

Scribes and Editors as Authors in Restoration Manuscript Culture: The Case of *Sodom*

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Harold Love once bemoaned that editing the work of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, is “plagued with more problems of attribution than that of any English poet of comparable stature,” since he “belonged to a culture in which most oppositional verse was withheld from the press and distributed in manuscript to circles of readers.”¹ As Paul Davis notes, “Only about a third of his canon ... found its way into print during the poet’s lifetime – twenty-three poems, of which eighteen, short lyrics and songs for the most part, appeared without Rochester’s authorization and anonymously.”² In contrast, Davis explains, the majority of his poetry “circulated in manuscript, initially among his coterie at Whitehall from where it would radiate outwards to wider spheres of readership through successive acts of transcription, a process that has come to be known as ‘scribal publication.’” When Rochester died, his family attempted to destroy all of his manuscripts and fought to prevent publication of his scandalous work. Despite these efforts, print editions based on manuscripts circulating widely in and out of London, throughout the country, and even across the Channel appeared just months after his death. Pepys famously owned a copy by November 1680. In the hope of avoiding prosecution, London printers often listed the place of publication as Antwerp and attributed the volumes to the “E. of R.” Love argues that this attribution appears more frequently than any other in these collections “because it was a notorious one which might be added at a venture to any piece encountered in circulation, either through honest speculation or a desire to inflate the price of a piece of poetical merchandise.”

It is this context that I would like to consider the obscene play *Sodom*. It is an understatement to say that *Sodom* complicates our understanding of authorship, understood as

the creative agency, intent, and self-presentation that generates a text.³ Like many of the scandalous poems attributed to Rochester in published anthologies of the period, the first known print edition of *Sodom* appeared in 1684 and attributes the play to the “E. of R.” Just a decade later, Anthony à Wood called this attribution into question, and over the past 80 years scholars have frequently debated it. With titles such as “Rochester or Fishbourne: A Question of Authorship,” “The Authorship of *Sodom*,” “Does Otway Ascribe *Sodom* to Rochester? A Reply,” “Did Lord Rochester Write *Sodom*?”, “But Did Rochester *Really* Write *Sodom*?”, and “The Author of *Sodom* among the Smithfield Muses,” this scholarship rests on the assumption that *Sodom* is the product of one (or maybe two) author(s)—Rochester, Christopher Fishbourne, and/or Thomas Jordan. In contrast, I argue that studying *Sodom* as a text shaped at least as much as, if not more, by the scribes and editors who circulated it in manuscript and in print is an excellent case study for countering Rochester’s overdetermined authorial presence in Restoration literature more generally. To make this argument, I will examine five textual variants that arguably reflect scribal and editorial changes to the text rather than an author’s. I offer that these variants illustrate how scribes and editors shaped meaning and created frameworks for interpreting the text. Based on these examples, I suggest the need for more investigation into how scribes and editors played authorial roles in the production and transition of late seventeenth-century texts especially as they moved from manuscript to print.

Starting in 1684, *Sodom* was printed at least four times in the half-century following its probable composition in the late 1670s, but only one copy of these editions, likely dating from the 1720s, is known to still exist. In contrast, the play survives in ten known manuscript copies: one held by the University of Nottingham, one by the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek in Vienna, one by the Victoria and Albert Museum, one by the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, one

by the British Library, one by the University of Hamburg, one by the Suffolk Record Office, two by Princeton Library, and one by a private owner. When it comes to these manuscript copies we can say very little with any certainty. We do know some things. Only the two copies included in a manuscript miscellany held by Princeton were likely to have been copied before the 1684 print edition of the play; all other known manuscripts probably post-date that printing. The two Princeton copies are especially noteworthy since the first is a shorter, three-act version of the play that features a different plot than any of the other nine copies, all but one of which are comprised of five acts.⁴ Seven of the known manuscripts either lack a title page or do not offer an attribution: the two Princeton copies and the ones held by the University of Nottingham, the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, the V & A, the Suffolk Records Office, and the private collector. Three—those held at the Bibliothèque Nationale, the British Library, and the University of Hamburg—attribute the play to Rochester and are probably among the last of the ten to have been copied. The Paris and Hamburg manuscripts are handwritten copies of the 1684 print edition of *Sodom*. Titles for the work vary among the manuscripts and include *Sodom*, *The Destruction of Sodom*, *The Farce of Sodom*, *Sodom or the Quintessence of Debauchery*, and *The Farce of Sodom. Or The Amours of Bolloximion*. Textual variants among the manuscripts are plentiful.

