UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND
RELIGION DEPARTMENT &
PROGRAM IN AMERICAN STUDIES

Course Revision Proposal
Witchcraft & Its Interpreters (RELG 273)

1. Course number: Religion 273
2. Full course title: “Witchcraft & Its Interpreters”
3. Catalog description: “Interdisciplinary exploration of witchcraft, popular magic, and demonic possession in early modern England and British North America based on original legal records and other primary sources. Special attention given to the Salem Witch-hunt and the historical methods employed by contemporary scholars.”
4. Prerequisites: none
5. Hours of credit: 1 unit
6. Estimate of student enrollment: 19
7. By whom and when the course will be offered: Dr. Douglas L. Winiarski, Department of Religion; offered in alternate years (fall semester)
8. Staffing implications: There are no anticipated staffing issues associated with this course.
9. Library resources: Most relevant texts that I have used in the more advanced iterations of this course are available in published form at Boatwright Library, through subscription databases such as JSTOR and ProjectMuse, or at “Witchcraft in Salem Village”—a full text website sponsored by the Electronic Text Center at the University of Virginia. Students would benefit from having access to multiple copies of the recently published Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt, Bernard Rosenthal, et al., eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
10. Relation to existing courses and curricula: RELG 273 is a revised version of an advanced research seminar that I have taught for nearly a decade (RELG 373). I have redesigned the seminar as a lower-division field-of-study course. It is my hope that offering the course at the 200-level will help to ensure enrollments and attract more students to the Religion major.
11. Indication of approval by department or program: February 10, 2010.
12. **Purpose and rationale for the course:** “Witchcraft and Its Interpreters” is designed to help students develop basic analytical skills through the interdisciplinary investigation of witchcraft, popular magic, demonic possession, and allied occult phenomena in early modern England and British North America. Class participants work with a wide variety of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century primary texts, including church, court, probate, and town records; sermons and theological treatises; and personal diaries, autobiographies, and letters. They also explore secondary literature, learning in the process how professional scholars construct interpretations of early modern conceptions of the supernatural. Bi-weekly class discussions emphasize different methodological approaches drawn from the fields of religion, history, gender studies, sociology, and psychology. The written assignments for the course provide opportunities for students to practice these methods in focused papers relating to witchcraft incidents not covered in our classroom discussions.

13. **Brief outline of the course** (based on Fall 2008 iteration of RELG 373):

- Week 1: Introduction to the Course/Witches of the Atlantic World
- Week 2: The Usual Suspects/Collective Biography
- Week 3: Social Dimensions of Witchcraft
- Week 4: Witchcraft & Gender
- Week 5: Magic, Wonders & Popular Culture
- Week 6: Demonic Possession & Psychohistory
- Week 7: Magic & Popular Religion
- Week 8: Mid-Term Case Analysis Paper
- Week 9: Introduction to the Salem Witch-Hunt
- Week 10: Social History & the Salem Witch-Hunt
- Week 11: Racial Outsiders & the Making of a Witch-Hunt
- Week 12: Ministers & Magistrates Debating Spectral Evidence
- Week 13: Gender, Language & the Andover Confessions
- Week 14: Putting the Pieces Together

### Historical Studies Methods & Rationale

The unusual and fascinating subject matter of early modern witchcraft trials and allied occult phenomena, which has generated a theoretically sophisticated historiography and numerous anthologies of edited primary texts, make this course an ideal candidate for FSHT credit. RELG 273 challenges students to interpret witchcraft, popular magic, and demonic possession in the early modern Atlantic world through a series of methodological frames and a variety of primary texts.

The FSHT component of RELG 273 may be divided into four interrelated learning objectives:

- Analyzing different types of seventeenth-century texts, including church, court, probate, tax, and town records; sermons and theological treatises; and personal diaries, autobiographies, and letters.
Indentifying the contextual approaches employed by scholars who study early modern Anglo-American witchcraft incidents and allied occult phenomena: social history, legal history, gender theory, psychohistory, intellectual history, popular culture studies, and race and ethnicity studies.

Employing these frames to form independent interpretations. The course paper assignments provide opportunities for students to apply different methodological approaches to unfamiliar, but well documented cases of witchcraft.

Emphasizing historical interpretation over historical causation. I encourage students to think about how witchcraft, popular magic, and demonic possession “made sense” to people in seventeenth-century England and British North America (rather than what caused the Salem Witch-Hunt) and why occult lore frequently provided a compelling cultural lens throughout which they understood misfortune, pain, illness, and other temporal afflictions.

