Crossroads of Knowledge in Early Modern England: Interdisciplinary Approaches
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Early modern England was a culture at a crossroads, not least in its ways of knowing. A time of intense literary production, it also saw the cultural forces of humanism and the Reformation in a grand collision; crucial shifts in the law; scientific advancement; and dramatic growth in trade and travel. At stake across the board was knowledge: its theories and technologies, its excitements and anxieties. But the questions this culture asks and seeks to answer about knowledge, how to get there, and where to stop, do not neatly fall within the remit of any one discipline, let alone the broad categories of science and the arts.

The overlaps and negotiations at the boundaries between disciplines committed to knowing or conceptualising knowledge invite and deserve systematic research. For it is at these crossings that resolutions conditioned by disciplinary interests are challenged by the different aims and responsibilities of alternative knowledge systems. Literary texts, relatively unconstrained by specialised discourse or quantitative evidence, are uniquely syncretic in the way they capture mental habits produced by epistemic cross-currents. Less obviously, non-literary texts - be they natural philosophical essays, legal treatises, sermons or economic pamphlets – also adopt literary strategies in their attempt to communicate and persuade. But in their explorations of the dynamic tensions of this energetic but far-from unified period, they are distinct from each other as well as from mainstream ‘literature’.

Again, material objects elude discursive restrictions and find their own way of knowing, of carrying certain knowledges, and of imparting these to human understanding.

This set of seminars will probe the interface between the imaginative literature of the time and epistemology in its wider sense. Subsequent disciplinary segregation has obscured the ‘understood relations’ among these disciplines: epistemic transactions that went to the heart of the experiences of knowledge and belief which so deeply vexed and shaped the period’s thought. We will approach this field through the specific intervention of literary texts in this wider conversation. What do they ‘know’, or tell us, that the other discourses cannot, or do not, because of their particular disciplinary investments? What claims to demonstrability or assurance will literature not share with science or religion or the law? Crucially, how do these cognate practices in turn engage with literary constitutions of knowledge? Why, and how, are epistemic exchange at discursive thresholds specifically productive? And finally, how does the material world of things mediate knowledge?

In the first three classes, will examine the intersections between literary forms and three key, but apparently disparate, areas of thinking on the condition of knowledge, and the ends and means of knowing: law, theology and economics. In the fourth session, we will focus on physical objects of knowledge and explore methodologies for approaching the question of material knowledge and its imaginative purchase.

experiment with tracing epistemic metaphors to try and understand the period’s thinking about the process, ethics and psychology of knowing.

Class I Law and rhetoric, equity and drama

The study of ‘law and literature’ has flourished in recent years, and early modern England, in particular its theatrical production, has been one of the central areas of critical interest. The first class will try and go behind this phenomenon and ask some basic questions. Why are plays interested in legal scenarios? What approaches to knowledge does literature share with the law, and what can their dialogue, and our interdisciplinary questions, tell us about these? To start thinking about these issues, we will focus, in Class 1, on Vittoria’s trial in Webster’s The White Devil (and, briefly, the final scene of Jonson’s Volpone) to examine the notion of equitable drama, the relation between rhetoric and law,
the body as a text in court, and the larger issues of representation and method raised by these considerations.

**Primary texts:**
Anon., *A Warning for Fair Women* (1599), ed. Charles Dale Cannon (The Hague, 1975), scene xvi, esp. ll. 2174-2379, where Anne Sanders appears in court. I will put a copy on reserve in the Faculty library nearer the time.
William Shakespeare, *All’s Well that Ends Well*, V.iii.
Henry Swinburne, *A Treatise of Spousals, or Matrimonial Contracts*, ed. Randolph Trumbach (London, 1985) (extract will be provided)
John Webster, *The White Devil*, III.ii – ‘The Arraignment of Vittoria’
Extracts from Aristotle and Quintilian will be circulated or recommended nearer the time. They will include, centrally, Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, 3.11 and *Poetics*, 17, 1455a22-26; 17.1; 4.2.123; and Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 6.2.27-35.

