

A CONJECTURAL EMENDATION FOR ROCHESTER'S 'THE MISTRESS'

IN THE COURSE OF EDITING a selection of Rochester's poems¹ I read David Farley-Hills' remarks on stanza 4 (11.13-16) of Rochester's 'The Mistress'.² Farley-Hills points out that the stanza is meaningless as it is printed in Tonson's edition (which gives the earliest known text of the poem) and in most modern editions:

You wiser Men despise me not;
Whose Love-sick Fancy raves,
On Shades of Souls, and Heav'n knows what;
Short Ages live in Graces.³

For convenience of reference I quote the first four stanzas of the poem from David Vieth's edition:

An age in her embraces passed
Would seem a winter's day,
Where life and light with envious haste
Are torn and snatched away.

But oh, how slowly minutes roll
When absent from her eyes,
That feed my love, which is my soul:
It languishes and dies.

For then no more a soul, but shade,
It mournfully does move
And haunts my breast, by absence made
The living tomb of love.

You wiser men, despise me not
Whose lovesick fancy raves
On shades of souls, and heaven knows what:
Short ages live in graves.⁴

Vieth has taken Tonson's version of the poem as his copy-text, since, as he points out, all other known texts apparently descend from it.⁵ He has correctly removed the semi-colon from the end of line 13 and the comma from the end of line 14. But his substitution of a colon at the end of line 15 still leaves line 16 unintelligible.

What can 'Short ages live in graves' possibly mean? One might devise ingenious interpretations for the line. For example, 'short ages' might be construed as an understatement for 'no time at all'. The line might thus be a warning to the 'wiser men' that when we are dead we shall be outside time, and, therefore, have no experience, implying that we ought not to waste the time we have now. But why should Rochester use the word 'live' to relate 'short ages' to 'graves'? There seems no reason. The line, as it stands, defies plausible interpretation.

Farley-Hills proposes changing the punctuation thus:

You wiser Men despise me not,
 Whose Love-sick Fancy raves
 On 'Shades of Souls' and 'Heav'n knows what
 Short Ages live in Graves'.⁶

'Heav'n knows what' becomes an adjectival phrase qualifying 'short ages'. Farley-Hills suggests that the expressions which he has placed in quotation marks represent the views of the wiser men about the poet's ravings as they have been depicted in the previous stanzas. Because the wiser men do not appreciate his love, they can only present a confused view of it, and Rochester indicates this by the confused nature of the expressions.⁷

This suggestion is plausible, but it is still unsatisfactory. There are two objections to it: first, as before, there is no reason offered why Rochester should choose 'live' to relate 'short ages' to 'graves'. To argue that it indicates the confusion in the wiser men's minds is tantamount to saying that any nonsense can be regarded as textually sound, if the poet is thought to be representing confusion. The choice of 'live' remains arbitrary. Secondly, although 'Heav'n knows what short ages live in graves' is grammatically possible, it is rhythmically grotesque. Farley-Hills argues that the stanza is very free syntactically 'with much over-running, because it describes the tension between the "mad" world of love and the sober (and dead) world of the wiser sort who think love is madness'.⁸ This argument is inadequate because it presupposes that any ugly expression may be regarded as textually correct, provided the poet is concerned with a tension between two points of view. This particular expression remains unjustified. Personally, I cannot believe that Rochester perpetrated such a horror.

There is a much simpler, and more elegant solution to this crux. I suggest that Rochester originally wrote:

You wiser men despise me not,
 Whose lovesick fancy raves
 On shades of souls, and Heav'n knows what,
 Short ages, living graves.

In the seventeenth century 'living' was not uncommonly spelt 'liveing'.⁹ Let us suppose (what is not unlikely) that the form 'liveing' occurred in one of the manuscripts in which the poem was circulated. From this premise two arguments can be developed to explain Tonson's reading:

Either (i) a copyist left off the 'g' of 'liveing' through carelessness or fatigue, and a subsequent copyist misread what remained as 'live in', or deliberately separated the two syllables.

