Early Modern Theories of Everything

Module summary
This course will explore the parameters of knowledge in the Renaissance and the ways in which the era grappled with and rejected systems of knowledge inherited from antiquity and the medieval era. We will look at early modern attempts to theorise the relations between different disciplines - the sciences, humanities and theology - and how this fed into the literature of the era. In particular, the course will pay detailed attention to Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), thinking about the shape and scope of knowledge in the epic: diabolic and Adamic conceptions of the world, Satanic rhetoric and Eve, the angelic narrations of Raphael and the incomunicable nature of everything he says. Thinking out from the classical and patristic pillars of Renaissance thought, including Plato, Augustine, Aristotle, Lucretius and Pliny, the course will look at some of the monuments of early modern knowledge theory, and its ideas of the encyclopaedic. Texts will include (in full or extract): Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum* (1620), Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) and Thomas Browne's *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646). You will be asked to think about the scope and permeability of early modern categories of knowledge and literary responses to the era's natural philosophy, including, for example, the marvellous and bizarre scientific poetry of Phineas Fletcher's *The Purple Island* (1633), Margaret Cavendish's *Poems*, natural philosophy and animal theory, creation in Lucy Hutchinson's works and John Donne's *Anniversaries*, on the decay, theological and anatomical, of the world.

Module aims
The primary aim of this module is to think about knowledge and the disciplinary parameters of the Renaissance - how theology related to science, how politics was implicated in religion or how humanist scholarship absorbed the classics. We will aim to develop a historiized understanding of these questions, looking at how literary and philosophical texts arrange their ideas. The module will enable you to think about the constructed and artificial antagonisms between 'science and religion' and to think through these questions in relation to some of the literature of the period, by Donne, Browne, Cavendish and others. You will also have the chance to engage, in detail, in the era's greatest piece of literature, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, to encounter and be baffled by its unfathomably vast scope.

Module outcomes
On completion of the module, you should be able to:
1. Show an advanced understanding of early modern thought and the relations between different disciplines, how theology and science, or literature and philosophy, were intertwined.
2. Engage with the intellectual history that underlies some of the era's literature - Donne, Browne, Cavendish and others.
3. Demonstrate an extensive understanding of *Paradise Lost* and the intellectual history that underlies the epic.
4. Produce independent arguments and ideas which demonstrate an advanced proficiency in critical thinking, research, and writing skills.

Indicative Reading
Thomas Browne, 21st Century Authors, ed. Kevin Killeen (OUP, paperback, 2018).
John Donne, *Anniversaries* (Oxford Scholarly Editions Online)
Margaret Cavendish, *Poems and Fancies* (EEBO)
Phineas Fletcher, *The Purple Island* (EEBO)

Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (Routledge, 2001)