathan, p. 46.

[9] Ibid.

Hobbes' evaluations are strictly pragmatic. Logically he defined virtue as the keeping of civil law, and for him religion, though generated by fear and weakness, had its value, chiefly because of its civilising and orderly effect. Where religion is not pragmatically justified Hobbes ignored it. He conceded that the mysteries of faith may have a therapeutic value, like "wholesome pills for the sick," but did not pursue the subject further because it was outside his range of interest.

Although Hobbes was able to explain almost anything in human experience which caught his attention by means of this intriguingly simple mechanistic conception of the nature of man, his philosophy is actually profoundly sceptical. He thought that man, in common with animals can know through sense perception, but that any more subtle certainty, dependent on reason, is questionable. Language, the naming and categorising of things, is a necessary prerequisite for reason, but according to Hobbes there is no inherent necessity for the naming of an object, and no possibility that each individual will regard it in exactly the same way. Reason always depends on a primary supposition, but as no two human beings can be trusted to interpret an object similarly there can be no foundation for certainty on which to ground reason. Therefore, since we can comprehend nothing except through unreasoned sensation, the assertion that we have knowledge of the nature of God and His relationship with mankind is untenable. God can be posited as First Cause, and that is all.

Hobbes was extremely wary in the expression of such audacious philosophy, and peppered his writing with quotations from Scripture.

Two factors afforded him additional protection: first, his political ideas offered strong support to the current trend of absolutism, and secondly he was able to do a great deal of damage to the actual fabric of religion under cover of a fervent and patriotic Protestantism. Nevertheless, Hobbes' contemporaries were well aware of how dangerous his views were to religion.

At a time when all the protagonists in the intellectual battle seemed to be vying with each other in proclaiming the profundity of their scepticism, Hobbes' position was that of a pragmatist who detested both scholastic dogmatism and the scientific empiricism of the Royal Society. He thought it impossible to prove any truth, but believed that if acting as if a certain hypothesis were true produced more fruitful results than acting as if it were not, then this hypothesis would be more valid, "truer," than its alternatives.

The virtuosi, who also described themselves as sceptics, counter-attacked by accusing Hobbes of intellectual arrogance. Their view was that Hobbes himself could not be knowledgeable enough to affirm categorically that nothing could be known. His mechanistic philosophy derived from his fascination with mathematics, but as his enemies did not fail to point out, Hobbes was a bad mathematician, and more credence should be given the conclusions of genuine scientists such as Descartes, whose learning, far from destroying their faith, had strengthened it. Extending the attack from Hobbes to the libertines Glanvil noted that if Hobbes' theories were glib and unsubstantiated, how much more unfounded were those of "divers of the brisker Geniusses, who desire rather to be accounted Witts, then endeavour to be so," and who

"have been willing to accept Mechanism upon Hobbian conditions."[10]

The dynamism of Hobbes did indeed exert considerable influence on the Wits, who were charmed by his audacity and either unwilling to or incapable of evaluating his inconsistencies or scientific errors. Worried churchmen feared that Hobbes' mortalism, and his idea that the soul was material would remove deterrents to sin, and that his determinism would provide the libertines with an excuse for every immoral action they liked to commit. The Wits' conduct was not reassuring. They found Hobbes' theory of the mechanical nature of the passions congenial to their mood, and agreed with his accusation that, for its own dark reasons, the Church had for centuries rebuked as sinful behaviour that was simply natural.[11] In fact, they often interpreted Hobbes as vindicating sensual license, which was far from his intention. In an attempt to find an explantion of their own adolescent and exaggerated behaviour they scaled down Hobbes' serious political philosophy to fit their small social world, so that Hobbes' horrible vision of acquisitive and brutal men warring against each other appears in Restoration comedy as the battle of the sexes, while his analysis of the will for power as the dominant appetite is dramatised in the ranting supermen of Heroic Drama.

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[10] Scepsis Scientifica, p.lviii.

[11] This was the usual libertine line of attack on the Church. It was Lucretius' contention, and is of course repeated again and again in the writings of the French libertins.

Chapter III

English patterns for the successful life.

Sir William Temple; Sir Francis Osborne.

In France one very large section of the libertin persuasion is distinguished not by the vehemence of its intellectual beliefs but by its adherence to a formal code of behaviour, of which the values were Epicurean and the emphasis on agreeable social relations, and moderate and elegant worldly diversions. In England the precepts of honnêteté carried little weight with the libertines. Though the wits were attracted by fashionable polish they despised ultra-refinement as foppery — in high society the vogue was to be witty, but at the same time crudely dissolute. There was in fact no real equivalent to the restrained sophistication of the French libertin honnête homme. One does not look to find libertines among the Sir Fopling Flutters who dedicated themselves to the perfection of courtly graces, nor do those (usually older) men who felt the moral attraction of Epicureanism qualify as libertines. The distinctive mode of libertine behaviour in England was cynical, aggressive and opportunist, and Epicureanism was interpreted by the libertine wits as counselling not a tranquil, unstressful existence but lively, egotistical participation in sensual pleasures.

The measure of the difference between French and English libertinage can perhaps best be illustrated by examining two equally thoughtful but otherwise totally dissimilar patterns for the successful life. That of Sir William Temple comes closest to the ideal of the French honnête homme, but is by English standards hardly libertine

at all. The advice of the sagacious realist Sir Francis Osborne, on the other hand, though it comes from a spokesman of an older generation, was very much in keeping with the outlook of the arrivist Wits.

The attitude of Sir William Temple (1628-1692) seems more French than English, and had he lived in France his particular blend of scepticism and Epicureanism would have admirably fitted him for the category of libertin and honnête homme. However, his philosophic affinities with the French libertin honnête homme should not be allowed to obscure the fact that Temple's way of thought is typically English. His adoption of the "garden philosophy" was so complete that he did actually retire to comparative solitude at Moor Park, a course of action which in France only illness or banishment would have forced an honnête homme of Epicurean bent to follow.

Temple's life was a fairly conventional one for a gentleman of the time. He had travelled widely in Europe, and carried out several diplomatic missions. He was at Court, and when young had "lived two or three years . . . in the usual entertainments of young and Idle men."[1] He was well read, his main enthusiasm in literature was for the classics, and he considered no learning outside moral philosophy particularly valuable. As he was not interested in natural science, and distrusted the idea of progress, his attitude to questions current in his day was somewhat old-fashioned. He preferred to centre his attention on man, and on what philosophy he

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[1]Lady Gifford, "Life and Character of Sir William Temple," Early Essays and Romances of Sir William Temple, ed. G.C. Moore Smith (Oxford, 1930), p. 6.

should adopt to be most happy in his environment.

Temple's favourite guides in the formulating of moral philosophy were Aristotle, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Socrates, Epicurus, and among more modern writers, Montaigne, — a list which indicates fairly clearly what his point of view in philosophy would be. His analysis of man's nature is realistic. In his essay "Upon the Gardens of Epicurus" he acknowledges that man possesses the gift of reason, which raises him above the beasts and gives him enormous advantage over them, but he observes also that reason furnishes him with desires which lead to restlessness, discontent, and the necessity to devote most of his energy "to subdue and divert them." Man alone "is born crying, lives complaining and dies disappointed,"[2] is troubled by ambition, the urge for riches, honour and power. Since happiness is what we really desire, the wise man will use his reason to find out which philosophy best conduces to it. So, ironically enough, the only sensible use of reason is to "allay those disorders which itself had raised,"[3] in order to reach a state of peace which, it is implied, beasts ungifted with reason have never forsaken.

Pragmatically Temple concludes that man attains greatest happiness when he has reached "tranquillity of mind, and indolence of body."[4] Although most traditional philosophic systems, in spite of their differences and contentions, arrive at this same conclusion, there is no particular recipe for achieving such happiness. Temple's

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[2]Sir William Temple, "Upon the Gardens of Epicurus," Miscellanies in Four Essays (Glasgow, 1761), p. 53.

[3]Ibid., p. 61.

[4]Ibid., p. 62.

own method is flexible. He thinks that health, material benefits and a sensible control of one's impulses are helpful, that "Public business is the most contrary to all others to that tranquillity of mind,"[5] books promote nothing but a "busy idleness," and that true pleasure is to be found in "temperance, rather than satisfying the senses."[6] One must bear adversity stoically, not be too disturbed by others' distress, and resolve "neither to disquiet life with the fear of death, nor death with the desire of life; but in both, and in all things else, to follow nature."[7] Self-knowledge is all the knowledge one should attempt, or is capable of attaining, for: "all the different schemes of nature that have been drawn, of old or of late, by Platon, Aristotle, Epicurus, Des Cartes, Hobbes, or any other that I know of, seem to agree in one thing, which is the want of demonstration or satisfaction, to any thinking and unprepossessed man."[8]

To place one's confidence in science is vain, for more of man's ignorance is revealed with every advance. Since the fundamental character of man has not changed or progressed throughout civilised history, small discoveries made about the natural world are of little importance; what man gains in one field he loses in another, and his periods of greatness wax and wane. In this Temple was against the tide of opinion in England and closer to the temper of French libertins such as Gabriel Naudé.

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[5]"Upon the Gardens of Epicurus," p. 66.

[6]Ibid., p. 61.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid., p. 60.

Basically sceptical Temple disliked both the optimistic empiricism and the naive piety of the virtuosi. His scepticism, however, bears no resemblance to Browne's fideism, and its descent cannot be traced from the typically English rational scepticism of Herbert. Hobbes' philosophy was equally alien to his way of thinking. He was probably most influenced by Montaigne, on whose essays he modelled his earlier writings. Like Montaigne he refused to consider imponderables, but thought that all studies appertaining to man, such as history, comparative religion and moral philosophy, deserved attention.

