MA Theories of Everything in Early Modern England

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Course Description
This course will explore the parameters of knowledge in the Renaissance and the ways in which it, by turns, grappled with and rejected systems of knowledge inherited from antiquity and the medieval era. It will engage with early modern attempts to theorise the relations between disciplines (the sciences, humanities and theology) and schemes of knowledge that were built on such presumptions. Thinking out from the classical and patristic pillars of Renaissance thought, Augustine, Aristotle and Pliny, the course will look at, for instance, the ‘rise of science’ and concepts of encyclopaedism. It will explore the idea and ideal of the ‘polyhistor’, how philosophers cultivated their identities, and the extent to which the renaissance distribution of knowledge turns, with a seeming inevitability, to the idea of a ‘theopedia’, that learning turns around theology. The corollary of this was a sense of forbidden knowledge and the dangerous bounds that thinkers might be engaging. Interest may also focus the role of the material and the cultural in re-figurations of intellectual history: engagement (or perhaps re-engagement) with the wider, non-European world, the social construction of knowledge, changes in its institutional locations, emergent networks and modes of authorising ‘proof’ and ‘fact’ as categories of knowledge, to ask how such factors impinged upon constructions of encyclopaedic taxonomies.

The course will look at some of the monuments of early modern knowledge theory, including: Francis Bacon’s The Advancement of Learning (1605) and Novum Organum (1620), Robert Burton’s The Anatomy of Melancholy (1621) and Thomas Browne’s Pseudodoxia Epidemica (1646), in which texts the parameters of early modern natural philosophy and its fundamental permeability by theological and humanist models of knowledge will be explored. The works are united by the ways in which their efforts to schematise natural philosophy are so prey to proliferation and dissolution. We will also look at some of the less well known attempts to create and utilise categories of knowledge, such as the hexamera, exemplified by John Swan’s Speculum Mundi (1635), in which knowledge is lodged according to its day of biblical creation, a scheme which allowed theology to come into proximity with, for example, meteorology (4th day) or natural history (6th day). Similarly alien is Phineas Fletcher’s attempt in The Purple Island (1633), to schematise a rigorous anatomy of the body alongside a militant national Protestant topography of the body. The course will also consider some of the literary explorations into the shape and scope of knowledge, Marlowe’s Dr Faustus (1604 / 1616) and the central parts (the angelic narrations) of Milton’s Paradise Lost (1667), renaissance Platonism in relation to both poetic formulations (Spenser / Donne) and scientific thought (Kepler) and will conclude with early scientific formulations of the Royal Society, along with the Swift’s deadly mockery of the encyclopaedic virtuosi, seeing the early enlightenment as the end of Everything.

Books to Buy
Class by Class Summary, 2014
(If you press ‘Ctrl’ and left-click at the same time, it will take you direct the library page)
This will give you an idea of content, but the course may vary slightly.

Class 1: Introduction: Early Modern Everythings and Early Modern Science
Milton, *Paradise Lost*, (1667) Books 5-8
Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (Routledge) handout

Class 2: Bacon, Science and Royal Society
Francis Bacon, *Novum Organon* (1620) VLE extracts- Available in full via ebook from library
in series ‘British Philosophy, 1600-1900’
From Thomas Sprat *History of the Royal Society of London* (1667)
Margaret Cavendish, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666) VLE
Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning* (1605) extracts

Class 3: Body and Soul: Anatomy and Melancholy
Phineas Fletcher, *The Purple Island* (1633) extract

Class 4: Body, Matter and God: Early Modern Natural Philosophy
René Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy* (1644) extract
John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667) books 5-8
Anne Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (c.1670) extract
Robert Boyle, *A Free Enquiry into the Vulgarly Received Notion of Nature* (1686) extract

Class 5: The Anti-Encyclopaedia
Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646), Book 1
Thomas Browne, *The Garden of Cyrus* (1657)

Class 7: Platonic Everythings
Plato, *Timeus* (extracts as handout)
Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486) (extracts as handout)
Edmund Spenser, *Hymnes in honour of Love and Beautie* (1596) (extracts as handout)
John Donne, *Anniversaries*, (extracts as handout)
Henry More, *A Platonic Song of the Soul* (1647) on VLE / handout

Class 7: Lucretius and Early Modern Materialism
Extracts from Montaigne’s Annotated copy of Lucretius, ed. M.A. Screech
Lucy Hutchinson, translation of Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*
Lucy Hutchinson, extracts from Order and Disorder

Class 8: Hexamera and Christian Everythings: Animals, Machines and Souls
Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*.
Milton, *Paradise Lost* and animals
John Swan, *Speculum Mundi* (1635)
Browne, *Pseudodoxia*, Book 3/ Topsell / Franzius