

Jan Golinski, “Humphry Davy: The Experimental Self.” *Eighteenth Century Studies* 45.1 (2011): 15-28.

Humphry Davy in Jan Golinski’s article is marked out as an intriguing figure in the first two decades of the nineteenth century; a fascinating lecturer to his audiences, yet a “mystery to his contemporaries” (24). According to Golinski, Davy is “charismatic and protean” (17) in his experiments, publications and lectures, where the chemist experiments with his body and deploys his charms and passion to reconfigure chemistry as a powerful discipline that can yield new knowledge and discoveries. Golinski proposes that Davy’s different identities are evident of the chemist’s personal exploration of the self. The article thus establishes that Davy can be a case-study from which to understand that with the wider transformation of practices, rhetoric and other techniques of structuring disciplines in this period there also came the exploration and shaping of the individual identity.

A subtle link between the concerns of historians of science and literary critics comes in the beginning of the article with the explanation that Foucault’s work can illuminate the period scholars call both the “second scientific revolution” (15) and the Romantic period since the changes in disciplinary institutions in modern society also transformed the sense of self and the individual. For Golinski the “implications” of Foucault’s work “have not been completely explored” (16) by scholarship on the early nineteenth century and the complex relationship between personal individuality and institutions can be analysed via Davy as an experimenter of both science and the self. To this end the paper follows Davy’s career as a chemical experimenter refashioning his own identity to foster resources and support for two newly established institutions, the Pneumatic Institution in Bristol and the Royal Institution in London. Golinski concludes that Davy underwent a serious and “profound inquiry” of his own identity throughout his life, shaped by “the difference structures of disciplinarity” and ultimately expressed in his final work *Consolations in Travel* (1830), where Davy “broke new ground” in synthesising his personal life and Enlightenment literature to suggest the adaptability of the self (25).

Davy’s publication of his nitrous oxide experiments in 1800 is the first case for Golinski’s argument since Davy needed to define the remit of the new Pneumatic Institute, to make the experiments “fit” (19) with already-established philosophies, while also including the narratives on the impact of the experiments on the self by those who experienced the gas, all in a single text. Golinski’s useful textual analysis brings to bear how those who experienced the gas, including Davy, employed the language of aesthetics, and articulated a loss of control over their body, questioning the relation between mind and body.

Davy’s lectures at the Royal Institution from 1801 is Golinski’s second case from which to explore how the chemist’s body, rhetoric and powerful experiments transformed the institution, the remit of chemistry and his own identity. Davy sought to distance himself from the reputation that his self-experimentalism at Bristol gave him by reconfiguring his body as the centre of attention during his theatrical lectures for his aristocratic patrons and the middle-class audiences. Here Golinski’s argument is not limited by an analysis of the lectures alone, but incorporates the writings of attendees of his lectures and his acquaintances. The journals of James Dinwiddie provide an interesting account of the way Davy involved and addressed his audiences beyond the lecture script (21-2).

Such an article on the way in which Davy experimented with his identity and the self suggests that Davy's letters and manuscript poetry might be usefully considered. While Golinski does indeed point out that in these texts Davy reflects on his "genius" (17) and the "basis of life and thought" (21), further consideration of Davy's personal correspondence and notebooks could bolster Golinski's argument. It is clear that he is concerned with the public persona that Davy forged in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. Following the methods of constructivism, in the paper Davy is frequently characterised as an active player in seeking to establish the authority of science through careful construction of the claims and the practices of chemistry. Davy, Golinski argues, attempted "to mobilise" (17) support for the Royal Institution, who "tried to fit" (19) his science into familiar frameworks, and "to fashion" (21) his identity. This perhaps overstates Davy's purposefulness in his career and his consideration of his subjectivity. Golinski concludes that a lifetime of experimentation in science and with the self led to the writing of *Consolations*, a pinnacle of Davy's experiment with the self, during his retirement. While this overlooks Davy's earlier poetry where he addressed the same ideas while a working chemist, Golinski's reading of the philosophical tract in his conclusion impressively encapsulates a much needed reading of Davy's life-long personal exploration of his selfhood.

Wahida Amin
University of Salford