WESTERN ESOTERICISM IN THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Bachelor. 2nd year. 12 EC.

1. Title of Module: Western Esotericism in the Early Modern Period

2. Course Description: On the basis of primary sources and secondary literature, this module examines the history of Western esotericism during the Renaissance and Early Modern Period. Each class will focus on a founder or chief exponent of important Western esoteric currents such as Christian Kabbalah, Paracelsianism, Rosicrucianism and Christian theosophy, including such famous names as Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Agrippa, Paracelsus, Dee and Kircher. Our close reading of primary source material will be set in the context of contemporaneous social, religious and intellectual developments. Students will be introduced to some central themes in the study of Western esotericism, including Renaissance typologies of magic, astrology, kabbalah, alchemy's quest for the elixir, the philosophers' stone and transmutation, all with a consideration of their relation to early modern science and religion. During each class students will deliver an oral presentation following an introductory lecture from the teacher. After the presentation is delivered the teacher will focus further on the problems in question and these will be discussed; all students are expected to actively participate in this discussion.

3. Learning Objectives: By the time they complete this module students will have received a good overview of the major figures and central themes of Western Esotericism in the Early Modern Period. From their critical examination of primary and secondary sources, students will have new knowledge of this subject area, an understanding of the fundamental characteristics of esotericism for this period, and insight into some of the social, religious and philosophical changes that took place in the Renaissance that were conducive to the development of Western esotericism. From their presentations and essays they will have the ability to identify, analyse and synthesise material from original historical texts and to evaluate modern scholarly interpretations, and then frame relevant questions for their presentations and essays in an independent and coherent way.

4. Assessment: 1) Each student must deliver at least one oral presentation related to the course reading for their chosen week, with the encouragement to examine additional literature. This presentation will be graded and constitutes 40% of the final grade. 2) On conclusion of the module, every student must write one paper on a topic of their choice related to the theme of the course. The essay mark will count for 60% of the final grade. For all obligations to be fulfilled, a minimum attendance of 80% of the classes is required.
5. **Teaching Schedule**: 2 x 7 lectures, plus essay preparation.

3 September

1. **Introduction (Forshaw & Zuber)**

General introduction, discussion of the program's theme, goals and set-up of
the course. Students decide who is going to be responsible for presenting each
seminar. Instructions about how to get the reading materials. Questions.

Bloomsbury, 2013, pp. 21-33; Antoine Faivre, *Western Esotericism: A Concise

10 September

2. **Marsilio Ficino and Renaissance Magic (Forshaw)**

'Chapter II: Ficino's Magic', in: D. P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from

Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, edited & translated by Carol Kaske and
John Clark, Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies,
1989, pp. 243-373 (please make sure you read chapters 1-3, 4, 8, 11, 13, 15, 18,
20 and 26. Note: This is a parallel-text translation and you will only be reading
every other page).

17 September

3. **Pico, Reuchlin and Christian Kabbalah (Zuber)**

David H. Price, *Johannes Reuchlin and the Campaign to Destroy Jewish Books*,

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, 'Seventy-One ... Kabbalistic Conclusions', in:
S. A. Farmer (ed. & trans.), *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486)*,
(facing-page translation: only every other page is in English).

Johann Reuchlin, *De Arte Cabalistica: On the Art of the Kabbalah*, edited and
36-63 (facing-page translation: only every other page is in English).

24 September

4. **Heinrich Agrippa and Occult Philosophy (Forshaw)**

Charles G. Nauert, 'Magic and Skepticism in Agrippa's Thought', *Journal of the

Llewellyn's Sourcebook Series, 1995, Letters, pp. lii-lvii; Book I, Chapters 1-2,
pp. 3-7; Book II, Chapters 1-4 & 12, pp. 233-243, 287-290; Book III, Chapters
1-6, 36-38, & 49, pp. 441-456, 579-588, 627.