As far as his Epicureanism is concerned Temple is more akin to the libertin admirer of Montaigne, St. Évremond, than to the English Wits with their exaggerated concentration on sensual pleasure. His general outlook, however, differs from that of St. Évremond, or from the sophisticated social butterfly, the Chevalier de Méré, in being more robust and practical. Though he disliked pedantry, and thought one should live naturally and gracefully, he did not attach much importance to etiquette and the mechanics of pleasure. It was his considered opinion that "all the rest are bawbles, besides old wood to burn, old wine to drink, old friends to converse with, and old books to read."[9]

The vision of the satisfying and successful career of Sir Francis Osborne (1593-1659) is very different from Temple's introspective and ethical outlook. Osborne's practical advice on

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[9]"On Ancient and Modern Learning," p.52

how to conduct oneself in a busy and vicious world is in direct contrast to Temple's advocacy of retirement and the cultivation of mental tranquillity.

Though Osborne died on the eve of the Restoration, his ideas on the successful life were highly popular with the Wits, and his principles, or lack of them, were thoroughly in the mood of Restoration London. By 1664 Advice to a Son (1656) was "most esteemed and generally cried up for witt in the world."[10] The reason for its success was simple: although the Wits had the reputation of being busy ruining their estates with gaming and fashion, and their health with venereal disease, in reality they were very much concerned with advancing themselves, keeping favour at Court, and consolidating their fortunes. They might approve the refinement of the French honnête homme, in so far as politesse furthers success, but they also appreciated a plain statement of the hard facts of advancement, presented unvarnished in Osborne's book.

Osborne himself was a respectable man, not given to excesses and basically uninterested in religious controversies. Yet he produced a book which right from its publication caused consternation among the moralists and was severely censured at Oxford in 1658 on the grounds that it "did instil principles of Atheism into young gentlemen."[11] This is quite understandable, for the practical common-sense necessary for self-advancement is, of course, just as immoral as debauchery. It demands that one should be completely

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[10]Pepys, Diary, III, 480.

[11]Anthony à Wood, History and Antiquities of the University of Oxford (Oxford, 1796), II, 684.

undeceived about one's true motives, and sanctions duplicity and selfishness. Its aims are certainly not concerned with either moral philosophy or innocently pleasurable diversions.

Advice to a Son contains clear-sighted counsel on how a young man should behave in most common situations and indicates the attitudes he should take to contemporary problems. Its criterion of behaviour is based purely on whether a course of action conduces to self-interest or not. Osborne's standard is never personal pleasure, but advancement. Consequently the delights of the arts, of conversation, sport, and gaming are not stressed because they are seen as secondary to the main business of life — that of consolidating one's material position. Thus in education "no study is worth a Man's whole employment, that comes not accompanied with profit."[12] In matters of religion Osborne feels that hypocrisy, although technically unchristian, is sometimes the most sensible course, and since the reasonable man will always look out for himself, he advises his son: "keep your Compliance so loose, as if possible, you may fix it to the best Advantage of your profit and honour."[13]

Most interesting, for the light it throws on the fashionably cynical attitude of Restoration Comedy, is Osborne's chapter on love and marriage. In Osborne's opinion the worst sin a man can commit against himself is to be misled by emotion, and this is most likely to occur in connection with women. He obviously deems it better

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[12]Sir Francis Osborne, Advice to a Son, ed. E.A. Parry (London, 1896), p. 13.

[13]Ibid., p. 116.

to be on the safe side and so exaggerates when warning his son of the three main dangers he can encounter, which are: contracting a financially unsatisfactory marriage, venereal disease, and making a laughing stock of himself. Love, he thinks, is simply concentrated lust: "Love, like a Burning-glass, Contracts the dilated Lines of Lust, and fixeth them upon one object."[14] It is usually an illusion, "causing Madness in some, Folly in all."[15] Marriage results unavoidably in disappointment: "Those Vertues, Graces and reciprocal Desires, bewitched Affection expected to meet and enjoy, Fruition and Experience will find absent, and nothing left but a painted Box, which Children and Time will empty of Delight; leaving Diseases behind, or, at best, incurable Antiquity."[16] He proceeds to list its disadvantages in detail: once taken, the step can be regretted but not revoked; there is the risk of being cuckolded; there is jealousy, boredom: "Ask yourself, What Desire you ever attained, that long and repeated Fruition did not render tedious, if not loathsome;"[17] and worst of all, there is loss of freedom: "a married man changeth the Shape of Natural Freedom, and inrols himself among such as are rendered Beasts of Burden."[18] Children are frequently disappointing, he thinks, and a very poor excuse for marriage, "the poorest way of Immortalizing that may be,

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[14] Advice to a Son, p. 41.

[15] Ibid., p. 42.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid., p. 49.

[18] Ibid.

and as natural to a Cobbler as a Prince."[19] His final advice to his son is that if he must marry he should marry only for wealth and take care never to make himself "a Pupil to whining Love."[20]

The attitudes of both Temple and of his older relative Osborne were, of course, influenced by the events of the Civil Wars and of the Commonwealth period. If one way of dealing with disturbing occurrences was to retire contentedly to the country and to cultivate one's natural resources, the alternative was to remain in the thick of things and protect one's interests by becoming aggressively self-seeking. The counsel of hard-boiled utilitarians, who offered advice on planning one's life with an eye to the main chance, had far more appeal for the Wits than the unenterprising alternative posed by Temple or Evelyn, and a code of ruthless expediency, formulated by men too sensible to be libertines themselves, formed an important part of the Wits' philosophy of life at the Restoration.

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[19] Advice to a Son, p. 55.

[20] Ibid.

Chapter IV

Libertinism in Seventeenth Century Lyrics.

Sir John Suckling, Thomas Carew, the Restoration Lyric Poets.

One of the most obvious feature of libertinism is its unremitting advice to revel in the pleasures of the senses. Accent on the sensual, however, does not in itself make a libertine, otherwise three quarters of the poets writing in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century would qualify. Although it is difficult to find a clear line of demarcation between the many innocuous bagatelles on the carpe diem theme and lyrics which, though fairly trivial, did add something to the libertine tradition, such a distinction does exist, and not all unreflective erotic verse can be dismissed as poetic convention innocent of libertine intent.

The libertine undertone in Suckling, for instance, becomes very clear when one compares his lyrics with Herrick's. Herrick wrote almost exclusively on the carpe diem theme, yet cannot by any stretch of imagination be called a libertine poet. Although his unique subject in Hesperides (1648) is pleasure, and his only concern is with the delights of drink, love, dress, friends, weddings, and, in defiance of the Puritans, with the pagan English country customs of wakes, wassails and Maying, the philosophical implications of hedonism did not interest him in the least.

Sir John Suckling (1619-1647) on the other hand, does follow the libertine convention, and the personality of a libertine, egotistical and tirelessly realistic, is apparent in his lyrics.

Suckling's writing possibly lacks sensibility and generosity

of feeling but has nevertheless a curiously effective style. Extremely dry — four parts irony to one of voluptuousness — his occasionally uneven verses are an attack on tasteless emotional luxury, and make maximum sense read as contrast to the background of the conventional love poetry they impertinently contradict.

The attitudes Suckling attacks are those of the libertines commonly found fault with although in his own gay, lightweight poetry the offensive is rarely explicit. He was a Cavalier and was therefore naturally opposed to Puritan rigidity and to the Stoic attitude because he did not consider strict curbing of the appetites meritorious. His view of Platonic love is very plain — practically all his lyrics rail against it:

> I hate a fool that starves her love,
> Only to feed her pride.[1]

Suckling's anti-Puritanism, distaste for stoic virtue and for preciosity are all facets of his enmity towards the orthodox, sternly moral philosophies. His bias was against mental contortions elevating reason at the expense of the senses. Generally speaking he disliked the artifices which give the impression the ordinary human animal is nobler than he actually is, and at the same time drastically reduce his range for enjoying himself. In fact, Suckling's attitude, expressed in the limited range of the love lyric, is equivalent to the intellectual libertine's attack on the futility and errors of metaphysics.

Suckling aims when he writes about love to remove all superfluous sentiment and present it purely as an appetite, as enjoyable

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[1]Sir John Suckling, Works in Prose and Verse, ed. A. Hamilton Thompson (London, 1910), p. 26.

as food and not worth taking any more seriously. His judgement is pragmatic. Unrequited love, he writes in one of his best poems, which is slightly reminiscent of Donne, is unsatisfactory in this life, and we have no grounds for thinking it may be rewarded in the next,

> For there the judges all are just,
> And Sophonisba must
> Be his whom she held dear,
> Not his who lov'd her here:[2]

Love affairs should be brought to a satisfactory conclusion here and now, for

> T'have loved alone will not suffice,
> Unless we also have been wise,
> And have our Loves enjoy'd.[3]

Platonic love, in which "love's triumph must be Honour's funeral" he considers a contradiction in terms.

The most sensible attitude in love, according to Suckling, is one of cynical, light-hearted detachment. Tricks are admissible when they enhance the pleasure (Suckling can write quite persuasively against fruition and the dullness of mutual love); self-indulgence and freedom to change are essential:

> I'll give my fancy leave to range
> Through everywhere to find out change:
> The black, the brown, the fair shall be
> But objects of variety.
> I'll court you all to serve my turn,
> But with such flames as shall not burn.[4]

Among Suckling's verses there are very few compliments or imaginative tributes to beauty. He concentrates instead on driving home the point that man is no more than a creature of natural appetites,

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[2]Suckling, Works, p. 16.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid., p. 74.

and, concerned as he is with taking the wind out of the sails of preciosity, often goes to the opposite extreme. One of his favourite exercises in debunking is to equate sex with eating. The figure of love as a feast, which occurs frequently, fraught with emotion, in both religious and secular lyrics in the seventeenth century, is one that Suckling immensely enjoyed debasing to the level of the commonplace, and at the same time, of common-sense:

> Some youth that has not made his story,
> Will think perchance the pain's the glory,
> And mannerly sit out love's feast:
> I shall be carving of the best,
> Rudely call for the last course 'fore the rest.[5]

A further consequence of Suckling's libertine naturalism and clear-sightedness is his occasional bitterness and disenchantment. Although he ridicules the pretension that love is anything other than a simple physical appetite, the devious satisfaction of which may be entertaining, his poetry is certainly no advertisement for sensuality. He is as opposed to taking straightforward concupiscence seriously as he is to over-emphasis on the spiritual aspect, and in the interests of truth is constrained to point out that the results and nature of eroticism are extremely disappointing. In a bitter mood he can maliciously discover "a quick corse" in every woman:

> The locks, that curl'd o'er each ear be,
> Hang like two master-worms to me.[6]

and can view the scene of gallantry with cynical distaste:

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[5]Suckling, Works, p. 21.

