

ALCHEMY, MAGIC and MYSTICISM LIBA 497

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DESCRIPTION of the COURSE

The history of alchemy traces human efforts to achieve immortality through the transformation of matter and spirit. While alchemists attempted to prepare the “philosophers’ stone,” with the power to transmute base metals into gold, the transmutation of metals became symbolic of the transformation of flawed man into a perfect being. The alchemists or magician’s Great Work (Magnum Opus) serves as a metaphor for all human creative work, whether it be art, writing, medicine, psychology or science, where life and work are a process that mirrors a journey to the underworld and rebirth.

Traditional magic and the alchemical process of perfection of metals and human nature was based upon an integrated cosmology derived primarily from Greek and Egyptian mysticism. The influence of alchemy and magic is evident in the works of Durer, Botticelli, Shakespeare, Marlowe and Mozart. While the Enlightenment severed science from mysticism, alchemical and magical symbols continued to penetrate the work of Gustav Moreau, Yeats, Jung and Cocteau, among others.

The study of magic and alchemy provides unique insight into the history of science, psychology, anthropology, art and literature. Today, modern theoretical physics rejoins metaphysics to mathematics in “superstring theory,” in describing a unified cosmos whose nature cannot be measured or verified but only postulated through imagination. In this course we will examine elements of Babylonian, Greek and Egyptian mysticism from which alchemy and traditional magic have been derived, and then look at the influence of alchemical and magical motives in Western literature, art, music and science.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Goals of this Synthesis course (detailed below) will be assessed by student success in:

1. Development and application of tools for thinking about the intersection of magic, religion and superstition, in the form of surveys and presentation of results
2. Presentation of secondary materials related to ancient religions, of iconography related to alchemy, the history of science, presentation and interpretation of classical magic.
3. A presentation of a paper with original research using primary and secondary sources, or original visual arts project, both to be selected by the student with approval of the instructor.

The subject and the seminar structure are particularly appropriate to interdisciplinary study and student success in synthesizing the texts, discussion and personal educational achievements will be measured by a variety of methods including discussion of readings and instructor lectures, individual and group presentations, lectures and discussions.

OBJECTIVES of the SYNTHESIS COURSE: Alchemy, Magic and Mysticism

1. To use interdisciplinary perspectives and approaches in the study of a subject which draws upon an extraordinary diversity of disciplines as evidenced by the required texts, including Ancient Religions (addressed in the excellent new survey text edited by Classics scholar Susan Johnston), magic in the western tradition, and alchemy, as an essential aspect of the history of science, leading to cosmological models such as that of Plato's *Timaeus* and Brian Greene's string theory.

2. The course focuses on problems and issues of contemporary life. Alchemical studies attempt to solve problems of social fragmentation, dissociation, specialization, and alienation from work, as well as other universal philosophical problems asked by Plato, Aristotle, Geber, Al Razi, Newton and string physicists. How did the universe begin? What is the origin and purpose of life? Why must we die? To what extent can we prolong life? To what extent should we attempt to control nature? Alchemical studies in Egypt, Greece, China, Africa and Europe have historically addressed these questions, no less relevant today when alienation and violence characterize our culture. Attempts to turn lead into gold, the work most commonly associated with alchemy, though its least significant aspect, mirrors our obsessive materialism and lack of interest in issues of social justice, or the global community. Work for many provides few personal benefits apart from monetary gain. Since science and philosophy parted company, industrialization, specialization and cultural fragmentation has led to a sense of alienation from nature, work and community.

3. The course explores factors influencing these problems and issues and suggests alternate solutions to problems and issues. In China, Nigeria, Alexandria, Florence, London and Paris, alchemists dealt with the transformation of matter from one state or form to another, imitating the processes of nature. The outer work was linked to inner or hidden work on human personality. The alchemical fire, called the secret of the opus, was a physical fire, controlled within an actual vessel, but also the heat producing quality of meditation and imagination. The chemical processes of alchemy mirrored the spiritual and psychological processes necessary for mental health and high ethical values. From Plato to Newton, scientific work was inseparable from philosophical work. The study of alchemy is no less than the search for integration in the realms of personality, the human family, nature and the cosmos. The search for a unified field theory, an integration of man and cosmos, links Greene's string theory to Plato's *Anima Mundi*.