Or (ii) a copyist misread the two adjacent 'g's of 'liveing graves' as one, and deliberately wrote 'live in graves'.¹⁰

The reading 'live in graves' eventually reached the copy for Tonson's edition.

'Short ages' refers back to what the poet has said in stanza 1 about the rapidity of time's passing when he is with his mistress. 'Living graves' refers back

to stanza 3 where the poet describes his breast as the 'living tomb' of love. Lines 15 and 16 do, as Farley-Hills suggests, represent the views of the wiser men who do not appreciate the poet's love, but they do so in a different manner from that which he suggests. The wiser men's contempt and lack of understanding are expressed through the dismissive phrase 'Heav'n knows what', and through the paradoxical or semi-paradoxical phrases 'shades of souls', 'short ages', and 'living graves'.

Unfortunately, we have no independently descended manuscript texts for this poem, but, paradoxically, this does not weaken the argument for the proposed emendation. It is well-known how superior Vieth's texts of Rochester's poems are to those of previous editors, and that this superiority is due to Vieth's collating the texts in printed editions with independently descended texts in contemporary manuscripts. We know how corrupt textually the printed editions of Rochester's poetry, published after his death, can be. We ought not, therefore, to be prejudiced in favour of a printed text when we have no manuscript texts with which to compare it.

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¹ *Lyrics and Satires of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester* (Sydney, 1980). This article is an expansion of my brief comments in favour of the proposed emendation on page 138 of the edition.

² D. Farley-Hills, *Rochester's Poetry* (London and Totowa, New Jersey, 1978), pp.86-7, 216.

³ *Poems, etc. on Several Occasions: with Valentinian, a Tragedy. Written by the Right Honourable John Late Earl of Rochester*. London, Printed for Jacob Tonson at the Judge's-Head in Chancery-Lane near Fleet-Street, 1691, p.26.

The stanza is reproduced with identical punctuation in the following modern editions: *Collected Works of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, ed. John Hayward (London, 1926), p.12; *The Poetical Works of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, ed. Quilter Johns (Halifax, Eng., 1933), p.18; *A Satire against Mankind and Other Poems by John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, ed. Harry Levin (Norfolk, Conn., 1942), p.12; *Poems by John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, ed. V. de Sola Pinto (The Muses' Library, London and Cambridge, Mass., 1953 and 2nd ed. rev., 1964), p.17; *Restoration Carnival*, ed. V. de Sola Pinto (London, 1954), p.184.

The semi-colon at the end of line 13 and the comma at the end of line 14 are removed in *Selected Lyrics and Satires of John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester*, ed. Ronald Duncan (London, 1948), p.65. Duncan removes only the comma from the end of line 14 in *Rochester* (The Pocket Poets, London, 1959), p.24.

John Adlard follows Vieth's punctuation (given above) in *The Debt to Pleasure: John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, in the eyes of his contemporaries and in his own poetry and prose* (Cheadle Hulme, Eng., 1974), p.95.

⁴ *The Complete Poems of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester* (New Haven and London, 1968), p.87.

⁵ *ibid.*, p.198.

⁶ *Rochester's Poetry*, p.87.

⁷ *ibid.*, p.87.

⁸ *ibid.*, p.87.

⁹ The present participle (or verbal noun) of all verbs ending in a consonant followed by 'e' could be spelt in this way. 'Designeing', 'writeing', 'approveing', 'glareing', 'makeing', 'liveing', 'leaveing', 'escapeing', 'aymeing', 'pleaseing', 'admireing', and 'gibeing' all occur in the first twenty-three pages of a manuscript anthology of poems compiled in 1680 and now owned by the Royal Library,

Stockholm. See the facsimile published as *The Gyldenstople Manuscript Miscellany of Poems by John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, and other Restoration Authors*, ed. Bror Danielsson and David M. Vieth (Stockholm, 1967), pp.6,7,9,11,13,15,22,23.

Other examples will be found in another manuscript anthology, MS.Eng. 636F, compiled about 1680, in the possession of the Houghton Library, Harvard University. See e.g. pp.1,3,4,5,7,10.

¹⁰ I owe explanation (ii) to Professor H.L. Rogers of the Department of English in the University of Sydney.

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