[6]Ibid., p. 38.

> For still the flowers ready stand:
> One buzzes round about,
> One lights, one tastes, gets in, gets out;
> All all ways use them,
> Till all their sweets are gone, and all again refuse them.[7]

This vivid but coarse image illustrates Suckling's main weakness as a poet, which is that he does not compensate enough for what he demolishes. The libertine emerges from Suckling's extremely unvoluptuous verse as pure egotist and cold sensualist, and lacks glamour because the poet has insisted on banning emotion and beauty as well as puritanism and platonics.

Ultimately Suckling fails to convince one of the value of mercurial appetites, and one feels he stresses change not so much because of the richness of varied experience but because he finds nothing contenting in any object of his affections. This aridity is not an inevitable consequence of libertinism, for Donne, who pleaded the same cause in his licentious poetry, managed to avoid it. The fault perhaps lies more in the change of literary fashion than ideas: Donne's stylistic complexity, argumentativeness and sensuousness has a definite advantage over Suckling's intentional bareness and plain speaking, for it can command a much wider emotional and intellectual range.

It would be unfair and fruitless to attempt to disengage Suckling's total outlook on life from his lighthearted literary output. The question of whether to see him as the serious colleague of the latitudinarians at Great Tew, or the rake who travelled in France and was well acquainted with the contents of the French

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[7]Suckling, Works, p. 19.

libertin miscellanies is irrelevant here, since the attitudes which emerge from his poetry are fully libertine.

Though the lyrics of Thomas Carew (1595-1639) are decidedly less cynical than those of Suckling their content shows how common currency the libertine themes were. Carew can write in the libertine vein if he wants to. Like Donne, he can criticise the rules of conventional morality as shackles on natural liberty, created not by gods but by man in his most defective mood, and followed only by cowards:

> We shall see how the stalking pageant goes
> With borrow'd legs, a heavy load to those
> That made and bear him; not, as we once thought,
> The seed of gods, but a weak model wrought
> By greedy men, that seek to enclose the common,
> And within private arms empale free woman.[8]

More engagingly he can assume the libertine argument only to deflate it. Thus he can begin, for instance,

> In the first ruder age, when Love was wild,
> Nor yet by laws reclaim'd, not reconciled
> To order, nor by Reason mann'd, but flew
> Full summed by Nature in the instant view
> Upon the wings of Appetite[9]

yet at the end of the poem he settles for constancy as being a reasonable advance on the "dark confusion" of primitive times.

In Coelum Britannicum the claims of pleasure to sovereignty are well summarised:

> I am the goal,
> The journey's end, to which the sweating world
> And wearied Nature travels. For this, the best
> And wisest sect of all philosophers
> Made me the seat of supreme happiness . . .
> My necessary offices preserve
> Each single man and propagate the kind.[10]

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[8]Thomas Carew, Poems, ed. Arthur Vincent (London, 1933), p. 70.
[9]Ibid. p.163.
[10]Ibid., p. 219.

but the masque of the five senses is rejected, for Carew declines to place himself on a level with animals. Lions and bulls might indulge themselves freely, but man "must in judgement sit, and tame this beast."[11]

The subjects of lyrics written by the Court Wits at the Restoration are much the same as those of Suckling or Carew, but the tone is clearly different. The numerous "Persuasions to Enjoy," attacks on honour, defences of inconstancy, approvals of the consummation of carnal love, and of variety of experience, are treated with a marked lack of fantasy and sensuousness. The explanation for this difference in sensibility to the lyrics of the earlier poets can only lie in the change in the social and intellectual atmosphere of libertinage in which the poetry was written. Poetic perception of erotic feeling had become noticeably debased since the time of Cowley's "Injoyment" or Carew's "Rapture," poems which though libertine in flavour still conserve something of the Renaissance attitude towards love as a rich human experience. The implication is that once the fettering constraints of honour and custom are broken, happy sensuality can raise man almost to a level with the gods. There are, of course, many Caroline lyrics which engage in a good deal of genial and graceful debunking of this point of view, and which do pretend to a realistically libertine outlook. However, there is a difference between the cynical and disabused lyrics of Suckling and those of post-Restoration writers. Suckling's wit is fed by rebellion. It is original and undisciplined, and one feels he enjoyed pitting the new set of

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[11]Carew, Poems, p. 70.

impudent attitudes he had evolved against the conventional, still powerful models. Rochester or Sedley, on the other hand, were not isolated instances of rebellion but were members of a tightly-knit group, all of whom shared the same unorthodox opinions. The Court Wits were in agreement with each other that platonic love is nonsense and that man's nature and his possible range of feeling are fully able to be analysed. This uniformity of opinion partially accounts for the degree of similarity between poems composed by the Wits, and for the rather tired and contrived appearance of some of their lyrics. Being in accord about what to say the only license of originality they allowed themselves was in finding fresh ways to say it wittily.

The gay, provocative naturalism of pre-Restoration poets had been fairly superficial: with regard to religion and ethics they were likely to be surprisingly serious-minded. In contrast the Restoration Court Wits, when they thought at all, were libertine through and through, and their intellectual temper coldly iconoclastic. This is not to say that the Wits were intellectuals — most of them were far from it — but that their poetry cannot help reflecting the climate of the age, which was calculating, utilitarian, and devoid of idealism.

The poems of the Court Wits have so little individuality that it is often difficult to distinguish by whom they were written. The explanation for this is partly that many of the poems were the result of collaboration between members of a small convivial group, and partly that trifles fabricated within the Wits' society for mutual admiration or criticism had to meet certain rules of the game.

The criteria for these poems, many of which are restatements of themes from Horace, Catullus, Ovid or Lucretius were lucidity, polish, allusion and, most important perhaps, witty, antithetical "turn". Though they are slight, the libertine philosophy which prompted them is clearly discernible.

Most obvious is the Wits' emphasis on making the most of the real pleasures of the senses and their antipathy to notions which would prevent them tasting "solid joys." Wycherley writes forthrightly

> Pox! on your dull Platonic Schemes;
> 'Tis wasting Life in idle Dreams,
> And gutting solid joys.[12]

and Mulgrave attacks custom:

> Custom, that prudence sometimes overules,
> But serves instead of reason to the Fools,
> Custom, which all the world to slavery brings.[13]

Many of their longer poems deal with the pleasures of sex in detail, with a violent and coarse voluptuousness and lack of delicate innuendo which would have been quite foreign to Suckling, who would not have seen the necessity to bother, or to Carew or Cowley, who would have clouded and softened their effect by idealistic sensuousness. It is perhaps not too far fetched to discover the explanation for the difference in tone in the influence of Hobbes' philosophy. In these poems the Wits were not concerned with giving their contemporary readers the luxury of vicarious pleasure (though they might count on their amusement) but with instruction — the poems are, among other things, propaganda for Hobbes' philosophy. According to Hobbes all man's activities can

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[12] Wycherley, Works, IV, 59.

[13] John Sheffield, Earl of Mulgrave, Works, 3rd Edition (London, 1740), I, 86.

be analysed into drives towards pleasure or power. The appetites are mechanical and are not to be interpreted morally. Activity, or vehemence in themselves are better than a static condition, which in Hobbes' view approximates to failure and death. In the Wits' often mistaken interpretation Hobbes vindicated sensual licence.

As disciples of Hobbes the Wits considered themselves appointed to free society from the error of attempting to see things other than they actually are, namely, mechanical, mobile, coarse, and devoid of moral implication. (It is perhaps this naturalistic passion for "objectivity," rather than any deep-seated despair at life's futility, which prompted the various poems on impotence written in imitation of Ovid (Amores II, vii)). Thus when in Rochester's mock pastoral dialogue, in which inconstancy is proved to be the norm, the pompous rake advises:

> Be by my example wise,
> Faith to pleasure sacrifice.

the shepherdess maliciously replies:

> Silly swain, I'll have you know,
> 'Twas my practice long ago:
> While you Vainly thought me true,
> I was false in scorn of you.[14]

Such versions of pastoral dialogue, in which the semblance of guileless archaic form only brings into relief a thoroughly debauched modern sentiment, proved an accommodating vehicle for the Wits' strident insistence on the separation of fact from fancy. The favourite technique of the "turn", by which another, usually unappetising perspective is suddenly revealed is another example of this. The poet may start with the customary benign device of a carpe diem

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[14] John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, Poems, ed. V. de Sola Pinto (London, 1953), p. 11.

poem:

> Phillis, be gentler, I advise;
> Make up for time mispent

but when his reader is sufficiently lulled, the concluding stanza gives him a sudden sharp kick:

> Then if, to make your ruine more,
> You'll peevishly be coy,
> Dye with the Scandal of a Whore,
> And never know the Joy.[15]

The responsibility for the dominant note of coarseness and realism in these lyrics does not, of course, lie predominantly with Hobbes. Social background also had a great deal to do with it. Sir Francis Osborne's dire warnings about falling victim to "whining love" were well taken by the Wits, who were surrounded by examples of disease, backbiting and politic prostitution. The violent castigation of women of Dorset's

> Tell me, Dorinda, why so gay . . .
> . . . so have I seen in larder dark
> Of veal a lucid loin;
> Replete with many a brilliant spark,
> As wise philosophers remark,
> At once both stink and shine.[16]

did not necessarily denote profound despair at the futility of all amorous relationships. It was simply a sudden explosion of perfectly legitimate disgust founded on observation of the contemporary social scene. Such occasional dark outbursts, however, do not explain away the persistent flavour of acid disillusionment in the Wits' poetry. Their own contribution to the seventeenth century mode of dissection was to intellectualise pleasure and to

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[15] Rochester, Poems, p. 71.

