HI 412: Popular Culture in Medieval and Early Modern Europe
Spring 2013, Professor Phillip Haberkern (phaberke@bu.edu)
Wednesday 3-6, Department of History (226 Bay State Rd.) rm. 504
Office Hours: Tuesday 11-1 and (preferably) by appointment (Hist. Dept. rm. 509)

This seminar is concerned with an intriguing, if amorphous, subject: the popular culture of medieval and early modern societies. But what is popular culture, and how can contemporary scholars access it? Can it only be understood in opposition to an equally vague “elite” culture of courts and cloisters, or did the high and low speak to each other? If so, how? What channels and mediators allowed for the mutual creation of culture in Europe during the premodern era? In order to answer these questions, we will focus our inquiry in two ways: temporally, by examining primarily the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; and topically, by directing our attention to religious topics. By doing so, we will attempt to outline the contours of the sacramental, festive, and even daily lives of individuals and communities across two centuries, and see how broader historical shifts affected these cultural frameworks.

This class is a high level, reading intensive seminar. Each week you will need to prepare certain readings before class, which we will discuss intensively. We will also examine a variety of textual, visual, and oral primary sources together in class, in order to become familiar with the data that historians use in order to study popular culture. Over the course of the semester, students will be expected to conduct original research; informed by our collective readings and conversations, this research will combine primary sources and scholarly literature to illuminate further one aspect of popular culture. This research, along with our engagement with contemporary scholarship and the records of late medieval and early modern society, will enable us to come to some provisional answers to the course’s guiding questions, which remain productively unresolved among the scholarly community.
Required Texts:

This seminar is reading intensive (averaging 125 pages per week). Although most of the readings will be available via online databases and Blackboard, you will need to purchase four books. Three of them are on order at the BU bookstore:


I did not order a fourth book, because it is rather expensive new. Copies are available used online, though, and we don’t get to it until the end of the semester. As such, I’d like you to find and order a copy online, either from amazon.com or abebooks.com:


Course Requirements:

There are four primary components for assessment in this course:

1) Attendance and participation will be essential for your success. Attendance for this class is mandatory, and you will need to participate in the seminar's discussion consistently and substantively. Any student who misses three or more sessions of the course (barring unforeseen circumstances and a conversation with the instructor) will fail. You should prepare the readings each week, identifying the key sources used by the author and major questions of interpretation posed by the text. The instructor will send out reading questions for the assigned material each week; be sure to consider these questions thoughtfully.

2) You will need to choose a topic for your research over the course of the semester (a preliminary list is appended to the syllabus). Once you have chosen a topic in consultation with the instructor, you will prepare an annotated bibliography (with at least two books and five articles) on that topic, along with a brief (1-2 pp., single spaced) summary of the historiographic “state of the field” on that topic. This bibliography will be due by Friday, March 1, in my box (in the history department office, rm. 308, 226 Bay State Rd.).
3) Based on your preliminary research, you will need to choose one (or a couple, at most) primary source, and write a careful analysis of that text. Your analysis will need both to place the primary source within your broader field of inquiry and describe what we can learn about that field from the specific text; and to use your broader analytical framework to describe the importance of the primary source. This paper will be 6-8 pp. (double spaced), and will be due in the instructor's box by **Friday, April 5**.

4) A final component of your semester's research agenda will require you to do a detailed analysis of an oral or visual source related to your topic. You should choose a source that illuminates your previously chosen text, as your last essay (also 6-8 pp., double spaced) will require you to engage in a careful “reading” of your primary source and then discuss how it illuminates the major themes in both your primary text and the relevant secondary literature. This final essay will be due in the instructor's box by **Friday, May 3**.

In short, the final three components of this course's evaluation ask you to write the constituent elements of a larger research paper, but space out the sections over the course of the semester, rather than writing one large essay at the end of the class. In doing so, you can deliberately and intentionally build on your earlier work, without the intensive time pressure of an end-of-semester rush.

**Here is a Preliminary List of Topics in the Study of Medieval and Early Modern Popular Religion:**

- The Cult of Saints
- Marian Devotion
- The Imitatio Christi
- Confraternities
- Astrology and Divination
- Folk and Faith Healing
- Education and Reading
- Apocalypticism
- Penitential Practices
- "Superstition"
- Religious Riot and Inter-Confessional Violence
- Eucharistic Devotion
- Carnival
- Pilgrimage
- Perceptions of/Violence Against the Jews
- Magic and Witchcraft
- Iconoclasm
- Religious Drama
- Heresy
- Wonders and Prodigies
- Perceptions of the Turk/Muslims

**Grading Breakdown:**

- Attendance and Participation: 15%
- Annotated Bibliography: 25%
- Primary Source Analysis (textual): 30%
- Primary Source Analysis (visual/oral): 30%

**Please note:** late papers will be accepted, but with a penalty of one-half letter grade per day late.
**Academic Conduct Code:**

Students are expected to uphold the highest standards of academic integrity and abide by the spirit and letter of Boston University’s Academic Conduct Code, which is available at: [www.bu.edu/academics/resources/academic-conduct-code](http://www.bu.edu/academics/resources/academic-conduct-code). Any breaches of the Code or instances of academic dishonesty will result in prescribed disciplinary action and a failing grade for the course.

