

HIST 0150B (Spring 2014)

The Philosophers' Stone: Alchemy from Antiquity to Harry Potter

MWF 1-1:50pm, Wilson 302

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Image from the *Rosarium philosophorum*, the second volume of *De alchimia opuscula complura veterum philosophorum*, edited by Cyriacus Jacob (Frankfurt am Main, 1550).

Course description:

As a set of ideas and practices, alchemy has a long, rich history in China, Roman Egypt, the Middle East, Europe, and the U.S. From late antiquity to the present, alchemists have transformed matter in order to understand nature, make things (including gemstones, elixirs, and gold), and explore connections between the natural and the divine. The history of alchemy offers a point of entry into science, magic, medicine, gender, religion, and cultural images of the sage, fool, and fraud, as well as questions of continuity and transformation over time. We will explore these issues and more, while using alchemy and its history to understand changing views of the past, its relationship to the present, and how scholars and others have deployed it in the service of their own agendas.

This course has a second, but equally important goal: to develop the discussion, critical thinking, and writing skills that will be essential to your success here at Brown. Discussion sections will be self-reflective, meaning that we will work towards ensuring that each student participates and learns to make comments that link to others and move our conversations forward. In the writing component of our class, we will stress the idea that constructing a good paper is a complex process that involves reading

critically, developing interesting and coherent ideas by synthesizing several texts, and then conveying those ideas to the reader clearly and effectively. We will explore each of these steps in detail and hone the tools essential to good academic writing. You will learn how to analyze other scholars' work (i.e. secondary sources) in terms of evidence and argument, as well as how to use primary sources (i.e., texts written in the historical past) to comment on the general themes of our class. Finally, we will discuss how to craft a clear, well-supported argumentative essay with properly formatted foot-/endnotes.

HIST 0150 courses are meant to introduce students to methods of historical analysis, interpretation, and argument. This class presumes no previous history courses and is appropriate for students in their first and second years who are considering concentrating in History, as well as for students farther along who are interested in the topic or who haven't taken many history courses previously.

Learning Goals:

- To understand the basic theories and practices associated with alchemy in a variety of temporal and geographical contexts.
- To recognize connections between alchemy and the commercial, intellectual, social, and religious contexts in which it flourished.
- To begin to master the basic skills in the discipline of History, including the analysis of primary and secondary sources and writing analytic essays, as preparation for other courses in History.
- To strengthen the set of skills required for success at Brown in general: critical reading, analytic and scholarly writing, and productive participation in seminar discussions.

Assessment:

Participation (10%) Your participation in discussion section is absolutely crucial. Full participation points will go to students who attend class regularly and participate constructively in discussions. Attendance in class is mandatory – absences will affect your participation grade.

**** See the "Course Policies" sheet at the end of the syllabus for a fuller guide to assessment of your participation in this course.****

2 Papers (25% and 35%) During the semester, you will be required to write 2 short papers. The first will be 5-6 pages, with specific topics to be distributed in class and based on class readings and lectures. The second will be slightly longer (6-8 pages) and will require a critical analysis of an outside book or website (details to follow).

These short papers are an opportunity to demonstrate your understanding of the texts, to consider in greater detail a particular issue or problem, and to practice communicating your ideas effectively. All papers must be typed, double-spaced, with reasonable margins and fonts, and must include the appropriate documentation (according to the Chicago style outlined in Lipson). Please note the late policy on the Course Policies sheet.

Exams (30% total) This course has 1 in-class midterm (15%) and 1 final exam (15%), to be held May 8, 2-5pm.

Readings (available on reserve at Rockefeller Library and at the Bookstore):

Jonson, Ben. *The Alchemist*. Methuen Drama; Revised Edition, 2010.

Lipson, Charles. *Doing Honest Work in College* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Newman, William R. and Lawrence Principe. *Alchemy Tried in the Fire*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

Principe, Lawrence. *The Secrets of Alchemy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

Rowling, J. K.. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (any edition).

® = links to readings available on Canvas; our OCRA password is [lapis](#)

1. Introductions		
W 1/22	Introductions	Lipson, <i>Doing Honest Work in College</i>
F 1/24	Writing the history of alchemy	
2. Origins: from Greco-Egyptian <i>chemeia</i> to Arabic <i>al-kimiya</i>		
M 1/27	Imitating nature	Principe, <i>Secrets of Alchemy</i> , Intro, Ch. 1 & 2.
W 1/29	Ancient matter theory	® Caley, "The Leyden Papyrus X: An English Translation with Brief Notes." <i>Journal of Chemical Education</i> 3 (1926): 1149-66. ® Stavenhagen, ed., <i>A Testament of Alchemy</i>
F 1/31	Translation and transformation	
3. Latin <i>alchemia</i>		
NB: discussion sections will begin this week. Assignments TBA.		
M 2/3	The medieval university	Principe, <i>Secrets of Alchemy</i> , Ch. 3 ® Newman, "Technology and Alchemical Debate in the Late Middle Ages."
W 2/5	Art and nature	® DeVun, "The Jesus Hermaphrodite: Science and Sex Difference in Premodern Europe."

