The past couple of decades have seen a ‘turn to the body’ in Renaissance studies. This has entailed an effort at the recovery of corporeal levels of meaning largely lost to modern ears, a reading of medical, physiological and anatomical materials alongside literary texts, and a focus upon the corporeal nature of the early modern self and the embodied nature of its emotions, cognitions and relations with the world. Though ‘pre-Cartesian’ is a term debatable in its precision and use-value, it has become a key tenet of much scholarship of the period that we cannot fully comprehend the early modern world in the absence of a perspective that takes in the period’s humoral, permeable and dynamically psycho-somatic habits of thought.

This course combines historical and theoretical perspectives on the place of the body in early modern culture. It is not conceived of as in any way exhaustive of the topic, nor does it attempt to put across an established theory. The hope is that it will act as an introduction to a set of issues circulating around the ‘backbone’ of embodiment and its theorization; as a provocation to engage with a topic that has become increasingly significant over recent years in a variety of critical disciplines.

Some questions we will explore include: What forms of knowledge does the body offer? What part does the body play in the construction of self and other? What makes bodies such compelling objects of desire or repulsion? How is the immediate materiality of the body represented in literary texts? How, conversely, can the body itself be ‘written’ - marked and changed by ideological and socio-historical forces? What, ultimately, can we say about the enigmatic, paradoxical, impossible relation between the body and language?

The course assumes that you are able to devote a minimum of six to eight hours of reading-time to prepare for each class. The specified reading for the class is made up of core reading – texts that will form the centre of class discussion each week – and secondary readings, which will offer in-depth critical material on the primary texts and/or suggest further lines of enquiry – ways of opening out broader questions emerging from the week’s main texts. The secondary reading is not compulsory, but to get the most out of the course you will need to explore at least some of this material. Most of the texts are readily available in the various Cambridge libraries. Each week I will ask one or two of the group to pre-circulate (by e-mail) a one-page response to a core text, and I
will also be asking for short presentations in class on material from the secondary list. The aim of these presentations is to open conversation, to proffer additional perspectives on the core text(s), rather than merely to précis a given critical text.

**Seminar 1: Montaigne**

In the first of these seminars we will look at some early modern ideas about embodiment (macrocosm and microcosm, humoralism, the body politic, incarnational habits of thought, insides and outsides), and their relation to subjectivity in the period. We will also consider the intersections between corporeal and other (medical, religious, political, interpersonal) discourses. Discussion will focus upon Montaigne’s essays. Topics and questions we might explore include: Is the body a form of knowledge? What kinds of knowledge can the body provide? Does the body have a history? What tensions in ideas of the body can we see in and through these texts? How (a)typical is the concept of embodiment evinced by these texts?

**Essential Reading:**

**Additional Reading Suggestions:**
- Andreas Vesalius, *De humani corporis fabrica* (Basle: Oporini, 1543)

**Seminar 2: King Lear**

What does thinking about early modern embodiment do to a reading of *King Lear*? Does it significantly affect our interpretation of the text? Does it change the way we think of Shakespearean tragedy? How might it influence an understanding of the relation between play and audience? In this seminar we might think about the relation between the human body and the spaces in which it is located, insides and outsides of the body; about the uses and abuses of the idea of the body politic; about the gendering of the body and its engendering; about sacred and secular forms of embodiment; about vulnerability, power and ideology.

**Essential Reading:**


Additional Reading Suggestions:


**Seminar 3: Donne**

In this seminar we will focus on the body apprehended in a sacred context and its relation to secular ideas of embodiment. Other topics we might discuss include: bodies and/as cultural artefacts: can the body be written? and in what sense are texts bodily? Subjectivity, objectivity and the body; epistemic shifts: nostalgia and embodiment; selfhood and inwardness: love, sex and the body.

**Essential Reading:**


**Additional Reading Suggestions:**

- Christopher Ricks, ‘Donne after Love’, in *Literature and the Body*, ed. Elaine Scarry
- Felicia Wright McDuffie, *To Our Bodies Turn We Then: Body as Word and Sacrament in the Works of John Donne* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005)

Seminar 4: Descartes / Milton
Topics and questions we will explore include: Do bodies think? Physics and metaphysics; bodies and machines; disciplining the body; secularisation, commodification, textualisation.

Essential Reading:


Additional Reading Suggestions:

- René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method of Properly Conducting One’s Reason and of Seeking the Truth in the Sciences* [1637]