

HI2E5-15 The Supernatural in Early Modern Britain

20/21

Department

History

Level

Undergraduate Level 2

Module leader

Martha McGill

Credit value

15

Module duration

10 weeks

Assessment

100% coursework

Study location

University of Warwick main campus, Coventry

Description

Introductory description

This module will focus on British conceptions of the supernatural from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Topics will include miracles, witchcraft, possession, astrology, angels, ghosts, fairies and the impact of the Reformation, Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment. The module will give due consideration to differences between England, Wales and Scotland, and students will be encouraged also to reflect on the broader global framework. We will draw on a wide range of source materials, including church and court records, pamphlets, religious or philosophical treatises, material objects, artwork, literary sources, parliamentary acts, manuscript letters and antiquarians' accounts.

[Module web page](#)

Module aims

The module will prioritise understanding the ideas and cultural trends that bolstered supernatural beliefs. We will think about how historians can approach the 'otherness' of the past, in part by considering how 'fantastical' belief systems could be rational within their historical contexts. Students will develop a broader understanding of early modern religion, natural philosophy and

community tradition. The history of the supernatural is a history of tension between religious orthodoxy, and beliefs or practices that subsisted outside of the intellectual mainstream. We will consider the clashes and crossovers between 'popular' and 'elite' conceptions of the supernatural world, and examine how discourses about the supernatural could marginalise or empower disadvantaged groups. Stories about female witches and prophets, or 'gypsy' fortune-tellers and second-sighted Scottish Gaels, both reinforced and subverted established stereotypes. We will also look at how physical and mental disabilities were navigated through narratives of 'monstrosity' and possession. Ultimately, the module will ask students to reflect sensitively on how early modern communities celebrated, contested or made sense of the unfamiliar.

Outline syllabus

This is an indicative module outline only to give an indication of the sort of topics that may be covered. Actual sessions held may differ.

Week 1: Miracles and providences

Week 2: Angels

Week 3: Witchcraft

Week 4: Possession

Week 5: Popular magic

Week 6: Reading week

Week 7: Ghosts

Week 8: Fairies and second sight

Week 9: Disenchantment

Week 10: Broader contexts

Learning outcomes

By the end of the module, students should be able to:

- Demonstrate a detailed knowledge of the nature and range of early modern British supernatural beliefs, and to show some awareness of the wider global framework.
- Communicate ideas and findings, adapting to a range of situations, audiences and degrees of complexity.
- Generate ideas through the analysis of a broad range of primary source material.
- Analyse and evaluate the contributions made by existing scholarship.
- Act with limited supervision and direction within defined guidelines, accepting responsibility for achieving deadlines.

Indicative reading list

- Philip Almond, *Demonic Possession and Exorcism in Early Modern England: Contemporary Texts and their Cultural Contexts* (Cambridge, 2009)
- William E. Burns, *An Age of Wonders: Prodigies, Politics, and Providence in England, 1657–1727* (Manchester, 2002)
- Owen Davies, *Popular Magic: Cunning-folk in English History* (Hambledon, 2007)
- Peter Elmer, *Witchcraft, Witch-hunting and Politics in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2016)
- Sasha Handley, *Visions of an Unseen World: Ghost Beliefs and Ghost Stories in Eighteenth-*

Century England (London, 2007)

