Me, Myself and I: Identity and the Self in Europe, c. 1500-1700

This course explores the issue of selfhood and identity in early modern Europe. Historians have become increasingly interested in questions about the self, as they move beyond grand narratives focused on institutions and structures. Scholars seek to explain how and why individuals behaved as they did, and unpick the ways in which individual, sometimes emotional and irrational actions shaped communities, culture, and societies. This course will use wide-ranging primary material from across the early modern world to examine the self and notions of identity, both more conventional 'ego-documents', such as letters and diaries, and other less obvious materials such as financial records and accounts, or collections of objects.

We will examine the ways in which early modern men and women thought about their subjective identities and what selfhood meant for them. Was gender the most important element of individual identity? Or age? Are the emotions men and women expressed the key to comprehending subjectivity and selfhood? And how important is it to understand the different ways early modern societies conceived of age, life cycles, professions, or the body? The history of the self also demands that we consider broader questions about how individuals were shaped by their interaction with one another and the community, since scholarship has started to move away from the idea of a discreet self which was self-fashioned in isolation. And finally, self and subjectivity throw open our assumptions about social and cultural change, and modernity. If the early modern self was different, how and why was it different? And how does the history of subjectivity and identity interact with and indeed alter our narratives of events like the Reformation or the Scientific Revolution?

READING LIST

Primary sources

The Correspondence of Erasmus, ed. R.A.B. Mynors and D.F.S. Thomson (Toronto, 1974-77)

Diary of Lady Margaret Hoby, 1599-1605, ed. Dorothy M. Meads (ed.), (London, 1930)


Martin Luther, selected letters, from Luther’s Works (55 vols.), various editors (Minneapolis, 1900-86)

Letters of the Lady Brilliana Harvey, ed. Thomas Taylor (London, 1853)

Luther's Lives: Two Contemporary Accounts of Martin Luther, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Vandiver, Ralph Keen and Thomas D. Frazel (Manchester, 2003)


A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Gronniosaw, an African Prince (Bath, 1770), available online at http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/gronniosaw/menu.html

Matthäus Schwarz, Klaidungsbüchlein (Book of Clothes), selected images

Albrecht Dürer, self-portraits

Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, self-portraits

Hans Sachs, The Book of Trades (Frankfurt am Main, 1568), http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/t/the-book-of-trades-das-standebuch/

Online resources

http://emlo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/ (searchable resource of early modern letters)

http://womenwriters.library.emory.edu/earlmodern/ (texts written by early modern women)


http://www.torch.ox.ac.uk/humanitas/?q=lynn-hunt-roundtable-discussion-disscussion-histories-self (roundtable discussion on the history of the self)

Secondary Literature

Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor (eds), History and Pysche: Culture, Psychoanalysis and the Past (New York, 2012).


James Halvorson and Karen E. Spierling (eds), Defining Community in Early Modern Europe (Aldershot, 2008)


Joseph Koerner, *The Moment of Self-portraiture in German Renaissance Art* (Chicago, 1997)


Lyndal Roper, ‘Martin Luther’s Body: The “Stout Doctor” and His Biographers’, *American Historical Review* 115 (2010), 351-84

Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 2007)

