Paragraph Construction, Transitions, and Incorporating Quotations  
(in discussing the erotic poems of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester)

The author’s thesis here is that Rochester’s sustained (i.e., in multiple poems) association of sexual prowess with emotional distance or unavailability constitutes a satirical attack on the preening machismo of the period (late seventeenth century) in which he was writing. This excerpt discusses three poems, whose subjects will become clear from the author’s analysis. I have included the latter part of the first paragraph, the entirety of the second, and the beginning of the third.

[Initial discussion of how the poem’s narrator depicts himself as heroic despite being impotent.] **Ultimately,** however, the epic analogy in “The Disabled Debauchee” of a brave retired admiral reliving his past exploits through the actions of others glorifies the actor being portrayed even as it dissociates him from the action itself. **Indeed,** Rochester is so detached that physical involvement in sex is unnecessary to his satisfaction. Like a veteran living vicariously through his recruits, he is fulfilled merely in watching those whom he encourages to follow suit; he is “absent, yet enjoys” (12).

**Rochester** makes similar claims about the power of uninvolved sexual conquest in “The Imperfect Enjoyment.” Here, however, complications arise from his earnest love for his partner, Corrina; though he was once able to “carelessly invade / Woman or man” (41-42), the eagerness of his feelings now causes him to finish before intercourse even begins. **This** failure confounds Rochester, who—asking himself incredulously “what oyster-cinder-beggar-common whore / Didst thou e’er fail in all thy life before?” (50-51) – bitterly condemns his performance as “true to lewdness, so untrue to love” (49). **Guilt-ridden** over his partner’s dissatisfaction, he reintroduces emotional disengagement in an effort to please her, hoping that “ten thousand abler pricks agree / To do the wronged Corrina
right for thee” (71-72). Rochester depersonalizes her partners not only by calling them “pricks” rather than men (an insult as well, of course), but also by numbering them in the impersonal thousands. Yet this explicit dehumanization of her prospective lovers only reinforces how thoroughly Rochester accepts the incompatibility of emotion and sex: detaching from Corrina enough to encourage her to have sex with others, and concluding that these outside encounters will be succeed precisely because they are emotionally meaningless. The real sadness of “The Imperfect Enjoyment” is not Rochester’s impotence faced with true love, but his conclusion that his only option is to participate still more wholeheartedly in the callous culture that produced that impotence – and encourage his sweetheart to do so as well.

Considering the ramifications of emotion during sex, it is no surprise that the most successful of Rochester’s subjects is “Signior Dildo,” the Italian sex toy that takes England by storm. Women everywhere greet Signior Dildo as a welcome substitute for men, who, according to Rochester, either conquer emotionlessly or fail lovingly. As a gesture, this has the effect of broadening Rochester’s satirical attack: women are not simply victims of hyper-masculine rakes; their own superficiality encourages and valorizes such behavior in men.

[Discussion and close reading of this poem follow.]