[16] Charles Sackville, Earl of Dorset, Works of the Most Celebrated Minor Poets (London, 1751), I, 131.

find it wanting. Consequently there is a certain querulous note in their verse. They were well aware of human insufficiency but in spite of their claim to accept the nature of man and his limitations they were irritated by his defects, and disquieted by the fact of death. Etherege laments the transitoriness and uncertainty of sensual pleasure:

> It may be we within this hour
> May lose these joys we now do taste;
> The blessed, that immortal be,
> From change in love are only free.
> Then since we mortal lovers are,
> Ask not to know how long our love will last.[17]

Sedley constantly complains that joy is short-lived and, in a truly libertine translation from the French puts the Epicurean rake's predicament succinctly: he is unable to believe in life after death, and exasperated with the pleasures of this life, — luckily he finds some consolation in wine:

> Cou'd I not drink more than I whore,
> By heav'n I wou'd not live an hour.[18]

The Wits' attitude to death is bleakly agnostic:

> What shall become of man so wise;
> When he dies?
> None can tell
> Whether he goes to heav'n or hell:
> Or after a few minutes dear,
> He disappear,
> And at last,
> Perish entirely like a beast,[19]

This matter of fact enquiry, or Rochester's statement allowing of no contradiction "dead, we become the lumber of the world" are

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[17] Sir George Etheredge, Works, ed. A. Wilson Verity (London, 1888), p. 391.

[18] Sir Charles Sedley, Works (London, 1778), II, 103.

[19] Ibid., p. 98.

evidence of a far more radical libertinism than Suckling's, who, when he mentions death, endues the subject with a subdued charnel house glamour that hints at traditional belief.

The keynote of these lyrics is in fact not one of high tension delight in sex, nor of profound spiritual disillusionment, but the calm depression which seems the usual consequence of mismanaged Epicureanism,[20] and which again is typically libertine. The terrors of life after death which give so much meaning to life were removed, and the tangible pleasures of the present emerged as ephemeral, insignificant or unattainable. In face of this, the pose the Wits adopted is on the whole fairly impressive. They elected the consolations of wine, and, since they really did rate friendship highly, of the company of libertines of the same mind as themselves. Rochester writes:

> Farewell Woman, I intend,
> Henceforth, ev'ry night to sit
> With my lewd well-natured Friend,
> Drinking to engender Wit.[21]

and in a letter to his friend Henry Savile begs him to find some good wine "so may thy wearied Soul at last find Rest, no longer hov'ring 'twixt th'unequal Choice of Politicks and Lewdness!"[22]

It is clear from an examination of lyrics written before and after the Restoration that a profound change in the nature of libertinage had taken place. In spite of great differencesin style between between Donne's complex and rationalising poems, Carew's

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[20]Such fatalistic Epicurean depression occurs in the writing of French libertins such as Théophile de Viau, La Mothe de Vayer, La Rochefoucauld and St. Évremond.

[21]Rochester, Poems, p. 26.

[22]Collected Works, ed. John Hayward (London, 1927), p. 251.

mellifluous lyrics, and Suckling's "natural" but uneven verses a certain basic optimism and satisfaction with man's state is common to all of them. They may be provocative, coarse or common-place, but always against the safe background of tradition.

Gay, if cynical, debunking of a tradition that is on the whole safely invincible is not the mood of post-Restoration lyrics — the libertinism of the Wits was much more deeply rooted. Far from feeling man to be a creature of infinite capacities, the Wits prided themselves on their utilitarianism and clear-sightedness, and aimed to define man's precise limitations. As a result their lyrics suffer from an overdose of realism, and in spite of their accent on pleasure many of them have a jaded, world-weary tone, which can rise to heights of outraged misogyny or discontent with the limitations of man they have so well described. Emphasis on classification and the clear light of reason was of course the intellectual temper of the age, but only in libertine circles, where it was exaggeratedly applied to social behaviour and ethics, did it lead to frustration and melancholy.

Chapter V

The Libertine Attitude in Comedy

John Fletcher, Thomas Shadwell, Sir George Etherege, William Wycherley.

The more startling libertine ideas current in the seventeenth century found clearest expression in the drama, undoubtedly because they provided excellent material for argument and were useful in supplying the antithesis which makes for the tension of a good plot.

The writers of tragedies featuring Machiavellian followers of nature, or misguided victims of philosophy were quite obviously not in favour of their characters' moral aberrations. The criminal or erroneous nature of the ideas of, for example, Edmund in King Lear, d'Amville in The Atheist's Tragedy, Giovanni in Ford's T'is Pity She's a Whore, or Orbella in Suckling's Aglaura, is an essential ingredient in the tragedy, and all "libertine" characters professing them are duly punished.

In comedy the attitude is naturally more relaxed, and though there is a general air of condemnation, there is far more evidence of a transition from the Elizabethan estimation of the Machiavellian villain as a subject inspiring fear, or the epicure requiring correction because he has strayed from the path of reason, to the point of view of Restoration drama in which the Machiavellian has become a gentleman and the epicure's way of life is vindicated as actually the most reasonable.

The licentious epicure was a dominant character in seventeenth century comedy, possessing high entertainment value because his

appropriately riotous exploits and highly flavoured speech enlivened plot and dialogue. Seen as a fop he might provide a butt for satire; if the writer's purpose was didactic the discountenanced profligate repenting of his folly could serve as a good moral example. Most frequently he was portrayed as a wild gallant, addicted to wine, feasting, gaming, and, indiscriminately, women. Out for himself alone he had no use for marriage because it curtailed his liberty, and was bored by virtue, or, since he was usually convinced of the libidinous nature of women, sceptical of it. He was often shown as boastful and ill-mannered, and occasionally as gifted with an unpolished impudence which passed for wit. Invariably he lost the game, and in spite of valiant efforts to preserve his freedom was reclaimed for reason and sobriety, and tamed to wedlock.

Though comedies featuring this type of libertine character always end with the rake's capitulation to marriage there is great variety in the extent he is required to change and the amount he is asked to give up. In Marston's Dutch Courtezan the change from epicure to stoic is complete. The wild gallants are fully converted to the idea of constancy and moral uprightness, and as the play ends are well on the way to graduating in the art of platonic love. But in the comedies of Beaumont and Fletcher, which were closest in spirit to Restoration comedy and for that reason continued to enjoy immense popularity on the Restoration stage, such radical metamorphosis is not required. The rakes must marry, but need not immediately reform. Mary, in Monsieur Thomas, is advised to give her wild gallant a year's grace for the civilising influence of marriage to take effect:

A year hence and these mad toys that now possess him

> Will show like bugbears to him, shapes to fright him;
> Marriage dissolves all these mists.[1]

In the same play Dorothea and Hylas compromise and make a pact: to Hylas' "You must allow me another mistress" Dorothea counters "Then you must allow me another servant." Moreover, once married, the rakes are not asked to respect the virtues of mind and soul more than physical pleasures. Platonic love is decidely not the style of the heroines. In private, when their conversation can be extremely salacious, they confess they have "a mind to be married," and when they succeed in snaring their lovers "Shall we to church straight" implies unabashed eagerness to enjoy sex as soon as possible.

The rakes in these comedies show many of the characteristics which are later developed in Restoration comedy. Mirabel in The Wild Goose Chase is a merry sensualist and womaniser, who holds it "as commendable to be wealthy in pleasure, as others do in rotten sheep, and pasture."[2] He is brash, contemptuous of the hypocrisy of women, and keeps a record of his conquests as an advertisement for his attractiveness. He and his friends are totally opposed to marriage, refuse to "tug ever like a rascal at one oar" and proclaim that "a new strong, lusty bark cannot ride at one anchor." (I.iii.320). But, finally hunted down and trapped by woman's superior wit Mirabel capitulates with fairly good grace:

> Well: I do take thee upon meer Compassion;
> And I do think I shall love thee. As a testimony,
> I'le burn my book, and turn a new leaf over. (V.vi.389).

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[1]John Fletcher, Monsieur Thomas (I.iii) in The Works of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, ed. A. Glover and A. R. Waller (Cambridge, 1905-12), IV, 342. Subsequent page references will be to this edition.

[2]The Wild Goose Chase (II.i), Works, IV, 334.

The main difference between Mirabel and his ilk and the fully fledged libertines of Restoration comedy is that the former are never presented as worthy of emulation, and their licentious behaviour is usually regarded as a sign of immaturity. They are amusing but they are shown to have all the imperfections of youth. Their wit is inept and unpolished, they are not particularly clever and are frequently outwitted. In comparison with Etherege's comic heros the machinations of these thoroughly unmalicious wild gallants appear amateur and lacking in ambition.

By the time of Etherege and Wycherley a change has plainly occurred in the portrayal of a libertine. He has reached a high standard of finesse and become a figure the audience is asked to admire. His libertinage is not simply one of manners but also of ideas, and no mercy is shown to characters in the plays who do not share these ideas or are unsuccessful in putting them into action. Restoration comedy consequently has a much harsher and more critical flavour than that of Beaumont and Fletcher. There are no "conversions," and little chance of any gay and satisfactory improvements in the way of life of substandard characters: the elegant goats are permanently divided from the sheep.

