



UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

Faculty of Humanities

Academic Year 2020-2021

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 M. Pasi).

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: [116217092Y](#)

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:

T: 020 525 4484

E: studieadviseur-geschiedenis-fgw@uva.nl

For general information on the programme Western esotericism, please see: www.amsterdamhermetica.nl

Teaching Schedule

Wednesdays 15:00-18:00, Online, Blocks 1 & 2

9 September 2020

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.

16 September 2020

2: Marsilio Ficino & Renaissance Magic

Brian P. Copenhaver, 'Scholastic Philosophy and Renaissance Magic in the De vita of Marsilio Ficino', *Renaissance Quarterly* 37:4 (1984): 523-554.

'Chapter II: Ficino's Magic', in: D. P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella*, London: The Warburg Institute, 1958, 30-59.

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).

23 September 2020

3: Johann Reuchlin & Christian Cabala

Joseph Dan, 'The Kabbalah of Johannes Reuchin and its Historical Significance', in: Joseph Dan (ed.), *The Christian Kabbalah: Jewish Mystical Books and their Christian Interpreters*, Cambridge Mass., 1997, 55-84 (& endnotes).

Johann Reuchlin, *De Arte Cabalistica: On the Art of the Kabbalah*, edited and translated by Martin and Sarah Goodman, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press/ Bison Books, 1993, 36-63 (facing-page translations: only every other page is in English).

30 September 2020

4: Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa & Occult Philosophy

Wouter J. Hanegraaff, 'Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa', in: Christopher Partridge (ed.), *The Occult World*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2015, 92-98.

Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn's Sourcebook Series, 1995, Letters, pp. liii-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.

7 October 2020

5. Theophrastus Paracelsus, Magic & Alchemy

Charles Webster, *Paracelsus: Medicine, Magic and Mission at the End of Time*, New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2008, Chapter V: Matter and Magic, 131-168.

Andrew Weeks, 'Paracelsus', in Christopher Partridge (ed.), *The Occult World*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2015, 99-106.

Paracelsus, *Astronomia Magna or the whole Philosophia Sagax of the Great and Little World* (extracts), in: Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke (ed.), *Paracelsus: Essential Readings*, Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1990, pp. 109-120.

14 October 2020

6. John Dee's Conversations with Angels

Deborah E. Harkness, 'Shows in the Showstone: A Theater of Alchemy and Apocalypse in the Angel Conversations of John Dee (1527-1608/9),' *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (1996), pp. 707-737.

John Dee, *Five Books of Mystery*, Book I, JD's note, preliminary invocation, prologue, 1-2 action, in: Joseph H. Peterson (ed.), *John Dee's Five Books of Mystery: Original Sourcebook of Enochian Magic*, York Beach: Weiser Books, 2003, 56-73.

21 October 2020

7. NO CLASS

28 October 2020

8. NO CLASS

4 November 2020

9. Heinrich Khunrath, In Oratory & Laboratory

Hereward Tilton, 'Of Electrum and the Armour of Achilles: Myth and Magic in a Manuscript of Heinrich Khunrath (1560-1605), *Aries* 6.2 (2006): 117-157.

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

11 November 2020

10. Jacob Boehme & Theosophy

Andrew Weeks, *Boehme: An Intellectual Biography of the Seventeenth-Century Philosopher and Mystic*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991, Chapter 7: The Will to Revelation, 185-208.

Ariel Hessayon, 'Boehme's Life and Times', in Ariel Hessayon and

Sarah Apetrei (eds), *An Introduction to Jacob Boehme: Four Centuries of Thought and Reception*, London: Routledge, 2014, 13-37.

Jacob Boehme, *Mysterium Magnum* (1622), translated by J. Ellistone and Jo. Sparrow, London, 1656, Preface and 1-22.

18 November 2020

11. Rosicrucianism

Hereward Tilton, 'The Rosicrucian Manifestos and Early Rosicrucianism', in: Christopher Partridge (ed.), *The Occult World*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2015, 128-144.

Thomas Willard, 'The Strange Journey of Christian Rosencreutz', in: Albrecht Classen (ed.), *East meets West in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: Transcultural Experiences in the Premodern World*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013, pp. 667-697

The Fame and Confession of the Fraternity of R: C: (trans. Thomas Vaughan, London: Printed by J. M. for Giles Calvert, 1652), in: Frances A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, London & New York: Routledge, 1972; reprint 1996, pp. 238-260.

25 November 2020

12. Michael Maier, Music, Myth & Alchemy

Peter J. Forshaw, 'Michael Maier and Mythoalchemy', <https://furnaceandfugue.org/essays/forshaw/>

Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens* (1617), translated as *The Flying Atalanta, Or Philosophical Emblems of the Secrets of Nature*, British Library, MS Sloane 3645, Emblems 1 & 39.

H.M.E. de Jong, *Michael Maier's Atalanta Fugiens: Sources of an Alchemical Book of Emblems*, York Beach, Maine: Nicolas-Hays, Inc., 2002, 55-63, 255-259.

2 December

13. Athanasius Kircher & Esoteric Knowledge

Noel Malcolm, 'Private and Public Knowledge: Kircher, Esotericism, and the Republic of Letters', in: Paula Findlen (ed.), *Athanasius Kircher: The Last Man Who Knew Everything*, London: Routledge, 2004, 297-308.

Kircher's *Vita* (Chapters 6 & 7), in: John Edward Fletcher, *A Study of the Life and Works of Athanasius Kircher, 'Germanus Incredibilis'*, Leiden: occult world Brill, 2011, pp. 485-502.

Joscelyn Godwin, *Athanasius Kircher's Theatre of the World*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2009, 9-24.

9 December

14. Robert Boyle, Sceptical Chymist & Supernatural Alchemy

Lawrence M. Principe, 'Boyle, Robert', in: Wouter J. Hanegraaff et al (eds), *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, Leiden: Brill 2006, 199- 201.

[Robert Boyle] 'Robert Boyle's Dialogue on the Converse with Angels aided by the Philosophers' Stone', in: Lawrence M. Principe, *The Aspiring Adept: Robert Boyle and his Alchemical Quest*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998, 310- 317.

Matthew D. Rogers, 'The Angelical Stone of Elias Ashmole', *Aries* 5:1 (2005), 61-90.

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 pages, 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 29 January 2021**). The paper will be returned with critical comments and suggestions by **Friday 26 February**. The final revised version must be submitted the following month (i.e., no later than **Friday 31 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.