

Department of English & Writing Studies

English 3341F (001)**Sex, Death, and Philosophy: Libertinism and Eighteenth-Century Literature**

Fall 2025

Instructor: Mark McDayter**Prerequisites:** At least 60% in 1.0 of English 1020-1999 or permission of the Department.

Unless you have either the requisites for this course or written special permission from your Dean to enroll in it, you may be removed from this course and it will be deleted from your record. This decision may not be appealed. You will receive no adjustment to your fees in the event that you are dropped from a course for failing to have the necessary prerequisites.

Course Description

The restoration of the monarchy in 1660 ushered in a new and sometimes frightening era of philosophical, social, and sexual freedom. This course explores Libertinism, a subversive doctrine that challenged cultural and sexual norms, through the poems, plays, and prose of the late 17th and early 18th centuries.

Objectives

By the end of the course, successful students will be able to:

- Be able to speak and write critically
- Be proficient in close textual analysis
- Be capable of interpreting the significance of narrative and discourse
- Be able to write reasoned arguments with a sophisticated use of evidence
- Gain familiarity with the political, social, cultural, and intellectual context of late 17th- and early 18th-century libertinism
- Gain insights into the additional context provided by the realities of gender and sexual diversity in the period under consideration
- Demonstrate some understanding of the impact of manuscript and print culture upon the dissemination and interpretation of libertine literature

Course Materials

John Cleland, *Fanny Hill, or the Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (Required) \$16.00

Methods of Evaluation

The grade for the course will be arrived at as follows:

- Manuscript Miscellany Exercise – 15%
- Annotated Bibliography – 15%
- Final Research Essay – 25%
- Participation – 10%
- Final Exam – 35%

Students are fully responsible for looking at and being familiar with the information posted on the department website at <http://www.uwo.ca/english/undergraduate/Student%20Information.html>.

Late penalties for assignments are 1% per business day, to a maximum of 10 days.

Participation grades will be assigned on the basis of attendance at and/or contributions to tutorials

Statements

Academic Consideration

Students may request academic consideration in cases of extenuating circumstances – that is, personal circumstances beyond the student's control that have a **substantial but temporary** impact on the student's ability to meet essential academic requirements.

1. Requests for academic consideration are made to the Academic Advising office of the student's Faculty of Registration.
2. Requests for academic consideration include the following components:
 - a. Self-attestation signed by the student;
 - b. Indication of the course(s) and assessment(s) relevant to the request;
 - c. Supporting documentation as relevant.

Requests without supporting documentation are **limited to one per term per course**.

Instructors may designate one assignment or assessment as exempt from this allowance. In this course, requests for academic consideration pertaining to the final examination **must** be accompanied by supporting documentation.

Assignments with flexible deadlines and any term work that does not count towards the course grade are **not** eligible for additional consideration.

Documentation for medical illness, when required, includes the completion of a [Western Student Medical Certificate \(SMC\)](#) or, where that is not possible, equivalent documentation, by a health care practitioner.

Requests linked to examinations scheduled by the Office of the Registrar during official examination periods as well as practice laboratory and performance tests typically scheduled in the last week of term **always** require formal supporting documentation.

Attendance

Attendance is mandatory in all classes and tutorials. In cases of excessive absenteeism (e.g. more than 9 unexcused hours for a half course, 18 for a full course), which are not accounted for by either academic consideration or accommodation, students may be debarred from taking the final examination, and will receive an official warning to this effect by or before the course drop date (see Senate policy). In classes with or without final exams, students who do not attend class will receive 0% for course participation grades. Unless other policies dictate a different set of penalties in specific English and Writing Studies programs, this will apply to all department programs.

Gender-Based and Sexual Violence

Western is committed to reducing incidents of gender-based and sexual violence (GBSV) and providing compassionate support to anyone who is going through or has gone through these traumatic events. If you are experiencing or have experienced GBSV (either recently or in the past), you will find information about support services for survivors, including emergency contacts at the following website: https://www.uwo.ca/health/student_support/survivor_support/get-help.html. To connect with a case manager or set up an appointment, please contact support@uwo.ca.

