

LIBA 497
ALCHEMY, MAGIC, AND MYSTICISM

Instructor: Dr. Carol MacKay
Office: Liberal Arts 3067
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Office hours:
Or by appointment
Course time:

COURSE TEXTS:

Eric Holmyard, *Alchemy*. Dover Publications, 1990.
Kahn, Charles H. *Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans*, Hackett, 2001.
Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries*. The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987.
Alexander Roob, *Alchemy and Mysticism*, Taschen, 2001

Short excerpts from online and E-reserve texts will be assigned from the following:

Linden, *The Alchemy Reader*
Pythagorean and Empedoclean fragments
Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*
Copenhaver, Brian. *Hermetica*
Paracelsus, selected readings
François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*
Cyrano de Bergerac, *Voyages to the Moon and the Sun*
Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno*
Carl Jung, *Alchemy*
Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe*

Films excerpts from:

“Divine Magic,” The Knowledge Channel
Mozart, *The Magic Flute*
Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe*

COURSE CONTENT AND GOALS

In this course we will examine the ancient art of alchemy in its different physical and spiritual manifestations, its links to magic and mysticism, and its demise during the Scientific Revolution. Long dismissed by many as the domain of charlatans, it has in the twentieth century become the subject of scholarship revealing a more complex picture of a tradition important to creative endeavors in medicine, art, psychology, literature, religion, philosophy, and other fields. Seeing an underlying unity to all existence, the thinkers we will study searched for the reality they believed to exist behind appearances, for the prime matter that made up the physical world and for mystical connections

beyond the physical senses. Their goals were basic to human dreams, as the real gold they sought was the saving and transformative knowledge of the elixir that would alleviate human suffering, offer long life and the hope of immortality. They saw in the torturous journey of the metals toward transformation into something new the possibility that the human spirit itself might be transformed if they could find the right signs to lead them on a long and difficult path, believing that their ability to transform the metals was dependent on the success of their own quest for spiritual transformation. They documented their search in language and art that is symbolic rather than literal, leaving a cryptic path for others who would be initiated into the same tradition

In looking at this tradition, we will read excerpts from both primary texts and scholarly works that aim to acquaint students with the following:

- Traditions that reach above to the stars and below to the underworld
- Evolutions of thought in the ancient world that led to the development of physical and spiritual alchemy
- The Hermetic tradition, or the search for hidden knowledge
- Some of the large number of literary and artistic works in which the alchemists documented their search symbolically as well as creative works influenced by the Hermetic tradition
- The rediscovery of ancient texts during the Renaissance
- Renaissance natural magic
- Inheritors of the initiatory alchemical tradition in the Renaissance, or the initiatory nature of the search for a saving knowledge, including quest literature, the legend of Faustus, and the Rosicrucians; the survival of that tradition during the Enlightenment in Freemasonry
- Twentieth century re-evaluations of alchemy, including Carl Jung's view of the relationship between psychology and alchemy, and the modern search for prime matter

COURSE METHODOLOGY

The class will be conducted as a seminar, with class discussion, presentations by participants in oral or written form, and some group work. Regular class attendance is then crucial to success in the course. Readings will be mostly short selections or book chapters from a wide range of both primary and secondary sources. We will try to identify a subject for the research paper by around the time of midterm, after everyone has a better understanding of the tradition we are studying. Individual conferences will be held to determine a subject that suits the interests of each student, and we will identify research resources and strategies.

COURSE EVALUATION

Since a significant portion of the final grade will be based on class activities, absences should be avoided if possible and should be limited at most to no more than two

absences, which represent the loss of one week's work. The midterm and final exams will have both a take home essay and an in-class test component. The following percentages will be used to determine course grades:

Written homework	10%
Class discussion participation	10%
Quizzes	10%
Class presentations	10%
Midterm	25%
10 page research paper	20%
Final examination	15%
 Total	 100%

The grading scale is as follows:

90 – 100	A
86 – 89	B+
80 – 85	B
76 – 79	C+
70 – 75	C
66 – 69	D+
60 – 65	D

Course Readings and Presentations:

Note: Bring Roob, *Alchemy and Mysticism--The Hermetic Museum* to each class meeting.

Readings will consist most often of short selections from a wide variety of sources.

Week One: January 8-10

Ancient Persian, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian traditions.

Ancient Greek search for the reality behind appearances

Class readings: Kahn, *Pythagoras*, 1-22; Pythagoras, “The Golden Verses,” handout.
Empedoclean fragments, handout.

Week Two: January 17

Transformation in the Mystery religions; Dionysius and Apollo

Class Readings: *Pythagoras*, Chapters 3 and 4, pages 23-38.

Individual reports: Pythagorean symbols

Week Three: January 22-24

Pythagoras, Chapters

Transformation in the Mystery religions; Dionysius and Apollo

Intro. to *The Ancient Mysteries*, 1-14.

Meyer, "The Greek Mysteries of the Grain Mother and Daughter," 17-20; Plutarch of Chaeronea, "Progress in Virtue," page 38.

Week Four: January 29—31

Monday Jan. 29: Class readings: "The Greek Mysteries of Dionysius," 63-65

Plato, *The Republic*, Book 2.6-7, pages 99-100.