While acknowledging how difficult it is to say anything definitive about these manuscripts, I would like to highlight five of these textual variants to suggest ways scribes and editors shaped the texts *Sodom* that we have today. These variants create alternate interpretations of *Sodom*'s often sexually explicit scenes. To do this, I am tentatively organizing the surviving texts into three categories. In the first are the two Princeton copies, which, as I've said, probably predate any print version of the play. In the second grouping, I place the two handwritten copies

of the 1684 print edition (i.e., the Paris and Hamburg manuscripts) and the sole surviving copy from the 1720s. Finally, the third category is comprised of the remaining manuscript copies, which might have been influenced by the printed versions but are not replicas of them. This third category includes the manuscripts at Nottingham, the V&A, the British Library, and the Suffolk Record Office. The five textual variants I will outline here (one from each major scene in the play) are: 1) the inclusion or exclusion of prologues and epilogues in copies of the play; 2) the inclusion or exclusion of a line describing the size of Buggeranthus's penis in Scene 2; 3) the rearrangement of lines between Princess Swivia and Prince Pricket in Scene 3; 4) versions of stage directions near the end of scene 5; and 5) the inclusion or exclusion of a concluding line spoken by Bolloxinian at the end of the play. Together, I maintain that these variants cannot be adequately explained by mere censorship, especially since a) some many other more sexual graphic elements of the play are included in both manuscript and print versions of the text and b) some of them are not technically sexually explicit.

One of the most obvious variants in the texts of *Sodom* is the inclusion of additional prologues and epilogues in some versions of the play. The two manuscript versions in Princeton MSS C0199 include one prologue, spoken by Bolloxinian. The speech begins, "Almighty Cunts, whom Bolloixinian here / Tyr'd with their tedious toil does quite cashier; / From thence to Arse he has his Prick conveyed / And thinks it Treason to behold a maid." The general gist of what follows is a misogynist complaint (not unusual in collections of manuscript satires in the period) that, once women have been introduced to sex, they will inevitably become whores. The Princeton manuscript ends with an epilogue spoken by Fuckadilla, who exclaims, "You see, Gallants, the effect of lechery," and proceeds to delineate the joys for men of heterosexual vaginal sex over masturbation or anal sex with other men. The copies of the print editions in my

second category insert another prologue before the one spoken by Bolloxinian, one that mimics ones appended to more traditional plays in the period by satirizing audience members for seeing the play and setting expectations for the play's effects on them. In sum, this prologue states that it is a "Play to please your curiosity" by sexually arousing anyone who sees it. These copies also add a second epilogue and an encomium by Swivia "in praise of cunts." The second epilogue returns to the theme of the new prologue—ie., the play will (satirically speaking) inspire men and women to swive with one another in the pursuit of ultimate pleasure, a theme further addressed by Swivia's brief speech. Some of the manuscripts in my third category, namely the V&A, Nottingham, and Suffolk copies have no prologues or epilogues, while the British Library's manuscript includes all of the prologues and epilogues contained in the print copies. A more detailed analysis of these variants suggests that the print editions use the added prologues and epilogues to frame the play as an inspiration for what we would now call compulsory heterosexuality: its dramatic argument, say these editions, is to arouse men and women and inspire them to engage in vaginal sex with one another.

The second textual variant I want to highlight occurs in the play's second scene, which dramatizes the reactions of Queen Cuntigratia and her ladies in waiting to King Bolloximian's declaration that "buggary may be used throughout the land." In the Princeton manuscripts's second, longer version of *Sodom*, one of the ladies in waiting, Officina, suggests to Cuntagratia that she should seduce Buggeranthes to ease her sexual frustrations, since "I've heard [his prick] is both long and Large." Some of the manuscripts in my third category—the ones potentially influenced by the print editions but are not copies of them—include this line while others omit it. In contrast, all three of the print copies excise this description of Buggeranthes' penis. Indeed, at no point in the print editions do Cuntigratia or her ladies in waiting describe a man's penis. They

evaluate mens' sexual performance, discuss their reasons for lechery, and bemoan that men have turned to sodomy, they even discuss the sizes of various dildoes, but their ability to evaluate or discuss "actual" pricks is removed from these texts, which seems to also remove the sexual agency these women seem to enjoy in the earliest manuscript versions of *Sodom*.