		® [Ps.-] Albertus Magnus, "Libellus de Alchimia [excerpts]."
4. Transformations of Christianity		
M 2/10	Christendom fractured?	® Matus, "Resurrected Bodies and Roger Bacon's Elixir."
W 2/12	The Lion's Blood	® DeVun, "'Human Heaven': John of Rupescissa's Alchemy at the End of the World." ® Forshaw, "Vitriolic Reactions"
paper #1 due Friday, 2/14, by 5pm		
5. Interlude: China		
M 2/17	NO CLASS: PRES. DAY	® Sivin, "Chinese Alchemy and the Manipulation of Time."
W 2/19	<i>Wai dan, nei dan</i> , and alchemy	® Pregadio, "Early Daoist Meditation and the Origins of Inner Alchemy."
6. Renaissance		
M 2/24	Reassessing antiquity	Principe, <i>Secrets of Alchemy</i> , Ch. 5
W 2/26	Magic	® Yates, "The Hermetic Tradition in Renaissance Science." ® Hanegraaff, <i>Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge</i> , Intro. & Ch. 1
7. Technology, expertise, and the rise of the state		
M 3/3	Patronage in the courts	® Nummedal, "Practical Alchemy and Commercial Exchange in the Holy Roman Empire."
W 3/5	Making money	® Bartels, "The Production of Silver, Copper, and Lead in the Harz Mountains from Late Medieval Times to the Onset of Industrialization." ** start reading <i>Alchemy Tried in the Fire</i>
8. Scientific revolution		
M 3/10	Reading the book of nature	Newman and Principe, <i>Alchemy Tried in the Fire</i>
W 3/12	Institutionalizing knowledge	
9. Cultural representations of alchemy		

M 3/17	MIDTERM	Ben Jonson, <i>The Alchemist</i>
W 3/19	Fool, Sage, and Fraud	
10. SPRING BREAK - NO CLASS		
11. The decline of alchemy?		
M 3/31	The chemical revolution?	® Powers, 'Ars Sine Arte:' Nicholas Lemery and the End of Alchemy in Eighteenth-Century France."
W 4/2	Remapping knowledge in the Enlightenment	® Newman and Principe, "Alchemy vs. Chemistry." ® "Alchemy" and "Chemistry," The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/did/ ® Price, <i>An Account of some Experiments on Mercury, Silver and Gold, made in Guildford in May, 1782.</i> (Oxford, 1782). Selections
12. Recipes, matter, and replication		
M 4/7	The matter of sources	Principe, <i>Secrets of Alchemy</i> , Ch. 6
W 4/9	GUEST LECTURE: Lawrence Principe	® Smith, "Vermilion, Mercury, Blood, and Lizards: Matter and Meaning in Metalworking." ® Bucklow, <i>The Alchemy of Paint</i> , Ch. 4: "Metallic Blues" The Chymistry of Isaac Newton , "Experiments in Mineral Acids" and "Multimedia Lab."
13. Revival		
M 4/14	Spiritualism and the occult	Principe, <i>Secrets of Alchemy</i> , Ch. 4 ® Jung, "The Idea of Redemption in Alchemy."
W 4/16	Psychology	
14. Alchemy today		
M 4/22	Contemporary alchemical practices	Rowling, <i>Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone</i>
W 4/24	Conclusions	
F 4/26	READING PERIOD BEGINS	
paper #2 due Monday, April 28, by 5pm		
NB: The final for this class will be held on Thursday, May 8, from 2-5pm. Please plan accordingly.		

COURSE POLICIES

LATE POLICY FOR ASSIGNMENTS: All late papers will be penalized one grade per day (including Saturday and Sunday). (A "B" paper turned in 2 hours late, for example, will receive a "C".)

PARTICIPATION: The following is a guide to my assessment of participation.

Outstanding: Contributions in class reflect exceptional preparation. Ideas offered are always substantive, provide one or more major insights as well as direction for the class. Challenges are well substantiated and persuasively presented. If this person were not a member of the class, the quality of discussion would be diminished markedly.

Good: Contributions in class reflect thorough preparation. Ideas offered are usually substantive, provide good insights and sometimes direction for the class. Challenges are well substantiated and often persuasive. If this person were not a member of the class, the quality of discussion would be diminished.

Adequate: Contributions in class reflect satisfactory preparation. Ideas offered are sometimes substantive, provide generally useful insights but seldom offer a new direction for the discussion. Challenges are sometimes presented, fairly well substantiated, and are sometimes persuasive. If this person were not a member of the class, the quality of discussion would be diminished.

Non-Participant: This person says little or nothing in class. Hence, there is not an adequate basis for evaluation. If this person were not a member of the class, the quality of discussion would not be changed.

Unsatisfactory: Contributions in class reflect inadequate preparation. Ideas offered are seldom substantive, provide few if any insights and never a constructive direction for the class. Integrative comments and effective challenges are absent. If this person were not a member of the class, valuable air-time would be saved.

COMMUNICATION: I will do my best to facilitate learning in the class. To that end, I will attempt to answer questions as they arise. Contact me via e-mail or—and this is especially encouraged—come to office hours. If you cannot make posted hours, make an appointment. Please speak with me immediately if you're having a problem in the class. I can be more understanding of your needs if you bring them to my attention before they become a serious problem.

ACCOMMODATIONS: Students who need accommodations in order to meet the course requirements must consult [Student and Employee Accessibility Services](#) (SEAS) and meet with me by the end of shopping period to make appropriate arrangements.

ACADEMIC CODE: Students are responsible for familiarity with the Academic Code, which is available on the Dean of the College website. I take academic integrity seriously and will file a report of any violations during this course. If you are unsure about how to footnote or cite a source, check the online version of the *Chicago Manual of Style* (available via Josiah) or come speak with me.

MISCELLANEOUS: I expect all students to arrive to class on time, with the relevant readings, and prepared for discussion. Please turn off all cell phones. Consistent lateness or disruption of class will affect your participation grade.

In order to pass this class, students must attend at least 50% of class meetings and complete all assignments.