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**Course Schedule**

**Note:** All readings marked [BB] are available on the course’s Blackboard site, in the “Course Readings” section. All journal articles are available through major online databases and the library’s search page.

**1/16: Introduction and Definitions** – In our first meeting, we will go over the course structure and expectations, and spend some time thinking through a definition for the key terms in the course, considering especially issues of periodization and what makes something “popular.”

**1/23: The Contours of the Subject** – For this week, we will read through a history of late medieval and Reformation-era Christianity. This book, while not explicitly devoted to a study of popular religion, will allow us to interrogate the ideas about progress, communalism, and individualism that have predominated in historical research.

*Reading:* John Bossy, *Christianity in the West, 1400-1700*

**1/30: Pilgrimage** - With this week we will begin to explore specific aspects of medieval popular religious culture. We will begin with an examination of pilgrimage in late medieval culture, and use anthropological and historical lenses to do so. We will end with a more substantial primary reading, comprising a classic, elite critique of pilgrimage.


**2/6: The Cult of Christ’s Blood** – We will expand upon our previous week’s readings for this meeting, primarily by exploring one particular type of shrine and its place in the late medieval imagination. By focusing on the prominence of blood shrines, we will explore both the importance of Christological devotion and the explosive growth of regional shrines in the fifteenth century.

*Reading:* Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, chs. 1, 2, & 4 [BB].
2/13: The Sacramental and Social Body – In this meeting, we will explore the development of a new feast in late medieval Europe, Corpus Christi, as a means of accessing the place of eucharistic devotion in this culture. We will also examine the rise of collective civic practices that marked this feast in order to understand the various resonances of the “corpus” in medieval Christianity.

**Readings:** Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture*, chs. 3 & 4 [BB]; Mervyn James, “Ritual, Drama, and the Social Body in Late Medieval Towns,” *Past and Present* 98 (1983), 3-29.

2/20: NO CLASS (MONDAY SCHEDULE) – PLEASE USE THIS WEEK TO WORK ON YOUR ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY, AND TO SCHEDULE A TIME TO SPEAK WITH THE INSTRUCTOR ABOUT YOUR TOPIC!!!

2/27: Marian Devotion – Perhaps the dominant figure in late medieval piety was the Mother of God, Mary, who came to be seen as an ideal intercessory figure. For this week, we will explore the visual and devotional practices that came to be associated with the BVM, and attempt to see whether or not any sort of specific “women’s religion” existed in the 1400s.


***ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY DUE IN MY BOX BY FRIDAY, 3/1***

3/6: The “Magic” of the Church – In our last week on medieval religious culture, we will examine the phenomenon of “sacramentals:” objects and incantations taken from the official liturgical life of the Church and used in unexpected and unsanctioned ways. Were these objects magical, or do we need to invent another rubrik for understanding them? This is the question we will ask this week.


3/13: NO CLASS – SPRING BREAK

3/20: The Reformation and Popular Culture – Beginning with this week, we will discuss the ramifications of the Protestant Reformation(s) for popular religious culture. What could be kept of medieval practice, and what would be discarded? How? In this meeting, we will begin to sketch out answers to these questions.

3/27: **Uprooting Traditional Practices** – One of the most distinctive (and shocking) elements of Reformed Protestantism was its rejection of the cult of saints and its consequent iconoclasm. In this week, we will explore the popular dimensions of this practice, and try to determine how the avid image makers of the late middle ages could become image breakers in a few short years.

**Reading:** Wandel, *Voracious Idols and Violent Hands.*

4/3: **The Popularity of Violence** – The onset of the Reformation was not greeted passively by Catholic authorities (and crowds). In this week, we will explore how popular forms of religiosity could spur inter-confessional murder and mayhem, and examine whether or not there were distinctive Catholic and Protestant modalities of violence.


***PAPER #2 DUE IN MY BOX BY FRIDAY, 4/5***

4/10: **The Quiet Persistence of the Past** – Although the transition to Protestantism could be marked by violence, many people transitioned from one spiritual regime to another with little noise. How can we recover their voices and experiences? Luckily, one remarkable record allows us to do so for a tiny village in England, whose religious life we will examine this week.

**Reading:** Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath.*

4/17: **A Disenchanted World?** – The great sociologist Max Weber argued that the Reformation was a crucial component in modernity’s “disenchantment of the world.” We will interrogate that argument this week, and employ more contemporary scholarship in order to wonder if popular culture has even now eliminated wonders and magic from the world.


4/24: **Witchcraft, Magic, and Folk Wisdom** – In our last full week of discussion, we will learn about a wizard and veterinarian(!) whose healing activities ran afoul of the local authorities. The record of his trial sheds crucial insight into the fuzzy boundary between magic and religion, and the tragic consequence of its being transgressed.

**Reading:** Behringer, *The Shaman of Oberstdorf.*
5/1: **Conclusions** – In our last meeting, we'll ask a potentially uncomfortable/frustrating question: have we been tilting at windmills all semester? In other words, can we actually write a history of popular culture, or are we looking for a mere scholarly construct? Hopefully, asking a question such as this will allow us to (re)evaluate our efforts from the course.


***FINAL PAPER IS DUE IN MY BOX BY FRIDAY, 5/3***