**Background and secondary reading (unmissables asterisked)**
Aristotle, *Poetics*
*Ina Haberman, “She has that in your belly will dry up your ink”: Femininity as Challenge in the “Equitable Drama” of John Webster, in Erica Sheen and Lorna Hutson, eds, *Literature, Politics and Law in Renaissance England* (London, 2005), pp. 100-120
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Julie Stone Peters, ‘Law, Literature, and the Vanishing Real: On the Future of an Interdisciplinary Illusion’, *PMLA* 120.2 (2005), pp. 442-453 (UL classmark: P700.b.152.199 – the catalogue only refers you to the online resource and this particular year’s publication may not be accessible there); and Peter Brook’s response to it in a letter to the editor, followed by Stone Peters’s reply, in *PMLA* 120.5 (2005), pp. 1645-1647.

**Class II Trust and doubt: from law to theology**

In Class II, we will look at the uses of proof across legal, theological and ‘literary’ material, to ask how the aims and investments of specific domains of knowledge inflect the status of certainty and knowability. We will address literary/imaginative mediations of the wider cultural meanings and epistemologies of faith across religious and secular contexts. We will pause on the grammar of unknowing – possibly using Herbert’s ‘Prayer I’ as a point of entry. We might also reflect on how tracing – and thinking with - a concept such as evidence across fields of knowledge can be methodologically productive.
Primary texts:
Please familiarise yourselves with these plays, but we will concentrate on the specified scenes in discussion.
William Shakespeare, All’s Well that Ends Well: final scene
Shakespeare, The Winter’s Tale: ditto
Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night’s Dream: Bottom’s report of his dream (IV.i.197-211 in New Cambridge edition)
Christopher Marlowe, Dr. Faustus, II.iii (in both 1604 text and 1616 text)
George Herbert, ‘Prayer I’
+ Henry Swinburne, A Treatise of Spousals (written c. 1600, pub. 1686) (extracts will be provided nearer the time)

As there are several texts here, I am not suggesting any secondary or background reading at this point, other than revisiting Aristotle and Cave from Class I’s reading list.

Selected extracts will put on Moodle nearer the time. Further details and instructions will be circulated a week ahead of each class.

Class III: Epistemic metaphors: a case-study and a methodological experiment

We will begin by focusing on the labyrinth as a metaphor of knowing than runs through several domains of knowing in the period – I will introduce this and invite comments. This will also be our route into natural philosophy, or at least a peek into that discourse. We will then have presentations from volunteers from the group on a selection of epistemic metaphors of their choice, reflecting on the yield and risks of such a critical approach, and conclude by thinking together about the concepts methodological challenges and possibilities of interdisciplinary studies.

This sort of inquiry lends itself to computational search and analysis. Digital approaches help us track patterns that we cannot track manually. I plan to introduce you to these approaches at the simplest level in this class.

Prelim reading:


Ricoeur, Paul, The rule of metaphor: Multidisciplinary studies of the creation of meaning in language, trans. Robert Czerny (Toronto: University Toronto Press, 1975)

Further reading suggestions on this class will be provided nearer the time, and to an extent in discussion with the group.

Class IV Objects of Knowledge
Please note that this seminar needs to take place in the Graham Robertson seminar room in the Fitzwilliam Museum. Whether this is possible will not be known to us till later in the year. If not, we will have to adjust the topic.

This session will involve physical objects from the Fitzwilliam collection. It will consider the intersection of literature, epistemology and materiality in the early modern world, asking how knowledge informs, and interacts with, the material world. We will consider a range of questions in the presence of a selection of objects: what, and how, do objects know? How do we construct knowledge through objects? Are there historically specific dimensions to the relationship between knowledge and materiality in this period, and does literature play a role in negotiating these? How does the physical presence of objects shape what we think and say about the historical knowledge they carry and the cultures they existed within?

Presenters for this week will be asked to choose an object from the Fitzwilliam catalogue for discussion; it is recommended that you liaise with the curators (details will be provided) in order to visit your object beforehand (if it is not already on display) and have it in the room to present with on the day. There will also be a selection of other objects present around which we will focus our discussion.

*Primary texts*
Please visit the Fitzwilliam Museum before the class takes place!

*Background and secondary reading*
*Helen Smith, Grossly Material Things* (Cambridge, 2013)
*Bruce R Smith, The Key of Green: Passion and Perception in Renaissance Culture* (Chicago, 2009)