Intellectual Property/Copyright

All instructor-written materials (e.g. PowerPoints, lecture notes, oral lectures) for this course are created solely for students' personal use within the course, and remain the instructor's intellectual property. Further reproduction, fixation, distribution, transmission, dissemination, communication, or any other uses, without securing the consent of the copyright owner (the course instructor) may be an infringement of copyright. You may not distribute, email, or otherwise communicate these materials to any other person. These limitations extend to recording, photographing, or sharing lectures (online or in-person) and lecture material without permission. Posting the instructor's content from this course to online course sharing sites like OneClass or Course Hero without permission is both an infringement of intellectual property law and a violation of academic integrity guidelines. The instructor will pass these cases on to the Western University Ombudsperson or their Department Chair as appropriate.

Religious Accommodation

Students should consult the University's list of recognized religious holidays, and should give reasonable notice in writing, prior to the holiday, to the Instructor and an Academic Counsellor if their course requirements will be affected by a religious observance. Additional information is given in the Western Multicultural Calendar.

Support Services

Registrarial Services <http://www.registrar.uwo.ca>

Student Support Services <https://student.uwo.ca/psp/heprdweb/?cmd=login>

Services provided by the USC <http://westernusc.ca/services/>

Academic Support & Engagement <http://www.sdc.uwo.ca/>

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to MentalHealth@Western: <http://www.uwo.ca/uwocom/mentalhealth/> for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.

Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence

AI may be used as a research tool, but should not be the sole source for research, and should be used with care. AI may *not* be used to generate the text submitted for evaluation. Please note that the student is responsible for any issues or errors that may arise from their use of AI.

Academic Offences

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_undergrad.pdf

Plagiarism

Students must write their essays and assignments in their own words. Whenever students take an idea or passage from another author, they must acknowledge their debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate and by proper referencing such as footnotes or citations. Plagiarism is a major academic offence.

Plagiarism Checking

All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between The University of Western Ontario and Turnitin.com <http://www.turnitin.com>.

All instances of plagiarism will be reported to the Chair of Undergraduate Studies. Proven cases of plagiarism will result in a grade of zero for the assignment. Subsequent offences will result in failure for the course.

Schedule of Classes and Assignments

Please note that the schedule that appears below is somewhat flexible and subject to change.

Handouts are available on the “Resources” page of the course OWL site. “Walker” refers to the ebook version of [John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester: The Poems and Lucina's Rape](#), ed. Keith Walker and Nicholas Fisher (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), while “Curley” references the ebook version of Thomas Hobbes, [Leviathan: With Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668](#) (Hackett, 1994), also available through Western Libraries. Wycherley’s *The Country Wife* is also available through Western Libraries, through the database [Drama Online](#).

My office hours on campus are, for this term anyway, Tuesdays 3:30pm-4:30pm, and Wednesdays from 11:30am-12:30pm. You can find me in my office at University College, 3419 (third floor, at the north end of the building, next to the stairwell).

Week 1 – 8-10 September, 2025

Introduction

A brief introduction to the course, its themes, expectations, and such administrative matters as need to be tended to.

Backgrounds: Revolution, Atoms, Madness, and Very Dangerous Books

Much of the intellectual and philosophical content and rationale of Restoration libertinism was derived from two books, one ancient and one “modern,” that were considered by many among the most subversive and “dangerous” works ever written. The reputedly mad Roman poet Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura* was a poetic account of Epicurean philosophy that was widely reviled as atheistic. Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* was similarly believed by many to be irreligious and politically dangerous. It is perhaps not surprising that these two most subversive texts should provide the underpinnings for a notoriously blasphemous philosophy.

