

GENDER, SEX, AND SEXUALITY
HISTORICAL AND CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES
HHPH4014
THE ROARING GIRL
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NEW HISTORICISM

Points (1) to (6) below are the theoretical assumptions of New Historicism:¹

- 1) All actions, practices and experiences are, for purposes of understanding them, historically embedded. No discourse or text, imaginative (literary) or archival (historical records), gives access to unchanging truths or expresses unalterable human nature.

This poses a potentially intractable problem for historical interpretation: the reader of literary texts or historical documents is embedded in his/her own historical contingency. There is an 'impossibility of fully reconstructing and reentering the culture' of the historical period in which a text was written.² This does not mean we are locked into a perpetual present; on the contrary, our present is in a historical process of negotiation and exchange with the past.

- 2) All aesthetic representation (literature, art) embodies the 'circulation of social energy'. It is 'an extraordinarily sensitive register of the complex struggles and harmonies of culture'.³
- 3) Society is conceived along the same lines as the structural theory of linguistics conceives of signification within a language system.
 - A language is a verbal sign system. Each sign is composed of:
 - An acoustic image or sound pattern as a result of auditory impression and oral articulation ('*signifiant*', usually translated as *signifier*), which is also equivalent in writing to the graphic/written mark or sequence of letters;
 - A concept ('*signifié*', translated as *signified* or significance).
 - The connection between the signifier and the signified is fixed but essentially arbitrary. There is no natural or inevitable connection between the written or spoken word and the concept that is associated with it. The relationship is a convention accepted by all users of a given language, and is therefore social rather than natural.
 - What a *sign* refers to in the world is called its *referent*. But the meanings (*signifieds*) of words do not map directly onto the phenomena to which the sign refers in the world; they are 'created' or 'constructed' in and by a language. So a language is an indirect, not a direct or transparent, naming of things existing independently of language or making up a reality that is unchanged by language, whether in our minds or in the world beyond us.

¹ H. Aram Veaser, 'The New Historicism', in *The New Historicism Reader*, ed. by H. Aram Veaser (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 1-32. (pp. 2, 8).

² Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), the Introduction, pp. 1-9 (p. 5).

³ Greenblatt, p. 5.

- The arbitrariness of the verbal sign necessitates a systematic structure for language.
 - As we read or listen to someone speaking, we find the boundaries of the meanings of a word by placing it among similar sounding words whereby we discern significant differences in sound (phonemes). Difference of pronunciation is accepted. Even mispronunciation is accepted provided there is no different meaning attached to the sound, i.e. no significant difference in sound (phoneme).
 - The contextual network of a word consists of other words at the same or at other levels of structure that are connected or proximate in meaning, and we also distinguish between these.
 - They may be similar or related, but at different levels, e.g. river and stream are different kinds of flowing body of water; beret and Stetson are different kinds of hat.
 - They may be similar in meaning, e.g. jump and leap , or
 - They may be connected, e.g. nurse and ward.
 - In the structure of language some words or linguistic terms have their sense or meaning in opposition, e.g. ‘male’ has sense by contrast to ‘female’. These are binary oppositions which human beings arguably impose on a spectrum of differences. For example, night/day is a binary opposition, but between night and day there is an almost infinite variation for which we have some terms in the language: dawn, dusk, twilight, gloaming. Arguably, *binary oppositions* arise only by repressing differences within the opposed terms or entities.
 - So we distinguish between meanings (signifieds) by distinguishing between words (signifiers). Meaning (the signified) arises as a result of a term’s place in its contextual network. Therefore, it is argued, meaning (the signified) is an effect of the difference in sounds or marks between words or terms (signifiers) in a linguistic system. A language is a system of elements which are wholly defined by their relations to one another within the system. In language there are only differences without positive terms.
 - Consequently ‘male’ means what it does because of its oppositional relationship to ‘female’ in the linguistic structure, not because it maps accurately onto a phenomenon of ‘maleness’ in the world. The meanings of male and female are as though superimposed on biological sexual differences.
- If so, how do we manage to communicate meaning and refer to the world? We are able to do so because language is a social system and through use its signification and reference become conventional.