Few events in American religious history have attracted more attention than the notorious 1692 Salem witch-hunt. From Cotton Mather’s published apologetics and Arthur Miller’s incendiary play, *The Crucible*, to contemporary movies, novels, sitcoms, and cartoons, the image of the witch continues to haunt the American psyche. This course examines the historical roots of America’s fascination with witchcraft. We will be reading the original texts of the Salem trials, as well as court records, sermons, diaries, letters, and related documents from earlier witchcraft incidents in seventeenth-century England and British North America. In addition, course participants will evaluate scholarly books and articles that assess witchcraft from a variety of methodological perspectives, including theology, social history, psychology, gender studies, legal history, popular culture studies, and ethnohistory. I anticipate that this course will appeal to students who are interested in the history of witchcraft, popular magic, demonic possession, and supernatural hauntings during the early modern period, as well as those who seek a “behind the scenes” look at the process through which scholars have interpreted these unique religious phenomena.
early modern England and British North America. The FSHT component of RELG 273 may be divided into four learning objectives:

- Analyzing different types of seventeenth-century texts, including church, court, probate, tax, and town records; sermons and theological treatises; and personal diaries, autobiographies, and letters.
- Identifying the contextual approaches employed by scholars who study early modern Anglo-American witchcraft and allied occult phenomena: social history, legal history, gender theory, psychohistory, intellectual history, popular culture studies, and race and ethnicity studies.
- Applying these different methodological and contextual frames to unfamiliar, but well documented cases of witchcraft that we have not discussed as a class.
- Differentiating historical interpretation from historical causation. We will pay close attention to the ways in which witchcraft, popular magic, demonic possession, and supernatural hauntings “made sense” to people in seventeenth-century England and British North America (rather than what caused the Salem witch-Hunt) and why occult lore frequently provided a compelling cultural lens through which they understood misfortune, pain, illness, and other temporal afflictions.

**Liberal Arts “Competencies”**

By the end of the semester, it is my hope that you will have developed a general interest in the study of early modern witchcraft and its contemporary interpreters. But this is not all that I hope you will take away from our seminar. Throughout the semester, we will be working together to hone your analytical, writing, and communication skills. These are the basic building blocks of a liberal arts education; they are also “competencies” that are highly prized by staffing agents in corporations, law firms, and other professions.

Success in this class will hinge on your ability to master the art of historical interpretation. No component of the course will require you to memorize “facts” and restate them in timed exams. Instead, I will be evaluating your intellectual growth in these core competencies:

- Comparing and contrasting primary texts;
- Summarizing, judging, and articulating cogent criticism of scholarly arguments;
- Applying the analysis of one set of materials to a different situation;
- Forming coherent arguments and communicating those ideas persuasively to others.

In short, it is my firm belief that our bi-weekly discussions will help to prepare you for post-collegiate careers.

**Course Procedures and Requirements**

RELG 273 has no prerequisites and assumes no prior knowledge of the subject. Our bi-weekly meetings will consist of short presentations and seminar-style discussions. Keeping up with the
scheduled reading assignments is crucial. I expect that you will spend *an average of three to four hours preparing for each class* and *roughly two hours per page when writing papers for class.*

Attendance is mandatory. I will evaluate the quality of your participation in our discussions after each class using the following scale: 5 (multiple informed/insightful comments), 3 (moderate contributions), 1 (minimal participation), and 0 (absent). *Please do not email me to explain class absences other than those involving approved University of Richmond events/activities.*

During the semester, each student will write two short position papers (one during each half of the semester), and two longer essays. For writing assignment guidelines, see our course BlackBoard website.

Final grades for the semester will be calculated as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Description</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class Attendance and Informed Participation</td>
<td>35%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Position Paper Assignment A, B, C, D or E (2 pages)</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position Paper Assignment F, G, H, or I (2 pages)</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midterm Case Analysis Paper (5–7 pages)</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Paper (8–10 pages)</td>
<td>25%</td>
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**Required Texts**

The following books are available for purchase in the campus bookstore, or from major internet distributors. Students can also obtain used textbooks at discounted prices at [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com) and [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com). Readings on the schedule of assignments are keyed to author’s last name.


