

Why We Do Where We Do: Modern Divisions of Science and Literature

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This seminar concerns the declarations and achievements of independence by practitioners of literature and science in seventeenth-century Europe. Modern scholars of this culture have documented the calls of literary and scientific authors for the mutual distinction of their disciplines. On the one hand, writers of literature began to claim that their work should operate in a domain free from the demands of reason and evidence made by scientists. Scientists, on the other hand, began to envision a rhetoric-free zone where such demands could be met. These separate spheres assumed various forms as scientific and literary societies multiplied, laboratories were built, and the notions of aesthetics and taste emerged. As a result of these developments, science and literature obtained the separation that characterizes how they relate – and do not relate – today.

The subject of the seminar is the complexity of the process by which science and literature actually achieved the independence from one another that they declared. From a modern perspective, the break between them appears clean. But during the early modern period, they in fact separated by uniting and united in order to separate. While they loudly distinguished themselves in opposition to one another, their differences arose from tacit but deep collaborations. By exploring these collaborations, I hope to recover the tensions that influenced how the fields of literature and science where we work today first took shape.

The first semester of the seminar will concentrate on a series of episodes that mark the gradual divergence of scientific and literary practices: the rise of the novel, the invention of taste, the origins of probability theory, and the controversy over the vacuum. Our study of these topics will include texts by Blaise Pascal, Madame de Lafayette, Samuel Richardson, Robert Boyle, and the Earl of Shaftesbury. Modern research by Michael McKeon, Thomas Kavanagh, Lorraine Daston, Katharine Park, Steven Shapin, and Simon Schaffer, among others, will guide our discussions of these early modern events.

In the spring semester, I wish to use the early modern material covered in the fall to reflect on modern understandings of the relation between literature and science. I am particularly interested in twentieth-century theorists (C.P. Snow, Thomas Kuhn, Richard Rorty, Stephen Toulmin, Bruno Latour, and others) who seek to recruit science to reform literature and to deploy literature as a guide for science. However, the structure of the seminar in its second semester will be made especially flexible to accommodate individual interests. This seminar thus invites both humanists and scientists to think together about what underlies some of the divisions in academic culture as well as about how we can better communicate across them.