RENAISSANCE ESOTERICISM

Master. 2nd year. 12 EC.

1. Title of Module: Renaissance Esotericism II: Occult Philosophies.

2. Course Description: Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa’s *On Occult Philosophy* (1533) is the best-known Renaissance encyclopedia of magic. Its syncretic mixture of material drawn from medieval grimoires, from classical antiquity and from sources new to the Christian West, such as the Jewish tradition of Kabbalah, is an invaluable resource for our understanding of early modern occult philosophy and modern occultism. In this module we shall investigate *Philosophia occulta*, an important current of Western esotericism, considering the various kinds of knowledge and experience that participate in Renaissance ideas of magic. Ranging through the natural, celestial and divine realms we shall examine some of the sciences and philosophies and encounter some of the significant figures that contributed to its development. We shall seek to amplify Agrippa’s writings with material drawn from other influential contemporary sources and conclude the module with sessions on subsequent esoteric approaches that display affinities with his occult philosophy. Students will be expected to participate actively in class, present and discuss articles from the reading list, and write an academic paper.

3. Learning Objectives: The course will provide students an overview of Occult Philosophy in Medieval and Early Modern Europe. The course aims to encourage students to develop their critical skills in the close-reading and analysis of primary source material and modern scholarly discussions so that they can then discover their own positions in academic discourse on this important area of Renaissance Esotericism. They will be able to put their ideas to the test in class-room presentations and discussion and then formulate their perspective by writing an academic paper as preparation for their MA thesis.

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.
5 September

1: Introduction

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.

12 September

2: Of Magic in General


19 September

3: Occult Sciences 1: *Astronomia Superior* (Astrology)


26 September

4: Occult Sciences 2: *Astronomia Inferior* (Alchemy)


3 October

5: Hermetic & Neoplatonic Magic


10 October

6: Christian Cabala

17 October  

7: Occult Philosophy


24 October  

= NO CLASS =

31 October  

8: Natural Magic


7 November  

9: Celestial Magic


14 November  

10: Ceremonial Magic


22 November  

11: Paracelsian Philosophy

28 November 12: Rosicrucianism


5 December 13: Theosophick Philosophy


12 December 14: Conclusions

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

19 December 15. Essay Work

6. Lecturer: Dr Peter J. Forshaw

PROCEDURE

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, which means that a maximum of three meetings can be skipped. Failure to be present at more than three meetings results in the judgement: “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. 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. My mobile number is 0643185445.

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 as indicated in the instructions (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), no later than Tuesday 31 December 2013). Within one month (i.e. by Friday 31 January) the paper will be returned with critical comments and suggestions. 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 author.
- 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 disliked 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.