Western Esotericism in the Early Modern Period
Western Esotericism in the Early Modern Period 12 EC

Part of minor Western Esotericism

The module 'Western Esotericism in the Early Modern Period' is part of the Bachelor minor Western Esotericism (which in itself forms an excellent preparation for the MA in Western Esotericism). It can be followed along with the following seminars in 'Western Culture and Counter Culture' (Prof. W.J. Hanegraaff) and 'Western Esotericism from the 18th Century to the Present' (Dr. J. Strube).

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 Cabala, Paracelsianism, Rosicrucianism and Christian theosophy, including such famous names as Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Agrippa, Paracelsus, Kircher and Dee. 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, cabala, alchemy's quest for the elixir, 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.

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.

This course is taught entirely in English.

Course catalogue: 116217092T/WC

Semester 1
Block 1 and 2 (12 EC): Western Esotericism in the Early Modern Period

Lecturer: Dr. P.J. Forshaw

For most current information about this minor and its entry requirements, please contact our study adviser at:
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For general information on the programme Western esotericism, please see:
www.amsterdamhermetica.nl
Teaching Schedule

Mondays 09:00-12:00, OMHP A1.18C (for the first block; 2nd block tbd)

4 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.

11 September 2: Marsilio Ficino & Renaissance Magic


Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, edited & translated by Carol Kaske and John Clark, Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1989, 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).

18 September 3: Johann Reuchlin & Christian Cabala


25 September 4: Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa & Occult Philosophy


2 October  5. Theophrastus Paracelsus, Magic & Alchemy


9 October  6. John Dee's Conversations with Angels


16 October  7. William Lilly & Christian Astrology


23 October  8. NO CLASS
30 October  

9. Heinrich Khunrath, In Oratory & Laboratory


Heinrich Khunrath's Circular Figures and Engravings, *Amphitheatre of Eternal Wisdom* (1609), extracts

6 November  

10. Jacob Boehme & Theosophy


13 November  

11. Rosicrucianism


20 November  

12. Michael Maier, Music, Myth & Alchemy


27 November 13. Athanasius Kircher & Esoteric Knowledge


4 December 14. Robert Boyle, Sceptical Chymist & Supernatural Alchemy


11 December 15. Conclusions

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

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. 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), no later than Friday 26 January 2018. The paper will be returned with critical comments and suggestions by Friday 23 February. The final revised version must be submitted the following month (i.e., no later than Friday 30 March). 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?
- You are encouraged to use some form of presentation software, e.g. PowerPoint, Keynote, or Prezi.

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.