

1. Course Information

ENG3341F – Sex, Death, and Philosophy: Libertinism and 18th-Century Literature
1269 – Fall 2026

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.

2. Instructor Information

Mark McDayter
Associate Professor
University College 3419
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Office Hours: Tuesdays 3:30-5:00pm, Wednesdays 11:30am-1:00pm, or by appointment

Students must use their Western (@uwo.ca) email addresses when contacting their instructors.

3. Course Syllabus, Schedule, Delivery Mode

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 Schedule

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-5:00pm, and Wednesdays from 11:30am-1:00pm. 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 – 9-16 September, 2026

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) [Lucretius Excerpts and Head Notes]

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 – 14-16 September, 2026

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, “[A Satire on Charles II]” (“T’th’ Isle of Britaine long since famous growne”) (Walker 74-75)

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

Anonymous, “Mrs. Nelly’s Complaint” (Handout: OWL)

Week 3 – 21-23 September, 2026

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 – 28-30 September, 2026

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 – 5 -7 October, 2026

The Radiest 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 – 12-14 October, 2026
READING WEEK

Week 7 – 19-21 October, 2026

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 8 – 26-28 October, 2026

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 phallogentric 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, 28 October**

Week 9 – 2-4 November, 2026

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 perforce an important part of the repertory of the two new theatre companies, the new plays that began to make their way on to 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)

Week 10 – 9-11 November, 2026

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 11 – 16-18 November, 2026**“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 12 – 23-25 November, 2026**Imperfect Enjoyments: The Dynamics of Desire and Fruition**

Libertinism confronted two paradoxes that threatened the human happiness that it promised. On 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 – 30 November – 2 December, 2026**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 13 – 7-9 December, 2026**Critique and Revision: Libertinism Goes Middle Class****Texts:**

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

Notes:

- **Essay due**

4. Course Materials

Aphra Behn, *The Rover and Other Plays* -- \$11.20

John Cleland, *Fanny Hill, or Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* -- \$16.00

Books are available at [Western's Dellelce Family Bookstore](#).

Additional course material will be posted to OWL: <https://westernu.brightspace.com/>

Students are responsible for checking the course OWL site (<https://westernu.brightspace.com/>) regularly for news and updates. This is the primary method by which information will be disseminated to all students in the class.

If students need assistance with the course OWL site, they can seek support on the [OWL Brightspace Help](#) page. Alternatively, they can contact the Western Technology Services Helpdesk. They can be contacted by phone at 519-661-3800 or ext. 83800.

Technical Requirements

Electronic Devices: *No aids are permitted for the exam for this course. Electronic devices of any kind (including calculators, cell phones and smart watches) are not permitted.*

Statement on the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI)

In this course, students are permitted to use AI tools exclusively for information gathering, preliminary research, and outlining. These tools are intended to enhance the learning experience by providing access to diverse information sources. However, it is essential that students critically evaluate the obtained information, exercise independent thinking, and engage in original research to synthesize and develop their own ideas, arguments, and perspectives. The use of AI tools can serve as a starting point for exploration; however, students are expected to uphold academic integrity by appropriately attributing all sources and avoiding plagiarism.

Assignments should reflect the students' own thoughts and independent written work. By adhering to these guidelines, students contribute to a responsible and ethical learning environment that promotes critical thinking, independent inquiry and allows them to produce original written contributions.

5. Methods of Evaluation

Grading Scheme and Assessment Dates

The overall course grade will be calculated as listed below:

Assignment 1 (Transcription Exercise)	15% -- October 28, 2026
Assignment 2 (Annotated Bibliography)	15% -- November 18, 2026
Research Essay	25% -- December 9, 2026
Participation	10%

Final Exam

35% -- TBA

Note that supporting documentation is **always** required for academic consideration requests for examinations scheduled by the office of the registrar (e.g. December and April exams) and for practical laboratory and performance tests typically scheduled during the last week of the term.

When a student receives academic considerations or academic accommodations which overlap with the built-in flexibility of the assessment, the longest period of accommodation will determine the deadline. The built-in flexibility of the assessment should not be taken to extend any considerations or accommodations.

General information about missed coursework

Students must familiarize themselves with the *University Policy on Academic Consideration – Undergraduate Students in First Entry Programs* posted on the Academic Calendar:

<https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academicpolicies/appeals/academicconsiderationSep24.pdf>

This policy does not apply to requests for academic consideration submitted for **attempted or completed work**, whether online or in person. The policy also does not apply to students experiencing longer-term impacts on their academic responsibilities. These students should consult: [Accessible Education](#).