Some of the difference between pre and post-Restoration comedy can be accounted for by the fact that libertine notions had received stimulus and backing from the philosophy of Hobbes. The intellectual bones do not, of course, obtrude very much in Restoration comedy, for comedy of manners and explicit philosophy do not mix and, though the Wits might be fascinated by some of the more arresting views of Hobbes which seemed to substantiate their own naturalistic bias, their

appreciation of them was still facile and skin-deep. However, that they were exceedingly interested, though perhaps in a careless and provocative way, both in their reading of Hobbes and in the ideas of an older philosophic libertinage is apparent from Thomas Shadwell's play The Libertine.

Shadwell based his Libertine on Rosimond's Don Juan ou l'Athée Foudroyé, and in writing it was plainly making capital from a subject of topical interest. The Libertine is not particularly sophisticated, and is in fact a showy melodrama which can rival the worst of the heroic dramas. Although Shadwell sets his play in the conventional Jonsonian frame of Comedy of Humours, and purports to offer his audience "rather an useful Moral, than an incouragement to vice,"[3] the attempt at moral censure is to say the least not very sincere. This is quite clear when we contrast The Libertine with Molière's or Rosimond's version of the same theme.[4] Shadwell saw no need to make his play a tragi-comedy, overladen with moral indignation, nor did he affect Molière's attitude of superiority and honnête mockery. On the contrary he knew that the Wits would thoroughly enjoy "The most Irregular Play upon the Stage, as wild, and as extravagant as th'Age," (Prologue, p.23), and that it would not be likely to excite criticism from any quarter he could not afford to ignore. It is probable that the Wits appreciated a joke at their own expense and like seeing their bombastic notions played out to ridiculous excess.

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[3]Thomas Shadwell, The Libertine (I.i) in Complete Works, ed. Montague Summers (London, 1927), III, 21. Subsequent page references will be to this edition.

[4]See above, pp. 68-70.

The libertine characteristics in the play are ones familiar from French plays on the same subject. The three villains, Don John, Don Antonio, and Don Lopez, are portrayed as complete egotists, and their crimes -- fratricide, incest, patricide, murder, rape, sacrilege, church robbery and nun ravishing -- are committed for self-advancement or self-delectation. Don Juan "owns no Deity but his voluptuous appetite, whose satisfaction he will compass by Murders, Rapes, Treasons or ought else." (I.i.29). For these libertines good and evil are relative, and in their opinion those who propose absolute moral standards do so either from political motives or else are "dull Fools" suffering from conscience, that physiological disorder "raised from the fumes of a disordered Splean." These are conventional libertine sentiments, in this instance given fresh lustre because they were very close to Hobbes' well-known views. Don Juan's self-justification on grounds that he follows the "only Certain Guide, Infallible Nature" (I.i.25) also appears to have benefitted from a new coat of Hobbsian polish. One gathers from the Dons' recital of the libertine litany (I.i.28) that they are anti-rationalists:

> We live in the life of Sense, which no fantastick
> thing, call'd Reason, shall controul,

and pragmatists:

> My reason tells me I must please my Sense.
> My appetites are all I'm sure I have from Heav'n, since
> they are Natural, and them I always will Obey.

For them Nature is matter, moving atoms, the substance of which they and everything around them which they attempt to control, is formed. Reason is equivalent to the will and intelligence they employ to gain their ends, and is, again following Hobbes, dependent on sense:

> By Nature's order, Sense should guide our Reason,
> Since to the mind all objects Sense conveys
> (I.i.26).

One other heresy completes the credo of these libertines: their final excuse for their actions, somewhat inconsistent with all the energy they have put into chasing their pleasures, is determinism:

> All our Actions are Necessitated: none command their
> own Wills (III.i.55).

In spite of its burden of philosophy the comic action in The Libertine does not falter, precisely because Shadwell avoids indicating sincere approval or disapproval of the provocative opinions his characters express. The virtues the libertines in the play possess -- youth, savoir faire, courage, and inventiveness -- are those the Wits were sure they also possessed, and the crimes Don Juan and his friends commit are so outrageous that they need not be taken seriously. Consequently the Wits could either experience vicarious pleasure, or, what is more likely, could appreciate the humour of their pretentious amorality carried to its logical but fantastic conclusion of abysmal villainy.

A further reason why the iniquity of Shadwell's libertines has a less powerful effect than might have been expected is that in comparison to the unity of Molière's and Rosimond's versions of the same subject, there are many other things in Shadwell's play to divert the attention. There is a wide range of characters, a most complicated intrigue, and a variety of changes of scene. Ghosts, storms, dances, are introduced, as well as contrasts of courtly masque, conventional comic repartee and lacrymose lament which might have occurred in any Jacobean or Caroline play.

Shadwell's picture of the libertine can serve as a frame of reference in determining whether or not the Comedy of Manners can be interpreted as comedy principally about libertines successfully manipulating society.

The heros of such plays as Etherege's Man of Mode or Wycherley's Country Wife are obviously examples of perfect Wits: the question is whether they were also meant to be ideal libertines. It seems probable that they were, although they are of course superficially much more civilised versions than Shadwell's characters. As creatures of comedy they do not violently rape or kill; their activities are within the bounds of possibility. Their range is restricted by the customs of the world of the real Wits, but the notions which dictate their actions are much the same as those which motivate Shadwell's villainous characters.

Once the comic values of the plays have been accepted, Wycherley's or Etherege's plays can be enjoyed without uneasiness in spite of the fact that the humour is almost entirely malicious and cynical, but one finds that in order to see the plays as gay one has in fact accepted a libertine standard of values. In the first place, the type of humour used makes it plain that the Wits endorsed Hobbes' rather cold and ferocious theory of laughter. Hobbes defined laughter as "a sudden glory,"[5] an apprehension of some deformity in what is ridiculed which enables the perceivers to congratulate themselves on their own superiority in contrast to what is shown up for ridicule. The targets for laughter in Restoration comedies are not moral, but seemingly social deformities. Satirised are all those wanting in wit, country

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[5]Hobbes, Leviathan, p. 36.

bumpkins or cits lacking an elegant social manner, as well as the fop and the affected. Cuckolds, "superannuated stallions," lecherous and pseudo-honourable women past their first youth, -- a vast gallery of those not successful in the sexual hunt, are also objects of attack.

The English Wits' critical standpoint was as far removed from Méré's as it was from Molière's. More interested in wit than in the ramifications of etiquette, the rakes were closer to intellectual than social snobbery. Their ideal was a young, vigorous, clever animal; a hero who never loses control of his chicanery. Therefore what they criticised and ridiculed was the inefficiency of everyone who does not know how to be a villain well.

Their libertine standard is further evident in their attitude toward "Nature" and natural behaviour. It might seem at first glance that the Truewits are right-minded scourges of affectation and hypocrisy: Wycherley's Horner exclaims "pox on 'em, and all that force nature, and would still be what She forbids 'em. Affectation is her greatest monster."[6] But the Nature they had in mind was closer to Hobbes' definition than to that of the French honnête homme. The English Wits did not particularly admire moderate behaviour in accordance with decorum and the bienséances. They did, on the other hand, respect those who admit to Hobbes' "right of Nature," that is, the right of man to ensure his success by any means in his power, moral or otherwise. It is true that there are in the comedies besides such libertines as Dorimant and Horner, conventionally honest characters such as Alithea

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[6]William Wycherley, The Country Wife (I.i) in Restoration Plays from Dryden to Farquhar, ed. Sir Edmund Gosse (London, 1912), 90. Subsequent page references will be to this edition.

and Harcourt in The Country Wife and, in the Man of Mode Medley, Emilia, Young Bellair and Lady Townley, a whole collection against whose sober background the exploits of Dorimant can shine. But the honnête characters are always secondary to the libertine principals, and are not allowed to monopolise much of the wit, which is usually equivalent to outwitting.

It is essential for the success of the plays that the chief character be both amoral, "a fine Whoring, Swearing, Smutty, Atheistical man,"[7] as Collier later phrased it, and diabolically clever. The heroines may be chaste but they are still full of sprightly malice, and the heros are not so taken by them that they forget their own interests and cease to keep up their alternative intrigues. When this scheme is not followed, as it is not in Congreve's Double Dealer, where the hero Mellefont is more pawn than libertine, and the libertine Maskwell is discredited, the audience has the poor choice of identifying with an anaemic or a dishonnête character, and the play therefore fails.

Central to the philosophy of the French Epicurean honnête homme was the idea of moderation. While it is true that his veneer of sophisticated politesse all too often served to disguise a ruthless egotism, a French honnête homme would have considered it immoderate, ill-mannered and pointless to openly vaunt this. The English Wits, however, saw no reason to gloss over the truth of the matter because they liked paradoxes and exaggerations. For them there was no such thing as an innocuous pleasure seeker; polite manners were a useful mask to obscure the libertine's true intent, and to make it easier for

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[7]Jeremy Collier, A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage (London, 1698), p. 143.

him to accomplish his ends, which in the Restoration plays are uniquely restricted to sexual conquests.

The libertine-oriented audience did not censure hypocrisy, in fact they liked the portrayal of successful hypocrisy -- this is the mainspring of the plays. What they scorned was failure. They did not deprecate extremes per se, for they enjoyed extremes of audacity such as Dorimant's in The Man of Mode, or coarseness so near the line that it is a miracle it never steps over and loses its point, such as Horner's china scene in The Country Wife. Expenditure of useless emotion in displays of passion or jealousy provided them with wonderful opportunities for ridicule and exercise of libertine wit.

Etherege's Man of Mode (1676) undoubtedly far excells most of the other rather confused and crude comedies of the Wits, although contemporaries were not unreservedly enthusiastic. In contrast to Sedley's hyperactive and chaotic Mulberry Garden or Wycherley's incondite and over-abusive Plain Dealer its merits of disciplined construction, consistent interaction of characters, and precise verbal wit appear outstanding. It is one of the clearest plays in which to follow the exploits of the libertine.