In addition, we will be reading scholarly articles and other documents that are available on BlackBoard (see bibliography below). You will need to download and print copies of these texts and bring them with you to class.

**Disability Accommodations**

Students with disabilities for whom accommodations have been formally granted by a University of Richmond Disability Advisor must present a copy of their “Disability Accommodation
Notice” to each professor within the first week of the academic term. Accommodations must be negotiated in advance for each assignment. Students should plan to consult with me at least one week prior to any scheduled deadline.

**Cell Phones & Laptops**

While in class, please disable all cell phones, pagers, Blackberries, and other communication devices. In addition, I ask that all students refrain from using laptop computers, which may create distractions that will disrupt the flow of our discussions.

**Grade Scale**

Final grades will be assigned based on the following grade scale: A+ (98–100); A (93–97); A– (91–92); B+ (88–90); B (83–87); B– (81–82); C+ (78–80); C (73–77); C– (71–72); D+ (68–70); D (63–67); D– (61–62); F (60 and below).

**Course Schedule**

**August 25**

**Introduction to the Course**

**August 27**

**Puzzling through Early Modern Witchcraft**


**September 1**

**Witches of the Atlantic World**


**September 3**

**Theological & Legal Aspects of Witch Hunting**


**September 8**

**New England Puritanism: An Overview**


**September 10**

**The Usual Suspects**

September 15  
Social Dimensions of Witchcraft I  

September 17  
Social Dimensions of Witchcraft II  
- Records of the Town of Easthampton (BlackBoard).

September 22  
Witchcraft & Gender I  
- Breslaw, ed., Witches of the Atlantic World, pp. 322–29 (Reis); 330–36 (Kamensky).

September 24  
Witchcraft & Gender II  
- Sharpe, Instruments of Darkness, pp. 169–89.

September 29  
Magic, Wonders & Popular Culture I  
- Breslaw, ed., Witches of the Atlantic World, pp. 89–95 (Hall).

October 1  
Magic, Wonders & Popular Culture II  

October 6  
Beyond New England  

October 8  
Demonic Possession  
October 13  Hauntings & Poltergeists
  ▪ [Chamberlain], Lithobolia, pp. 1–16 (download PDF from Early English Books online database).

October 15  Mid-Term Case Analysis I

October 20  Mid-Term Case Analysis II/Writing Workshop

October 22  Mid-Term Case Analysis III/Salem Overview
  MID-TERM CASE ANALYSIS PAPER DUE IN CLASS.

October 27  Salem I
  ▪ Norton, In the Devil’s Snare, pp. 3–81.

October 29  Using the Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt
  ▪ Norton, In the Devil’s Snare, pp. 82–231 (begin).

November 3  Salem II
  ▪ Norton, In the Devil’s Snare, pp. 82–231 (complete).

November 5  Salem III
  ▪ Norton, In the Devil’s Snare, pp. 232–313.

November 10  Racial Outsiders & the Making of a Witch-Hunt
  ▪ Read Tituba’s case file online at UVA’s Salem Witch Trials Documentary Archive and Transcription Project (http://etext.virginia.edu/salem/witchcraft/).
  ▪ “Tituba and the Witchcake,” 1–3 (Handout).
  POSITION PAPER ASSIGNMENT F.

November 12  Social History & the Salem Witch-Hunt I
  ▪ Boyer and Nissenbaum, “Joseph and His Brothers,” 133–52 (BlackBoard).

November 17  Social History & the Salem Witch-Hunt II
  POSITION PAPER ASSIGNMENT G.
November 19  Ministers & Magistrates React
- Silverman, Selected Letters of Cotton Mather, selections T.B.A. (BlackBoard).

POSITION PAPER ASSIGNMENT I.

November 24  Thanksgiving Break—No Class

November 26  Thanksgiving Break—No Class

December 1  The Andover Confessions
- Read the confession of Mary Toothaker online at UVA’s Salem Witch Trials Documentary Archive and Transcription Project (http://etext.virginia.edu/salem/witchcraft/). Then select four additional confessors and read the confession narratives for each.

POSITION PAPER ASSIGNMENT I.

December 3  After Salem
- Breslaw, ed., Witches of the Atlantic World, pp. 420–21 (Apology of the Jury); 422–26 (Hale); 512–15 (Weisman).
- Rosenthal, Salem Story, pp. 36–37 (Handout).

BlackBoard Bibliography