So, if society is conceived in the same way as the structural theory of linguistics conceives of signification within a language system, then social acts and identities are understood in terms of their relation to other social acts and identities in the societal system. Every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices. In New Historicism, description and analysis of cultural practices and acts sorts out levels of rhetorical meaning. Importantly, events, experiences, acts, and practices within a society are only ever understood semiotically even by the experiencers themselves, the participants in those acts and events. They are ‘always embedded in systems of public signification, always grasped, even by their makers, in acts of interpretation’.⁴ Equally importantly, ‘human identity is more constituted than constitutive;

⁴ Greenblatt, p. 5.

constituted by, for example, the pre-existing structures of language and ideology, and by the material conditions of human existence'.⁵

- 4) In society, literary texts circulate inseparably from non-literary texts, and societies are governed by 'master fictions' as well as by force. Power is located at once localised in particular institutions – the government, Parliament, the judiciary, the court, the church, the colonial administration, the patriarchal family – and diffused in ideological structures of meaning, characteristic modes of expression, recurrent narrative patterns.⁶ Literature does not simply express social rules and codes, however. But neither is it the autonomous origin of its own aesthetic power. Nor is the origin of its power simply in its author. Rather literature functions in three different ways, as 'a manifestation of the concrete behaviour of its particular author, [...] the expression of the codes by which behaviour is shaped [and understood], and as a reflection upon those codes'.⁷
- 5) Critical reflection on, and description of, society's codes – its acts, behaviours, practices, values – within a literary text necessarily participate in the structure and system of language and society that it describes. Just as meaning does not exist independently of the language structure from which it arises, so a person's reflection on society does not exist independently of society itself.
- 6) Arguably, every act of critique and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practices it exposes. By *opposing*, one may unwittingly accept crucial structural elements of society and the associated value systems, and therefore any attempt at subversion is contained. Put simply, for example, if society is conceived on the whole as good, any opposition to structural elements that are regarded as integral to society may automatically and unthinkingly be characterised as bad. If opposition is regarded as posing a threat, it may need to be contained, its power diffused. This reflex may exist within each person. New Historicism claims to reveal 'the self's deep implication in its founding culture, even where we have always assumed that we were witnessing an opposition'. One pessimistic conclusion to this is that rather than actually presenting independent alternatives, all social and political opposition to crucial structures of society is potentially implicated in ideological oppression and 'the good fight is doomed to fail'.⁸

MIDDLETON & DEKKER'S *THE ROARING GIRL*

- 1) In the English Renaissance, more specifically London in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the emergent theatre is an instance of the literalisation and institutionalisation of the conceptual demarcation between artistic and other social practices. As it developed, the demarcation between the theatre and other institutions and practices had an improvisational character. At least some of its modes of exchange with other social institutions, practices, and behaviours are tangible.
- 2) In Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker's *The Roaring Girl*, the boy actor playing the character Moll delivers these lines at the end of the play's epilogue:

The Roaring Girl herself, some few days hence,
Shall on this stage give larger recompense;
Which mirth that you may share in, herself does woo you,
And craves this sign: your hands to beckon her to you. (Epilogus, 35-38)

⁵ Jonathan Dollimore, 'Subjectivity, Sexuality, and Transgression in *The Roaring Girl*', in Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker, *The Roaring Girl: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, A Norton Critical Edition, ed. by Jennifer Panek (New York; London: W.W. Norton, 2011), pp. 250-66 (p. 251).

⁶ Greenblatt, p. 6.

⁷ Greenblatt, p. 4.

⁸ Veaser, pp. 3, 6.

