

## Sophister Module Description Template 2026-27

**Full Name:** Phantasmatic Properties and Literature

**Short Name:** Phantasmatic Properties

**Lecturer Name(s) and Email Address(es):** Björn Quiring, [quiringb@tcd.ie](mailto:quiringb@tcd.ie)

**ECTS Weighting:** 10

**Semester Taught MT/HT:** MT

**Year JF/SF/JS/SS:** SS

### **Module Content:**

Both literary authors and philosophers have occasionally pointed out that in modern (capitalist) societies our sense of identity and agency decisively depends on our sense of ownership and of power over the things we own and the persons we control. As the philosopher William James expressed it: “a man’s self is the sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation [...] and his bank account.” William’s brother Henry James wrote numerous novels and novellas that demonstrate the consequences of this assumption. But if our self is dependent on our properties and our ability to control them, it is eminently fragile. After all, the things we own tend to slip from our grasp, whether it’s the decaying tomatoes in our fridge, our malfunctioning smartphones or our close relatives who escape our control attempts. Even “my body” and “my mind” often refuse to do my bidding. Thus, our sense of identity is constantly endangered by more or less severe forms of disintegration, or even uncanny reversals in which our possessions start to possess and control us. As a result, property also becomes an urgent affair of language and rhetoric: despite these uncertainties, we try to invent or re-invent coherent narratives that are able to convince ourselves and others of our basic stability. These narratives are connected to what has been called “phantasms” since Freud and Lacan: images and scenarios that constitute the core of our social being, despite their imaginary character.

Literary texts have always perpetuated such phantasms, but they have also subverted them by voicing the unavoidable uncertainty of any sense of identity. And sometimes they have pointed out that the uncanny slippage or disquieting loss of identity also offer interesting opportunities to relate to the world in new ways. In the seminar, we will read narratives of phantasmatic ownership, focusing on Shakespeare’s *Othello*, on excerpts from the epic poem *The Prelude* by William Wordsworth and on the novella/ghost story *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James. Besides closely reading these three works, we will read diverse theoretical texts that will provide different perspectives on them.

**Learning Outcomes:**

- Read selected literary texts from several literary epochs.
- Think about questions of ownership and selfhood in literature and society.
- Read selected theoretical texts on the aesthetic and political aspects of property and subjectivity.

**Learning Aims:**

- Gain a deeper understanding of the entanglement between the history of ownership, the history of selfhood and the history of literature.

**Assessment Details:**

- Number of Components: 1
- Name/Type of Component(s): 1 final essay
- Word Count of Component(s): 5000
- Percentage Value of Component(s): 100%

**Preliminary Reading List:**

- David Archard, “Do parents own their children?”
- Aristotle, *Politics* (excerpts)
- William Empson, “Legal Fiction”
- Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (excerpts), “‘A Child Is Being Beaten’: A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions”
- G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (excerpts)
- Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*
- William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (excerpts)
- Jacques Lacan, “Fantasy, Beyond the Pleasure Principle” and other texts
- Paul Langford, *Public Life and the Propertied Englishman* (excerpts)
- John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (excerpts)
- C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (excerpts)
- Sean Mccloud, *American Possessions: Fighting Demons in the Contemporary United States* (excerpts)
- Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (excerpts)
- Mark Rose, *Authors and Owners: The Invention of Copyright* (excerpts)
- William Shakespeare, *Othello*
- Jean Starobinski, “The Struggle with Legion: A Literary Analysis of Mark 5:1-20”
- Eva von Redecker, “Ownership’s Shadow: Neoauthoritarianism as Defense of Phantom Possession”
- Donald W. Winnicott, “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena: A Study of the First Not-Me Possession”
- William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (excerpts) and other poems
- Noam Yuran, *The Sexual Economy of Capitalism* (excerpts)

Please note:

- **Curricular information is subject to change.**
- **Information is displayed only for guidance purposes, relates to the current academic year only and is subject to change.**