By wit Etherege understood civilised manners and expression put to the most efficient use -- refinement to the end that his libertine characters can attain their far from virtuous ends. His honnête homme, therefore, is a man who is at the height of his powers of manipulating others for his own purposes. Dorimant is an ideal of dizzying elegance, wit, and ruthlessness never attained in real life. Being a typical libertine not interested in business, politics, or virtuoso distinction,

his area of activity is limited to the sexual hunting ground. Here he is thoroughly inconstant, quickly becomes bored with a single liaison and finds it essential to carry on several affairs at the same time. His reply to his mistress's reproach is:

> Constancy at my years! 'tis not a virtue in season; you might as well expect the fruit the autumn ripens in the spring . . . 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.[8]

Dorimant meets his counterpart in Harriet, who is described as "wild, witty, beautiful, lovesome and young," and who is also suitably vindictive and unpredictable -- in short, a female libertine. Dorimant's intention is to snare Harriet without being trapped himself, and to carry on an affair as impertinent and fancy-free as his with Belinda, waiting for the moment when he can savour her capitulation to the full, which will come when she begins to enquire about his activities and attempt to extort promises from him. This is cruel but stimulating sport; the libertine audience would enjoy Belinda's downfall and Loveit's jealous passions, to which Dorimant replies with the taunt "Spare your fan, Madam, you are growing hot, and will need it to cool you." (II.ii.455).

However, in Harriet Dorimant meets his match. Harriet has no intention of capitulating, and remains chaste because to keep herself unattainable is her best weapon. It is fairly clear at the end of the play that Dorimant will marry Harriet, and theirs will be a lively marriage à la mode. This seems inconsistent, for the libertines were as much against marriage as they were against other aspects of

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[8]Sir George Etherege, The Man of Mode (II.ii), Restoration Plays, p. 456.

conventional behaviour, until one realises that it will be marriage on libertine terms. Like Dryden's Doralice and Rhodophil they are adept at outwitting and entertaining each other, therefore there is at least a possibility that their marriage, as a perpetual game of well matched aggressions, will succeed according to their libertine lights. There is not so much hope for non-libertines who marry, such as Young Bellair and Emilia, for too soon after her marriage Emilia begins to show an ominous softening towards Dorimant.

One of the most recurrent motifs in The Man of Mode is the play of illusion and reality -- a kind of baroque trickery. Most of the comic situations in the play arise from the fact that things are not what they seem. The chief characters are all engaged in deceiving each other, more or less successfully according to their individual prowess in the game. Belinda lies to Loveit, Dorimant deceives Belinda, Emilia Old Bellair, Harriet her mother. The wit in the play derives from skilfully handled dramatic irony: for instance, the audience can appreciate Harriet's falsely amorous exchanges with Young Bellair, under the eye of the parents, Dorimant's fine false anger with Loveit for entertaining Sir Fopling Flutter, or Lady Woodvil's mistaking Dorimant for a young man of sober, old-fashioned virtue.

The theme of the deceptiveness of appearances occurs very early: Dorimant's first conversation of the day, while dressing himself in the height of fashion and refinement, is with a bawd, so that he can find out the news of the town and enquire what further reputations he can ruin. Dorimant's politesse is not for the sake of pleasant social relations; he is polite from a most savage intent

and most playful when most vicious. But the pretence of honnêteté is kept up and he never becomes ugly. As Loveit expressed it: "I know he is a devil, but he has something of the angel yet undefaced in him, which makes him so charming and agreeable that I must love him be he never so wicked.(II.ii.452).

In Wycherley's much harsher Country Wife (1675) this favourite theme is explicitly stated by the lesser libertine light, Harcourt, who remarks midway through a cumulative passage of satirical rant: "Most men are the contraries of what they seem." (I.i.90). The mask which covers the master libertine, Horner, is far from angelic: to the amorous women he is content to appear a prize stallion, and to their husbands a harmless spaniel. As a means to gain his ends Horner resorts to a trick which outdoes Rochester's Alexander Bendo: he pretends impotence. He tells his confident (who as a further cynical comment on human duplicity is made not a genuine doctor but a quack) that with such a reputation he will have easier access to the women he intends to seduce; but, since they are so very unsavoury, lust-quenching is clearly not his real aim.

There are perhaps two reasons for Horner's counterfeit impotence. The first, a typical libertine trait, is that Horner likes to flirt with imminent failure, and in fact needs the stimulation of danger. According to Hobbes, man can indulge his senses, but he is very vulnerable to satiety and boredom, and he must be constantly on the alert. The libertine's success is ephemeral and depends on the absence in himself of the faults he satirises in others, decrepitude, boorishness, lack of wit, and on never allowing himself to be caught in his own nets.

This weakness in the libertine philosophy is well illustrated in the character of Horner. Horner is never shown to be simply gay or happy. He is not satisfied with any of his conquests. His view of women "more impertinent, more cunning, and more mischievous than their monkeys, and almost as ugly" (IV.iii.134) remains constant, and he is therefore not unrealistically paired off at the end of the play. What does give his life meaning, and stimulate him sufficiently to avoid boredom is the audacity of gambling with success. The closer he skates to failure the more he and the audience enjoy it. For instance, the suspense and attraction of the notorious china scene lies in how close the hero can go to the shattering of propriety and yet remain an intact Truewit -- it is balancing on the tightrope of decorum. The faint doubt in the mind of the audience as to whether it really befits a Truewit to pose as impotent is early resolved by Horner's straigtforward intrigue with Margery, the country wife.

The second reason for Horner's dissembling is that Wycherley intended him as a satiric scourge, and his pose does aid the exposure of the dishonourable pretensions to honour and basic coarseness of his female prey, and the despicable credulity of the cuckolded husbands. At the end, by revealing himself in his true colours Horner can punish them. His castigation of society is extremely acid and thorough. He has no mercy for fools, and can even exploit innocence, though a little more protectively. On the whole, Wycherley's fictional exaggeration makes Horner's complete disillusionment with society, and his relentless urge to punish and expose perhaps a truer image of Rochester, whose libertinage had a dark, moral streak, than Etherege's

Dorimant, who is sometimes said to be a portrait of the socially brilliant Rochester.

The above interpretation of Wycherley's play may give the impression that it is far more heavy and sullen than it actually is. Horner's trick can be regarded simply as hilarious bawdy, and it is offset both by Harcourt's honnête courtship of the agreeable Alithea, whom he wins by neat disposal of the worthless Sparkish, and by the touching naivete of Margery, taking her first steps towards becoming an accomplished female libertine. However, the fact remains that in this play, even more than in the Man of Mode, the psychological flavour is bitter.

The problem of how to regard Restoration comedy without distortion is difficult. The plays discussed are two of the best of the period, and in comparison with other less biting comedies of the Wits it appears that their comic excellence depends on the extent they are spiced with vindictiveness. Certainly the Wits enjoyed both Etherege's clean cruelty and Wycherley's violent misanthropy. The criterion of constant success in the plays, and the fact that suspense comes from the imminent possibility of failure even of the Truewits seems incongruous with their surface impression of civilised manners and gaiety. The major interest of the comedies is undoubtedly in penetrating the disguises, and in a cynical apprecation of the Truewits' machinations, but in spite of the rather dismal implications of unrestricted libertine playfulness the plays are able to remain gay, simply because they are fiction and not fact. In reality a life like Horner's would be pure anxiety, but within the cadre of literature

this dangerous juggling with success supplies conflict and suspense, which saves comedy from being a mere kaleidoscopic relation of events. Through the medium of a play the libertine audience may laugh at the outrageousness of libertinage, and on the occasions when the libertine is outwitted derive a malicious solace from the downfall of somebody else.

Chapter VI

The Man of Sense

The general impression made by the Wits' poetry and plays is certainly not one of unclouded gaiety. But though they undeniably contain an undertone of disillusionment and acid criticism the depth of the Wits' pessimism can be deceptive and should not be overexaggerated. Part of it was undoubtedly a fashionable pose of doubt and misanthropy, struck by rakes who though they might pen a neat lyric on the illusory nature of pleasure and the finality of death, were really not too deeply concerned with anything except enjoying London life. Also, a large proportion of their more crude and sombre comments are simply the result of an inquisitive dissection of reality, which they were attempting to see with the eye of Hobbes.

The tone of dissatisfaction is loudest in their satire. Most of the Wits preferred to write social satire, which though it sounds rabidly discontented with life, actually springs from a self-congratulatory sense of superiority. A few of the more reflective, however, notably Rochester and Wycherley, do reveal a genuine and profound strain of uneasiness and pessimism, which was exacerbated by the only too obvious discrepancy between the libertine ideal and the actuality.

The measuring stick of the libertine Wits was "the man of sense," an honest addict of pleasure, guided by "right Reason" and secure in the conviction that he was possessed of perfect wit.

Those who did not meet this standard were promptly set upon and an attempt made, in satire, more to demolish than correct them.

Wycherley's castigation of society in The Plain Dealer is very thorough-going, but the character of Manley still remains as proof that there are still some "men of sense" in existence. Rochester's morose misanthropy goes much further. In his Satyr Against Mankind he questions whether the libertine "man of sense" is not a figment of the imagination.

The satire falls into two sections. The first pleads for an honest, clear-sighted libertinage, and makes a perfectly legitimate satiric attempt to destroy some of the errors which prevent mankind from attaining this enviable state. Rochester discovers the chief obstacle in metaphysical ratiocination. This, he thinks, is sheer folly inspired by pride, and can be explained as man's perverse attempt to invent a sixth sense, which only serves to confuse the findings of the admittedly imperfect five. Agreeing with Hobbes, he considers Reason a delusion, an "Ignis fatuus, in the Mind." Far from being man's highest faculty it is actually a wilfully false guide in the dangerous journey of life:

> Pathless and dang'rous ways it takes,
> Through errors, Fenny-Boggs, and Thorny Brakes;
> Whilst the misguided follower, climbs with pain,
> Mountains of Whimseys, heap'd in his own Brain:
> Stumbling from thought to thought, falls head-long down,
> Into doubts boundless Sea, where like to drown,
> Books bear him up awhile, and makes him try,
> To swim with Bladders of Philosophy;
> In hopes still t'oretake the'escaping light,
> The Vapour dances in his dazled sight,
> Till spent, it leaves him to eternal Night.[1]

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[1]Rochester, Poems, p. 118.

