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FLR 607: Magic in the Middle Ages



Welcome to the study of magic! In this course we will examine how medieval culture defined magic, how magic reflects the medieval understanding of the universe, and the legacy of medieval magic in the modern world. The materials will cover medieval western Europe, with a focus on England. Topics will include magical practice, supernatural creatures such as elves, fairies, and magical animals, the relationship between magic and religion, the beginning of the witch era, case studies of specific people charged with using magic, and what magic can tell us about people's relationship with their world. This course also relates to the upcoming exhibit on the history of magic at the UO Museum of Natural & Cultural History, and there will be a unit exploring ways to present the history of magic to audiences, as well as a chance to intern designing the exhibit.

There are no books required for purchase; all excerpts and articles are posted on Canvas. But for further exploration you may want to buy one or more of the following:

Richard Firth Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars: Fairy Beliefs and the Medieval Church* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017). 304 pages. ISBN 978-0812224252. (List price \$27.50 paperback, \$22.92 on Amazon). Also available as an ebook; see: <https://www.upenn.edu/pennpress/about/ebooks.html>

A new classic on medieval beliefs. Warning: Middle English quotations are not translated.

Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (originally published 1971). 853 pages. ISBN 978-0140137446 (\$22.99 on Amazon, from \$7.99 used on eBay). The finest

and most influential book ever written on western magic, though now outdated here and there.

Stephen Wilson, *The Magical Universe: Everyday Ritual and Magic in Pre-Modern Europe* (Hambledon & London, 2003). 592 pages. (Hardcover \$23.71 on Amazon.)

A rich text jam-packed with examples, though a little infuriating because he gives no references.

Claude Lecouteux, *The Tradition of Household Spirits: Ancestral Lore and Practices* (Inner Traditions, 2013). (\$12.82 paperback on Amazon; also available as a more expensive ebook.) The range of Lecouteux's knowledge is unparalleled — he was a professor at the Sorbonne — but unfortunately one has to ignore his very unscholarly and mystical conclusions, which are more intrusively apparent in his other books. Apart from that this is a fascinating book of unparalleled scope.

Grading:

Preparation as an assigned discussion leader: 5%

Conference abstract: 5%

Weekly written response or other weekly assignment: 10% total

General preparation, engagement, and participation: 10%

Book review: 10%

Seminar paper: 60%

Weekly assignments: Each week there will be a short written assignment of maximum 500 words (about one page single-spaced), based on the reading, and designed to help you integrate the material and think about it in a focused way. It is due to be turned in via Canvas by **10 pm on the Wednesday** before the relevant class, i.e. for Week 2, it is due at 10 pm on the Wednesday of Week 2. This is a very small number of words for some big concepts, so be efficiently succinct! But allowing any more words would mean your time would be taken up with further writing, whereas it is better spent on reading and thinking. It is best to balance careful general statements with some very brief mentions of individual examples. The question for each week is the question listed under the theme of the week below, e.g. the question for Week 2 is “What did people attempt to use magic for?” There is no written assignment for Week 1, and the written assignments for Week 7 and Week 10 are different and detailed below. *You may also skip one week's written assignment (of your choice).* (But not Week 7 or Week 10.) You do not need to tell me which week you are skipping. If you insist on doing a written assignment for every week, which you should not, I will grade only the first eight.

A conference abstract designed for the Western States Folklore Society conference is also due by January 24 (the end of Week 3); this is required and worth 5%.

Please be very careful in your citations, and I hope it goes without saying that all work must be original. In the unthinkable event of plagiarism, you will fail the course. Please review the university policies on academic dishonesty at:

<http://pages.uoregon.edu/tpayne/EG595/plagiarism.pdf>

<http://researchguides.uoregon.edu/citing-plagiarism/plagiarism>.

Schedule:

January

Week 1: January 10

Magic: Problem-Solving with the Supernatural

Why did people attempt to practice magic? Was magic rational or irrational?

Week 2: January 17

Magic for Love, Magic for Peril, Magic for Thieves

What did people attempt to use magic for?

Catherine Rider, “Common Magic” (from *The Cambridge History of Magic and Witchcraft in the West*, pp. 303-31).

Owen Davies, Chapter 3, “Who and Why” (pp. 67-91) and Chapter 4, “Services” (pp. 93-118) (from *Cunning-Folk: Popular Magic in English History* (London and New York: Hambledon and London, 2003)). Note: these treat the post-medieval period, which is better documented.