For procedures on how to submit Academic Consideration requests, please see the information posted on the Office of the Registrar's webpage:

<https://registrar.uwo.ca/academics/academicconsiderations/>

All requests for Academic Consideration must be made within 48 hours after the assessment date or submission deadline.

All academic consideration requests must include supporting documentation; however, recognizing that formal documentation may not be available in some extenuating circumstances, the policy allows students to make one Academic Consideration request **without supporting documentation** in this course. However, the following assessments are excluded from this, and therefore always require formal supporting documentation:

- Examinations scheduled during official examination periods (Defined by policy)

Evaluation Scheme for Missed Assessments

Missed assignments (numbered 1 and 2 in the syllabus and evaluation criteria) and the research essay may, with the agreement of the instructor or the provision of documentation, be granted extensions.

When a student misses the **Final Exam** and their Academic Consideration has been granted, they will be allowed to write the Special Examination (the name given by the University to a makeup Final Exam). See the Academic Calendar ([Special Examinations](#)), especially for those who miss multiple final exams within one examination period.

Essential Learning Requirements

Even when Academic Considerations are granted for missed coursework, the following are deemed essential to earn a passing grade.

Assignments 1 and 2
Research Essay
Final Exam

6. Additional Statements

Academic Integrity Module

Incoming undergraduate students are required to complete Western's Academic Integrity Module. Information about the module, including access instructions, and completion deadlines, is available at: https://vpacademic.uwo.ca/Academic_Integrity_Module.html.

This training is part of the required training suite for all incoming students. Students who do not complete the Academic Integrity Module by the deadline will have an academic seal placed on their records and will not be able to add/drop courses, obtain a transcript, or Intent to Register the following year.

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, here:

https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_offences.pdf

Statement on the use of plagiarism-checking software

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>).

Policy on Accommodation for Religious Holidays

Students should review the [policy for Accommodation for Religious Holidays](#). Where a student will be unable to write examinations and term tests due to a conflicting religious holiday, they should inform their instructors as soon as possible but **not later than two weeks** prior to writing the examination/term test. In the case of conflict with a midterm test, students should inform their instructor as soon as possible but not later than one week prior to the midterm.

Religious Accommodation requests for final exams should be submitted via the Student Absence Portal.

Academic Accommodation and Accessible Education

Academic Accommodation is “a means of adjusting the academic activities associated with a course or program of student in order to permit students with disabilities to participate in those activities at the University and to fulfill the essential requirements of a course or program.” <https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academicpolicies/appeals/Academic%20Accommodationdisabilities.pdf>. Students with disabilities are encouraged to register with **Accessible Education** at the earliest opportunity. “Accessible Education plays a central role in Western's efforts to ensure that its academic programs are accessible for all students” <http://academicsupport.uwo.ca/accessibleeducation/index.html>

Special Examinations

A Special Examination is any examination other than the regular examination, and it may be offered only with the permission of the Dean of the Faculty in which the student is registered, in consultation with the instructor and Department Chair. Permission to write a Special Examination may be given on the basis of compassionate or medical grounds with appropriate supporting documents. To provide an opportunity for students to recover from the circumstances resulting in a Special Examination, the University has implemented Special Examinations dates. These dates as well as other important information about examinations and academic standing can be found [here](#).

Support Services

Academic Advising

Your Home Faculty's Academic Advising Office will support or refer whenever you have an issue that is affecting your studies, including information on adding/dropping courses, academic considerations for absences, appeals, exam conflicts, and many other academic related matters. Do not hesitate to reach out to them if you are struggling and unsure where to go for help. Contact info for all Faculties is here: <https://registrar.uwo.ca/facultyacademiccounselling.html>

Mental Health Support

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health@Western (<https://uwo.ca/health/>) for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.

Gender-based and sexual violence

Western University [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/studentsupport/survivorsupport/get-help.html>. To connect with a case manager or set up an appointment, please contact support@uwo.ca.

Learning Development and Success

Counsellors at the Learning Development and Success Centre <https://learning.uwo.ca> are ready to help you improve your learning skills. They offer presentations on strategies for improving time management, multiple-choice exam preparation/writing, textbook reading, and more. Individual support is offered throughout the Fall/Winter terms in the drop-in Learning Help Centre, and year-round through individual counselling.

USC

Additional student-run support services are offered by the USC, <https://westernusc.ca/services/>.