Faculty of Humanities

Academic Year 2018-2019

Renaissance Esotericism I
Medieval & Early Modern Modern Alchemy
Renaissance Esotericism I: Medieval & Early Modern Alchemy 12 EC

Part of MA Western Esotericism

The module Renaissance Esotericism I: Medieval & Early Modern Alchemy is part of the MA Western Esotericism. It can be followed along with the following seminars in 'Western Esotericism and Its Scholars' (Prof. W.J. Hanegraaff), 'Contested Knowledge' (Prof. W.J. Hanegraaff) and 'Occult Trajectories' (Dr. J. Strube).

Alchemy is an important strand in the story of Western esotericism, with roots stretching back to late antiquity in Greco-Roman Alexandria. It first made an appearance in Europe in the twelfth century in the form of Latin translations from Arabic manuscripts, which in its turn had adopted, adapted and transmitted ideas from previous Greek authorities. This course focuses on the Renaissance and Early Modern periods which witnessed a growth of interest in the 'divine art of alchemy' due to the advent of printing and the eventual production, in the seventeenth century, of the elaborately illustrated alchemical emblem books that were to provide such a fascination for the psychologist Carl Jung in the twentieth century. During the course we shall consider significant primary texts and examine the arguments of influential voices in the current history of alchemy. We shall become acquainted with various kinds of alchemy, from the medieval interest in gold-making and the enthusiasm for chemical medicine in the sixteenth century to later, controversial notions of 'spiritual' alchemy. We shall investigate the way the alchemists communicated their secrets by way of image and text, the claims they made regarding transmutation, the Quintessence, Elixir, and the Philosophers' Stone, and the relation between alchemy and other esoteric strands such as astrology, cabala and magic. Students will be expected to participate actively in class, present and discuss articles from the reading list, and write an academic paper.

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: 153414022Y

Semester 1
Block 1 and 2 (12 EC): Renaissance Esotericism I: Medieval & Early Modern Alchemy

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

Wednesdays 12:00-15:00, OMHP, Room E1.08, Blocks 1 & 2

5 Sept 2018  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 Sept 2018  2: The New Historiography


19 Sept 2018  3: Alchemy in Antiquity

4: Medieval Alchemy 1: The Arabs


5. Medieval Alchemy 2: The Christian West

10 Oct 2018

6. Renaissance Alchemy: Paracelsus and the Paracelsians


17 Oct 2018

7. Rosicrucians & Alchemy


24 Oct 2018

8. NO CLASS
9. Early Modern Chymistry


10. Hieroglyphic and Emblematic Alchemy

11. Alchemy & Cabala

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C.H. Josten, 'A Translation of John Dee's Monas Hieroglyphica (Antwerp, 1564), with an Introduction and Annotations', Ambix, Vol. 12, Nos. 2 & 3 (June & October, 1964), pp. 84-147, 155-185 [Please note: this is a parallel-text translation and you will only be reading every other page]


12. Alchemy & Astrology

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13. Spiritual Alchemy & Religion

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Mary Anne Atwood, A Suggestive Inquiry into the Hermetic Mystery, London: Trelawney Saunders, 1850, 135-170; 455-473.
5 Dec 2018

14. Alchemy & Psychology


12 Dec 2018

15. Conclusions

General discussion of the course and the possibility for students to discuss their essay topics, giving brief presentations for group feedback.
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 a judicium “insufficient”. Active participation means that you have read the materials for each week and take part in the discussions. You will be asked questions about the texts, so be prepared!

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 Canvas, 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 25 January 2019. The paper will be returned with critical comments and suggestions by Friday 22 February. The final revised version must be submitted the following month (i.e., no later than Friday 29 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 20 and 30 minutes and contains the following elements:

- It provides some background information about the author. Please do not just copy his/her CV from the internet, but tell us in your own words who the author is and what s/he has been doing.

- 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 short reminder 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. NB: The term “reminder” is used deliberately: your audience has already read the text, so please do not get into pointless summaries of what everybody already knows (“he says this, then he says that, in the next section he says that,” etc.).

- 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 this 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: what did you think of the text, did you like it, or disliked it, and why? Please note “criticism” does not mean that you necessary have to criticize the text, although you’re welcome to; it means that you show that you have read it with a critical mind.

- Use of PowerPoint, Keynote or Prezi is not mandatory, but very welcome. However: use it wisely. It is never a good idea to use long stretches of text if you do not then read through the quote, otherwise it will distract your audience’s attention from what you are saying. Use text elements sparingly: not with the intention of providing information, but rather, with the intention of helping your audience follow the thread of the information provided in your spoken presentation. Likewise, images are welcome, but should be functional, not just recreational.

While all students following the course are expected to have read the texts under discussion, a good presenter (and recipient of a high grade) has taken the trouble of looking 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 the trouble to visit the library (the physical one: not just the internet!) and have a look at additional literature relevant to the text and the themes that are central in it. On sites like JSTOR or Project Muse it is often possible to find reviews of books being discussed. Therefore you need to plan your presentation well in advance.