Stephen Wilson, “House, Work, and the Land” (from *The Magical Universe: Everyday Ritual and Magic in Pre-Modern Europe*, pp. 3-24).

Johannes, Dillinger, “Magical Treasure” (from *Magical Treasure Hunting in Europe and North America*, pp. 53-84).

Optional supplemental reading:

Richard A. Shweder, Nancy C. Much, Manamohan Mahapatra, and Lawrence Park, “The ‘Big Three’ of Morality (Autonomy, Community, Divinity) and the ‘Big Three’ Explanations of Suffering,” in *Morality and Health*, ed Allan M. Brandt and Paul Rozin (New York and London, 1997), pp. 119-69 (esp. pp. 119-30).

[Case study: Burchard of Worms]

Turn in your written assignment (details above) via Canvas by Wednesday at 10 pm this week.

Week 3: January 24

The Powerful Hidden Folk



What magical beings live in the human world? What patterns can be seen in their characteristics? How do they relate to the human world?

Claude Lecouteux, “The Manifestations of Household Spirits” (from *The Tradition of Household Spirits: Ancestral Lore and Practices*, pp. 126-52)

Richard Firth Green, “Believing in Fairies” (pp. 11-41) and “Incubi Fairies” (pp. 76-109)
(from *Elf Queens and Holy Friars: Fairy Beliefs and the Medieval Church*)

“How to Survive Halloween,” from the British Library blog:

<https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2019/10/how-to-survive-halloween.html>

Selections from:

Walter Map, *Courtiers’ Trifles*

Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*

[Case study: Gerald of Wales]

Turn in your written assignment (details above) via Canvas by Wednesday at 10 pm this week.

Turn in your 100-150 word **conference abstract** via Canvas by Friday at 2 pm this week. (Detailed instructions are on Canvas.) Feel free to consult me by email or in person about this abstract if you would like further advice or directions!

Week 4: January 31

Religion and Magic: Quarrelsome Bedfellows

Were magic and religion similar or different? How did religion attempt to influence or control magic?

Keith Thomas, “The Magic of the Medieval Church” and “Magic and Religion” (from *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, pp. 25-50 and pp. 636-40)

Catherine Rider, “Charms, Prayers, and Prophecies: Magic and Religion” (from *Magic and Religion in Medieval England*, pp. 46-69).

Turn in your written assignment (details above) via Canvas by Wednesday at 10 pm this week.



Week 5: February 7

Joan of Arc at the Fairy Tree: Real People and their Magical Beliefs

What can we learn from authentic examples of people who practiced or were said to practice magic?

• Joan of Arc (1431):

Read “Joan of Arc” trial documents on Canvas.

- Eleanor Cobham and Margery Jourdemayne (1441):

Ralph A. Griffiths, "The Trial of Eleanor Cobham: An Episode in the Fall of Duke Humphrey of Gloucester," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 51 (1968-69), 381–99.

Jessica Freeman, "Sorcery at Court and Manor: Margery Jourdemayne, the Witch of Eye next Westminster," *Journal of Medieval History* 30 (2004) 343–57.

[Case study: Marion Clerk]

Turn in your written assignment (details above) via Canvas by Wednesday at 10 pm this week.

Saturday, February 8

The Play of Daniel (*Ludus Danielis*). Central Lutheran Church, 1857 Potter Street, Eugene, 7:30 pm. Sponsored by the UO and performed by the renowned early-music group, the Boston Camerata. This once-only medieval performance of an important religious play will help give a sense of the atmosphere of medieval belief in the miraculous — an experiential dimension that is missing by merely reading texts and looking at images. Attendance is not required, but I strongly urge you to come and experience the Middle Ages first-hand!

Week 6: February 14

Bewitched: The Surprising History of Witches

What motivated the emergence of the witch hunts? How did they develop? Who was targeted? What were those people actually doing?

Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, "Introduction: The Problem of European Witchcraft" (from *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), pp. 1-22).

Michael D. Bailey, "Diabolic Magic" (from *The Cambridge History of Magic and Witchcraft in the West*, pp. 361-92).

Michael D. Bailey, "Review of Owen Davies and Willem de Blécourt, eds., *Beyond the Witch Trials and Witchcraft Continued*," *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 4:1 (2009), 100-104. Read this review for a quick summary of the development of witch-hunts in their final phases.

