Having dashed about London for nearly a month, hiding by day and changing quarters each night in an attempt to avoid arrest on charges of high treason, George Villiers, duke of Buckingham, gave himself up and made his way to the Tower of London on June 28, 1667. Accused by his own steward of prognosticating the king’s death by hiring an astrologer to cast the king’s horoscope, Buckingham’s life was at stake if found guilty of this crime. As Theobald Taaffe, earl of Carlingford, reported to James Butler, duke of Ormonde, Charles II received Buckingham that morning and “was very kind to the Duke,” asserting “that he would be content to have his head cut off, if he did not prove that the witnesses examined against the Duke were suborned and bribed.” In the face of this danger, Buckingham invested his journey to the Tower with the appearance of a triumphant royal progress. As another of Ormonde’s correspondents related, “My Duke of Buckingham in his way to the Tower dyed at the Sun in Bishopsgate, gazed on by numerous spectators to whom he designedly showed himself with great ceremony from the balconye.” He even sent advance “word to the Lieutenant of the Tower that he would come to him as soon as he had dined.” The crowds cheered his performance, since, as Samuel Pepys reported, “the world reckon[s] him to suffer upon no other account then that he did propound <in Parliament> to have all men questioned that had to do with the receipt of the Taxes and prizes,” a motion to guarantee that the king’s tax agents faithfully performed their duties and to call into question the governing practices of his political nemesis, Lord Chancellor Edward Hyde, earl of Clarendon.1

J. W. Webster, Performing Libertinism in Charles II’s Court
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Buckingham’s “designedly show[ing] himself with great ceremony” to spectators on the way to the Tower was a political performance. Purposefully mimicking the general contours of a royal progress or city pageant, Buckingham cast himself as the protagonist in a political drama. Falsely accused of wrongdoing by his enemies at court, he starred in this drama as the champion of good government, appealing to the common folk of London against corrupt ministers at court as he merrily marched to his unjust, and therefore only temporary, imprisonment. Presenting himself as a combination of Christ, Shakespeare’s Prince Hal, and Charles I, Buckingham converted what could have been his last moments as a free man into a triumph of public relations. His transformation of politics—the court intrigues that led to his arrest for high treason—into public performance was a strategic effort to use his popularity outside the court to augment his own influence with the king and to challenge the influence of men such as Clarendon and the duke of York. This strategy was only partially successful and lasted just a short time. Buckingham contributed to Clarendon’s dismissal as lord chancellor in 1667 but failed to gain for himself any lasting influence with the king. This chapter argues that Buckingham responded to this failure by resorting to another kind of performance, the theatrical drama. Like his life at court, his move to playwriting was also inherently political. Favoring toleration for religious groups outside the Church of England, encouraging pro-English trade policies against Ireland, France, and the Netherlands, and supporting Parliamentary independence from the crown, Buckingham championed positions that made him popular with non-Anglicans, merchants and farmers, and radical factions that wanted to limit the powers of the restored monarch. His political fortunes and authorship of *The Rehearsal* dramatically shaped the direction of libertinism in the 1670s.

Writing for the theater was a natural extension of Buckingham’s desire to be admired by citizens outside the court. Michael McKeon suggests that a need for validation was an element of aristocratic ideology. He writes, “The notion of honor as a unity of outward circumstance and internal essence is the most fundamental justification for the hierarchical stratification of society by status, and it is so fundamental as to be largely tacit. What it asserts is that the social order is not circumstantial and arbitrary, but corresponds to and expresses an analogous, intrinsic moral order.” Linda Zionkowski notes that “Besides courage and valor in the king’s service, another indicator of this ‘unity of status and virtue’ that validated the ‘rule of the best’ was elite participation in, if not dominance over, the literary culture of their time.” With the reopening of the theaters in 1660 and Charles’s