



The Renaissance Studies Program presents the second lecture in its
“Forms of Knowledge and the Renaissance Uses of the Liberal Arts” series:

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Before Psychology

Friday, October 16, 3:30 p.m., Oak Room, Indiana Memorial Union

“I respect no study, and deem no study good, which results in money-making. Such studies are profit-bringing occupations, useful only in so far as they give the mind a preparation and do not engage it permanently. One should linger upon them only so long as the mind can occupy itself with nothing greater; they are our apprenticeship, not our real work. Hence you see why liberal studies are so called; it is because they are studies worthy of a free-born gentleman. But there is only one really liberal study – that which gives a man his liberty. It is the study of wisdom, and that is lofty, brave, and great-souled. All other studies are puny and puerile. You surely do not believe that there is good in any of the subjects whose teachers are, as you see, men of the most ignoble and base stamp? We ought not to be learning such things; we should have done with learning them.” (Seneca, Epistle LXXXVIII)

Following Seneca’s definition of “liberal study” as “that which gives a man his liberty,” this lecture takes up the question of how psychology came to find a place within the corpus of the liberal arts and, more specifically, how the liberal arts were configured before psychology as a modern discipline had been established as a “science.” Conventional accounts of the history of the disciplines remind us that there has been something like “psychology” since at least the time of the ancient Greeks, who valued knowledge of the psyche as one way in which the passions could be brought under the control of reason. Psychology in its modern form is different in at least two respects: first, it is based on experiment; second, it has predictive value, and this predictive value may yield therapeutic benefits. Before there was psychology in the modern sense, there was literature. Examples from the early modern period (Cervantes, Shakespeare, and Montaigne in particular) demonstrate the role of literature in producing a form of self-understanding that revolves around the psyche, and which lends both social and moral purpose to the formal studies that comprised the trivium—rhetoric, grammar, and logic (dialectic). The psychological practice of literature in the early modern context is threefold: it is experimental (albeit in a hypothetical or virtual way), by placing characters in unusual, “what if” situations; it reveals behavioral patterns and typologies, both on the individual and social levels; and it performs a therapeutic function, by allowing readers or spectators to “work through” difficult emotions while remaining insulated from their most adverse consequences. In these ways literature meets Seneca’s definition of “liberal study” by opening the path toward wisdom.

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