Claudia Opitz-Belakhal, "Witchcraft Studies from the Perspective of Women's and Gender History: A Report on Recent Research," *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 4:1 (2009), 90-99.

[Case study: *Malleus Malleficarum*]

Turn in your written assignment (details above) via Canvas by Wednesday at 10 pm this week.



Week 7: February 21

Workshop on Magic Projects

Compare prepared to discuss your potential seminar paper topic with the class and get helpful suggestions; and be ready to give helpful suggestions to others.

Written assignment: By Wednesday 10 pm of Week 7, submit a proposal of your seminar paper topic, of 500 words maximum, via Canvas as usual.

Week 8: February 28

The Long Magic of Christmas and Hallowe'en

How does magic figure in the history of two popular American holidays?

Ronald Hutton, "Rights of Celebration and Reassurance" (pp. 34-41), "Samhain" (pp. 361-70) and "Saints and Souls" (pp. 371-78) (from *Stations of the Sun*)

The following have direct links from Canvas:

Lesley Bannatyne, "Halloween. A History":

<http://www.iskullhalloween.com/historyarticle.html>

"This Just In! What 'The Night Before Christmas' Really Reveals About Santa," on my history blog:

<https://pastisaforeigncountry.wordpress.com/2018/04/27/this-just-in-what-the-night-before-christmas-really-reveals-about-santa/>

Jon Kaneko-James, "Ghosts of Christmas Past":

<https://jonkanekojames.com/2016/12/ghostsofchristmaspast/>

Turn in your written assignment (details above) via Canvas by Wednesday at 10 pm this week.

Week 9: March 6

Magic Surviving, Revived, and Invented

What formal traditions of modern magic are most common? Do they resemble medieval magic?

Ralph Merrifield, "Survivals, Revivals and Reinterpretations" and "Written Spells and Charms" (from *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*)

Explore the website on objects concealed in buildings: www.apotropaios.co.uk/

And especially the article on shoes:

<http://www.apotropaios.co.uk/concealed-shoes---an-article-by-june-swann.html>

(Both of these accessible via Canvas)

Ronald Hutton, "Modern Pagan Festivals: A Study in the Nature of Tradition," *Folklore* 119:3 (2008), 251-73.

Helen A. Berger, "Witchcraft and Neopaganism" (from *Witchcraft and Magic: Contemporary North America*, ed. Helen A. Berger, pp. 28-54)

Optional supplemental reading:

Wendy Griffin, "Webs of Women: Feminist Spiritualities," from *Witchcraft and Magic: Contemporary North America*, ed. Helen A. Berger, pp. 55-80. Online at:

https://www.academia.edu/291781/Webs_of_Women_Feminist_Spiritualities
(accessible via Canvas)

Turn in your written assignment (details above) via Canvas by Wednesday at 10 pm this week.

Week 10: March 13

Displaying Magic

How should the history of magic be presented to the public?

Read: “What Makes a Great Museum Label?”:

https://www.museumnext.com/article/what-makes-a-great-museum-label/?fbclid=IwAR2AXeS4Yozwk7ro5W5qeSOkSZsL946D_2mO34MGB06bZbiMQInFJrHP0Y (available via Canvas)

Kathleen McLean, “Museum Exhibitions” (from *Planning for People in Museum Exhibitions*, chapter 2).

Alice Parman, “Exhibit Makeovers: Do-It-Yourself Exhibit Planning,” *History News* 65:1 (2010), 1-8

Instead of the conventional written assignment:

This week, visit the UO Museum of Natural and Cultural History (1680 E. 15th Ave.; open Tuesday through Sunday 11 am-5pm, till 8 pm on Thursdays; free with UO ID). *At the museum, answer Worksheet 5.2 about your experience at the museum. (That is, treat yourself as the object of the survey.)*

Then fill out and prepare to submit in class: Worksheet 1.1 (Take-home messages); Worksheet 2.1 (Story-line ideas); Worksheet 2.3 (Focus Group Questions); Worksheet 2.7 (Objects). All of these are on Canvas; you will need to print them out.

[In-class assignments: Worksheet 8.1 (Creating Memorable Experiences); Worksheet 8.4 (Prompts to Encourage Visitor Participation).]

Seminar paper:

Wednesday, March 25, 10 pm: Seminar paper due, via Canvas.
Instructions are posted on Canvas.