1 October

5. **Paracelsus and the Chymical Philosophy (Zuber)**

Charles Webster, *Paracelsus: Medicine, Magic and Mission at the End of Time*, New

Paracelsus, *Astronomia Magna or the whole Philosophia Sagax of the Great and Little
World*, and pseudo-Paracelsus, *Liber Azoth* (extracts), in: Nicholas Goodrick-
Clarke (ed.), *Paracelsus: Essential Readings*, Wellingborough: Aquarian Press,

8 October

6. **John Dee's Conversations with Angels (Forshaw)**

Deborah E. Harkness, 'Shows in the Showstone: A Theater of Alchemy and
Apocalypse in the Angel Conversations of John Dee (1527-1608/9),'

15 October

7. Simon Forman and Astrology (Zuber)


22 October

8. = NO CLASS =

29 October

9. Paracelsianism (Forshaw)


Oswald Croll, *Philosophy Reformed & Improved in Four Profound Tractates*, London, 1657, extracts

5 November

10. Jacob Boehme’s Theosophy (Zuber)


12 November

11. Rosicrucianism (Forshaw)


19 November

12. Leon Modena’s Criticism of the Kabbalah (Zuber)


26 November

13. Athanasius Kircher & Esoteric Knowledge (Forshaw)


3 December

14. Platonic-Hermetic Christendom: Ehregott Daniel Colberg (Zuber)


10 December

15. Conclusions (Forshaw & Zuber)

General discussion of the course and the possibility for students to discuss their essay topics, giving brief presentations for group feedback.

17 December

16. Essay Work

6. Lecturers: Dr Peter J. Forshaw & Mike A. Zuber.

7. Further Reading

For students wishing to delve further into the subject matter, these recommendations complement the weekly readings.

  Pioneering at the time, this work remains a stimulating introduction though many of its claims need to be qualified after five decades of research.

  In portraying the early-modern period (used as a synonym for ‘scientific revolution’), this booklet also addresses many elements of esotericism, viewing them not as alien but as integral to the intellectual ferment of the period.
There are three requirements for successfully completing the course:

1. **Presence and active participation**

   You are required to attend at least 80% of the seminar meetings. Failure to be present at more than three meetings results in the grade: “insufficient”.

2. **Oral presentations**

   One or several primary or secondary sources are studied during each seminar meeting. Dependent on the number of participants, you are required to take responsibility for at least one seminar presentation (instructions for seminar presentations, see below). If the number of participants is relatively small, you are required to accept more than one presentation. A grade is awarded for each presentation. In case of more than one presentation, the highest grade counts. This grade counts for 40% of the final grade.

   Please note: not turning up when you are scheduled for a presentation is taken very seriously, for it means that you are letting down all your fellow students and are in effect sabotaging the entire meeting. Therefore in cases of “no-show”, 1.0 will be subtracted from the final grade. Exceptions can be made only if you can demonstrate that the absence was due to force majeure (serious illness, deaths in the family etc.), and if the absence was reported as early as possible (by means of email via Blackboard, or if necessary by telephone).

3. **Written paper**

   You are required to write a paper (min. 10, max. 15 pp., 1.5 line spacing) on a subject of your choice, relevant to the theme of the course, and selected in consultation with the instructor. Take care! The paper will be evaluated on the basis of its contents, but the grade will be negatively influenced by failure to respect basic style requirements (i.e., rules for use of footnotes, literature references in footnotes, and presentation of the bibliography).

   A first version of the paper must be submitted as a Word document (attachment to p.j.forshaw@uva.nl or m.a.zuber@uva.nl, as agreed upon), no later than Tuesday 31 December 2013. The paper will be returned with critical comments and suggestions by Friday 31 January 2013. The final revised version must be submitted the following month (i.e., no later than Friday 28 February). If either the first or the final version of the paper is submitted too late, this results in a subtraction of 0.5 point for each week that it is late. The grade awarded for the paper counts for 60% of the final grade. Please note the following! “First version” does not mean merely a first sketch or draft: it should be a complete paper, written according to the instructions.

**Instructions for Seminar Presentations**

A good presentation takes between 15 and 20 minutes and contains the following elements:

- It provides some background information about the historical author; for present-day scholars, restrict biographical information to university affiliation and position.
- The presentation makes clear what the text is about (or claims to be about) and why the author seems to have written it.
- It contains a clear and succinct summary – in your own words – of the structure and the contents of the text, presented in such a way that someone who has not read the text would be able to follow it.
- It contains two or three well-chosen quotations that clarify the author’s intentions and his/her argument.
- It contains an element of critical evaluation. (For example: What to make of the text? How convincing do you find the author? Are there gaps or weaknesses in the argument? Can you find counterarguments against his/her claims? And so on.) Don’t be afraid to also indicate your personal opinion: did you like the text, or dislike it, and why?

While all students following the course are expected to have read the texts under discussion, a good presenter has taken the trouble of looking a bit further. For example, if the required reading consists of only a few sections of a longer chapter, the presenter will have read the entire chapter so as to be able to put the sections in context. He or she will also have taken a look at some additional literature relevant to the text and the themes that are central in it.