Texts:

Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe* [De Rerum Natura] (Melville) [[Excerpts in OWL](#)]
Hobbes, *Leviathan* ([Curley](#)) (Online; [Hobbes’] Introduction, Ch. 1-3, 5-6, 11-13)

Notes:

- Manuscript Exercise Assigned
- Research Essay Assigned
- Annotated Bibliography Assignment assigned

Week 2 – 15-17 September, 2025

The Libertine Court and "the Culley of Britaine"

The licentiousness of the court of Charles II, centred around Whitehall Palace and St. James's Park, is notorious — and perhaps somewhat exaggerated. What is certainly true, however, is that this tight-knit little world of aristocrats, courtiers, socialites, and government functionaries spawned a wealth of libertine satire, pressed into the service of social and political strategems that were as much about power and social prestige as they were about sex.

Texts:

Rochester, "Satyr" ("In the Isle of Brittain long since famous growne") (Walker 86-87)

Dorset, "The Duel of the Crabs" (Handout: OWL)

Anonymous, "Mrs. Nelly's Complaint" (Handout: OWL)

Week 3 – 22-24 September, 2025

Coffee and Smut: Libertinism about Town

The licentiousness of the court of Charles II, centred around Whitehall Palace and St. James's Park, is notorious — and perhaps somewhat exaggerated. What is certainly true, however, is that this tight-knit little world of aristocrats, courtiers, socialites, and government functionaries spawned a wealth of libertine satire, pressed into the service of social and political strategems that were as much about power and social prestige as they were about sex.

Texts:

Anonymous, "Satyr 1682" (Handout: OWL)

Rochester, "Signior Dildo" (Walker 145-151)

Wycherley, *The Country Wife* ([Online](#); [Western Libraries](#))

Week 4 – 29 September-1 October, 2025

Libertine Men and Women

Libertinism was not merely a philosophy, nor a literary theme. It was also, in theory at least, a way of life for its adherents. The degree to which the precepts of libertinism were actually reflected in their day-to-day business and interactions is, perhaps, arguable, and applicable only on an individual basis, but poets working in the libertine tradition certainly sought to address the putative impact of this approach to life upon the sexual politics of the day.

Texts:

Dorset, ["Methinks the poor town has been troubled too long . . ."] (Handout: OWL)

Etherege, *The Man of Mode* (Handout: OWL)

Week 5 – 6 -8 October, 2025

The Readiest Way to Hell: John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester

The historical and literary personality who looms largest over the culture of libertinism in the Restoration was undoubtedly John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester. Young, sexually attractive, witty, and possessed of a brilliant gift for poetry, Rochester quickly became the "poster boy" for court libertinism, and, in that capacity, a figure of nearly mythic proportions. As he established his prominence as poet, satirist, and roué, there developed around him a larger-than-life reputation. Dozens of poems by others were attributed to him, and sometimes apocryphal tales of his sexual exploits, daring social antics, and blasphemies began to cluster around his public profile.

Arguably, no critic was more severe or penetrating about this developing mythos than was the poet himself.

Texts:

Rochester, "Upon Nothing" (Walker 106-110)

Rochester, "A Translation from Seneca's Troades, Act II, Chorus" (Walker 56-57)

Rochester, "Love and Life" (Walker 28-29)

Week 6 – 13-15 October, 2025

The Readiest Way to Hell: John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester (cont'd)

Rochester, "Verses to the Postboy" (Walker 104-106)

Rochester, "The Disabled Debauchee" (Walker 70-80)

Week 7 – 20-22 October, 2025

The Female Libertine: Aphra Behn

As will no doubt already be clear at this point in the course, many of the poetic and cultural expressions of libertinism in the Restoration are in practice firmly underwritten by an unquestioned phallocentric understanding of "freedom" and "desire," and a subtle (or not-so-subtle) misogyny. What, then, does it mean to be a woman in such a culture? And can there be such a thing as a female libertine?