In reply to the possible objection of a theological opponent, a "Formal Band and Beard," that it would be sinful ingratitude to refuse to utilise the faculty with which an insight into God's mysteries can be gained, Rochester contests that "mysteries" able to be unravelled by man were in all probability fabricated by him in the first place.

Rochester thinks that man can know very little except through the direct evidence of the senses. His premise is that "our Sphere of Action, is lifes happiness,"[2] and he follows Hobbes in contending that happiness is the result of decisive movement, and cannot emerge from stagnant thought without active outcome: "Nor can a man any more live, whose desires are at an end, than he, whose sense and imaginations are at a stand."[3] The only guides to constructive action are the senses, and the activities most productive of happiness are those closest to instinct, for with the slightest mental sophistication or tendency toward verbal definition error creeps in, which leads to unhappiness and obscures the claims of the natural animal appetites.

The "man of sense," according to Rochester, would respond to stimuli as simply as an animal. He would accept pleasure without confusion, and be healthily predatory without being vicious. In fact he would tend towards virtue because, pragmatically, a virtuous course is more rewarding.[4]

There is, however, strong probability that the "man of sense"

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[2]Poems, p. 121.

[3]Leviathan, p. 63

[4]See "Consideratus Considerandus," Poems, p. 126,

Vertue's the Sollid good, if any be;
'Tis this Creates our true Felicitie;

is merely a product of wishful thinking. Rochester finds "right Reason" among the animals, but when he turns to man he sees no evidence of its existence at all. From this point onwards the satire developes into a savage indictment of man, in which, with a despairing clarity Rochester examines the reasons for his intrinsic viciousness.

In his outline of man's nature Rochester partially follows Hobbes' theory of appetites. Hobbes had not passed a moral judgement on man, but had been content to perform a careful analysis of the mechanical nature of the passions, discovering the master passion to be a desire for power. Since an unchecked appetite for supremacy would bring man into constant unpleasant conflict with his fellows, Hobbes turned his attention to political theory and sketched a method for curbing it. Rochester's mood and aim are entirely different. Far from being detached he is shrill with moral indignation and rebellion. He finds the motivating passion to be not power but base fear:

> Look to the bottom, of his vast design,
> Wherein Mans Wisdom, Pow'r, and Glory joyn;
> The good he acts, the ill he does endure,
> 'Tis all for fear, to make himself secure.

The truth of the matter is that to survive, to advance and to win respect practical villainy is absolutely essential,

> . . . honesty's against all common sense,
> Men must be Knaves, 'tis in their own defence.

Without exception men are knaves; the only difference between them lies

> Not in the thing it self, but the degree;
> And all the subject matter of debate,
> Is only who's a Knave, of the first Rate?[5]

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[5]"Satyr Against Mankind," Poems, p. 123.

Granted that hypocrisy and the semblance of villainy are necessary for survival he is unable to discover anyone who acts virtuously under the protective mask of vice: even if he lowers his standards sufficiently to be willing to accept someone intellectually totally misguided who nevertheless leads a virtuous life, he can find no-one.

Rochester has here obviously gone much further than criticising non-libertine society from a libertine standpoint -- he has queried the reality of any good whatsoever in man, which leads the modern reader to ask whether by doing so he has not exceeded his satirist's license, by removing the hope of improvement. Rochester, however, defended his satiric savagery to Burnet as a matter of technique, explaining: "a man could not write with life unless he were heated by Rage."[6] If satire is not written with a dangerous aliveness it might as well not be written at all: it was not Rochester's ambition to laugh people into correct behaviour, through the medium of tolerant comedy, but to shock them into realisation of their faults. The English particular flair was for wrathful vigour, -- on the occasions when they made an attempt to portray moderate behaviour they were unable to present it with any warmth. In Wycherley's Plain Dealer (based on Misanthrope) Philinte, the spokesman for honnêteté in Molière's play, is quietly effaced, since his resignation and benevolent hypocrisy were totally alien to an English audience, whereas Manley, Wycherley's Alceste, is not presented as suffering from black bile, but as an inspired castigator of society with almost the license of a Bible prophet, which might indicate

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[6]Burnet, Some Passages, p. 26.

that the Restoration playwrights had, in an inverted way, learnt something from the art of the Puritan preacher.

Neither Wycherley nor Rochester forsake active whip-lashing to sink into the state of passivity which is despair. They were both extremely deeply involved with moral problems, and were admired by the libertine society they lived in for being so, a fact which leads one to the conclusion that if one scratches the surface of the opportunistic, blatantly amoral and exhibitionist libertine one finds underneath a core of idealism and humanism. The virtues Rochester or Wycherley would like the "man of sense" to possess are still in all probability the classical virtues. The "man of sense," therefore, is actually the moral equivalent, more robust and less tepid, of the honnête homme, and is fundamentally the more honest and admirable conception.

CONCLUSION

Before discussing the contrasts between French and English libertinage the very considerable degree of similarity between the two must be stressed. There were, after all, certain set ways of reacting against the autocracy of Christian orthodoxy, and against scholasticism, many of which had already been laid down previous to the seventeenth century, needing only a slight shift of context to become part of the libertine body of opinion. Besides Cicero, Seneca and Pliny, and the more recently popular Sextus Empiricus and Lucretius there were provocative suggestions for the libertines in Averroës, Lull, Valla and Pico della Mirandola. These sources, as well as the thought of the Paduans Pomponazzi and Cremonini were of course common to both French and English writers. Fulke Greville, for example, when considering sceptical doctrines could draw on Agrippa, Cusa and Sanchez; the works of Bruno were well known in Sydney's circle, and it appears from Burton that Vanini was not unknown in England. This is not to say that Englishmen who showed an interest in these Renaissance and pre-Renaissance writers were of libertine turn of mind themselves. Usually they were not, and of course, in England none of these authorities had the flavour of unorthodoxy they had in France. But their influence was there to form a basis for English libertinage when the need arose.

In addition to the common background for both French and English libertinage there is also the question of French influence

on English libertinage and vice versa. It is not possible to discuss this at all thoroughly here, but a few relevant facts should nevertheless be mentioned.

A number of the works of the libertins and of those who influenced the libertins had been translated into English. By 1660 Montaigne, Charron, Sorel, Cyrano de Bergerac, Naudé and Gassendi had thus reached a wider audience. Other writers, such as La Rochefoucauld, François la Mothe le Vayer, and Fontanelle, though translated somewhat later, were undoubtedly known in the original. The catalogue of Congreve's library alone would seem to indicate a certain amount of English interest in French libertinage.[1] Congreve had collected the essays of Montaigne, Charron (in English), Sorel's Francion, Gassendi's writings on Epicurus, Fontanelle, the letters of Gui Patin, and of St. Évremond, and Bayle's dictionary.

English liberal thought touched France more lightly, but the learned libertins were impressed by Bacon, by Lord Herbert of Cherbury's De Veritate, Hobbes' political writings, and Sir Thomas Browne's Religio Medici -- all of which they read in Latin or in French translation.

In view of the fact that so many of the same influences and ideas went to form the liberal trends in both France and England the differences between the two are surprisingly great. The most striking contrast is between the practical and constructive nature of liberal thought in England and the abstract, timidly sceptical and retrograde

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[1]See John C. Hodges, "The Library of William Congreve," Bull. N. Y. Public Library, LVIII (1954).

character of French libertinage. This difference exists at all levels of libertinage from the most scholarly and orderly to the most dissolute.

The English liberal tendency was towards pragmatism, whereas French libertinage, more philosophic and idealistic, constituted a critique of existing order rather than a new andpositive advance. One of the prime characteristics of the French libertin was his scepticism and suspicion of the validity or value of all knowledge, whether gained by the empirical method or through a priori reasoning. This attitude effectively limited the field of action of the libertin érudit to collecting information and allowing the results of his researches to stand in mute comparison, from which a few, most tentative conclusions could be drawn. English intellectuals, however, were not obliged to be libertines. They were fettered neither by the exigencies of metaphysics, nor by the extreme scepticism which in France resulted from constant, wary criticism of an authoritarian system.

It is true to say that the most positive line of thought, which led to significant advances being made in science, was not libertine, either in England or France, and could not be so because of the nature of libertinage. All libertines, whether intellectual or simply debauched were basically humanists, interested in the individual and in the present, therefore moral philosophy always had more attraction for them than the wider, more general field of scientific research. The important point here though, is not that English scientists were not libertine but that many of their assumptions would in France have laid them open to the charge of being so. This is even truer of English philosophers and theologians. Herbert, with his interest

in comparative religion, the Protestant Hales and Chillingworth with their repudiation of human infallibility in matters of doctrine, and their stress on simplicity and freedom of interpretation, Browne, with his delight in ill-defined and shadowy areas in religion would not have escaped censure in France.

In the behaviour of men like Falkland and his "university bounde in lesser volume" at Great Tew a sensible, adaptable, thoroughly tolerant spirit is apparent. These indubitably sincere and devout men were in conflict with majority opinion, but their liberal views did not make it impossible, as it would have been in France, for some of them to hold responsible positions in the State. Their aim was again pragmatic -- to find a viable solution to the problem of contentious sectarianism and to establish some common ground for belief on which all parties could agree. This careful, conscientious search for the truth is in direct contrast to the attitude of their French libertin contemporaries. Equally tolerant and equally emancipated with regard to excrescences of doctrine, Gui Patin or François la Mothe le Vayer specialised in destructive criticism and showed small concern for protecting the core of truth in religion. The habit of doubting, and of discovering picquant differences in belief rather than common ground was deeply engrained in them, and considering the regime under which they lived, the putting forward of practical suggestions for reform, even framed in restrained Gallican terms, would have been impracticable.