4. The course identifies ways in which students might contribute toward resolving contemporary problems and issues. Students will present some aspect of alchemical studies which interests them and is particularly relevant to their chosen field of study. They can choose a topic from biology, art, health care, literature, psychology, sociology or economics, among others; in every case they must make connections to contemporary concerns.

5. The course reinforces many of the goals and objectives of the University Core. These include analysis and critical evaluation of information, with discussion of texts and student led presentations of selected texts, which also allows for practice of effective oral and written communication. Final projects will require original research, which addresses the locating, gathering and processing of information. For students interested in mathematics, string theory provides challenges in that area. The goals of alchemical studies were profoundly concerned with ethics and "wise" judgment. The study raises questions about the origin of life and creation of the universe, the perfectibility of the human spirit, the connection of humans to nature, social justice, and ethical considerations in prolongation of life. The course provides ample opportunity for response to the arts, as early science was most often expressed in esoteric, symbolic terms, often in order to protect the individual from persecution by church and state. Therefore, a great deal of what remains to us of alchemical and magical studies, from Egypt to the Renaissance, is in the form of drawings and literature. Medieval alchemical and magical texts are filled with such imagery, much of which is reproduced on the facades and interiors of Gothic Cathedrals. Botticelli, Raphael, Bosch, Breugel,

and William Blake among others used the imagery in their paintings. Alchemical and magical themes and images can be found in works by Apuleius, Shakespeare, Marlowe, Cocteau and Mozart. The influence of alchemy, magic and mysticism on western art is a rich, but mainly unexplored field of scholarship.

6. Psychological health, as the process of integration of personality, is addressed in the study of Jung's works on alchemy. For example, Jung discusses his belief that depression (going into the dark unconscious) is essential in order to retrieve life sustaining energy, imagination, humor, joyfulness, rejecting Freud's sense of the unconscious as the repository of repressed, frightening experience and inappropriate desires.

7. This course provides historical perspective as an overview of problems addressed by alchemy, magic and mysticism from the earliest historical times: Sumeria (astronomy), Africa (sacred metallurgy), Egypt (the first known religion to include a concept of afterlife, the attempt to achieve immortality through chemistry and metallurgy), China, (Taoist philosophy born of alchemical philosophies and medicine) Greece (cosmologies: Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras and others. Alexandria was the center for dispersion of alchemical studies in the early centuries AD). We will also study texts and art from the Medieval, Renaissance, Enlightenment and Modern period, including contemporary science and psychology.

8. The course provides opportunities for understanding individual development or social behavior. Alchemical research in chemistry or medicine was combined with a philosophical, psychological process of refinement. Jung's interest in alchemy, a forty year study, was primarily in its application as a model for the integration of the personality. One of the medieval alchemists we will be studying, Nicholas Flamel, was believed to have turned lead into gold, based on instructive images in a Hebrew manuscript he found. He and his wife Pernelle, who lived modestly in Paris in the 14th Century, were famous philanthropists, founding many hospitals and homeless shelters, two of which remain in Paris. Definitions of magic historically dealt with intention and social responsibility versus personal gain.

9. The course is devoted to understanding science and scientific thinking in terms of cosmologies and early chemistry, as well as the complex interplay of science, magic and religion.

10. The study of alchemy, magic and mysticism provides insight into an important although neglected aspect of thought and creative work of western culture. It is not possible to understand the goals and problems of alchemical, magical or mystical thought without examining the origins of science and major religions including Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greco-Roman, Platonic and Aristotelian cosmogonies, Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Masterpieces such as Reims Cathedral, Notre Dame, works by Raphael, Botticelli and Shakespeare and others which draw on alchemical thought support understanding of major concepts in the western tradition.

