

Session 9

18th-century Poetry

Jonathan Swift and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu

Overview

- 1) Jonathan Swift, *The Lady's Dressing Room*
- 2) Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, *The Reasons that Induced Dr. Swift to Write a Poem Call'd the Lady's Dressing Room*

Jonathan Swift

The Lady's Dressing Room

(Norton 2766-2770)

Historical Background

- 17th century
 - one-sex model of the Renaissance
 - superiority of men → only men allowed to write
 - patriarchal, cultural & social arguments
 - common practice to write satires on women

Historical Background

- Later 17th century
 - feminist movement
 - fight for equal rights, education, access to literature (esp. poetry → male domain)

- Finally...
 - women allowed to write
 - public spectacle observing competition between male satirists ↔ female satirists

The Lady's Dressing Room

▪ Plot

- Celia leaves house after hours of dressing
- Strephon – her admirer – slips into Celia's room, detecting things that shock him:
 - dirty towels & clothes
 - chest hiding Celia's used toilet pan etc.

The Lady's Dressing Room

- Formal aspects
 - iambic tetrameter, mostly masculine
 - rhyme: couplets
 - run-on lines (enjambements)
 - numerous rhetorical figures: accumulation (l. 4, 24), anaphora (ll. 57/58)...

The Lady's Dressing Room

- Intertextuality

- refers to several myths and literary texts:

- Pandora's box

- myth of Venus and the story of Actaeon in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

- Milton's *Paradise Lost*

- Lee's *Rival Queens*

The Lady's Dressing Room

- A misogynist poem? -

- **Jonathan Swift** (1667-1745)

- lifelong bachelor

- clergyman

- hates human pride and aims to uncover illusions of romantic women as creatures of love and beauty and to ridicule men admiring women and their idleness

- MORAL LESSON (for men): do not trust the romantic representations of women in art and literature

- notorious passion for cleanliness

- compared to society at that time with little hygienic and medical values (bad/no teeth, fleas, lice, etc.)

The Lady's Dressing Room **- A misogynist poem? -**

→ Swift wasn't a misogynist but a misanthropist

His aims:

- to uncover the delusions produced by art and literature
- pointing out that physical beauty will fade
- advocating hygiene

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu

***The Reasons That Induced Dr.
Swift to Write a Poem Called
the Lady's Dressing Room***

(Norton 2770-2772)

Debating women – Writing about women and responding female writers

- by 1750: 60% of men and 40% of women could read (Barker-Benfield, 1992)
- early 18th century: great age of satire
- battle of sexes – exchange of poems by male and female writers
- women satirists: “When the ways of women come into question, women must speak for themselves.” (Norton 2766)
 - questions of equal rights, female education, the role of women in learning and literature
 - independence of mind, freedom of thought and deviance from the norm

Debating women – Writing about women and responding female writers

- women had no public persona
- genders: a) group consciousness ↔ b) individual wit
- women = goddesses of beauty and love
BUT: dragged down by male satirists
- neoclassical discourses of class and gender = ethos of aristocratic superiority

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu

- née Pierrepont
- *1689 †1762
- father: wealthy Whig supporter
- connections to London circle (Pope)
- husband: Edward Wortley Montagu
- children: Mary and Edward
- travelled through Europe → Turkey
- 1718 quarrels with Pope
- literary forms: letters, poems, essays...



Jonathan Richardson,
Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762)
(from: <http://www.myartprints.com/a/richardson-jonathan/lady-mary-wortley-montagu.html>)

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu

- 1736 Count Francesco Algarotti
- 1747 *Small-Pox*
- learned (taught herself) Latin, Italian, French, Turkish
- satirist (influence by Pope)
- characteristics: wit, intelligence, beauty
- proponent of the Impotence Theory
- publications after death

Jonathan Swift and Lady Montagu – Relationship?