A far more notorious and spectacular brand of libertinage in France was that of the followers of Vanini, who in the first

quarter of the century more or less openly defied philosophic and theological orthodoxy. These "freethinkers" rejected all the essential doctrines of the Church, refusing to believe in the divinity of Christ, in hell, in the immortality of the soul or in Divine Providence. They were animists, influenced immensely by the philosophy of Bruno, and were attracted by the moral teaching of Epicureanism and Pyrrhonism. There is a strong idealistic flavour in their writings; from Charles Sorel's Francion one gathers that in the circle of Théophile de Viau open-mindedness, freedom from common errors, courage and generosity were the admirable virtues, and that they considered sensual indulgence and promiscuity should be accepted as right and natural, as they had been in primitive society. Whether or not a clique analogous to Sorel's "les généreux," formed to combat the ignorant and mean majority, existed in reality, the libertins did implement a literary campaign for "following nature," for which the more imprudent were duly punished by the authorities.

In England there is nothing exactly comparable to this. The libertine current of ideas until the Restoration was weak and secondary, and even so there are striking differences of emphasis. One finds that all the core of French libertinage, its investigation of divergent Italian philosophy, is absent from English libertinage. The English were simply not interested in attacking fundamental Christian doctrines or opposing Averroès or Bruno to Aquinas. There is also very little libertine idealism or vehement criticism of the unemancipated majority. The main reasons for this have already been pointed out: in England during the first half of the century intellectual energy was expended

either in perfectly legitimate scientific research, or in heated dispute between equally zealous Protestant sects, leaving no place for serious libertinage. Earlier, some of the philosophic aspects so prominent in France had attracted the curiosity of intelligent men with diversified interests, Ralegh, Harriot, Sydney and Fulke Greville among them, but because disapprobation from State or Church was minimal no group with the marked identity of the French libertins appeared.

Although libertinage was not accorded much serious consideration in England certain facets, often the most superficial and provocative, do appear in literature. Some English poets adapted libertin naturalism and sensationalism for use in their own particular background. Primitivism and hedonism were in the air and were given a distinctly libertine twist in the anti-Petrarchan poetry of Donne and in some of the cynical Cavalier lyrics. But these naturalistic libertine notions were far from being held as sincere intellectual convictions, and though they do in part reflect rebellion against Puritan condemnation of carnal pleasure, their main purpose was to serve as weapons in the literary offensive against preciosity.

An example of how alien the French libertin spirit was to English writers is found in the seventeenth century English vogue for poems of rural solitude, where English poets actually borrow textually from poems by French libertins, but in the process entirely change the import of their ideas. For the contemplative English writers the emphasis was on virtuous retirement, and Epicureanism meant the utterly unsensual "philosophy of the garden." Marvell,

Fairfax, and later the "matchless Orinda" were attracted by the praise of nature, solitude and pleasure in the poems of St. Amant, Théophile, and Racan, without having any conception of what "nature" or Epicureanism meant to these libertins.

On the whole until the Restoration the English either misunderstood or rejected libertin ideas. They were less open to seduction by abstractions and intellectualisations than were the French, and for practical reasons usually preferred to accept conventional systems of morality. Self-correction, if a new and sensational concept of behaviour failed the test of practical experience was, again because of the lack of political pressure, far more characteristic of the English, during the post-Renaissance upheaval, than of the French. Thus Machiavellianism inspired Marlowe with enthusiasm but was censured from the moral standpoint by later writers until it fell into disrepute; the claims of pleasure were put forward in the figure of Falstaff, the lord of Misrule, but rejected in favour of order, and in Jacobean and Caroline comedy the dissolute "epicure" practically always succumbs to stoic virtue.

The dominant spirit of pragmatism in England, which insinuates itself into all areas of thought, even religious thought, again becomes apparent when one looks for the English equivalent of the libertin honnête homme. The Restoration Wit was simply a practical, exuberant egotist, whereas the French honnête homme was dedicated to developing the art of egocentricity. Basically, both Wit and honnête homme were geared to the pursuit of pleasure, but as to what constituted pleasure and how it was to be attained they differed considerably.

The honnête homme was typically an atheist, or at least

virtually indifferent to religion. Having accepted the chief proposition of Epicureanism, that all men seek the summum bonum, happiness, it seemed obvious that time and energy should be employed in perfecting the mechanics of pleasure. Specialists in honnêteté like the Chevalier de Méré were fairly content with their position as the social élite; and therefore concentrated on consolidating their facilities for pleasure. Thus they were not motivated very strongly to attempt new experiences, but on the contrary strove to maintain the static balance of the happy mean. The humanist mentality was still very strong in the character of the honnête homme; he did not only cultivate the worldly pleasures of cards, wine and conversation, but also placed a great deal of emphasis on moral philosophy, the classical virtues and true merit. The less attractive aspect of his character was that he sacrificed to the cult of civilised egocentricity emotion, enterprise and social honesty.

The mentality of the libertine Wits was completely different, probably because the mechanistic philosophy of Hobbes exerted a powerful influence over their way of thinking. According to Hobbes' analysis man seeks the summum bonum -- that is he pursues what is to his own advantage, which gives him the sensation of happiness. But the stress is altogether on action: he is motivated by discontent into perpetual aggressive action, and is most happy when he has most power. This interpretation of the workings of human nature affected the Wits' attitude in two ways; first, it acted as a liberating agent so that far from attempting to avoid extremes and keep to the golden mean, they deliberately sought intense experience: secondly, they

aimed, not at a well-satisfied state of contentment in which honnête entertainments might be enjoyed, but at the betterment of their material position through action. There was nothing muted about the behaviour of the Wits; they were blatant atheists, their debauchery was ostentatious in the extreme, and, where the French honnête homme might have politely dissimulated they were devastatingly honest about their ruthlessness and amorality. They preferred to excell in wit because of its mobility and vitality, rather than attempt the congealed perfection of honnêteté.

Part of the explanation for their behaviour is, of course, that they were making the most of post-war freedom and celebrating the defeat of Puritanism, just as the French had done after their Civil Wars earlier in the century. In England, also, cynicism and unrestrained gaiety was to secede to common-sense and a passionate interest in etiquette. However, even if one compares French libertinage at its height of amorality, as it appeared in the followers of Vanini, to English Restoration libertinage, there is still a significant difference between the two. Though the ideas of Machiavelli were well known to the beaux esprits,[2] and were in fact adopted by Vanini's political friends and patrons, it was not primarily the Machiavellian idea of nature which appealed to libertin poets such as Théophile de Viau. Far from being evil, the Nature of the libertins was God-permeated, and by "following Nature" they considered

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[2]The denigration of Machiavelli started in France with I. Gentillet's Discours sur les moyens de bien gouverner et maintenir en bonne paix une royaume. Contre N. Machiavel le Florentin (Paris, 1576).

they were returning to a state of primitive "natural" virtue, and keeping to a quite stringent, if unconventional code of ethics.

In contrast, there is a noticeable lack of idealism in the Restoration idea of "following nature". The man of sense is licensed to follow an instinct which directs him to be ambitious, aggressive and ruthless. The Wits were greatly indebted to Hobbes for this concept, but long before Hobbes the practical nature of this type of amorality had attracted English writers, and the ideas of Machiavelli, though viewed with a mixture of admiration and horror, had been very adequately represented in drama. By the Restoration the opportunist was no longer regarded as disreputable, and therefore some of the more unpleasant characteristics of this type of nature follower disappeared. The audience of Court Wits who watched the comedies of Etherege and Wycherley tended rather to admire the heros for their common-sense than criticise them for their cunning.

Though the Wits' fashionable materialism was construed as a danger to religion by devout and serious minded people, it was not actually intended as such. They were genuinely not interested in attacking the Church -- it was far more their vein to attack the individual vices of the clergy -- and though clerics might justifiably complain of their wild immorality, intellectually the Wits were fairly passive, and in intervals of debauchery were content to pay lip-service to religion and to sleep through sermons. The clergy would have had far more cause to complain if there had been in England any systematic intermingling of clever but dissolute with sober, erudite libertines, as took place in France at the dinner table of Luillier, for such a combination of libertinage of manner and mind makes a lethal weapon

against orthodoxy. In England, however, there was no fear of this occurring. Libertines and virtuosi were worlds apart, and it is certain no intellectual analyses of flaws in the faith took place at the Wits' drinking parties.

In conclusion: a brief note of the future of libertinage in the two countries. Libertinage of mind seems to have a much greater chance of survival than libertinage of manners: accordingly, philosophic libertinage in France thrived, whereas libertinage in England, which was more one of behaviour, declined. In France the line of subtle and subversive libertinage can be traced from Patin and Naudé to Bayle and Voltaire. Faith in reason grew stronger, and the cartesian method of investigation triumphed over scepticism. By the time of Voltaire English pragmatism (of a distinctly non-libertine variety) was able to be invoked in support of French intellectual libertinage. In England the libertine, the "Fine, Whoring, Smutty, Atheistical man," essentially an aristocrat, gradually disappeared, drowned by the increasing emphasis on etiquette and moral behaviour, and the insidious sentimentality of the rising middle class, which could not stomach the harshness of the libertine ethic of success. The real Wits died, or calmed down into sober, useful members of society; the libertines of drama were sucked into the mire of sentiment, starting with the softening of Farquhar's heros. The honest, ironic, opportunistic attitude to life of an honnête homme and libertine makes one of its last appearance in Chesterfield's Letters to his Son.

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