Texts:

Rochester, "A Song" ("Faire Cloris in a Pigsty lay . . .") (Walker 39-40)

Behn, "The Fair Jilt" ([George Mason University](#))

Notes:

- **Manuscript Exercise due -- Midnight, 24 October**

Week 8 – 27-29 October, 2025

The Female Libertine II

The Restoration in 1660 saw the resurgence of an English theatre scene that had been actively and effectively suppressed for 18 years. While older Elizabethan and Jacobean drama formed a large part of the repertory of the two new theatre companies, the new plays that began to make their way onto the stage of London's theatres were unlike anything that had come before, a reflection of the fact that theatre audience had also changed dramatically in the interim. More "aristocratic" and genteel, the new "comedy of manners" in particular held up a mirror to its audience, and explored (and critiqued) the newly fashionable libertinism of the town and court. Foremost among those dramatists who engaged in such explorations was Aphra Behn, who brought to her perspective a uniquely female perspective.

Texts:

Behn, The Lucky Chance (Handout: OWL)

READING WEEK - November 3-9, 2025

NO CLASSES

Week 9 – 10-12 November, 2025

Contracted Freedoms: The Shrinking Libertine World

By the 1690s, the philosophical libertinism that had characterized the Court and Town of Charles II's London was in retreat, under pressure on the one hand from a resurgent piety encouraged by the new monarchs, William and Mary, and on the other by a slow but discernible shift in the demographics of financial and social power from the old aristocracy, represented by writers like Rochester and Dorset, to an increasingly influential, and conventionally moral, middle class.

These changes are reflected, on the one hand, by the rise of a more "sentimental" and moralistic form of literature (particularly on the stage), but also by a subtle transformation of the dynamics of libertine writing itself.

Texts:

Congreve, The Way of the World (Handout: OWL)

Week 10 – 17-19 November, 2025

“Limbs in Amorous Folds”: Sexual Diversities

If it is true that libertinism in the Restoration was, in practice, largely male-centred and heteronormative in its assumptions and practices, it is also true that it did permit, to a greater extent perhaps than ever before, an expression of alternate sexualities that challenged not merely the conventional mores and norms of the era, but also to some degree the unquestioned tenets of “mainstream” libertinism itself.

Texts:

Rochester, “Song” (“How happy, Cloris, were they free . . .”) (Three Versions) (Walker 21-27)

Rochester, “Nestor” (Walker 11-12)

Behn, “To Fair Clarinda, Who Made Love to Me, Imagined More Than Woman.” (In [The Works of Aphra Behn, Vol. 1, Poem 80, p. 228](#))

Rochester, “Song” (“Love a Woman? You’re an ass . . .”) (Walker 37)

Notes:

- **Annotated Bibliographies due**

Week 11 – 24-26 November, 2025

Imperfect Enjoyments: The Dynamics of Desire and Fruition

Libertinism confronted two paradoxes that threatened the human happiness that it promised. One the one hand, fruition extinguished desire or was itself fleeting, ephemeral, and ultimately unsatisfying. On the other, the disconnect between mind and body, between desire and capacity, continually betrayed the pursuit of fulfillment.

Texts:

Etherege, “The Imperfect Enjoyment” (Handout: OWL)

Rochester, “The Imperfect Enjoyment” (Walker 8-10)

Behn, “The Disappointment” (In [The Works of Aphra Behn, Vol. 1, Poem 28, p. 65](#))

Week 12 – 1-3 December, 2025

Critique and Revision: Libertinism Goes Middle Class

Texts:

Eliza Haywood, “Fantomina” (Handout: OWL)

Cleland, *Fanny Hill: Or, Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (Penguin)

Week 12 – 8 December, 2025

Critique and Revision: Libertinism Goes Middle Class

Texts:

Cleland, *Fanny Hill: Or, Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (Penguin) (Cont’d)

Notes:

- **Essay due**