Euripedes, selections from *The BACCHAE*, 65-80; Orphic Hymns, 101-109.

The Class readings: *Pythagoras*, 72-85, 139-172.

Jan. 31: The rise of alchemy Class readings: Holmyard, *Alchemy*, 1-32.

Individual reports: Aristophanes, *The Frogs*, lines 311-459, pages 32-38;

Week Five: February 5—7

Class Readings: Holmyard, *Alchemy*, 33-42; *Pythagoras*, 86-110;

Meyer, "The Roman Mysteries of Mithras, 199-201; Lucien of Samasota, Menippus, (extract), 202-204; Porphyry, "On the Cave of the Nymphs, extract, 210-211

Meyer, "The Mysteries within Judaism and Christianity," 225-227." Plutarch, "Table Talk," Extract, 227-229;

Holmyard, *Alchemy*, 60-63, 67-82

Individual Reports: The Egyptian Mysteries of Isis and Osiris, 155-159; Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris* (extracts), 160-171. *Pythagoras*, 39-71.

Individual reports from Meyer: (R) "Isis Aretology from Cyme" and "Isis Love Spell from the Great Magical Papyrus of Paris," 172-176. (R) Apuleius of Maurdoros, *The Golden Ass*, Book II of *Metamorphoses*, 176-19.

Gospel of Philip, extract, 235-242.; Clement of Alexandria, "Exhortation to the Greeks," 243-251.

Week Six: February 12—14

Week Six: Class Readings: Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, "Methodology and Reflections," 3-47, e-reserve.

Alexandian Alchemy, magic, and mysticism: Hermes Trismegistus and the *Corpus Hermeticum*; Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 16-40. The initiatory path: the search for gnosis.

Gnostic cosmology: the Gnostic path to the stars; the Neoplatonic path to the stars; Holmyard, *Alchemy*

Neoplatonic light in the Gothic Cathedrals

Week Seven: February 19—21

Class Readings: Roob, *Alchemy and Mysticism*, Introduction, 8-33;

Paracelsus: Readings

Renaissance alchemy, magic, and mysticism: *Alchemy and Mysticism*, Agrippa, 534-537.

The Italian Neo-Platonists: Cusanus, 274-275; Ficino, 60-61, Pico della Mirandola, 46,

Giordano Bruno 623, 597. Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, extract on reserve.

Extract from *The Corpus Hermeticum*, handout

Marcilio Ficino and hermeticism; Pico della Mirandola and Jewish mysticism: The

Jewish Kaballah: Readings on Reserve; *On the Dignity of Man*, extract.

The Renaissance Magus: Marlowe, *Dr. Faustus*

Lecture : Grail and quest literature: The Golden Fleece

Class Readings: Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, extracts

Week Eight : February 26—28

Midterm

Rosicrucians: *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosencreutz*, 5 pages.

Hermetic Museum: Descartes, 616-617, Kepler, 624

(Short individual reports from the *Hermetic Museum* will continue during the following weeks) Tarot and transformation

Class Readings: Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, extracts

Isaac Newton, *Commentary on the Emerald Table*, reserve

Week Nine: March 5—March 7 Spring Break

Week Ten: March 12—14

Class readings:

Cyrano de Bergerac, *Voyages to the Moon and the Sun*, extracts

Alchemy and Mysticism, Masons 222-223, 293-295, 298, 347.

Freemasonry and Democracy, Margaret Jacob's view

Goethe's Faust; The Enlightenment; Faivre, chapter on Freemasonry and the Enlightenment: library reserve.

Mozart, *The Magic Flute*, film excerpts.

Week Eleven: March 19—21

Lecture: Carl Jung: Psychology and Alchemy.

Class Readings: Carl Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*. Chapter I, e-reserve. *Hermetic Museum:* Blake, 577, 626, 68-69. Yeats, 67

Week Twelve: March 26-28

Lecture: Carl Jung: Psychology and Alchemy, the mandala and psychology

Class Readings: readings from Jung on e-reserve;

Alchemy and Mysticism, readings.

Week Thirteen: April 2—4

Outline of paper and sources due.

Readings on twentieth century science, e-reserve.
Greene, *The Elegant Universe*, film (parts).

Week Fourteen: April 9—11

Research paper due

Class Readings and reports: Selections from *Alchemy and Mysticism*

Faivre, concluding chapter, library reserve.

Discussion: Synthesis of traditions; Alchemy, magic, and mysticism
twentieth century works of art and literature. Expressions in Music,
The Balm and Gilead, the Sorcerer's Apprentice, and other expressions in
music.

Week Fifteen: April 16—18 Presentations of research and discussion

Week Sixteen April 23—25 Presentations of research and discussion

Week Seventeen: April 30—May 4 Final Exam Week

Revisions: in my notes on light, Principe, in talking about alchemy says the following:
Theological images: Christ who turns sinful men into redeemed men becomes the
Philosopher's stone, and death, resurrection, are used. In the 19th century the idea that it
changed the soul of the practitioner appeared, but he says there is not evidence to say it
was the case in the MA. (my somewhere along the way is pretty late then and should be
changed.