

Session 8

# Seventeenth-century Drama

Jonson, Webster

# Overview

- New Historicism
  - Discourses
  - Circulation of power
  
- Discourses in *Volpone*
  
- John Webster
  - *The Duchess of Malfi*
  - “Revenge Tragedy”

# New Historicism

- This term was first used by Stephen Greenblatt (Pieters 11)
- Literary theory, “which emerged in the late 1970s” (Tyson 288)
- refuses the traditional Historicism and the New Criticism
- “... **literary texts are cultural artifacts** that can tell us something about the interplay of discourses, the web of social meanings, operating in the time and place in which the text was written.” (Tyson 288)

# New Historicism

- “... the literary text and the historical situation from which it emerged are equally important because **text** (the literary work) and **context** (the historical conditions that produced it) **are mutually constitutive: they create each other**” (Tyson 288-289)
- “... the literary text shaped and was shaped by the discourses circulating in the culture in which it was produced” (Tyson 292)

# Discourses

- **Discourse is a social language which is created by particular cultural conditions at a particular time and place, often by an institution (medicine, law etc.)**
- “... expresses a particular way of understanding human experience” (Tyson 281)
- cultures are constructed by multiple discourses that compete against each other and that change over time

# Discourses

- The term **discourse** is similar to **ideology**
- "... discourse draws attention to the role of language as **the vehicle of ideology**" (Tyson 281)
- Plenty of examples: the discourse of Christian fundamentalism, the discourse of modern science or the discourse of ecological awareness

# Discourses

- Writers are exposed to the discourses of their time:  
If we want to understand literature we have to understand the culture and society that produced the literature.
- Readers are exposed to the discourses of their time too:  
a critic is embedded in his/her own history.
- Since writers are always exposed to particular discourses, **all historical analysis is inevitably subjective.**

# Discourses / New Historicism

- New Historicism also explains what historical analysis cannot do:
  - 1) Historical analysis is subjective
  - 2) It cannot show “that a particular spirit of the times or world view accounts for the complexities of any given culture” (Tyson 283)
  - 3) Historical analysis cannot demonstrate that history is linear, causal or progressive.



# Discourses

- **“No discourse is permanent.”** (Tyson 281)
- In a society there are **several, competing discourses.**
- **Interaction among discourses:** “they are always in a state of flux, overlapping and competing with one another in any number of ways at any given point in time.” (Tyson 281)
- **History** is based on linguistic representation → therefore it is **literary or rhetorical.**
- **Literature is historical** because it absorbs the discourses of this time.
- “From a new historical perspective, **no discourse, by itself, can adequately explain the complex cultural dynamics of social power.**” (Tyson 281)

# Circulation of power

- According to French philosopher Michel Foucault (his ideas influenced the development of new historicism): “... **power circulates in all directions, to and from all social levels, at all times.**” (Tyson 281)
- According to Foucault, power circulates through exchange:
  1. **The exchange of material goods** (buying, selling, bartering, gambling, taxation, charity, theft)
  2. **The exchange of people** (marriage, adoption, kidnapping, slavery)
  3. **The exchange of ideas (discourses)**

# Circulation of power

- “From a new historical perspective, **no discourse**, by itself, **can adequately explain the complex cultural dynamics of social power.**” (Tyson 281)

## Example: Dictator of a small country

- his power must circulate in a lot of discourses:
  - in the discourse of religion (“divine right of kings” or in God’s love of hierarchical society)
  - in the discourse of fashion (the style of the First Lady)
  - in the discourse of science (Darwinism)
  - aim: stabilisation of power/rule

# Circulation of power

- What is really right, normal and natural? → depends on definition
- Examples: homosexuality, cannibalism, gender equality
- Michel Foucault: “... all definitions of “insanity”, “crime”, and sexual ‘perversion’ are social constructs by means of which ruling powers maintain their control. **We accept these definitions as ‘natural’ only because they are so ingrained in our culture.**” (Tyson 282)

# Discourses in *Volpone*

- Economic discourse
- Medical discourse
- religious (anti-Catholic) discourse
- Legal discourse (lawyers and the law)
- discourse of literature (literary works mentioned)
- discourse of travel writing (satire: Sir Politic)