- Deborah Harkness, *John Dee's Conversations with Angels: Cabala, Alchemy, and the End of Nature* (Cambridge, 1999)
- Lianne Henderson, *Witchcraft and Folk Belief in the Age of Enlightenment: Scotland, 1670–1740* (Basingstoke, 2016)
- Lianne Henderson and Edward J. Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History* (East Linton, 2001)
- Michael Hunter (ed.), *The Occult Laboratory: Magic, Science, and Second Sight in Late Seventeenth-Century Scotland* (Woodbridge, 2001)
- Brian P. Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland: Law, Politics and Religion* (Abingdon, 2008)
- Brian P. Levack, *The Devil Within: Possession and Exorcism in the Christian West* (New Haven, 2013)
- Phyllis Mack, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England* (Berkeley, 1992)
- Peter Marshall, *Invisible Worlds: Death, Religion and the Supernatural in England, 1500–1700* (London, 2017)
- Martha McGill, *Ghosts in Enlightenment Scotland* (Woodbridge, 2018)
- Darren Oldridge, *The Supernatural in Tudor and Stuart England* (Abingdon, 2016)
- Sally Parkin, 'Witchcraft, women's honour and customary law in early modern Wales', *Social History* 31 (2006), 295-318
- Diane Purkiss, *Troublesome Things: A History of Fairies and Fairy Stories* (London, 2000)
- Laura Sangha, *Angels and Belief in England, 1480–1700* (London, 2012)
- Robert W. Scribner, 'The Reformation, popular magic, and the "disenchantment of the world"', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23 (1993), 475-94
- Jane Shaw, *Miracles in Enlightenment England* (New Haven, 2006)
- Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London, 1971)
- Francis Timbers, 'The Damned Fraternitie': Constructing Gypsy Identity in Early Modern England, 1500–1700 (Abingdon, 2016)
- Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999)
- Alexandra Walsham, 'The Reformation and "the disenchantment of the world" reassessed', *Historical Journal* 51 (2008), 497-528
- Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits: Shamanistic Visionary Traditions in Early Modern British Witchcraft and Magic* (Brighton, 2005)
- Simon Young and Ceri Houlbrook (eds.), *Magical Folk: British and Irish Fairies, 500 AD to the Present* (London, 2018)
- NB. In addition to these core readings, each week's reading list will include optional further reading on Britain, and 'broader context' readings that look at the topics with reference to continental Europe, Asia, Africa or the Americas. In week 10's class, each student will be required to discuss two 'broader context' works on a theme of their choice.

[View reading list on Talis Aspire](#)

Subject specific skills

See learning outcomes.

Transferable skills

See learning outcomes.

Study

Study time

Type	Required
Seminars	9 sessions of 2 hours (12%)
Practical classes	1 session of 2 hours (1%)
Private study	130 hours (87%)
Total	150 hours

Private study description

History modules require students to undertake extensive independent research and reading to prepare for seminars and assessments. As a rough guide, students will be expected to read and prepare to comment on three substantial texts (articles or book chapters) for each seminar taking approximately 3 hours. Each assessment requires independent research, reading around 6-10 texts and writing and presenting the outcomes of this preparation in an essay, review, presentation or other related task.

Costs

No further costs have been identified for this module.

Assessment

You must pass all assessment components to pass the module.

Assessment group A2

	Weighting	Study time
Seminar contribution	10%	
Group project	40%	
3000 word essay	50%	

Feedback on assessment

Written feedback provided via Tabula; optional oral feedback in office hours.

Optional 'feed-forward' on an essay plan submitted in advance of the deadline.

Availability

Courses

This module is Optional for:

- Year 2 of UENA-VQ32 Undergraduate English and History

This module is Option list A for:

- UHIA-V100 Undergraduate History
 - Year 2 of V100 History
 - Year 2 of V100 History
- Year 2 of UHIA-V1V5 Undergraduate History and Philosophy
- UHIA-VM11 Undergraduate History and Politics
 - Year 2 of VM11 History and Politics
 - Year 2 of VM11 History and Politics
 - Year 2 of VM11 History and Politics
- Year 2 of UHIA-VL13 Undergraduate History and Sociology

This module is Option list B for:

- UHIA-VM11 Undergraduate History and Politics
 - Year 2 of VM11 History and Politics
 - Year 2 of VM11 History and Politics
 - Year 2 of VM11 History and Politics

This module is Option list C for:

- UHIA-V100 Undergraduate History
 - Year 2 of V100 History
 - Year 2 of V100 History
- Year 2 of UHIA-VL13 Undergraduate History and Sociology