

Alchemy and philosophy: from Paracelsus to Mary Shelley's Frankenstein

Start date 11 January 2020 **End date** 11 January 2020

Venue Madingley Hall
Madingley
Cambridge
CB23 8AQ

Tutor Dr Cecilia Muratori **Course code** 1920NDX014

Director of ISP and LL Sarah Ormrod

For further information on this course, please contact the Lifelong Learning team Zara Kuckelhaus, Fleur Kerrecoe
shortcourses@ice.cam.ac.uk or 01223 764637

To book See: www.ice.cam.ac.uk or telephone 01223 746262

Tutor biography

Cecilia Muratori, a historian of philosophy, is currently Research Fellow at Queen Mary University of London. Her first monograph is dedicated to the mystical philosopher Jacob Böhme and his remarkable afterlives in German Idealism, especially in the reception of G.W.F. Hegel: *The First German Philosopher: The Mysticism of Jakob Böhme as Interpreted by Hegel* (2016). She is interested in the mediation of philosophical concepts through the visual arts, and is co-curator of a series of philosophical exhibitions for the Dresden State Art Collections, including: *All in All: The Conceptual World of the Mystical Philosopher Jacob Böhme* (2017). She is also interested in the history of animal ethics: on this subject she has published several articles and edited two essay collections: *The Animal Soul and the Human Mind: Renaissance Debates* (2013), and *Ethical Perspectives on Animals in the Renaissance and Early Modern Period*, co-edited with Burkhard Dohm (2013). Her second monograph, *The Renaissance of Vegetarianism: The Afterlives of Porphyry's On Abstinence*, will be published with Legenda in 2020.

Course programme

09:30	Terrace bar open for pre-course tea/coffee
10:00 – 11:15	Session 1: Alchemy: The Birth of Science or the Birth of Monsters?
11:15	(<i>Frankenstein</i>)
11:45 – 13:00	Coffee
13:00	Session 2: How to Create Life Artificially (Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim)
14:00 – 15:15	Lunch
	Session 3: Healing with Alchemy (Paracelsus)
15:15	Tea
15:45 – 17:00	Session 4: Spiritual Alchemy (Jacob Böhme)
17:00	Day-school ends

Course syllabus

Aims:

This course:

- offers an introduction to the theoretical foundations of 'alchemy', as well as the most famous practical applications;
- guides the students in exploring the intersections between alchemy, philosophy and medicine in early modernity;
- provides the theoretical tools to interpret the afterlives of alchemy, with special regard to the long-lasting debate on the distinction between science and magic.

Content:

Can life be created from lifeless matter? Is it possible to transform natural substances? And can the knowledge of nature be a path to spiritual transformation? These are questions that fascinated early modern philosophers interested in alchemy. This course will reveal the rich philosophical foundations of alchemy, with a main focus on early modernity and the writings of thinkers such as Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim (known as Paracelsus, 1493-1541), Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim (1486-1535) and Jacob Böhme (1575-1624). Key ideas that will be discussed are the theory (and practice) of artificially creating life, the connection between the study of nature and its transformation, and the use of alchemy as a spiritual practice. The course also explores the literary afterlives of these ideas, considering in particular the 'alchemical background' in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

Presentation of the course:

The course will feature lecture sections (introducing the students to the main concepts and figures that we will explore) as well as guided close reading of selected pages. The students will receive a course pack containing all the texts to be read in class; no previous knowledge of these texts is required, and all texts will be read in English. A particular feature of this course is that it covers different kinds of texts, providing the students with first-hand experience of the varied background and applications of 'alchemy' through history, from philosophical, to medical, theological and literary treatments of the topic. The materials in the course pack will provide the basis for group discussions of key topics, such as the difference between various applications of alchemy, or the boundary between science and magic in the alchemical tradition. Depending on the students' interests, the tutor can offer in-depth explorations of selected topics, using iconographic materials on the alchemical tradition.

As a result of the course, within the constraints of the time available, students should be able to:

- learn to approach natural philosophical, theological, medical, and literary texts dealing with alchemical procedures;
- reflect on the distinction between science and magic as constructed in various traditions;
- recognise the key features of alchemical language;
- reflect critically on the intersections of alchemy with science, magic, and medicine;
- understand how the meaning and value attributed to 'alchemy' changed over time.

Reading and resources list

Listed below are texts that might be of interest should you wish to supplement your learning on the course. Any essential reading is marked with an asterisk *

The students will receive a course pack containing all texts to be discussed in class.

Author	Title	Publisher and date
Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim	<i>De occulta philosophia</i>	ed. V. Perrone Compagni (Leiden 1992) ed. A. Weeks (Leiden 2013)
Jacob Böhme	<i>Aurora</i>	ed. A. Weeks (Leiden 2008)
Paracelsus	<i>Essential Theoretical Writings</i>	in: <i>The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism</i> , ed. G. A. Magee (Cambridge 2016), pp. 359-371
Lawrence M. Principe	<i>Alchemy</i>	(Chicago 2013)
Lawrence M. Principe	<i>The Secrets of Alchemy</i>	(Chicago 2013)

Lynn Thorndike A History of Science and Experimental Magic, vols 5 and 6 (New York 1941)
Freely available online: <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.530351/page/n7>
<https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.530352/page/n3>

Website addresses

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818 ed.): https://romantic-circles.org/editions/frankenstein/1818_contents

Lawrence M. Principe's lecture on *Alchemy on the Cutting Edge* (2014):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=2Gc2YYPow6c>

Additional information

Venue

Details of how to find Madingley Hall can be found on our website:
<http://www.ice.cam.ac.uk/who-we-are/how-to-find-the-institute>

Refreshments

Tea and coffee and lunch will be provided. If you have any specific dietary requirements or allergies and have not already advised us, please inform our Admissions Team on ice.admissions@ice.cam.ac.uk or +44 (0)1223 746262.

Note Students of the Institute of Continuing Education are entitled to 20% discount on books published by Cambridge University Press (CUP) which are purchased at the Press bookshop, 1 Trinity Street, Cambridge (Mon-Sat 9am – 5:30pm, Sun 11am – 5pm). A letter or email confirming acceptance on to a current Institute course should be taken as evidence of enrolment.

Information correct as of: 21 October 2019