# Economic Discourse

- *Volpone*'s setting is in Italy, but actually London is meant.
- **Jacobean**
- **Free market and capitalism**
- **“a desire for unscrupulously gained profit seemed to be everywhere”** (McEvoy 54)
- **“All things can now be traded; everything, through the operation of money, can be transformed into something else. Nothing is stable and untradable, nothing has value in itself; everything, even a human being, has its price“**  
(McEvoy 55)
- **aim: profit**

# Economic Discourse

CORVINO      She shall do't. Tis done.  
'Slight, if this doctor, who is not engaged,  
Unless 't be for his counsel (which is nothing),  
Offer his daughter, what should I, that am  
So deeply in? I will prevent him. Wretch!  
Covetous wretch! – Mosca, I have determined.

MOSCA    How Sir?

CORVINO      We'll make all sure. The party you wot of.  
Shall be mine own wife, Mosca.

(Norton 1480)

# Economic Discourse

CELIA O God, and his good angels! Whither, whither,  
Is shame fled human breasts, that with such ease,  
Men dare put off your honours, and their own?  
Is that which ever was a cause of life  
Now placed beneath the basest circumstance,  
And modesty an exile made for money?

(Norton 1493-94)



# Medical Discourse

- quacks and quackery
- ridiculous medicine
- lots of quacksalvers without qualification
- Volpone as a quack doctor

VOLPONE No more. – Gentlemen, if I had but time to discourse to you the miraculous effects of this my oil, surnamed *oglio del Scoto*, with the countless catalogue of those I have cured of th' aforesaid and many more diseases, the patents and privileges of all the princes and commonwealths of Christendom, or but the depositions of those that appeared on my part before the signory of the Sanita, and ...

(Norton 1472)

# Anti-Catholic Discourse

VOLPONE Good morning to the day, and, next, my gold!  
Open the **shrine** that I may see my **saint**.

*[MOSCA reveals the treasure.]*

Hail the world's **soul**, and mine! More glad than is  
The teeming earth to see the longed-for sun  
Peep through the horns of the **celestial Ram**  
Am I to view thy splendor darkening his,  
That, lying here amongst my other hoards,  
Show'st like a flame by night, or like the day  
Struck out of chaos, when all darkness fled  
Unto the center. O thou son of Sol -  
But brighter than thy father - let me kiss  
With adoration thee, and every relic

Of **sacred treasure** in this **blessed room** .... (Norton 1447)

religious  
terms

# Anti-Catholic Discourse

- Scene can be read as a **parody of religious worship and the Catholic sacrament of the Eucharist**
- Gunpowder Plot 1605: failed assassination attempt against King James I of England by a group of provincial English Catholics led by Robert Catesby. Jonson was at least peripherally involved. → “Volpone was written in the wake of the Gunpowder Plot ...” (Dutton 1)
- Jonson distanced himself from the Catholic extremists.
- He converted to Catholicism. His conversion to “Roman Catholicism as **an act of symbolic resistance to the overweening state** ...” (Dutton 25)
- Jonson shows in his plays his opinion on political issues  
→ was arrested

# *The Duchess of Malfi*

## by John Webster

- “John Webster’s fame rests on two remarkable tragedies ... *The White Devil*, first performed in 1608 ... *The Duchess of Malfi*, first performed in 1614 and published in 1623” (Norton 1571)
- “In this play, the spirited ruler of Malfi secretly marries her steward for love, defying her brothers, a duke and a cardinal, who demand that she remain a widow. Their dark motives include greed for her fortune, overweening pride in their noble blood, and incestuous desire.”  
(Norton 1571-72)

# Revenge Tragedy

- Revenge Tragedy – “Tragic drama involving some or all of the following: murder, ghosts, bloody violence, retribution, a protagonist who delays, agonising soliloquies and catastrophes.” (Augner 261)
- It was a favourite form of English tragedy in the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras. People were fascinated by the dark violence. They were scared and amused at the same time.
- Examples: Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Webster’s *Duchess of Malfi*, Marston’s *The Malcontent*

# *The Duchess of Malfi*

- The main topics of *The Duchess of Malfi* are typical for a revenge drama:
  - revenge
  - misuse of power
  - the status of women
  - the result of unequal marriage
  - cruelty, murder, incest, corruption

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