‘With these lines, Middleton and Dekker script a boy in women’s clothing – the young actor who has played Moll Cutpurse for the duration of *The Roaring Girl* – to transform the conventional end-of-show applause of the audience at the Fortune playhouse into an invitation, beckoning the real-life Moll – a sometime thief and notorious cross-dresser named Mary Frith – to come and perform on that same stage. That Frith did so, “some few days hence” from the play’s first performance in late April or early May of 1611, is witnessed by an entry in the Consistory Court of London’s *Correction Book*, which records how she appeared “at ye Fortune in man’s apparel and in her boots and with a sword by her side” and “sat there upon the stage in the public view of all the people ... and played upon her lute and sand a song.” With this act, Frith managed to offend the city’s moral authorities in at least three ways at once: by defying the law which barred women from the public stage, by openly wearing the clothes and accoutrements of the opposite sex, and by entertaining her audience with “immodest and lascivious speeches,” which apparently included a teasing invitation to follow her home and find out which sex she *really* was.”⁹

- 3) Moll’s transvestism might suggest her subversion of traditional *gendered binary oppositions* which are superimposed on biological sexual differences. Indeed the fact of her cross-dressing arguably destabilises these essentialist binaries. She resists the adoption of the ‘traditional gender roles’ available to females in the world created by the play:
 - a) Wife: e.g. ‘I have no humour to marry, I love to lie o’ both sides o’th’bed myself, and again o’th’other side; a wife you know ought to be obedient, but I fear me I am too headstrong to obey, therefore I’ll ne’er go about it.’ (II.ii.34-39).
 - b) Prostitute: e.g. she will not be subordinated to Laxton by being paid for sexual favours.
 - c) Mercantile (middle-class) wife (as frequently represented in misogynist literature and city comedy): e.g. if she were one of these she would no longer be desired by Laxton, because she would have economic power in excess of his own.
- 4) Early modern documents concerning cross-dressing, however, explain women’s transvestism in terms of a response or reaction to the effeminisation of men wearing ‘feminine attire’.
- 5) In relation to these documents, it is significant that Moll is often critical of the lack of masculinity expressed by the gallants (II.i.290-93, 298-99). The failings of braggart men are what she seems to reprove both when she trips up Trapdoor (II.i.334) and when she bests Laxton at sword play in Lincoln’s Inn Fields (III.i.115-29).¹⁰ Moll’s apparently transgressive sexual identity might be deeply implicated in early modern culture’s binary oppositions and sexual hierarchies, so that what we might have assumed was an opposition is a function of containment, a reinforcement of those hierarchical binary oppositions. Jean Howard argues: ‘If Moll’s “corrections” worked, women would again be docile and men manly, and happy marriages would thrive.’¹¹
- 6) Yet, as Jean Howard goes on to argue, for this ‘corrective’ role Moll’s practice as a cross-dresser may be inappropriate. And in her tirade against the sex and gender systems when fighting Laxton, she seems to exceed the tamer demands for manly men and womanly women (3.1.71-111). So does she release subversive potential after all?

⁹ Jennifer Panek, ‘Introduction’, in Middleton and Dekker, pp. ix-xviii (p. ix). The quotation contains a quotation from *The Consistory of London Correction Book* for November 1611 to October 1613 (London Metropolitan Archives, DL/C/310, folios 19-20).

¹⁰ Jean E. Howard, ‘Sex and Social Conflict: The Erotics of *The Roaring Girl*’, in *Erotic Politics: Desire on the Renaissance Stage*, ed. Susan Zimmerman (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 179.

¹¹ Howard, p. 179.

- 7) If you are considering writing your essay for this module on this topic, you may want to give some thought to the following ways in which New Historicism has been criticised as an approach to literary texts:
- i. The New-Historicist assumption that literary and non-literary texts, and literary texts and other social practices, circulate inseparably has arguably resulted in 'arbitrary connectedness' and historians remain deeply troubled by what they perceive to be methodological anarchy. However this is possibly not a concern with the approach to *The Roaring Girl*.
 - ii. New Historicism has tended to emphasise the containment and neutralisation of disruptive or subversive energies by unifying, stable institutions and structures, through *binary oppositions* which arguably repress differences within the opposed terms. But there are often a plurality of voices in a period and not only polarised ones.