Scene three's depiction of Princess Swivia's seduction of her brother, Prince Pricket, contains the third textual variant I want to highlight. The Prince, now at 15 years old, has recently reached physical maturity. In the Princeton manuscript, Swivia reveals that she has not seen her brother's prick since he was nine and suggests, "let's see how much it's grown." When he shows her, she is impressed and offers to show him her "thing." Their conversation moves to his sexual inexperience, which Swivia offers to remove. Consequently, Pricket penetrates her and achieves his first orgasm. Shortly afterwards they discovered by Cunticula, another lady in waiting, who soon masturbates the prince to a second orgasm. When he needs a rest before engaging in any further sexual activity, the three retire to Swivia's bed to await his rejuvenation. While some of the texts in my third category share the Princeton manuscript's depiction of Swivia's initiation of this incestuous game of show and tell, none of the copies of the print editions do. But the lines are not omitted. Instead they are given to prince. In these texts, he initiates their sexual interaction by reminding Swivia that she has not seen his prick since he was nine; he offers to show her "how its grown." Thus, rather Swivia seducing Prickett, this scene becomes one of Pricket initiating sex with his sister.

The fourth textual variant appears near the end of scene 4 when Tewly arrives with a message for Bolloxinian from the King of Gomorrah. This message accompanies a gift of "forty striplings," which pleases Bolloximian immensely. He exclaims that these young men are "my valued gems" and "are to me more than the riches of my Treasury." He directs Tewly to "Grace

every chamber with a pretty boy” and singles one out to be his “pretty darling and my joy,” ending the scene with the declaration that, “Between thy pretty haunches I will play.” All of the manuscripts include this scene in much the same terms except that the copies of the printed editions, which insert several stage directions that emphasize the words boy and boys. IN these copies, Bolloximian “point[s] to the boys” when he calls them his gems. He agains points “to one of the boys” when he singles him out as his “chiefest darling and my joy.” The stage directions indicate near the end of the scene that “Exit all but the King and Boy.” And finally, after Bolloximian says he will play with the stripling’s haunches, the direction states “Exeunt King and boy.” The words “stripling” and “boy” in this period both denote adolescent males and, when viewed in the context of other poems from the period, especially ones by Rochester, we see that they connote an erotic form of power dynamics that (is at least as it is interpreted by scholars as) reinforcing heterosexual male dominance over his sexual partners, male or female. This arguably is the case here as well.

And finally, the play ends with the destruction of Sodom as punishment for the sexual vices propagated by the court. As Brimstone rains down on his kingdom, however, Bolloiximian invites his favorite courtier “to some darker cavern” in an attempt to evade this “Day of Doom.” In the Princeton manuscript, the scene ends with an additional line to the Bolloximian’s final speech: while “leering” on Pockenello, Bolloximian declares that in that darker cavern “on thy bugger’d Arse I will expire,” suggesting his continued defiance of what his court physician insists is the appropriate “propogable end” of sex which “nature gave with pleasure to enjoy.” In this version (along wit several of the copies I’ve placed in my third grouping), Bolloximian explicitly chooses queer sex even knowing that it will likely cost him his life. As we might

predict by this point, the printed copies remove this line, ending with just the exclamation that “We to some darker cavern will retire” and omitting his “leering” at Pockenello.

So, what am I arguing that all adds up to? Paul Hammond’s discussion of the functions of scribes in Restoration manuscript publication—copyist, editor, and sometimes a second author—includes that of censor, which might lead us to conclude that the textual variants I’ve gestured towards today are simply censorship of disapproved sexual activities, i.e., buggery. But I think there is more here to analyze and interpret. First off, there is a lot of explicit sexual content—everything from masturbation to dildo play to bestiality to incest—that finds its way into the print editions. In my quick outlining of how these variants might express attitudes about and frameworks for interpreting the play, men control the circulation and even description of their penises: the ladies at court might long for Buggeranthes’ prick, but in the print editions they cannot describe its length or girth. Prince Pricket can show his penis to his sister and even have sex with her, but she cannot be given enough agency to expose his penis herself. Heterosexuality in the print editions must be privileged over queer sex, which includes male sex with men and with women, especially if it is boundless, exhausting, and outside of marriage. It must be clear that the king is bugging “boys” not his equals; he retains masculine power. I posit that these emendations and excisions reflect an investment in advocating for specific power relationships between men and women not just in the world of the imagined *Sodom* but also in the cultural sexual ideologies of late seventeenth and early eighteenth century England.

¹ Harold Love, “But Did Rochester *Really* Write *Sodom*?”, *PBSA*, vol. 87, no. 3, 1993, 319.

² Paul Davis, “From Script to Print: Marketing Rochester,” in *Lord Rochester in the Restoration World*, ed. Matthew C. Augustine and Steven N. Zwicker. Cambridge UP, 2015. 40.

³ See Mengchen Lang, "Conceptions of Literary Authorship in Modern Literary Theories: History, Issues, Approaches," *FNS*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2022, pp. 78-100.

⁴ The Nottingham manuscript ends before the final act.