



HISTORIES OF BRITISH ART

1660-1735 RECONSTRUCTION AND TRANSFORMATION

ABSTRACT: DAVID BREWER

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'Authors and objecthood'

In this talk, I would like to explore a wide range of authorial likenesses in a variety of media (traditional portraits on canvas, painted wooden shop signs, engravings and woodcuts, carved and cast busts, etc.) in order to theorize the consequences in late Stuart and early Georgian Britain and her colonies of making, owning, and viewing an object which purported to resemble or stand in for an author. These decades are notorious, of course, for the ways in which authors were routinely linked to—and often reduced to—objects: e.g., the incipient toilet paper, or “reliques of the bum,” that Thomas Shadwell is destined to become in John Dryden’s *Mac Flecknoe* (written c. 1678). Such moves have been traditionally explained—and implicitly dismissed—as run-of-the-mill satiric dehumanizing, no different in principle than calling someone a “dog.” I would contend instead that there are important and seriously under-recognized ways in which the routine conception of authors as akin to objects was what enabled the Restoration and eighteenth-century literary world to function, and that the proliferation of artifacts purporting to be authorial likenesses was crucial in making such conceptions—and the practices they fostered—not only thinkable but attractive and compelling. However, different sorts of objects worked in different ways, and temporal and geographic distance introduced still further variation: what a reader in 1730s Massachusetts might do with a frontispiece of a contemporary, like Alexander Pope, is hardly interchangeable with what a 1710s collector in Covent Garden might do with a bust of Milton. Accordingly, I will be continually toggling back and forth between different scales of analysis in order to describe the complex, but ultimately coherent cluster of emotions, genres, objects, and practices that collectively comprised the socio-literary-artistic system inhabited by authorial heads.