11. The importance of global community, to the extent of a unified field theory, concerned thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Pico della Mirandola, Jung and Brian Greene. The inter-relatedness of peoples and nature is the essential principle of alchemical studies, which can be found in parallel chemical and philosophical works, in every realm of the global community, from Nigeria to Paris.

If you have a disability, you are encouraged to register for disability support services in the Counseling Center. If you require an accommodation, please advise the instructor by the end of the first week of class. You may be required to present written documentation to support these accommodations. The instructor will work with you to provide

reasonable accommodations to ensure that you have a fair opportunity to perform and participate in class.

TEXTS:

The Hermetic Museum: Alchemy and Mysticism, Roob (selections)

Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman World, Ogden (selections)

Religions of the Ancient World, Johnston (selections)

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

A passing grade in the course requires that you be prepared to discuss assigned reading material on the day it is due.

(50%) Presentations and discussions on reading. Attendance is very important; no more than one absence allowed for passing grade in the course.

(50%) A presentation based on a research project on some aspect of alchemy/magic; topic must be approved by instructor.

SCHEDULE OF READINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

8.27 WEEK ONE

Introduction to Magic: definitions, operations, strega. Surveys of superstition.

Cosmologies: *Timaeus* and *The Elegant Universe*: String Theory.

Pythagoras and Empedocles. Introduction to alchemy.

Astrological election: Babylonian natal horoscopes. Examples and analysis.

9.3 WEEK TWO

Labor Day--No class.

Reading:

Ancient Religions

Introduction ix-xiv

What is Ancient Mediterranean Religion? 3-16

Monotheism and Polytheism 17-31

Cosmology, Time and History 59-70

Mysteries 98-111

Magic 139-154

9.10 WEEK THREE

Presentation of Superstition Surveys: 10 minutes.

Reading: Ancient Religions, Histories, 155-244. including Egypt, Mesopotamia, Israel, Greece, Rome, Early Christianity

9.17 WEEK FOUR

9.24 WEEK FIVE Ancient Religions Presentations of Key Topics. (Including Egypt, Mesopotamia, Israel, Greece, Rome, Early Christianity) 10 minutes

10.1 WEEK SIX. Presentations of Ancient Mystery Cults: 10 minutes.

Reading (handout): Apuleius ("Cupid and Psyche") *La Belle et la Bete*

10.8 WEEK SEVEN. Monsters, Labyrinths and Apotropaic magic.

Pan's Labyrinth

10.15 WEEK EIGHT. Greek and Roman Ghosts presentations: 10 minutes

10.22 WEEK NINE. Natural Magic, Ficino, Melancholy, Correspondences, and talismanic gems.

10.29 WEEK TEN. Reading: The Hermetic Museum (introduction). Alchemical operations: esoteric and exoteric. Examples of texts with discussion of iconography and exercise. Jung's use of alchemy in theory of archetypes.

11.5 WEEK ELEVEN The Hermetic Museum presentations: 10 minutes

Alchemy website: <http://levity.com/alchemy>

Alchemical Glossary: <http://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/newton/reference/glossary.do>

11.12 WEEK TWELVE. The Game of Apocalypse. Origins, history and iconography of tarot, from 14th C Plague cemetery art and *Danse Macabre*, Petrarch's *I Trionfi*, Day of the Dead, Apocalyptic traditions, to 18th C divinatory tarot, Surrealist's WW2 Tarot of Marseille.

11.19 WEEK THIRTEEN. Handouts: Plato's "The Myth of Er," "The Myth of the Afterlife." *The Red Violin*.

11.26 WEEK FOURTEEN

LIBA Presentations 1-8

12.3 WEEK FIFTEEN

LIBA Presentations 9-16

12.10 FINAL WEEK

LBST Presentations 1-5