

**LIBA 497/LBST 590 Alchemy, Magic and Mysticism FALL 2005 Thursday 6-8.45**

**Pat Aakhus**

LA 3101 [Paakhus@usi.edu](mailto:Paakhus@usi.edu)

**DESCRIPTION:** 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.

**TEXTS:**

Timaeus, Plato

Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds, Ogden

The Alchemy Reader, Linden

The Hermetic Museum: Alchemy and Mysticism, Roob

Magic in the Middle Ages, Kieckhefer

Doctor Faustus, Marlowe

The Tempest, Shakespeare

Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition, Vyse

The Elegant Universe, Brian Greene

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS:**

Bring The Hermetic Museum to every class, as well as the assigned reading. A passing grade in the course requires that you be prepared to discuss assigned reading material on the day it is due.

(30%) Quizzes on reading. Graded on curve.

(15%) Midterm

(15%) Discussion, attendance, participation (more than one absence drops final grade by one full grade per absence)

(40%) A presentation based on a research project on some aspect of alchemy/magic; topic must be approved by instructor.

## SCHEDULE OF READINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

- 9/1 Introduction to the Course. Creation and Cosmologies.
- 9/8 Immortality of the Soul, The Underworld, Hymn to Demeter, Cupid and Psyche, Orpheus, Inanna, Egypt, Greek mystery cults. Readings:  
<http://users.erols.com/nbeach/demeter.html>  
<http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/cupid.html>
- 9/15 Plato: the Immortality of the Soul, Creation  
\*quiz Timaeus pg. 29-124 Plato Handouts: “Myth of Afterlife,” “Myth of Er”
- 9/22 Dick Davis reading--Persian poetry/mysticism.
- 9/29 \*quiz Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts in Greek and Roman Worlds  
Divination and Demonology
- 10/6. Alexandrian and Medieval Alchemy \*quiz Alchemy Reader 1-140
- 10/13 Ficino, Natural Magic, The Four Humors and Melancholy \*quiz on planetary Correspondences Magic in the Middle Ages
- 10/20 The Renaissance Magus \*quiz Doctor Faustus, The Tempest
- 10/27 Alchemy Reader: Paracelsus, Fludd, Ashmole, Boyle, Newton; Alchemy and Mysticism \*chapter reviews--midterm.
- 11/3 Symbolists, Surrealists, Jung, Tarrochi
- 11/10 \*quiz Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition- surveys
- 11/17 Unified Field Theory \*quiz The Elegant Universe
- 12/1 Presentations (LIBA 1-7)
- 12/8 Presentations (LIBA 8-15)
- 12/15 Final Exam