Changeable Forms: eighteenth-century embodiment

M.Phil in Eighteenth-Century and Romantic Studies, 2019-20

Convenor: Dr Rebecca Anne Barr

The eighteenth century was once seen as ‘the enlightenment’. This was an era in which science enabled reason and medicine to discipline and subdue the clamorous and unseemly demands of the body, and which elaborated a culture of politeness to polish the habits and smooth the movement of individual bodies in social spaces. This seminar traces multifarious embodiments in poetry and prose, and the differing bodies that populated the eighteenth-century imagination. Looking at theories of moral sense feeling, it will explore the overlap between embodied feeling and emotional affect. How reliable a mode of knowing does the body provide? How did eighteenth-century writers understand and experience their own physicality? Is there a difference between an embodied reaction and an intellectual or affective response? How did literary form shape representations and receptions of the body? How did shifting gender norms and racial politics change perceptions of embodiment? Can the body act as a mode of resistance? Using insights from the medical humanities, theories of embodiment and affect, alongside canonical and non-canonical texts, the course aims to probe and test the flesh of literary bodies, and to think about bodies as historical and cultural as well as corporeal and visceral.

Some Preliminary reading


Seminar One: 1. Sex and women’s bodies

In the opening seminar we will consider the ways in which the eighteenth century is credited with a shift in the understanding of sex and the body, supposedly moving toward a ‘two sex’ conception of gender according to Thomas Laquer’s influential thesis in Making Sex. This opening session will look at a wide variety of sources, setting the scene for the rest of the term. We look at Aristotle’s Masterpiece, a late-seventeenth-century work on sexuality, childbirth and midwifery reprinted throughout the eighteenth century and assess its representation of the body, and women’s bodies in particular. Its ideas of maternal impressionability help illuminate both the ‘monstrous’ births of Mary Toft and the ante-natal comedy of Tristram Shandy. We will examine ideas of embodied sensibility and female sexuality in Cleland’s Memoirs of a Woman of
Pleasure, and the rhetoric of misogyny that drives many of the representations of women’s bodies in the period.

Primary texts for discussion
Aristotle’s Masterpiece (1684).
John Cleland, Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure, or, Fanny Hill (1746)
Richard Manningham, ‘An exact diary of what was observ’d during a close attendance upon Mary Toft, the pretended rabbit-breeder’ (London, 1726)
Extracts from Samuel Richardson, Clarissa, on moodle.
Jonathan Swift, ‘A Beautiful Young Nymph going to Bed’; ‘The Lady’s Dressing Room’

Secondary Reading
Thomas Laquer, Making Sex, chap. ‘Of Language and the Flesh’.
Kathleen Lubey, Excitable Imaginations .2014.

2. Bodies and disability

This seminar picks up the themes of sexual difference, monstrosity and deviancy from our first session, to think further about bodily difference, variability and anomaly. Reading William Hay’s essay on deformity alongside Sarah Scott’s Millenium Hall, we consider how forms of anomalous or defective embodiments help crystalize alternative identities to the mainstream ‘normal’ body: sometimes acting as utopian or queer reformulations of society and morals, at others revealing the fictionality of bodily autonomy and power through leaky bodies, comic impotence and tragic impairment.

Primary texts for discussion
William Hay, Deformity: an Essay (1753)
Tobias Smollett, extracts from Humphrey Clinker.
Laurence Sterne, Tristram Shandy extracts on moodle
Sarah Scott, Millenium Hall (1762)

Secondary reading
3. Hungry bodies

In this seminar, we will think about the ways in which eighteenth-century writers explore the political and representational possibilities of hungry bodies. We will examine two poems by Irish authors in responses to ‘The Great Frost’ of 1739-41. This national food crisis was caused by cold weather and exacerbated by economic mismanagement. We also read a satire by Charles Churchill, which represents the perceived incursion of Scots influence in Britain as a symptom of Celtic starvation. The migration of hungry Scots is the symptom of a barrenness which is both part of natural poverty and a deeper spiritual condition. A brief letter from the heroine of Samuel Richardson’s tragic novel Clarissa is also included. In it, Clarissa responds to her friend’s concerns at her precipitous weight-loss, situating it in the aftermath of her rape by the libertine Robert Lovelace. We will consider how gender, nationality and politics affects the figuration of hungry bodies, the distinction between starvation and self-starvation, and bodies at the nexus of consumption and capitalism.

Primary texts for discussion
Charles Churchill, ‘A Prophecy of Famine’ (1763)
William Dunkin, ‘The Frosty Winters of Ireland’ (1742)
Samuel Richardson, extracts from Clarissa on moodle.
Laurence Whyte, ‘Famine: a Poem’ (1742)

Secondary reading
4. Race and the body

The eighteenth-century was the era of the circumb-Atlantic slave trade, a global economy in which human bodies were treated as commodities. What did this mean for the embodied subjects who were transported in such transatlantic networks? How are the bodies of racial ‘others’ represented and narrativized in literature? This seminar introduces a range of texts which deal with embodiment in differing ways. We look at the body politic in Oroonoko alongside the quasi-supernatural powers of the freed slave Jack Mansong in Obi. In The Female American’s the bi-racial female protagonist’s investment in spiritual authority is echoed in Equiano’s Interesting Narrative, an autobiographical work which treats the violent and alienating effects of capitalism on black bodies and the self. The harmed or injured body mobilized by sentimental representations of slave distress in both abolitionist and pro-slavery texts problematize the ethics of representation and feeling. These texts show the complex historical interrelations of race, gender, subjectivity and corporeality in the period.

Primary Texts for discussion
Aphra Behn, Oroonoko, or, The Royal Slave (1688)
Phillis Wheatley, Poems on moodle

Choose two of the following to read:
Olaudah Equiano, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano (1789)
William Earle, Obi, or, Three-Fingered Jack (1800): available in a Broadview edition

Secondary Texts
John Gabriel Stedman, Narrative of a Five Year Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam (1796).
General Secondary Reading

Please note that not all of these secondary texts directly focus on the eighteenth century, but they do touch on issues and theoretical approaches that should be of use to your thinking about the period and its literature.


Margrit Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries*. 1997)