Montagu



Swift

→ she refused his politics, his friendship with Pope, his vanity and what she considered indecency in his writings

The Reasons that Induced Dr. Swift to Write a Poem Call'd the Lady's Dressing Room

- Montagu's response → Norton 2770-2772
- anonymously published in 1734 – *The Dean's Provocation for Writing the Lady's Dressing Room*
- content: Dr. Swift – courtesan Betty – attempt to make love with her – fails, because of: a) the Dr.'s impotence or b) untidiness of Betty's dressing room – he wants his money back
- satire, parody, lampoon – mocking of Swift's poem *The Lady's Dressing Room* (Norton 2767-2770)
- adaptation of formal aspects: iambic tetrameter (- ^ - ^ - ^ - ^), pair rhyme (aabb), dramatized dialogue, replacing of vulgar names (Betty for Celia), satirical techniques

The Reasons that Induced Dr. Swift to Write a Poem Call'd the Lady's Dressing Room

- Montagu's version: Dr. Swift = affected hypocrite, clergyman (reversed positions)
- answer to Swift's last line "Celia, Celia, Celia shits": "She answer'd short, I'm glad you'll write, / You'll furnish paper when I shite."
 - witty parody and satirical hint to Swift's scatological preferences

Montagu's reaction and how she understands Swift's poem

- counter-attack
- prime target = (Dr.) Swift
- “The first recorded voice of feminist resistance to *The Lady's Dressing Room* is that of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, refreshingly untroubled ... diagnosing the poem as simple revenge for sexual misadventure” (Rawson 1995)
- “Dr. S[wift] in the midst of his Women, like a master E[unuch] in a seraglio.” (Montagu, *Complete Letters*)
 - idea of a harem
 - she accuses Swift of frustrated sexual lust and impotence

Montagu's reaction and how she understands Swift's poem

- her reply shows a performance typical of the contemporary discourse about gender identity
- she makes him fail in the sexual act and laughs as a woman at an essence of masculine pride
- she shows her richness of knowledge → Horace, Hercules

Other feminist writers

- few women critics at that time
 - Anne Finch, Mary Wollstonecraft (*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*)
- “Swift’s representation of women became a subject of debate, often vitriolic, beginning in his own lifetime.” (Barnett 2007)

Overview: Reader-response criticism (according to Tyson)

- goal: “to increase our understanding of the reading process by investigating the activities in which readers engage and the effects of those activities on their interpretation” (Tyson 188)
- written text = an “event that occurs within the reader”
- 5 categories:
 - 1) transactional reader-response theory
 - 2) affective stylistic theory
 - 3) subjective reader-response theory
 - 4) psychological reader-response theory
 - 5) social reader-response theory

Questions asked by reader-response criticism – How does this approach help to understand Swift's satire?

- Montagu as an aristocratic, self-determined, well-educated lady (social reader-response theory)
 - What does the interpretation of the text say about Montagu? (psychological reader-response theory)
 - What does the text do with Montagu? (She's taking revenge) (affective stylistic theory)
- (see Tyson, questions asked by reader-response criticism)

How would postmodern feminist critics react?

- patriarchal literature/patriarchal ideology
- Montagu = wanted to become a patriarchal woman

traditional gender roles – a little overview

Women	Men
-emotional (irrational)	-rational
-weak	-strong
-nurturing	-protective
-submissive	-decisive

How would postmodern feminist critics react?

- patriarchy = sexist → inborn inferiority (women)
- patriarchal ideology keeps women and men in their traditional gender roles (male dominance)
- a woman has to behave in a feminine way (gender!) → idealization of women
- e.g. fairy tales: idealized young girls (beautiful, sweet, romantic, gentle, submissive, virginal and angelic) → compare idealization of women in the eighteenth century
 - at the end the little princess has to marry the “right man” to “live happily ever after”

Internet Sources

- <http://books.google.de/books?id=BgSudxrDGUEC&pg=PA154&dq=the+reasons+that+induced+dr.+swift+to+write+a+poem+called+the+lady%27s+dressing+room&lr=&cd=46#v=onepage&q=the%20reasons%20that%20induced%20dr.%20swift%20to%20write%20a%20poem%20called%20the%20lady%27s%20dressing%20room&f=false> (date of access: 08.06.2010)
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