

Dr. Richard J. Martin  
Society and the Witch  
M/W 3:00pm-4:15

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## EXPOS 20: Society and the Witch Fall 2021 Course Information

Riding broomsticks and dancing in the woods at night, witches are often imagined to be outside society. But in these representations may be keys to understanding social norms, norms that get articulated through the witch's very violation of them. In this seminar, we ask what discourses about witches tell us about the societies that produce them. We begin by examining anthropologists' depictions of witchcraft among people who come to find magic believable: how do we understand others' beliefs in the seemingly irrational idea that magic is real? Closely considering evidence from classic ethnographic accounts, we critically examine other scholars' answers to questions such as this one by thinking across competing approaches to the study of magic. Next, we closely analyze the film *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* and the television sitcom *Bewitched*, bringing these pop-cultural phenomena into conversation with Mary Douglas's treatise on *Purity and Danger* and Pierre Bourdieu's critique of *Masculine Domination*. Using these theories, we examine the aesthetic and cultural significance of imaginative representations of witches. For the research paper, each student chooses their own example of witchcraft on which to conduct independent research. Sample topics include postmodern fairy tales like *Frozen* and *Maleficent*, Broadway musicals like *Into the Woods* and *Wicked*, historical witch-hunts and contemporary occult practices. What unites our diverse inquiries is a common interest in the social significance of this seemingly marginal figure: the witch.

Though our readings focus on witches, this seminar is first and foremost a course in inquiry and argument. It is designed to help you learn strategies for asking analytical questions, conveying critical insights, articulating complex ideas, and mastering academic conventions. We'll always be foregrounding *how* authors communicate ideas, so that *what* we learn about witches will be deeply entwined with our investigations into *why* and *how* we write about them. Indeed, the skills you develop here can be utilized for writing about other topics as well, and in a range of academic disciplines.

Your Expos 20 Seminar plays an important role in helping you make the transition to college-level work and in preparing you for the range of writing challenges you'll encounter during your time at Harvard. Learning to write well is a lifelong process. The more you practice writing, the better you'll get at it. Your writing may go through messy and frustrating phases as you experiment with new strategies and work toward making more sophisticated arguments. Don't let these seeming setbacks discourage you: such growing pains are ultimately worthwhile, as they indicate you are maturing as a writer and as a thinker.

Responsibility for this seminar's success lies in all of our hands. Together we comprise a community of readers and writers. All the work you do in this course is public within the course: we'll be discussing your writing in small groups and full class conversations. I ask that you read critically but respectfully, and that you hold yourselves and each other to high standards as you offer and receive feedback. Be prepared to revise radically, re-imagining everything, from your underlying assumptions to the way you structure an argument, from your evidence and analysis to the statement of your thesis. Helping you learn to invest seriously in the practice of revision as part of the writing process is a key aim of this course.

Likewise, because the writing process is complex, I imagine that each of you comes to this class with specific strengths and struggles. In each assignment, I elaborate course goals common to everyone, but I also want you to think about your own personal goals and how this course can help you achieve them so that, no matter where you are as a writer, we can together get you to places you haven't yet been able to reach.

### Required Texts and Materials

Available at the Harvard Coop (as well as through Harvard libraries):

Luhrmann, Tanya. *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft* [Approximate Cost \$30]

Available through various streaming services or on DVD (as well as through Harvard libraries):

*Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*

*Bewitched* (students may watch any two episodes from this television series)

[Approximate cost is up to \$25, depending on existing subscriptions]

The Luhrmann book is also available on reserve through Lamont Library, as are videos of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* and *Bewitched: The Complete Series*.

All other required texts are available online through our course website on Canvas. The website is

<https://canvas.harvard.edu>

We'll also be working with the following Writing Program resources:

*Harvard Guide to Using Sources*, available online at <https://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu>

## Overview of Assignments

Here is a skeletal outline of the papers you'll be writing in this course. It is intended to give you a sense of the arc of the semester. Detailed assignment sequences, including instructions for response paper assignments, will be distributed at the beginning of each unit.

### **Essay #1: Use Comparative Analysis to Evaluate an Argument (5 pages)**

Bringing two of the authors we've read (E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Tanya Luhmann) into conversation, write an essay in which you critique and refine one author's argument and/or findings, using the second text to help you develop your ideas.

- This unit introduces students to academic writing in the social sciences, focusing on anthropology. Our readings draw primarily on *ethnographies*, studies of individual cultures based on observational field research.
- This assignment requires us to think *comparatively*. We consider cross-cultural differences concerning magical beliefs and practices. Additionally, and more fundamentally, we think across competing paradigms through which each author approaches ethnographic evidence.
- In this unit, we'll use a preliminary writing exercise to cultivate the following skills:
  - Summarizing Sources & Working with Counterevidence

### **Essay #2: Use a Theoretical Lens to Develop a Close Analysis (7 pages)**

Using Pierre Bourdieu or Mary Douglas as a lens, make an argument about the cultural or literary significance of either *Harry Potter* or *Bewitched*. You should show how your argument is different from that of another scholar writing about your primary source, engaging that scholar's work in a text you've selected independently.

- This unit introduces students to academic writing in the humanities, focusing on media and cultural studies. Our *primary sources* are a film and a television sitcom. We develop a vocabulary for interpreting these audiovisual works, building on techniques for literary analysis (*close analysis*).
- This assignment requires us to engage *theoretical* and *secondary sources*. We draw on cultural theory to help us gain otherwise inaccessible insights about our evidence. We then show how our arguments are original in relation to a piece of previous scholarship on the topic.
- In this unit, we'll use preliminary writing exercises to hone the following skills:
  - Analyzing Evidence: Close Analysis & Lens Analysis
  - Representing an Argument Visually

### **Essay #3: Use Research to Intervene in a Scholarly Conversation (10 pages)**

Choose an example of witchcraft relevant to folklore & mythology studies. You might focus on a fairy tale and its reinventions, or another depiction of the witch in art,

literature, or music; alternatively, you might consider cultural practices or phenomena surrounding witchcraft, such as spirit possession, witch-hunts, neo-paganism, or shamanism. Make a researched argument in which you critically intervene in the scholarly conversation on your chosen text or phenomenon. Your finished essay should cite approximately ten sources and be approximately ten pages long. You may not write on the same primary source as you did in your unit 2 Essay.

- This unit introduces students to independent research. The assignment, grounded in folklore and mythology studies, enables students to work across the humanities and social sciences. Past projects have drawn on anthropology, art history, gender studies, government, history, literary studies, media studies, musicology, psychology, sociology, and theatre studies. Each student selects primary source material and determines the *disciplines* and *methodologies* that will enable them to ask and answer a research question about it.
- This assignment requires students to conduct *research* by identifying and locating resources available through the university libraries, including *primary sources*, *secondary sources*, *theoretical sources*, and *contextualizing sources*. We highlight how our analysis of primary source evidence makes an original intervention into the scholarly conversation on our topic. While in unit 2, we showed how our ideas were original in relation to *one* piece of previous peer-reviewed scholarship, here we show how our ideas are original in relation to the scholarly conversation *as a whole*. In doing so, we learn to emulate professional scholarship and gain an appreciation for what makes academic writing original, worthwhile and, ultimately, publishable.
- In this unit, we'll use preliminary writing exercises to develop the following skills:
  - Brainstorming
  - Creating an Annotated Bibliography
  - Conducting a Literature Review