The Exuvial Renaissance: Distributing Personhood in Early Modern Texts

As humans, we spread out into the world in innumerable ways. Our breath fans from our mouths and nostrils. Our body odours and perfumes waft on the air currents. Our bodies expel waste matter through urination and defecation as well as by less visible moultings of skin and hair. We can gesture with our faces or our bodies, and we can broadcast ourselves through speech, song and shouting. We can send our gazes roving across space; we can throw things. Much of this we can amplify with technological aids (megaphones, TV sets, rocket launchers). Then, of course, we can shape objects, environments, and monuments that project our identities out into the world. Among the most powerful of these projective devices are works of art and literature, which have long been understood as vehicles for secular immortality (the survival of the creator’s name for eternity). All of the foregoing might be thought of as forms of distributed personhood, a category that for all its rich implications has to date received little sustained attention from scholars in the humanities. This module brings together perspectives from anthropology, cultural history and literary studies to reflect on the circulation of the self in the early modern period, across a range of media, from paintings and clothing to printed books, manuscripts and stage plays.

The concept of the distributed self is outlined by Alfred Gell, in his posthumous Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory (1998). As humans, he suggests, ‘we are present, not just in our singular bodies, but in everything in our surroundings which bears witness to our existence, our attributes, and our agency’. He starts out with a curiosity about the agency of objects, the sense in which objects can do things. Objects have agency partly in and of themselves, but partly because they distribute the agency of people. The world is full of things that transmit the wills of their creators in absentia; indeed, Gell proposes, ‘objectification in artefact-form is how social agency manifests and realizes itself’.

Gell’s analysis then takes a startling turn, as he begins to meditate upon exuviae, meaning the cast-off shells, skins or coverings of insects, snakes and other animals. The word has a wider range of meaning in Latin, where it denotes ‘garments stripped off, skins of animals, [and] the spoils of an enemy’. Gell uses it to make sense of volt sorcery, the kind of magic that aims to harm an individual by harming their likeness, often with some incorporation of the victim’s hair, nail-clippings, food-leftovers or excreta. His crucial move here is to argue that both the image and the empowering additional extras are exuviae—the cast-offs, remnants or leavings through which being spreads out into the world. Equally important is his observation that the exuviae that are thrown off by the body remain intimately linked with it; they are at once detached from and in some sense still a part of the person that produced them. This licenses us to think of images in exuvial terms, rather than seeing them as detached representations (so a portrait is a distributed part or an extra limb of its sitter). Ancient accounts of sight understood this sense to work by means of emanations, ‘pictures of things and thin shapes ... emitted from things off their surface’. According to Lucretius, these pictures resemble ‘the gossamer coats which at times cicadas doff in summer, and the films which calves at their birth cast from the surface of their body, as well as the vesture which the slippery serpent puts off among the thorns’. Such a passage opens the way to a powerful model for thinking about the self, not in the familiar terms of mind and body but rather as a life-force which constantly pushes out from the body via its various excretions, extensions and distributions. Although all of this may seem strange to us, versions of exuvial thinking were widespread in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and they have considerable resonance with the way we think about our identities in the age of social media.

The structure of this four-seminar module will be roughly as follows: 1: Gell and early modern thing theory; 2: Donne, Herrick, & manuscript personhood; 3: Nashe and the printed self; 4: Distributing the self on stage. My approach will be exploratory and experimental, with the aim of testing out a concept that offers a new way of thinking about literature and identity.
Secondary Reading List


--- *The School of Montaigne in Early Modern Europe*, 2 vols (2017)


Douglas Bruster, *Shakespeare and the Question of Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), ch. 8 (‘The New Materialism in Renaissance Studies’)

Margreta de Grazia et al., eds, *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture* (1996)


Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (2011)

Farah Karim-Cooper, *Cosmetics in Shakespearean and Renaissance Drama* (2012)


James A. Knapp and Jeffrey Pence, ‘Between Thing and Theory’, *Poetics Today* 24 (4), 641-71


