Chapter One

POETS OF THE TIMES:
ROCHESTER, OLDHAM, AND
RESTORATION LITERARY CULTURE

“What’s all this? — verses! — By Heaven, Frank, you are a greater blockhead than I supposed you!” My father, you must recollect, as a man of business, looked upon the labor of poets with contempt; and as a religious man, and of the dissenting persuasion, he considered all such pursuits as equally trivial and profane. Before you condemn him, you must recall to remembrance how too many of the poets in the end of the seventeenth century had led their lives and employed their talents.

Sir Walter Scott, Rob Roy (1817)

Although a poet himself, John Wilmot, earl of Rochester, agreed with Frank Osbaldistone’s father about the triviality and profanity of seventeenth-century English verse. Yet for Rochester and other court wits, these characteristics carried no pejorative resonance; rather, the playful, licentious quality of poetry identified it as a pastime suitable for aristocratic males, whose indulgence in this kind of writing displayed their social power (they were above the restraints of decency imposed upon their inferiors) and status (they had leisure for composing poetic “trifles”). “[I] never Rhym’d, but for my Pintles sake,” declares one of Rochester’s rakish speakers, and although a dissenting merchant like Osbaldistone might abhor the motives that brought forth such rhymes, Rochester viewed them as the only ones appropriate for men of his class. Rochester, too, “looked upon the labour of poets with contempt”: for him, a poet’s need to work at writing revealed his deficiency in wit and suggested that, whatever his rank, his character was suited to the drudgery engaged in by the lower classes. By contrast, the “easy” poetry of Rochester and his
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coterie was invoked as evidence of their cultural dominance and sexual prowess alike, and thus was used to support their authority within the period’s interconnecting systems of class, gender, and literature.

Yet if poetry helped maintain the complex ideological structure of aristocratic power, it also represented and contributed to the tensions underlying this structure. This chapter will investigate the way in which John Oldham, a poet outside of court circles who tried and failed to earn a living as a professional writer, articulated his opposition to the hegemony of his patron, Rochester. The contradictions that shaped Oldham’s career suggest his location at the margins of polite culture: highly educated and impoverished, attracted to and repulsed by the court’s libertine ethos, suspicious of commercial print and yet aware of the possibilities it offered him, Oldham used his position as a writer engaged in the book trade to question both Rochester’s concept of literary production and the hierarchies of status and gender that it helped maintain. Here I will examine how the oppositions that characterized verse of the period—oppositions between coterie and professional poets, and between manuscript circulation and printed texts—threatened those hierarchies by enabling new constructions of masculine authorship to emerge.

I

In the “Advertisement” for his second volume of verse, entitled Some New Pieces Never before Publish’d (1681), Oldham describes the unusual genesis of his pastoral on the recent death of Rochester:

The Translation of that upon Bion was begun by another Hand, as far as the first Fifteen Verses, but who was the Author I could never yet learn. I have been told that they were done by the Earl of Rochester; but I could not well believe it, both because he seldom meddled with such Subjects, and more especially by reason of an uncorrect line or two to be found amongst them, at their first coming to my hands, which never us’d to flow from his excellent Pen. Conceiving it to be in the Original, a piece of as much Art, Grace, and Tenderness, as perhaps was ever offered to the Ashes of a Poet, I thought fit to dedicate it to the memory of that incomparable Person, of whom nothing can be said or thought so choice and curious, which his Deserts do not surmount.²

Oldham’s explanation of his printed elegy, which developed from his elaboration on a manuscript fragment by another, unknown poet, reflects